

Minister of Public Works
Mr J Radebe
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First International Conference on Construction Development Singapore

Honourable Chairperson,
Your excellencies,
Distinguished delegates from around the world,
Members of the international media.

It gives me great pleasure to join you today from across the Indian Ocean via satellite in this august and important International Conference. I must express my sincere apologies and my intense disappointment for not being with you in person. Nonetheless, let me express my deepest appreciation for the honour you have bestowed upon my country in asking me to present this address. Democratic South Africa is still a newcomer to the international arena but we are proud to play our part as the globe prepares for many great challenges of the next millennium. The recent history of our country has shown South Africans from all walks of life that the lessons we benefit from most are those born from international co-operation, experience, and extensive participation.

Although I cannot see you, I can sense the excitement of your combined energy as you prepare to get down to the work of conference. The fact that we can communicate in this manner is a small example of how the global village interrelates. I trust your proceedings will provide another fine example of how the villagers can work together for the benefit of all.

This First International Conference on Construction Industry Development is a very special occasion. It draws together government officials, specialists, researchers, constructors and designers from a wide range of disciplines to focus their attention on development in the construction industry. I am sure that I speak for all of us as I say "thank you" to the National University of Singapore, and particularly the School of Building and Real Estate, and other collaborating organisations which have taken this important lead to focus attention on a critical sector of economic endeavour, one which is all too often neglected or, at best, taken for granted.

The construction industry affects the lives of all humankind.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me pause briefly and ask you to look around the conference hall. You come from all around the world: you have gathered together experience and expertise from countries that are not represented here. You are all drawn from the vast complex collectively referred to as the construction industry. Getting you all together has required the services of a whole range of different technologies, many of which are at the cutting edge of modern scientific development. Think for a minute about the roots of our modern industry, and marvel at the genius of our forebears. Using methods and techniques which we have been able to refine, and some labour practices for example that we now reject, our multi-national world still boasts amazing examples of major construction sites which serve as monuments to public works endeavours and of the inter-relationship between civil society and government in one way or another. The pyramids of Egypt, the temple complex of Angkor Watt in Cambodia, the Great Wall of China, Great Zimbabwe in Southern Africa, the mountain glories of the Inca and Maya civilisations preceded the magnificence of the Indian subcontinent, or the great cathedrals and places of worship in Europe and the Levant. You have seen the splendour of Singapore's own skyline in the morning sun, and we are reminded of the great cities of the world today as well as the less visible architecture and homes of the billions who still live in abject poverty around the world.

What links the ancient with the modern, the magnificence of the great with the beauty of the humble adobe hut, is humanities' vision of grandeur magnified by intellectual capacity but restrained by the reality of poverty, of the lack of resources, of widespread environmental contamination. As we move into the next millennium, the responsibility to provide shelter to house the world's population, to provide the offices from which to direct development, to build the bridges, ports, road systems, maintenance depots, telecommunication sites, hospitals, crèches and so on fall on the shoulders of the construction industry. This is a mighty responsibility and it is part of the task of this conference to provide indicators of how best we can do it. This has to be an international effort as we know only too well that the conflicts caused all too often by poverty and degradation in many parts of the world are linked to areas which suffer from little or no infrastructure and which provide no hope except the restless discontent of millions. Insecurity in part of the village must occupy the minds of the rest of the people living there. That is an unmistakable reality of the modern global village.

The enormity of the challenge facing us is not minimised by the fact that most of our endeavours are taken for granted. Without thought to the source and effort of our industry, switches are activated and taps are turned on and off every second of the day. The industry's products are used every day by billions of people when driving or crossing the road, in offices, factories, or when preparing the family meal. The diversity of the industry's products includes pipelines and bridges, silos and tower blocks. Whole cities are the product of our industry, and every one of its products must be maintained.

All over the world international gatherings frequently discuss a myriad of policies aimed at ensuring that development is participatory, sustainable, job creating. Development should encourage the informal sector rather than marginalised it. It should seek to ensure equitable access to productive assets. This conference sends an important signal to the international community: the construction industry must be part of those global debates as we can provide much needed employment and infrastructure. In the process we can create the conditions in which millions of people may live with dignity in a world which seems increasingly determined to define unemployment as an acceptable norm.

There are undoubtedly many priority issues on the agenda of the developing world. Few of them however assume the same urgency as the area of infrastructure deficiencies, backlogs and disparities. The legacy of uneven development and under-development in post-colonial societies and the crippling effect that this has had on our capacity to deliver effectively has been particularly debilitating in the post-independence era. This is certainly true of our own experience in South Africa.

This stark reality has precipitated a very fundamental question which I believe must underpin the deliberations of this august international forum. If the skill we have jointly accumulated and assembled in Singapore today is to be effectively channelled into a sustainable and better world tomorrow, then the inputs and discussion at this conference should be guided by a fundamental question of conscience. That question asks: "construction industry development : for whom and whose benefit? For what purpose? and how best to achieve it?"

If, in the various sessions of conference, each of us can hold these two related questions uppermost in our minds, then I believe we can start distilling a vision of the development imperatives and priorities which will enable the construction industry to maximise its role in creating tomorrow's world on a more stable and equitable foundation than the one we inhabit today.

Certainly, in the context of the developing world we need to define responses aimed at rolling back the enormous legacy of an inadequate infrastructure, its inequitable distribution and the underdevelopment of locally based physical and human resources. The rapid urbanisation of recent times has amplified the desperation of millions of people who, in conditions of extreme overcrowding still do not have access to water or sanitation.

The construction industry operates in a complex and generally project-specific environment. It is impacted on by a wide range of legislation and regulation. Its operation is governed by numerous forms of contract and subcontract in a variety of combinations. Implementation is heavily dependent on labour and each new project faces different challenges in terms of size and scope, location and terrain and the range of skills and materials required. The industry is mobile, and every project involves the assembly of a new combination of team players and resources : new clients, a spectrum of professional disciplines, contractors and subcontractors, skilled and unskilled workers, plant and equipment.

Construction is a competitive and high risk business for both client and contractor. Hence, the art of construction procurement is uniquely advanced, with a spectrum of delivery models appropriate to different procurement objectives. Project managed delivery, conventional contracts and design and build contracts, are constantly developing, as are the materials and technologies used by the industry.

In short, nothing in our industry is static. Dynamic change is the order of the day, and hence the immense significance of this international conference, which brings us together, to learn from each other and to weave together the rich tapestry of our shared international experience.

In the complex project environment of construction endeavour, the industry's development is an issue broader than technology alone. Amongst other things, it is bound up with the need to transform industry relations, relations between clients and contractors, contractors and the professions, subcontractors and the workforce itself. My perusal of the conference agenda confirms that the many topics identified reflect international experience on all the aspects I have touched upon, and many more. It reflects a pragmatic focus on advanced technologies, the development and the developing countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, I took the opportunity at the beginning of this address to refer to the contribution South Africa tries to make in the fulfilment of our international obligations. We come from a background which emphasises that although all countries do have unique circumstances, there is much that we can learn from each other. I am extremely happy that this conference affords us the opportunity to share our vision and goals, our experiences and approaches in an effort to come to terms with the dynamics of global imperatives in order to effectively position ourselves in relation to "state of the art thinking" in the construction sector.

In South Africa, our experience in the post-liberation era, has seen infrastructure development occupying a central position in the policy of our Government of National Unity for achieving economic growth and improving the quality of life of the majority of South Africans. It is significant to note however that the construction industry which is so fundamental for providing the infrastructure to sustain ongoing development of our country, has in the past years only contributed 2,79 percent of our national gross domestic product. Clearly, this reflects a gross distortion rooted in the apartheid government's preoccupation with policies of domination, rather than those of development. This policy has also impacted negatively on the structural and operational nature of our domestic construction industry, impeding its development and its ability to meet and keep abreast of demands.

Confronted with this spectre, we have over the past year or so relentlessly worked at galvanising an across the industry buy-in to create an enabling framework for the reconstruction, growth and development of the construction industry. On the 27 November 1997, this initiative was brought to fruition through the launch of a major government policy initiative in the form of a Green Paper on the Construction Industry, setting out our vision for its development, and mechanisms for taking this process forward.

But we realise that we cannot afford the luxury of awaiting the outcome of this overarching industry development framework. Parallel to this initiative, government has over the past two years championed public sector procurement reform in an attempt to unlock the antiquated system which was primarily geared at entrenching the status quo and utterly incapable of addressing the development priorities of the new dispensation.

Critical to the success of industry development and infrastructure delivery is the comprehensive transformation of all organs of the public service to meet the new development challenges. Since the public service in South Africa accounts for 40-50% of total construction spending, its efficiency and expertise as a client and facilitator, is a vital component of the delivery process.

To give practical expression to its determination to transform both industry and the public sector as instruments of delivery, government has vigorously pursued the creation of innovative alternate infrastructure delivery models primarily geared: * at cutting through the impediments such as huge time-lags in the procurement and design phase, * addressing skewed tender procedures unduly prejudicing the historically disadvantaged and emerging sector from access to economic opportunities, * at directing public procurement towards the attainment of the broader socio-economic objectives of government such as the creation of sustainable productive employment,

The most notable of these initiatives has been the implementation of our Affirmative Procurement Policy (APP) which promotes access to work by formerly marginalised population groups. In addition, our Rapid Delivery Procurement System (RDPS) has focused particularly on fast-tracking the delivery of critical public sector infrastructure. The Community Based Public Works Programme, judged by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to be the leading public works programme in over 30 developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, has focused on empowering and building capacity in historically marginalised, but particularly rural communities. The focus of the CBPWP has been particularly on the creation of sustainable infrastructure community assets such as clinics, crèches, schools, roads, sanitation, water reticulation, dams and multi-purpose community halls. Through these construction projects a number of goals have been attained such as critical infrastructure delivery, job creation, skills transfer, training and human resource development, stimulation of the local economy through greater access to markets and opportunities and the empowerment of women, youth and the disabled.

Another fundamental reflection of the paradigm shift in the public sector, has been in the fostering of creative private-public sector partnerships in infrastructure delivery. Through government's innovative pilot Asset Procurement Operating Partnership System (APOPS), private sector capital can be geared towards the procurement and operationalisation of public infrastructure facilities.

The need to nurture and champion private-public sector partnerships is critical to meeting the demands of development on the one hand and the imperatives of the reconstruction, growth and development of the industry on the other.

While by no means a comprehensive overview, the initiatives I have outlined provide examples of our response to the question of what, and who, construction industry development should serve in the context of our new South Africa.

Allow me a few remarks in conclusion.

Although I cannot be with you, I wish to place on record that I draw confidence from the fact that a very capable and competent delegation from my own Public Works Department, the South African construction industry, and from non-governmental organisations, will make a valuable and meaningful contribution towards consolidating our shared experiences and crystallising a vision for greater networking, co-operation and industry development the world over. I look forward to the briefing I will receive on their return when they share with me the important lessons and conclusions of the conference. These will filter into our systems and nurture our programmes for improving the quality of life of millions of South Africans.

The construction industry the world over, but particularly in developing countries, has a pivotal role to play in infrastructure development. The key lies in innovation and in unlocking the many impediments which curtail its tremendous potential for shaping a sustainable destiny for all of humanity.

Once again I would like to congratulate the conference organisers for providing an international platform to take these objectives forward. I am sure the renowned beauty of Singapore and the progress made by its government and people will stimulate conference participation.

Arising from this initiative, I would like to see a greater commitment to building effective international networks, co-operation in developing better information and information technology systems for enhanced industry performance, the institution of research and academic awards for innovation and enhancement of international best practices in the industry and greater inter-governmental liaison in the formulation of policy for the development of the construction industry. Particularly I appeal for an agenda for the integration of the developing world into global construction initiatives, not only as client but also as architect of ideas in the design of the path we must follow.

May I take the liberty of requesting you all to consider convening the next international conference on construction industry development in South Africa. I believe that it will be an enriching experience for all of us. The South African government and the industry itself would be delighted to act as hosts for such an important event.

Finally, let me thank the organisers once again for affording me this opportunity to participate from a distance and to share some ideas on such a crucial topic. Let me express my appreciation, too, to South Africa's hard-working representative in Singapore, Mr Carl Werth for the work he has performed assisting my office with the preparations for this conference, and for being such a fine representative of the new South Africa abroad. I trust that this international conference will indeed be extremely stimulating and invigorating and that the distilled experiences garnered here will find their way into concrete practice which will fundamentally improve the future of this global industry!

On behalf of President Nelson Mandela's government, my own national department of Public Works, and the people of South Africa, may I wish you considered and fruitful deliberations.

I thank you and wish you well!

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