

**Minister of Public Works
Mr J Radebe
17 September 1998**

[Back](#)

**Keynote Address at the
NGO Week – National Conference**

Government's Perspective on Poverty and the Economy

Chairman,
Comrades,
Ladies and gentlemen.

At the outset let me thank you on behalf of government for the opportunity to address you this afternoon on the subject of the Mandela government's perspective on "Poverty and the Economy". It is always a pleasure for us to share ideas in forums where the all-important NGO sector in our country is represented. As most of you know, the ANC and the mass democratic movement in general owe a great debt to the work of countless thousands of men and women, paid-up workers and volunteers who spent hours, weeks, months and years, preparing our communities for the day when they would be able to assume control over their own lives. Although not in the pay of the liberation movement, the groundwork prepared by many NGOs during the latter days of apartheid ensured that the foundations upon which we build today are strong, well-defined and cover many areas of government endeavour.

I notice from your programme that you have four days of deliberations. As an aside I must say that I envy you the time you have allocated to discuss the important issues on your agenda – in government, there are times that we wish for four hours rather than the minutes we have to make assessments and reach decisions! More seriously, though, during the next four days in conference you will be dealing with a whole range of topics. All of them revolve around different aspects of the poverty question in our country, and your role as NGOs in helping the country as a whole to develop a sustained strategic approach to the elimination of poverty in South Africa.

I do not want to use my time with you to repeat strings of statistics that illustrate the enormity of the problem we face. I merely refer you all to documentation and previous conferences. Many of you will recall the work of the Second Carnegie Conference on Poverty during the 1980s: indeed some of you participated in that conference while some of us were still in exile or in gaol. I know from my own experience how eagerly the ANC waited for the results of that conference and especially the hundreds of papers it produced. More recently, the Office of the Deputy President commissioned a study into the relationship between poverty and inequality in South Africa. The report was released in June this year and generally was well received. Shortly thereafter members of the religious community gathered under the auspices of Archbishop Ndungane to develop proposals on measures to eradicate poverty. Your NGO Week itself has allocated significant time to the topic. All of these initiatives precede the Presidential Job Summit scheduled for next month.

Chairperson, I present this litany of conferences and workshops merely to make a simple but important point. Government and civil society in this country are fully aware of the scourge that poverty represents and we are constantly engaged in practical efforts to eradicate it and we continually assess and reassess our efforts and strategies. But because the problem is so immense we welcome all efforts to assist. That is why, ultimately, we in government will consider seriously the outcome of your deliberations over the next few days. Unfortunately other duties summons me away from here, but I rest assured in the knowledge that you will let us know promptly what your resolutions are. We acknowledge and are indeed grateful that the NGO community keeps us on our toes!

In any event, many of the NGOs present here today are more familiar than most with the conditions and livelihood of our communities. Many of you have first-hand experience of the deepest rural areas, the rambling shantytowns and informal settlements, the terrible incidents of child and spouse abuse, rape, and drug and alcohol abuse. Your experience, taken together with the programmes that you individually and collectively develop and implement, is one of the most valuable assets we have in this country. You combat poverty first-hand, often in difficult circumstances but I would hope always with the necessary co-operation and facilitation of all spheres of government.

Let me turn to the substance of my address to you this afternoon.

Government arms itself in the war against poverty directly in two ways at this stage. First of all, all government

departments have integrated the base elements of the RDP platform into their line-function budgets and activities. Second, and deliberately, since last year, government has set aside increasing amounts of money that are dedicated solely for poverty relief programmes.

Indirectly, government addresses the eradication of poverty through the adoption and creation of policy frameworks in a whole range of areas that allow for the inclusive participation of civil society at large, NGOs, religious groups, charity organisations, foreign donors and so on.

Our approach illustrates clearly that as far as we are concerned, the battle against poverty is both a long-term strategy that includes immediate, short-term programmes to deal with the most extreme cases of poverty in our midst. In other words, we do not believe in the comfortable dictum that "the poor will always be with us". Rather whilst we understand that the conditions of poverty cannot disappear overnight, we as a government and people have a responsibility to address the most extreme poverty-pockets now, yesterday and today.

The financial allocations we are able to marshal towards this effort are constrained by the general economic situation we find ourselves in. Naturally, we would want to secure dramatic increases across the board. As you know we are currently spending the R300m allocated last year. My colleague, Minister of Finance Trevor Manuel recently announced the distribution of this year's R817m. We hope to increase these figures for direct poverty relief to R1bn over the next few years. At the moment, poverty allocations are not included in the Medium Term Expenditure Framework but are catered for on annual amounts. Nonetheless, those funds are distributed to various programmes co-ordinated by individual departments on the understanding that their coherence and sustainability is the responsibility of the departments themselves. The programmes of the departments of Water Affairs and Forestry, Health, Constitutional Development, Housing, Education, Agriculture and Public Works must be added to the various initiatives that have emerged from the private sector and trade union movement, as well as the remarkable efforts of independent NGOs.

Currently we find ourselves in a situation where we have to service a substantial inherited government debt. Together with our engagement in the global economy, our freedom of movement is further constrained. However, government has adopted the view that it is preferable to mix and swallow our own medicine, than take forced doses from others at some future juncture. Simply put, we prefer home cooking to the rather exotic fare that too many countries of the developing world have to endure. Efforts are being made continuously and not least by President Mandela himself, to ensure that the question of debt is dealt with in a measured and pro-developing world way. The fact that your conference will also address the question of the Apartheid Debt Campaign will surely add weight to these efforts.

Government policy towards poverty alleviation and its eradication is based on essentially four pillars. These are the reduction of unemployment; the education and training of our people in necessary life and other skills; the creation, rehabilitation and maintenance of physical assets and infrastructure; and building the capacity of communities to become self-sustaining and self-governing in the fullest sense of the term. These pillars support an enabling environment for people-centred, and driven, development based on the need to empower people for self-reliance. We have extended significantly access to basic infrastructure and improved social services. Many government departments implement sustainable job creation programmes. Emerging business is supported and increasingly assisted through the provision of targeted training, access to credit and affirmative procurement and tender procedures. Social protection has been extended to vulnerable groups such as pregnant mothers, young children, babies, the aged and the disabled. Gender equity is emphasised in all our programmes with a clear understanding that as a society we still have a long way to go in this regard. Our concern for environmental rehabilitation and preservation is underscored by measured successes. Scarce resource awareness, particularly of water, the life-blood of any nation and particularly one such as ours that is prone to frequent drought, is a cardinal feature of government policy. Ensuring safe and healthy work environments, access to basic health support systems and implementing measures to secure our home and community environments remain essential tasks.

Over the last few years government departments at the national level and our counterparts in the provinces have developed a consolidated and coherent working relationship. Those departments that implement anti-poverty programmes co-ordinate their activities to make sure that integrated development becomes a reality.

Let me give you but one example of a successful project to illustrate my point. In the Northern Province there is a small village called Ha-Modjaji. It was identified as one of the communities that would fall under the Rural Anti-Poverty Programme of my own department. Just some months back I was invited to Ha-Modjaji to launch the projects in that province. I have always insisted to my officials that when I travel to projects I want to see them in operation. I can tell you clearly that I was most impressed with the community and the project itself. In effect, what has risen from the red soil of that village is a whole new complex: there is a community hall, a sports arena, community gardens, a water reticulation project, school, a taxi rank and a number of access

roads. These various projects are all clustered together to make sure that they are within easy and convenient reach without being on top of each other. Site planning and the identification of the projects themselves were conducted by representatives of the community and the various departments involved. Besides the involvement of the Provincial and National departments of public works, other departments such as education, sports, transport, agriculture and water affairs were also brought into the process. Today Ha-Modjaji sits at a veritable rural crossroads: the people of surrounding communities now have easier access to the transport and road system to Pietersburg and beyond. The community hall and sports arena have both significantly added to the recreation possibilities of the people there. The school and bulk water storage have also eased the lot of the community.

I can duplicate these stories from all around our country. We are aware that these are the beginnings of greater developments. I am also encouraged when I consider that important agencies like the International Labour Organisation and CASE have concluded that our projects have, *inter alia*, generally reached targeted groups such as women and youth, but more significantly have indeed reached the poorest of the poor in our land. At the moment, department officials are integrating the recommendations that both ILO and CASE to improve our systems to make sure that our objectives are fulfilled.

Within the framework I have just outlined I must stress, again and again, that government cannot, indeed should not march alone. We cannot because we simply do not monopolise the resources of wealth or personnel or ideas that exist. We should not because good government is a service government, a server of the people who live within its borders and not only those who vote for it. Our responsibility is to all our people; our people's responsibility is to each other without discrimination.

Chairperson, your programme indicates that you are all aware of the need for an integrated and holistic approach to the eradication of poverty. You will focus on urban development and housing, gender issues, children, youth, land, food security and rural development, education, health, the environment, welfare, the provision of services such as water, electricity and sanitation, SMME's, and as I have earlier indicated, the problem of the apartheid debt. Much of your deliberation will further concentrate on the particular role you as NGOs can and should fulfil within the broader ambit of South African society. These are all weighty issues and you require all the time you can squeeze in to deal with them properly.

Let me leave you with government's assurance that we value the role, function and operation of NGOs in South Africa. We are delighted, too, that you have built up an impressive set of international contacts and support. Where we fail, and we do more frequently than I would like, because of red-tape and bureaucratic bumbling, let us use the mechanisms we have established together to sort these irritations out. Where there are problems. Let us make sure that they arise because we are trying to do something concrete and practical.

Let us all make sure that we knuckle down and help build the country of our dreams – for the sake of our children, and the generations to come. The sacrifices of we the living are small compared to those of our fallen heroes and heroines: together, in our young democracy, let us build a living monument that will provide warmth, comfort, food and love for all our people.

I thank you.

[top](#)