

Minister of Public Works
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Poverty and Inequality Conference
Midrand Conference Centre

Chairperson,
Cabinet colleagues,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour to open this very important conference on poverty and inequality in South Africa. We are here to receive and discuss the report commissioned by the Office of the Deputy President and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality. The Report "*reviews the extent and nature of poverty and inequality in South Africa, assesses the current policy framework for the reduction of both, and provides guidelines on the formulation and implementation of such a policy.*" It represents an important milestone.

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, President Mandela's government has set out to combat our greatest threat: the poverty and inequality that bedevils our nation.

I do not wish to pre-empt either the detail or the conclusions of the Report this morning so I suggest that before we begin our deliberations today, we should be clear about at least three issues:

why should we as South Africans be so concerned about poverty and inequality in our country?

why has the advent of democracy witnessed a concerted effort to tackle the problem?

and

what have we done so far to combat poverty and inequality?

South Africa is a land of contrasts. We celebrate the diversity of our geography and environment, the richness of our multi-cultural linguistic and religious communities, the fascination of the world with our transition from the violence of apartheid to the security of our young democracy. More recently, as emphasised by our Deputy President Thabo Mbeki in the context of a discussion on reconciliation and nation-building, we have begun as South Africans together to confront perhaps the most significant contrast in our land: the differences between the two nations, black and white, which are defined mostly in terms of access [in the case of most whites] or the lack thereof [in the case of the vast majority of blacks], to life-sustaining opportunity, skills, knowledge, facilities, infrastructure and natural resources. Essentially, "*this reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations.*"

The statistical evidence is stark and I am sure we will hear more of this during the course of today. So briefly: over three million households are in poverty. Over 2.3 million South Africans suffer from malnutrition, including 87% of all African children under 12 years. Almost 95% of all our poor are African, 5% coloured and less than 1% indian and white. Over 75% of poverty is concentrated in rural areas, especially in the former homelands for which the previous regime conveniently never kept statistics. Some 65% of our adult population is illiterate. About 4% of all children between the ages of 10 and 14 are engaged in child labour. In excess of 9 million people live in imijondolo. Only 41% of rural clinics have an ambulance within one hour of an emergency call, compared to 71% of urban clinics. 6% of the population earns 40% of the income. An so on.

Let me just emphasise that government is convinced that in many ways the political transition from apartheid autocracy to democracy has not been carried through to the socio-economic sphere of our society yet. Poverty comes in many forms, all of which are related to its close cousin: inequality. Even if we were to implement policies that ensured that all of South Africa's people lived above a statistically defined poverty datum line, if the gap between those at the top who are rich and those who remain at the bottom remains as wide as it is at the moment, then we will not have succeeded in our task of building community, let alone nation in South Africa.

Let us be reminded of what George Orwell once wrote: "*Words are such feeble things. What is the use of a brief phrase like ... 'four beds for eight people'? It is the kind of thing your eye slides over, registering nothing. And yet what a wealth of misery it can cover.*"

Poverty and inequality are the every day existence of millions of our people. Economic fluctuations may mean that one family has to forego red meat or caviar every now and then; for others they represent calamities which resound with the cries of hungry babies, silent children and aching parents whose self-esteem has been crushed.

For those in doubt about the extent of the problem should just look around. Consider the shacks that come into view next time the plane lands at Cape Town international airport. Think about the where and why of the street children who clamour at your car windows in all our major cities. Listen to the muffled tones of children clutched to their mother's breasts in the crowded waiting rooms of rural clinics. Wonder whether you could manage a 90kg load of wood, gathered and carried on your head for more than 5 hours before you light the fire and prepare a small meal for your family. Urbanites complain frequently about the time spent commuting from the suburbs to the cities each day. Next time pause and think, for example, of the Marabastad - Pretoria bus where your journey to work begins at 2.30am, change busses and arrive in Pretoria at 7am. You still need to get back home the same day. Consider also the increasing instance of young white mothers, their skin scorched by our summer sun, often with youngsters, standing with cardboard placards asking for help, silent in their humility. Those of us who are more fortunate than others should as a matter of course go to any township cemetery in our land, but particularly those in rural areas, and stand silent before the long rows of graves, those that are only a few feet long, the resting place of the millions of children who never reached the age of 5 because of the associated hazards of malnutrition, disease, and denial.

Always we must remember the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "*We are not dealing with sets of statistics. We are talking about people of flesh and blood, who laugh and cry, who love and hate, who enjoy being cuddled.*"

Poverty and inequality are significant in any society. First and foremost, the humanity of people subjected to poverty is degraded. Often they are rejected and treated with contempt. Self-esteem and initiative are frequently smothered. The experience of poverty can often turn people against each other, looking inward to a symptom rather than a cause of their situation. But poverty and inequality are also extremely inefficient in economic terms. Malnourished or underfed scholars or workers cannot perform at their best. Poverty undermines the ability of people to consider each other as equals, as requiring respect from fellow citizens.

In South Africa, however, poverty in the present-day breathes the air of apartheid's legacy. For under apartheid the gap between black and white, between poor and rich, and the imbalances between rural and urban areas came about mainly as a result of the conscious, deliberate and committed application of policies and laws approved by minority parliaments and governments. The examples are legion, the experiences real, and the result a deep and widespread inequality and poverty that carries a largely racial definition. But the deliberate creation of poverty amongst the majority of South Africans was underpinned constantly by the eradication of legal citizenship and the implementation of a political system of discrimination that encouraged the growth of malignant racism, of disrespect for fellow human beings, and cleared the path for an assault on the dignity of all black people where age or gender were perceived in the eyes of the ruler as insignificant. Racism and racist practices have gone hand in hand with structural inequality and the perpetuation of poverty in our society. These diseases still run deep in our society. Just the other day I was appalled to learn of instances where terms like 'baas' and 'missus' and 'boys' are still used by some public but not-so-civil servants in South Africa.

Democracy in South Africa provides us with an important weapon to use in our war against poverty and inequality. Our constitution notes the historical task we have of reconciling our pasts, of developing our country, and of ensuring for all our people a society in which we can all become people in the true sense of the term.

The RDP remains the policy framework within which we pursue the objective of creating a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous society. GEAR is one of the principal instruments for the realisation of the policy objectives contained in the RDP. Since 1994 all government departments have embraced programmes and policies that tackle the scourge of poverty in one way or another. These efforts have embraced a number of issues recognised by, among others, the United Nations Development Programme. We have created an enabling environment for people-centred development based on the need to empower people for self-reliance. We have gone a long way already to ensure improved access to basic infrastructure and social services, particularly in rural areas. Many programmes address sustainable job creation. Initiatives have been taken to provide greater access to credit and opportunities for emerging businesses. We have extended social

protection for vulnerable people such as the aged, pregnant mothers and children, to greater numbers of people than ever before. All programmes promote gender equity and the full participation of women in all aspects of life in our society. We are conscious, too, of the necessity to preserve, maintain and regenerate our natural resource base. We have a security umbrella under which we can conduct our work. Essential elements such as the provision of running water, not only as a source of food, cleanliness and health, but also for production are central to all of our thinking. Primary health care, literacy and education for self-reliance, safe and healthy work environments, and so on are all part of the overall strategy to combat poverty and inequality.

In fact, imagine for a moment, an electronic map of South Africa that somehow indicated progress on a quarterly basis of infrastructural delivery, of the number of water points, taps and pipelines installed, of rural access roads built, of bridges and clinics and schools, of creches and so on; and the background colour changes to indicate how many more people received pensions now in an easier manner than before, who benefited from the free health care and where these changes were taking place. Add all the progress made in these 4 short years to address the inequities of a system established during 300 years of colonialism and apartheid, and still the result should amaze: our electronic map squirms with movement, and shocks the eye with its colour variations!

Co-ordination of these efforts has taken longer than we originally expected, but firm foundations have been laid for further progress. But we are dealing with an issue that pervades the very soul of our nation. Thus, government can only act as a leading activist in identifying the ground rules, establishing a coherent framework and providing the necessary encouragement to all sectors of our society. We are not alone: because it is the responsibility of all of us; political parties, business enterprises, organised labour, community and non-governmental organisations, religious groups and volunteer services, and of course our people generally, to get involved.

Our experience shows, and indeed the facts also indicate, that poor people themselves engage in a myriad of activities in order to survive in attempts to break the circumstance of poverty that chains them to drudgery. Sometimes, that struggle breaks down into despondency and despair. Most times, however, these struggles display intense ingenuity and initiative that no amount of scholarship could ever teach. Underneath the superficial veneer of helplessness which blinkered observers too often concentrate on are talents, contributions and skills and capabilities that are just as valuable as those displayed by the more fortunate.

Fighting poverty successfully requires a redistribution of access to facilities, to education, to opportunities to all our people. It demands not only that people have access but are also able to engage with that access, to develop their own self-reliance, using the safety nets and stepping stones which society as a whole can provide. Government has accepted the responsibility of taking the lead in initiatives to reduce and eradicate poverty and inequality. Our budget reform processes aim to open up access even to how we allocate funds; the allocations themselves are determined according to the priorities we have identified and these are firmly located in the social arena.

Our ultimate success depends on our ability as South Africans to strive consciously to overcome the negative results of deliberate poverty-enhancing policies. Our approach appreciates that the state has to use its muscle and the authority of its democratic mandate to work actively to give economic teeth to our political liberation. We understand, too, the domestic and international context of our economic endeavour and prefer to administer our own forms of control and discipline.

Deputy President Mbeki has outlined items which should form a common national agenda, and these include *"a common fight to eradicate the legacy of apartheid" in all its manifestations; "a commitment to confront the economic challenges facing our country, in a manner that simultaneously addresses issues of high and sustained growth and raising the living standards of especially the black poor"; and to adopt "an all-embracing effort to build a sense of common nationhood and a shared destiny, as a result of which we can entrench into the minds of all our people the understanding that however varied their skin complexions, cultures and life conditions, the success of each nevertheless depends on the effort the other will make to turn into reality the precept that each is his or her brother's or sister's keeper."*

This mammoth task requires thoughtful and careful planning. We are addressing the problem of poverty head-on. But for us in government and I am sure in many other institutions across our land, there is no such thing as "an acceptable level of poverty and inequality" in our country. Even if we were able to talk about only 1% of our population as poor, it would be 1% too many. Our Bill of Rights and the socio-economic rights enshrined therein presents us with a goal, an objective to actively work towards. There can be no comfort zones in the fight against poverty. And hence there is the constant need for critical assessment of where we are and what we have done. The terrain is changing all the time and we need to keep abreast of those changes in order to

speed things up. That is why, essentially, the researchers and their support staff need our congratulations and our gratitude for the production of this detailed and extensive Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa. Yours is a major contribution that helps us identify the magnitude and nature of the problem, assess what we have done, and guide our future path.

Systematic attempts to address the inhumane savagery of poverty in our country have been few and far between. During the 1930's the dire plight of poor, mainly Afrikaner, whites, mostly forced off the land and thrust unprepared into urban areas and towns, witnessed the attention of the first Carnegie Commission. Its report outlined horrendous stories of abject poverty and destitution. Its solutions however, whilst successful for poor whites also provided a catalyst for the further denial of human rights to black South Africans, helping to create the structural and political climate where poverty for blacks became official policy even before apartheid. In 1984 a second Carnegie Conference on Poverty convened to correct the imbalance, focusing attention for the first time on Southern Africa and inclusive of all who fell in a broadly defined category of human deprivation and poverty. Its existence, let alone its radical yet sensible proposals for "uprooting poverty" were denounced in Parliament by PW Botha as a waste of time and a purely political event. He, and his successors thereafter, consistently refused to acknowledge that in South Africa at least, the question of poverty and its eradication are profoundly political issues.

The Report we receive today goes beyond all of the previous ones, and its impact will be felt precisely because it has been prepared for a government that cares, for a government that has already shown its ability to direct resources in a meaningful way to uprooting poverty once and for all, for a government that is convinced that all South Africans, and all who live here, not only have a right to a dignified and respected existence free of poverty, but can depend on their government to lead the way.

Our government understands the nature of the challenge this places on our shoulders. The majority government of the ANC and IFP is drawn from the life-experience of the masses of our people who were dispossessed. Identifying and tackling an issue such as poverty and inequality is something that comes from within us; it is not a foreign or distant problem. *Ubuntu* defines the situation of others as ours; the problem as ours; the solution as ours, together for the benefit of us all. It is a concept that embraces all South Africans.

The task confronting us is this: we need to ensure that the current reality of the two nations in our land is itself overcome to ensure that the differences that constitute their separate identities does not again become the cause of division, divergence and potential destruction.

There are many sources from which I could draw to leave us with a sense of purpose, commitment and hope. I choose the words of one of Africa's greatest novelists, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o:

The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, and downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came: a world in which goodness and beauty and strength and courage would be seen not in how cunning one can be, not in how much power to oppress one possessed, but only in one's contribution in creating a more humane world in which the inherited inventive genius of man in culture and science from all ages and climes would not be the monopoly of a few, but for the use of all, so that all flowers in all their different colours would ripen and bear fruit and seeds. And the seeds would be put into the ground and they would once again sprout and flower in rain and sunshine.

I thank you.

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