

Rooting out devious traders

The MEC for Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs in KwaZulu-Natal, Sihle Zikalala, says the net is fast closing on dishonest traders.



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Zikalala on Tuesday said they are going after anyone who offers unsuspecting customers sub-standard products and services, and hikes prices beyond market related costs.

Zikalala and his team have recently traversed the province, conducting in loco inspections at various business sites, where they discovered that some errant enterprises were engaging in unfair business practices.

These bad practices include the selling of expired food products that pose health hazards to citizens, unregulated micro-lending (loan sharks), imposition of extremely high bank charges and reckless issuance of loans tagged with exorbitant interests to already heavily indebted applicants.

“What we have discovered during our investigations is shocking, to say the least. Some businesses are taking advantage of our poor and vulnerable communities and we have decided to take drastic steps to stop it.

“In the past few days, we found shops that sell perishable food that expired as far back as 2015. These included infant food products,” Zikalala said.

Speaking in Hluhluwe where he and his team conducted inspection, Zikalala said he was aware of many unscrupulous micro-lenders, who illegally confiscated identity documents from their clients.

“They keep these essential life documents to access and control the finances of their clients, which included instituting illegal and unlawful deductions of airtime and social grants.

“Unlawfully deducting money from our vulnerable citizens who receive social grants is a serious crime and it should be exposed so that the culprits are harshly dealt with. These are serious violations that require serious intervention,” Zikalala said.

Zikalala said his department had decided to change the way it enforced compliance and from now on, they would not hesitate to take stern action against businesses that cause suffering to people by flouting their consumer rights.

Direct in loco inspections in the form of unannounced blitzes would feature prominently in the new modus operandi to thwart the escalation of consumer rights abuses by greedy and heartless traders.

Offending enterprises would be hit with severe compliance notices and fines.

“We are in the process of establishing a Consumer Court, which will conduct hearings when there are allegations and instances of contraventions of legal prescripts.

“From now on, we want our officials not only to tell us how far they have gone in terms of consumer awareness but they should also report on actions they have taken against non-complying businesses,” Zikalala said.

Even as he decried the number of businesses that flouted consumer rights, Zikalala was full of praise for businesses that embodied good business practices, stressing that errant business were a minority.

He said economic growth depended on harmonious and honest relations between traders and their customers, especially given that “happy consumers means healthy business”.

Zikalala said, however, that government’s approach to consumer protection was not punitive but based on promoting fair trading by businesses and helping consumers to make informed decisions.

“This two-pronged approach has benefitted consumers and businesses who seek to serve their customers well. It has helped resolve disagreements between businesses and customers amicably,” he said.

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