

Minister of Public Works
MEC for Public Works, Mr Collins Chabane,
on behalf of Ms S Sigcau
12 April 2002

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Launch of the Public Works Communicators Forum at the Zebra Country Lodge

MECs for Works
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Amongst the many challenges faced by our democratic government in this country, has been that of restructuring government communication to accompany the successful transformation from apartheid to democracy.

This restructuring entails much more than posts and lines of reporting. The actual communication posts on the establishments of our respective units of government and the accompanying lines of reporting have been instituted to prepare the ground for the better delivery of information and effective communication.

Within the appropriately restructured overall government communication function, a number of key dynamics have to be continuously managed to ensure the maximum results for our integrated government approach to development and socio-economic growth. The supposition of course being that the political principals provide the guidance in respect of required communication policy direction, control the actual content and targeting and in general take the lead in developing and managing the communications strategy through their respective offices. This does not diminish the responsibility of the respective accounting officers and other officials to provide and convey the detailed information as required by the political principals.

As we have made great strides in the political and executive coordination of public works throughout South Africa, (Minmec and HoD structures) I believe that the appropriate time has come for us to afford our communicators within the portfolio the opportunity to share in fuller cooperation. This should lead to greater media understanding of the essential role that public works play in the infrastructure and socio-economic development of all societies in South Africa.

For that reason we are establishing this coordinating forum, to foster and enhance interaction between the various communicators and encourage increased liaison internally as well as externally with our public and with the media.

Allow me to refer back as far as October 1996, to the date of the Comtask Report. This report identified the principles guiding the structural changes within government communications as:

- Efficiency and cost effectiveness
- Professionalism
- Political control of the communications process
- Credibility and transparency.

The Comtask Report also referred to the central coordination and local implementation of communication, according to individually authored communication strategies and management of daily news by the respective units of government at the various levels, providing it is done "under the coordinating eye of the GCIS".

Nevertheless government acknowledges that the ideal situation is yet to be fully arrived at and that government communication still warrants more attention. Even in his State of the Nation address this year, President Thabo Mbeki alluded to the inefficiency of current communication systems by saying, " The weaknesses pointed out by the Stellenbosch researchers reflect a variety of limitations in the structures and systems of government that should be put right".

The President was responding to the study (and its report) undertaken by a team of academics at the University of Stellenbosch that commented on the government's performance during 2001.

Despite allocating a score rating of 65% for government successes as set out at the beginning of 2001, the

team attributed the shortcomings of government, to among others, inadequate communications, which in their words was "not always optimum".

This is of major concern to us as government, particularly at this critical point in time as we are rolling out developmental communications. We believe that developmental communications promoted in a spirit of transparency and accountability, will enable the people for the first time in centuries to formulate their own messages and relay their thoughts and feelings back to government in a manner that will entrench and strengthen democracy. By its definition, democracy implies a responsive government, one that is premised on the wishes of the majority of the people.

The launch of the Public Works Communications Forum today should be read against this background. It is another vital step to improve and coordinate our communication efforts and share information. As stated, the objectives of the Forum will be to:

- Generate co-ordinated and coherent messages in support of MinMec and HoD Forums to ensure that Public Works Communicators speak with a common voice in all its integrated and related communication activities
- Forge closer operational working relationships between tiers of government and position the National Public Works Programme as the flagship of public works
- Share media databases and ensure that Communication Practitioners dealing with the media build and maintain good working relationships
- Pool together resources as and when required in order to communicate effectively and learn from each other's success
- Evaluate the effectiveness of our public works communications campaigns and programmes at all levels of government
- Develop a national Public Works Communication Strategy.

Public Works is one of the oldest government functions in the modern development of South Africa. The building of the Castle of Good Hope by Jan van Riebeck in 1652 may be interpreted as the first public works project. About 350 years on public works continues to play an important role in the economic growth and social development of South Africa.

However, a maturing sense of democracy, competition for a limited editorial space in the media and a need to communicate constantly has meant that as public works communicators we have to maintain a high visibility in the public eye. Like most other government functions public works needs to claim its stake in the business of communication and information in order to ensure that we have an informed populace.

If one thinks of the amount of infrastructure we collectively build and maintain, the economic opportunities we provide and the communities we develop, there is no doubt that our function is key to the economic and social transformation of this country. We need to come out with a coordinated and concerted effort to position or reposition public works in the minds of the people.

We need to come out with bold and workable strategies; strategies that will begin to highlight some of the achievements by Public Works. For indeed we have worked very hard to turn around the levels of service delivery within public works; and to put in process mechanisms of dealing with corruption with quite a good measure of success.

I have noticed with pride the role that Public Works is playing within government communications. I refer specifically to the participation of Public Works, as an active member, in relevant communication clusters and fora. This is to support the decisions taken by Cabinet and its committees as well as the programs adopted for execution by the Forum of Directors-General and their clusters.

Two weeks ago, the Chief Director: Communication in the National Department of Public Works represented public works in a workshop to generate standards for all government communicators. About eight all-encompassing standards were generated and these will soon be forwarded to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for adoption. Once adopted they will form the basis for the future qualifications for the Outcomes Based System of education. This is pioneering work and public works will be remembered as one of the architects of communication standards for government. In the near future, all people who join government communications either at national or provincial level will be assessed for competency against these standards.

I sincerely hope that as you gather here today, you will take the opportunity to ponder on some communication basics, tips and innovations offered by the list of important speakers you have lined up.

We shall await with much optimism the results and progress of your endeavour. Together with all the MECs we shall continue to support any initiatives aimed at advancing the objectives of our government and its institutions.

As South Africans we should continue to work together, talk, communicate, and share our achievements - I trust that you will proudly continue the South African magic - as they say in Tourism: "We are proudly South African".

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