

Hlaudi hands out thank-you bonuses to SABC staffers

By [Thabo Mbkone](#)

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The SABC has paid about R42m in "thank you" bonuses to its staff and middle managers - in addition to normal bonuses.

SABC sources have confirmed that the board and newly appointed chief operating officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng had decided on the grand gesture to thank employees for their hard work during Nelson Mandela's funeral in December and the 2010 FIFA World Cup.



Motsoeneng: 'Desperate to stamp his authority' - staff member. (Image: SABC)

But critics have lashed the decision, saying that although they are not opposed to rewarding SABC employees, they would have expected it to be performance-based.

According to sources, board chairwoman Zandile Tshabalala and Motsoeneng last week approved a one-off R8,000 after-tax bonus for the broadcaster's 3007 bargaining unit employees as part of this year's wage settlement agreement with the labour unions.

Then, on Friday, a decision was made to extend the bonuses to middle managers. They were paid the equivalent of a month's salary.

An SABC middle manager earns an average basic salary of R38,000 before tax. The company has more than 476 employees at this level.

Executive and senior managers have been excluded from the bonuses.

Accounts in a mess

In December, staff will also receive a 13th cheque as usual.

The bonuses come just as the SABC claims it has finally managed to recover from a financial collapse that saw it struggling to pay production houses, being forced to survive on a National Treasury guarantee and a R1bn loan from Nedbank, which it managed to repay in October last year.

At the end of March last year, the SABC earned a net profit of R330m, but its accounts were in such a mess the auditor general was not able to say if the numbers were correct. He therefore issued a disclaimer on those accounts.

The government is still giving millions in taxpayer money to the broadcaster, including R224m last year - nearly double the R130m given the previous year.

Out of financial troubles?

SABC spokesperson Kaizer Kganyago strongly defended the bonus splurge.

"I don't know why it should be an alarming thing that we're paying staff. You can't be stuck with the fact that we were in a financial crisis. We're past it and we were able to pay off all the people that we were owing."

Kganyago said the broadcaster had R1.2bn cash in the bank and had overcome its financial challenges.

"You should be writing a story that says the SABC takes care of their staff."

He also distanced Motsoeneng and Tshabalala from the bonus decision.

'Desperate to stamp his authority'

An SABC staff member said: "To staff, the credibility of Hlaudi and the board depends on these bonuses. Hlaudi is desperate to stamp his authority, so he will give us [bonuses]."



Kganyago said the organisation needed to reward its employees for working hard over the past few years - during coverage of the 2010 World Cup and Mandela's funeral.

"This is not a bonus - a bonus is a 13th cheque they get anyway. This is just a thank you. That's why it is an ex gratia payment. We are giving it to staff who are in the bargaining council.

"They've exceeded expectations and we're now saying, as the organisation, we value you as our staff," said Kganyago.

Bonuses should be on merit

Kate Skinner, an independent broadcast researcher who is also a member of the SOS Support Public Broadcasting coalition, said although she was not opposed to SABC staff being rewarded, she was concerned that these bonuses were not performance-based.

"What you would prefer is a situation which is performance-linked so it's not absolutely everybody who gets it, but people who have particularly performed well. You would want them rewarded.

"But SABC workers do deserve a break. They have difficult circumstances and have suffered through some incredible crises and some incredibly poor management."

Rewarding mediocrity

Gavin Davis, a DA MP who serves on parliament's portfolio committee on communications, also criticised the awarding of blanket bonuses.

"There may be a few individuals who have performed well, but there is no way everybody at the SABC has," said Davis.

"It is these kinds of decisions that explain why the SABC is in the financial mess it finds itself in. It is a culture that rewards mediocrity and, in many instances, political affiliation over excellence.

"It reminds us of Ellen Tshabalala's claim two weeks ago that Hlaudi Motsoeneng had 'performed well' at the SABC, despite the auditor-general's disclaimer of opinion and the public protector's findings against him."

Source: *Sunday Times*, via I-Net Bridge