

**REMARKS BY PREMIER THABANG MAKWETLA AT THE OFFICIAL
OPENING OF THE MPUMALANGA REGIONAL TRAINING TRUST'S
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE**

EMALAHLENI

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Programme Director

Honourable MEC for Education, Ms Mmathulare Coleman

Honourable Mayor of Emalahleni, Ms Linah Malatji

The Provincial Head of the Department of Labour, Ms Agnes Moiloa

The CEO of the Construction SETA

The CEO of the Mpumalanga Regional Training Trust, Mr. David Maropane

Members of the Board of the MRTT

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour and privilege for me to address you at this occasion of the official opening of the Mpumalanga Regional Training Trust's Construction Centre of Excellence.

We are proud of the Construction SETA's accreditation of the Emalahleni Training Centre as a Construction Centre of Excellence, the only one in the Mpumalanga Province and one of only five in the country.

We wish to congratulate the Board and CEO of MRTT for achieving such an important milestone in the history of skills development in the Mpumalanga Province. We salute you and your partners at the Construction SETA and the Department of Labour for turning a long held dream into a reality.

As we are all aware, the Department of Labour is promoting Institutes of Sectoral or Occupational Excellence (ISOEs) and, as one its examples, the Construction Centre of Excellence is intended to be a hub of relevant actors, industry, providers, and the Construction SETA, who are all expected to collaborate in ensuring a seamless transition between learning and employment, and in addressing the supply of scarce and critical skills in the sector.

On behalf of Mpumalanga Province we commend the Department of Labour for its guidance and leadership that has enabled MRTT to obtain accreditation way ahead of other provinces. As you may have all noticed, this Construction Centre of Excellence is the first one outside the major economic centres of Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu. Surely this speaks volumes about our potential and vindicates our branding as a province known for its 'Pioneering Spirit'.

Skills for employment growth and development in Mpumalanga

We are excited about this opening of the Construction Centre of Excellence because it is a development which will complement our own efforts to promote a growing provincial economy that will improve the lives of our people, particularly in the areas where they live.

Construction may be a comparatively small contributor to the provincial Gross Domestic Product, at 2.1 percent in the most recent provincial estimates, but as we are all aware this is a fast growing and important sector employing close to a million people countrywide, particularly in light of government's infrastructure investment plans and our drive to create employment.

As part of its response to the global economic crisis, government is intending to spend at least R787 billion on public infrastructure investment which can only be realized if the necessary construction and related manufacturing sector skills needs are addressed immediately.

According to the National Scarce Skills produced by the Department of Labour skilled people required for the construction and infrastructure related manufacturing industries accross the economy by 2010 include:

- 4000 contracts managers, supervisors and foreman and 4000 project managers

- 3000 to 6000 engineers (civil engineers and technologists) and 1500 other built environment professionals related to construction and 7000 manufacturing engineers and related technologists in various industrial disciplines such electronics, mechanical etc.
- 32 000 artisans

As recognized in various studies on this sector, including work undertaken for the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA), the skills needs of construction and related manufacturing are rather immense. That is why we welcome and are immensely proud of the launch of the Construction Centre of Excellence today.

This Centre will address not only theory but workplace experience as well. The Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) recent **Infrastructure Barometer**, emphasises the importance of this combination in the supply of skills for this sector when it states;

“Challenges relating to the skills pipeline cut across the education, training and workplace arenas since the problem is not merely to equip new entrants with skills but to ensure that they gain the appropriate workplace experience to consolidate their managerial, supervisory, professional and craft capabilities so that they can replace the current generations of experienced but ageing personnel”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are excited about today's occasion because of our commitment to addressing the urgent human resource development challenges facing our province and our drive to create an environment conducive for the creation of decent work.

The demand for skills resulting from the infrastructure investment programme has been reported to hold immense potential to create significant employment opportunities for our people particularly those with intermediate levels of education. There are few other industries that offer similar potential for training people with intermediate levels of education to take up increasing employment opportunities according to such reports

The launch of the Construction Centre of Excellence also marks an important milestone in the deepening of 'smart partnerships' in the province, both across spheres of government and between private and public institutions, for skills development, service delivery, and the economic growth of our province.

The historical legacy

Many commentators, and the majority of our people, will attest to how apartheid robbed millions of educational opportunities and access to skills such that they were unable to obtain decent jobs or to better themselves through access to sustainable livelihoods.

This was a country where the best education institutions were reserved for whites and those allocated to Africans were often third rate institutions with poor quality teaching and a lack of adequate infrastructure.

In the workplace, for decades African workers suffered from the consequences of job reservation, influx control, and labour coercion that sought to make them the cheap labour for the mines, factories and farms.

This was a dispensation that had no interest in their development as individuals or workers.

Our government has decided to embark upon a national skills development strategy that seeks to upgrade the skills of our workers so that as a country we can improve our productivity and competitiveness in the face of globalization.

However, at the same time, and I am sure that the CEO of Construction SETA can elaborate on the challenges he has faced on this front, the focus is also on a skills development strategy that can be a means for redressing past discrimination in the workplace and for reducing poverty

by raising the employment prospects of first-time entrants into the labour market and targeted vulnerable groups such as youths, women and the disabled.

The nature of the ANC's response to the skills development challenge

From the Freedom Charter to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the labour market has been at the centre of the democratic movement's development agenda. Long before it became fashionable and apparent, even to neo-liberal experts based at the Bretton Woods institutions, the democratic movement relished the role of the labour market not only as a means of assisting in the allocative process of the means of production but also as a means of realising human development through facilitating 'work' as a creative and social activity.

Prior to the election of 1994 the tri-partite alliance prepared the Reconstruction and Development Programme (or RDP) that outlined, in broad brush, the goals of the new government. You will recall that in the "Labour and Worker Rights" section, there were seven broad areas that were targeted: basic organising rights, living wage, collective bargaining, workplace empowerment, affirmative action, international conventions and restructuring of labour market institutions. A second set of provisions, contained in the chapter on "Developing our Human

Resources” also impacted on the labour market, dealing as it did with lifelong learning at and for work.

In the area of skills development, much progress has been made under the leadership of the Department of Labour. When the Skills Development Act was passed in 1998 its mandate included the following;

"Providing an institutional framework to devise and implement national, sector and workplace strategies to develop and improve the skills of the South African workforce, to integrate those strategies within the National Qualifications Framework contemplated in the South African Qualifications Authority Act, 1995, to provide for learnerships that lead to recognised occupational qualifications, to provide for the financing of skills development by means of a levy-grant scheme and a National Skills Fund, to provide for and regulate employment services; and to provide for matters connected therewith."

As part of the rolling out of this Act and the National Skills Development Strategy, new stakeholder driven bodies have been established, known as Sector Education and Training Authorities or SETAs, which are responsible for driving the skills development agenda.

We recognize and welcome the role of the Construction SETA in the province and are excited about its collaboration with the Mpumalanga Regional Training Trust (MRTT).

One of the big challenges that lies ahead and which this collaboration will have to address is how to massively increase the number of previously unemployed learners engaged in structured learning at workplaces – in order that they can begin to make a successful transition from full-time learning or unemployment to work or self-employment.

Skills Development, the Global Crisis and our response,

The launch of the Construction Centre of Excellence comes at a time when the outlook for the economy, locally and globally, is a bleak one. However, as a country we have prepared a response that through collaboration with our social partners we can be able to avoid the worst and protect the most vulnerable.

As you may be aware, the national response to the global economic crisis includes a National Jobs Initiative (to be led from the Presidency), sector strategies, a phase two Expanded Public Works Programme, and the public infrastructure investment package that we have alluded to earlier.

I would like to also echo the Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, when he reportedly stated that skills development should not be a casualty of the global economic crisis. We could not agree with him more. Skills development and initiatives such as this Construction Centre of Excellence will continue to be important in our drive to fight poverty and underdevelopment in our province.

By all means we must avoid the vicious circle of inadequate education, poor training, low productivity and poor quality jobs and low wages that traps the working poor and excludes workers without relevant skills from participating in economic growth and social development.

Today is but a small step in a journey to improve the lives of our people. The ANC-led provincial administration has been steadfast in its drive to deliver on its commitment to building a better life for the people of the province. We are immensely proud of our record in pushing back the frontiers of poverty and facilitating the creation of opportunities for job creation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to salute all the cadres and stakeholders that have contributed to this event today.

The occasion of the opening of the Construction Centre of Excellence here in Emalahleni attests to the seriousness with which we hold skills

development, capacity building and 'smart partnerships' for the improvement of the lives of our people in our province.

We dare not fail,

I thank you.

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