

**ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS AND INFRASTRUCTURE SIHLE  
ZIKALALA DURING THE BUILT CLIMATE CHANGE INDABA, SUNDUMBILI, MANDENI,  
KWAZULU-NATAL, 07 NOVEMBER 2024**

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Our Hosts: Ilembe District Mayor, Cllr Thobani Shandu and the Mayor of Mandeni Local Municipality, Cllr Thabani Mdlalose;  
Deputy Mayor of Mandeni Local Municipality, Cllr Bhekithemba Magwaza;  
Mayor of Ndwedwe Local Municipality, Cllr SZ Mfeka;  
Councillors and Representatives from KwaDukuza Municipality;  
Speaker of Mandeni Municipality, Cllr Phindile Sishi;  
SALGA Leadership represented by Cllr Nkosinathi Myeni;  
Amakhosi neZinduna;  
Mandeni Municipal Manager, Mr Sizwe Khuzwayo;  
CBE Council Members led by Chairperson Ms. Amelia Mtshali;  
CEO: Council for the Built Environment, Dr. Msizi Myeza;  
Senior officials from the Department of Public Works and Senior Government Officials  
CEOs of Public Entities;  
Professionals and Captains of the Built Environment industry;  
Representatives of Academic Institutions;  
Registrars of Professional Councils;  
Members of the Media;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen;

We gather here today to deliberate on a very important matter that continues to shape our world and experiences.

The truth remains, as we stated in our inaugural Built Environment Climate Indaba in Durban last year – climate change is not a threat in the future; it is a stark and current reality that we are facing.

Who would have thought that during September our country would experience snow to the extent that our major arterial, the N3, would be closed for 3 days, leaving a few South Africans stuck for days?

In July, this province experienced wildfires that led to loss of human life, loss of livestock, and damage to infrastructure. The losses amounted to about R70 million which included approximately 22 121 hectares of lost grazing land and approximately 5 219 animals.

In June, the people of uThongathi experienced a violent tornado that destroyed more than 3000 households and killed at least seven people.

On Christmas Eve last year, this community of Mandeni experienced devastating flashfloods that led to the destruction of homes and loss of human life, poignantly evoking the gloom memory of the Easter weekend during April 2017 which saw the collapse of the Holiness Union church, killing 20-year old Nkululeko Nsele.

This province is still reeling from the calamitous 2022 floods which led to no less than 459 people dead and damage to infrastructure. The provinces of the Eastern Cape and North West were also not spared by the devastating floods.

Provinces like the Western Cape, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga, have also suffered severe weather changes. This ranges from extreme rainfall and frightening tornadoes to surprising snowfall. These are not singular incidents but clear signs of climate change due to global warming and environmental mishandling.

Currently, the climate crisis is an economic sinkhole, leading to a number of African nations losing up to 5% of GDP.

While the continent of Africa is the least contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, it is African nations who are paying the heaviest price because the continent is warming faster than other regions and is less resilient to climate disasters.

Rapid urbanization and below-standard planning are only increasing the impact of inclement weather patterns and floods.

The absence of adequate drainage systems in many places, along with the growth of informal settlements and homesteads in flood-prone areas, does not help the scenario.

The poor maintenance of storm water drains, and other water management systems often causes overflows and blockages, worsening flood-related circumstances.

Our decision to converge here at Sundumbili was intentionally chosen. Not merely because it's within my home district, iLembe, but because it perfectly aligns with the Climate Change Act which was assented by President Ramaphosa on 23 July 2024.

It is mandatory for each governmental policy to align with the goals of this all-important Act, emphasizing the urgency of climate change and need for coordinated climate action.

Among its founding principles, the Act calls on all of us to take urgent steps to contribute to a just transition towards low-carbon, climate-resilient and ecologically sustainable economies and societies.

It calls for the need to for decision-making to consider the special needs and circumstances of localities and people that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, including vulnerable workers and groups such as women, especially poor and rural women, children, and persons with disabilities.

Professionals and stakeholders in the Built Environment are called upon to creating communities that are climate resilient and mitigate environmental degradation.

Provisions of the Act resonate with Chapter 2 of the Constitution and Section 24 of the Bill of Rights which are clear that our citizens have the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**, communities like Mandeni are a stark reminder that it is the vulnerable poor that suffer the most during adverse weather patterns. Such communities have limited means to be climate resilient, prepare for and recover from, devastating weather events.

The local experiences also tell the story of the gap between policy makers and the lived experiences of communities which often hinder climate mitigation strategies and recovery efforts.

Finally, they tell the need to work closely with our traditional leaders in the design and implementation of safe, climate resilient human settlements.

**Compatriots**, it is important that this discourse on climate change is democratised, made accessible including talking about it in our indigenous languages.

In this regard, we wish to applaud Dr Nokukhanya Zondi for her ground breaking, 2022 PhD study titled, “**Community Perceptions About Climate Change in iLembe District Municipality**” which offer invaluable insights for policy makers and local government on the importance of local ecological knowledge on the changing climate patterns by local communities in the District Municipality.

Arguing that people are the heart and active agents of change in our the democratic, developmental local government, Dr Zondi demonstrates that understanding local community perceptions on impacts, causes, and responses to climate change is vital for the promotion of community resilience towards climate change.

To improve community resilience, we must therefore take into account local beliefs and promote public education on how safety can be enhanced.

Experience has shown, for instance, that relocating individuals after disasters poses numerous challenges due to social dynamics. People resist leaving their ancestral lands, jobs, customers or even fear being treated as second-class citizens in new communities. It is vital to consider these factors when planning relocations post-disaster.

The role of indigenous knowledge in combating climate change cannot be overstated.

One is reminded of an old man in Zimbabwe who used his indigenous knowledge of the debris left on the riverbanks to predict that a bridge being built would be overtopped by water.

Fortunately, his insights were taken seriously by design engineers leading to an adjustment in the bridge's height which saved the structure from being swept away.

Drawing on lessons from Mexico's Maya community, South Africa can learn valuable strategies for mitigating the impact of climate change and improving food security through successful initiatives like planting fruit trees and creating “edible” forests.

There's enormous potential for communities to engage in reforestation areas with native tree species and rejuvenating soil quality in regions harmed by monoculture practices, such as in timber plantations.

The possibilities of harnessing technologies for environmental conservation are enormous. In Brazil, indigenous communities are now using cameras instead of bows and arrows to defend their lands from illegal loggers and miners. The footage captured is shared globally via mainstream and social media, holding corporations accountable for their environmentally damaging actions.

In Somalia, an arid country with severe water shortages, pastoral communities, over 10 years ago, people were experiencing armed conflicts over diminishing grazing lands due to changing climate conditions.

However, a simple yet innovative use of technology turned the tide.

A mobile application that enables herders to share locations of lush pastures has reduced conflicts significantly, fostering harmony among the pastoral communities of Somalia.

**Compatriots**, our climate action must reflect our resolve to address what has been termed the triple planetary crisis. These are climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

The United Nations reveals that air pollution is the major cause of diseases and premature deaths with more than seven million people dying prematurely each year because of it.

Today, 9 out of 10 people in the world breathe air that contains levels of pollutants that exceeds World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines.

Cooking with traditional fuels is said to emit greenhouse gases roughly equivalent to global aviation or shipping and contributes to 3 million premature deaths every single year.

The loss of biological diversity impacts food supply and access to clean water. Decline in biodiversity comes from destructive human actions like deforestation and overfishing.

Last year at this conference, we emphasised the need to move beyond rhetoric or policy pronouncements to pragmatic action and implementation to protect the environment and create climate resilient communities.

It means that we must that human settlement planners must make use of locally produced, sustainable building materials like those assessed by our entity, Agrément South Africa (ASA) and that we must spread awareness on their value in climate mitigation and local economic development.

It means we must all make it a culture to plant trees and support the Ten Million Trees Campaign that was launched by President Ramaphosa.

In Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, showed us that it is possible to use ancestral knowledge on the protection of the environment by mobilising his nation to plant 10 million trees in 3 months and combat desertification while improving food security.

Together, we must galvanise communities to protect our river sources and oceans by fighting pollution, in particular through combating plastic pollution.

In South Africa, over 2.5 million tonnes of plastic are produced annually and poor waste management risks destroying our oceans resources and the blue economy.

Our education campaigns must encourage communities to re-use plastic bags and to properly dispose them.

Today, we are encouraged to see civil society and the private sector working together to support young sustainability champions.

One such is the Annual WWF PachiPanda Challenge Programme that promotes SMMEs and innovative youth projects that provide sustainable solutions to climate change.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure is contributing in mitigating against climate change. For instance, we have developed a **green building policy** to ensure that all our construction projects comply with international standards and minimize their impact on the ozone layer. This policy will essentially dictate the building of new social infrastructure across the country.

Under the guidance of our Council for the Built Environment, skilled individuals are working relentlessly to design sustainable infrastructure and establish towns, villages, and cities where just transition is a key consideration to ensure inclusivity.

We must infuse our urban planning strategies with climate resilience at their core. It is imperative that we weave together the threads of climate science, architecture, and urban design to create cities and human settlements that can withstand the challenges of a changing climate.

This means that our urban landscapes must be reimagined as a dynamic ecosystem that conserves water, mitigates heat, and facilitates sustainable mobility.

The interplay of green infrastructure, compact urban layouts, and energy-efficient buildings must become the hallmark of our urban planning efforts. Today, echoing this sentiment, our theme is: "**Co-creation of spaces and places that respond to just transition.**"

The carbon-intensity of the South African economy is unsustainable and risky to all, especially the vulnerable poor in our rural communities.

It is thus critical that we strengthen systems for adaptation and mitigation, build resilience in communities and accelerate our decarbonisation efforts and the pace of the just energy transition without leaving anyone behind.

The UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Simon Stiell, has recently stressed that **decarbonisation is the biggest transformation of the global economy in this century**.

Stiell avers that climate action aimed at reducing the carbon footprint is the single greatest opportunity for Africa, to lift up people, communities, and economies.

The opportunities for Africa have been identified in tripling renewable energy, doubling energy efficiency, and adopting transformative adaptations instead of merely reacting or responding to devastating climate impacts.

In other words, delivering on cleaner, more reliable and affordable energy across Africa carries the promise of unlocking a goldmine of human and economic benefits. More jobs, stronger local economies, underpinning more stability and opportunity, especially for women and the youth.

This means that we must seize the day and grab the monumental opportunities in clean energy and green infrastructure.

Research shows that financial flows to climate action are already estimated to be over a trillion dollars. In 2024 alone, investment in solar PV is set to grow to more than \$500 billion. More money is now going into solar than all other electricity generation technologies combined.

The investment opportunity is not just in solar and wind. It is also in a number of climate choices that we make as stakeholders - including where to build, what materials to use, how to heat and cool our offices, how to be resilient to storms or wildfires.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**, the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) plays a significant role in shaping our urban and rural spaces while influencing policy on sustainable infrastructure delivery.

We recognise its critical role in regulating the professions and providing regulatory frameworks within which various statutory councils operate.

These include engineering, town planning, property valuation, quantity surveying, land surveying, architecture, landscape architecture, construction and project management, and environmental management.

Working with academia and Professional Services in the Department, they must influence the curriculum of Programs that focus on designing, constructing, and retrofitting buildings with sustainable practices.

Skills development could include energy-efficient building design, green materials, water conservation, waste management, and construction using renewable resources.

Skills Development Programmes on climate-resilient infrastructure development and maintenance could include courses on flood-resistant structures, coastal erosion management, and climate-resilient urban planning.

It is important that the Department makes its contribution in the upskilling of our existing professionals in green building certification systems like EDGE, LEED, Green Star Africa, and energy-efficient design principles. Training on energy audits and the implementation of renewable energy sources (solar, wind) for buildings is also crucial.

Skills Development in particular for rural areas should focus on climate-adaptive architecture and construction, using sustainable and locally sourced materials. This can include skills in building homes and public buildings that are flood- and drought-resistant.

**Ladies and Gentlemen**, closing the gap between policy and practice requires the active involvement of all stakeholders. We must foster a culture of collaboration that transcends boundaries—be it geographic, sectoral, or ideological.

Government, private enterprise, local communities, and academia must forge robust partnerships that facilitate knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and resource sharing.

It is through these collaborative efforts that we can ensure that our policies translate into actionable projects that resonate with the needs and aspirations of our fellow South Africans.

This is our call to action. Climate change is everyone's business. Let us all pledge to do our part.

Together, we are carrying out the key priorities outlined by the Seventh Administration: fostering inclusive growth and job creation, reducing poverty and the cost of living, and building a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

I wish you a successful conference that will reflect the local experiences while offering tangible solutions for our rural communities to mitigate climate challenge.

I thank you!