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## SPEECH

### MINISTER MACPHERSON LAUNCHES WORKING ON INFRASTRUCTURE PILOT TO RESTORE DIGNITY THROUGH PERMANENT JOB PATHWAYS

*(Note to editors: The following address was delivered by Public Works & Infrastructure Minister Dean Macpherson at the launch of the Working on Infrastructure pilot programme at the Archie Gumede Conference Centre in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, on Monday, 4 May 2026.*

*The pilot forms part of the Minister's broader commitment to reform the Expanded Public Works Programme by improving transparency, ending abuse and political gatekeeping, and creating clearer pathways from temporary work opportunities to permanent employment.)*

- Public Works & Infrastructure Minister Dean Macpherson has launched the Working on Infrastructure pilot programme as a direct response to nine EPWP Listening Tours, where close to 4,000 participants and community members raised concerns about corruption, political patronage, abuse, and unfair access to EPWP opportunities.
- The pilot forms part of the Minister's commitment to reform EPWP by digitising recruitment through the SAYouth platform, removing political gatekeeping, and ensuring opportunities are allocated fairly, transparently, and without abuse.
- Through longer 8 to 10 month opportunities, skills development, workplace learning, mentorship, and private-sector partnerships, Working on Infrastructure aims to turn EPWP into a hand up to permanent employment, restoring dignity through jobs while helping maintain public infrastructure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just a few days ago, South Africa marked Workers' Day.

It is a day on which we honour the contribution of working people to our country.

It is a day on which we recognise the men and women who wake up every morning to build, clean, repair, teach, serve, care, produce and provide.

It is a day on which we remind ourselves that a job is not only about earning an income.

A job is about dignity.

And a job is about being able to look after yourself and your family.

Having a job is about being able to wake up in the morning and know that your hands, your skills, your effort and your time are needed.

Having a job is about being able to say: I am contributing. I am providing. I am building a future.

That is why unemployment is not only an economic crisis.

It is a dignity crisis.

Because when a person wants to work but cannot find work, it does not only affect their pocket.

It affects their confidence.

It affects their home.

It affects their children.

It affects their sense of place in the world.

It affects how they see themselves.

And in South Africa, there are millions of people who are not short of the desire to work.

They are short of the opportunity to work.

That is why we are here today.

We are here because the greatest restorer of dignity is a job.

We are here because no programme of government can claim to serve the poor if it does not help people move closer to work, skills, independence and a better life.

We are here because the Expanded Public Works Programme must once again become a programme that restores dignity, not one that too often leaves people feeling used, excluded, abused or forgotten.

And we are here because today, through the launch of the Working on Infrastructure pilot, we begin to give practical effect to the promise we made to communities across South Africa: that we have listened, that we have heard, and that we are now acting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was first appointed as the Minister, I made a pledge and commitment to the people of South Africa that we would cut corruption in EPWP, make it more fairer and more transparent.

Today, I am delivering on that promise to you, the people of our country.

Over the past year and a half, I have travelled across the country through the EPWP Listening Tour.

We wanted to listen to EPWP participants directly and hear what works and doesn't.

We listened to unemployed young people.

We listened to communities who have watched the programme operate in their streets, wards and municipalities.

We listened to people who still believe in the promise of EPWP.

And we listened to people who feel that promise has been broken.

Across nine EPWP Listening Tours, with more than 3,600 participants and community members engaging with us, we heard stories that we couldn't ignore.

We heard stories of hope.

We heard from people who said EPWP helped them put food on the table.

We heard from people who said EPWP gave them their first work opportunity.

We heard from people who said EPWP allowed them to serve their communities through road maintenance, grass cutting, street cleaning, public facility support and other important services.

We must acknowledge that.

EPWP has made a difference in the lives of millions of South Africans.

It has provided income.

It has provided work.

It has provided services in communities that needed them.

But we also heard stories of deep pain.

We heard from people who said opportunities were reserved for friends, relatives, political allies and people connected to those in power.

We heard from people who said they were asked to pay money before they could be placed on a list.

We heard from people who said they were threatened, intimidated or excluded because they did not belong to the right political structure.

We heard allegations of ghost beneficiaries.

We heard allegations of manipulated lists.

We heard allegations of the same people being recycled through opportunities while others were permanently locked outside.

And we heard allegations of sexual exploitation.

Sex for jobs.

Let us call it what it is.

It is abuse.

It is corruption.

It is the exploitation of the most vulnerable by those who should be protecting them.

It is an attack on the dignity of people who are simply asking for an honest opportunity to work.

And it has no place in the EPWP.

It has no place in government.

It has no place in South Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When a programme that was created to provide dignity becomes a tool through which people are humiliated, manipulated or abused, then we have a duty to act.

That is what today is about.

The Working on Infrastructure pilot project is a direct response to the EPWP Listening Tours.

It is the result of the commitment I made to communities that the days of abuse within EPWP must come to an end.

It is the result of the commitment I made that EPWP must not remain a programme where people are trapped in temporary work for years without training, progression or a path forward.

It is the result of the commitment I made that EPWP must become a hand up to permanent employment.

And today, we begin to deliver on that promise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

People do not want to be trapped in survival forever.

They want a future.

They want skills.

They want a fair chance.

They want to work.

They want to provide for their families.

They want to stand on their own feet.

That is why the EPWP must become more than a temporary safety net.

It must become a springboard to dignity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have said before that cutting grass or picking up litter for the rest of your life is not the future you have dreamed of.

There is no dignity in trapping a person in the same temporary opportunity without ever giving them the chance to move forward.

There is no dignity in a system where a person enters EPWP poor and leaves just as poor, with no certificate, no recognised skill, no workplace record, and no pathway to anything better.

There is no dignity in a programme that becomes the only lifeline for survival because the broader economy has failed to create enough jobs.

There is no dignity in people being forced to beg, plead or perform political loyalty to access a public opportunity.

There is no dignity in abuse.

There is no dignity in gatekeeping.

There is no dignity in corruption.

That is why reform is essential.

Because EPWP must not be a burden that keeps people trapped in poverty.

It must be a stepping stone towards a life of dignity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Working on Infrastructure pilot is built around a simple but powerful idea.

South Africa has an unemployment crisis.

South Africa also has an infrastructure maintenance crisis.

We have young people who want to work.

We have public buildings, schools, clinics, municipal facilities, government offices and community assets that need installation, repair and maintenance.

So why should these two challenges exist separately?

Why should young people sit at home while public infrastructure falls apart?

Why should government spend money on short-term work that does not build long-term skills, when that same investment can help maintain infrastructure and prepare people for real jobs?

Working on Infrastructure brings these two priorities together.

It says public employment must not only be about temporary relief.

It must also be about useful work.

It must be about maintaining public assets.

It must be about building skills that the economy actually needs.

It must be about preparing people for the workplace.

It must be about creating a pipeline of participants whose skills, experience and progress can be tracked, so that employers can find them, hire them and absorb them into the economy.

This is how we move EPWP from short-term survival to long-term opportunity.

This is how we turn public employment into a hand up.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the most important reforms in this pilot is how people will be recruited.

For too long, one of the biggest weaknesses in EPWP has been the human hand in the wrong place.

When lists are controlled by individuals, the door opens to manipulation.

When access depends on who you know, the door opens to patronage.

When recruitment is informal, the door opens to abuse.

When opportunities are distributed through political gatekeepers, the door closes on ordinary South Africans.

That must end.

Under this pilot, recruitment will be digitised through the SAYouth platform, supported by Harambee.

This matters.

It means a young person will be able to register, create a profile, add their skills and qualifications, apply for opportunities, and be matched more fairly.

It means we can verify people.

It means we can track participation.

It means we can see who is in the programme, where they are placed, what training they have received, and what happens to them after they leave.

It means opportunities should no longer be reserved for friends and family.

It means young people should not have to beg a councillor for a place on a list.

It means no one should have to produce a party card to access a public employment opportunity.

It means no one should have to pay a bribe.

And it means no woman should ever again be placed in a position where someone believes they can demand sex in exchange for a job.

This is what we mean when we say we are removing the human hand from the point where abuse happens.

We are not removing humanity from the programme.

We are removing manipulation.

We are removing gatekeeping.

We are removing the space where corruption grows.

Because EPWP must work for the unemployed person looking for an honest opportunity, not for the politically connected, not for ghost names on a spreadsheet, and not for those who see public employment as a vehicle for patronage and theft.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This pilot is also different because it is not built around a one-month opportunity that ends before a participant has even found their feet.

The Working on Infrastructure model is designed to provide a longer, more structured opportunity of between eight and ten months.

That matters.

Because skills are not built in a week.

Work readiness is not built in a day.

Confidence is not built through a once-off placement.

A young person needs time to learn.

Time to be mentored.

Time to be exposed to a real workplace that builds a record of experience.

Time to become employable.

That is why this pilot brings together recruitment, training, work readiness, workplace learning, mentorship and transition support.

TVET colleges and accredited partners will support technical and work-readiness training.

Municipalities, provincial departments, SMMEs and industry partners will help provide workplace exposure.

The CIDB will support standards and enterprise pathways.

YES, SAPOA, the National Business Initiative, Harambee and other partners will help link young people to real opportunities beyond the programme.

This is not government trying to do everything alone.

This is government accepting that if we want young people to move into permanent employment, the private sector must be part of the solution from the beginning.

Not as an afterthought.

Not as a guest at a launch.

But as an active partner in designing, hosting, mentoring and absorbing young people into real economic opportunities.

To our private sector partners here today: your role is essential.

You are not here for symbolism.

You are here because you can help turn this programme into a pipeline.

A pipeline of skilled, work-ready young people who can help maintain infrastructure, support businesses, grow SMMEs, and build the economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This launch also comes at an important moment for the credibility of EPWP.

Across the country, communities have raised serious concerns about corruption, unfair recruitment and abuse.

As the national department responsible for the programme, we do not have the luxury of looking away.

The days of turning a blind eye have come to an end.

That is why we have taken the strong stance to act and intervene where we see problems in how EPWP is being administered, just like we have done here in eThekweni where we have said we will have to withhold the EPWP grant for the new financial year if clear measures to act against ghost beneficiaries and employees receiving grants is not taken as highlighted by the Auditor General

To date, I have had no response from eThekweni to my request for a council resolution that commits to this action as requested by the AG.

This is unfortunate and I urge the leadership of the municipality to do so to avoid losing this grant.

We are prepared to help local government comply, but they must meet us halfway.

We cannot continue as if nothing is wrong when public money meant for the poor is placed at risk.

We cannot speak about dignity while tolerating systems that strip people of dignity.

We cannot speak about opportunity while allowing opportunities to be captured by a few.

And we cannot speak about reform unless we are prepared to change the way the system works.

That is why we must be uncompromising.

EPWP must be protected from those who want to use it for themselves.

It must be rebuilt for the people it was meant to serve.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

That is why Working on Infrastructure is so important.

The pilot we launch today will begin in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

These provinces will help us test the model, identify what works, correct what does not, and build the lessons needed for national rollout.

We are not pretending that everything will be perfect from day one.

We will judge it by whether participants leave the programme better off than when they entered.

We will judge it by whether employers can look at this programme and say: here are young people we can hire.

For too long, too many South Africans have suffered the indignity of being willing to work but unable to find work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To the young people here today, I want to speak directly to you.

We have heard you.

We have heard your frustration.

We have heard your anger.

We have heard your disappointment.

We have heard the stories of unfairness, exclusion and abuse.

And we have heard your desire to work.

My message to you is simple: help is on the way.

Not because government has suddenly discovered unemployment.

Not because this challenge is new.

But because we are now doing the hard work of changing the system so that it works better for you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we turn a promise into potential.

To the young people of KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo who will be part of this pilot: show South Africa what is possible.

To our partners: help us prove that government, business and civil society can deliver together.

To our officials: implement this programme with discipline, urgency and integrity.

And to every South African who has lost hope in ever working, today we take your hand and say, walk with us as we work to restore your dignity.

I thank you.

**Enquiries:**

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