

**Minister of Public Works
Mr J Radebe
26 June 1998**

[Back](#)

**National Poverty Summit
Eskom Conference Centre**

Today is 26 June, a day which celebrates one of the most significant events in the momentous struggle for justice, equality and freedom in South Africa. For it was at this time in 1955 that the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter, a document which would become the lodestar that outlined the basic vision of what type of society we, the people, black and white, united side by side, were fighting for. Hundreds of delegates drawn from all corners of our land gathered on the dusty soccerfield at Kliptown to adopt the Charter, clause by clause, until the apartheid police broke up the meeting. The apartheid state then began its ponderous preparations to criminalise the Charter and its vision by arresting 156 leaders and launching the infamous Treason Trial.

Many of us who are here tonight were either very young, or not yet even born, when the Congress of the People convened. At the time, and subsequently, the Charter was vigorously discussed, both by its millions of supporters and even among those who rejected its premises. For decades, debates raged about how best to secure democracy, to implement the vision of the Charter, and how to identify practical and workable strategies to ensure that freedom became a reality in our land.

I have chosen to draw our attention to the Congress of the People because I believe that in many respects it has direct relevance to our endeavours here at this National Poverty Summit. The Congress, and the Charter that arose from it, was born from a nation-wide consultation which drew on the pain and experiences, the hopes and fears, the dignity and humility, the thirst for justice, peace and freedom of our people. The context was an apartheid society, deliberately divided between black and white by official policy where everything, from education and pensions, health and job opportunities, housing and travel, land and mineral rights, access to public transport, churches, recreation parks, prisons and courts were experienced in totally different ways by South Africa's people.

One comparison between the two processes is the following. This National Poverty Summit has grown out of a number of prior initiatives to identify practical steps to combat the greatest scourge confronting our prosperity; the poverty which afflicts the vast majority of our people. It does not stand aloof from other discussion that have taken place, such as the launch two weeks ago of the Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa, or that are in the pipeline, for example, the looming Job Summit.

First of all it is inclusive. The summit has drawn role players and interested parties, activist groups and NGOs, business and labour, government departments and representatives from all spheres of government to participate in an extremely serious discussion to provide answers to the age-old question: ehto dyelat? What is to be done?

Second, and as the programme for the weekends deliberations makes clear, the Summit brings together the views, assessments, experiences and opinions of researchers and academics, side by side with those with direct knowledge and experience of poverty in our country. The integration of real life experience and theoretical critique alongside a realistic assessment of what is possible are central elements to the development of any workable strategy for the eradication of poverty in our society.

Third, there is a consciousness here that poverty and inequality in our country have merged from a deliberately distorted understanding of humanity and justice under apartheid. All of us acknowledge that the specific impact of apartheid social engineering has frequently changed but also sharpened the teeth of poverty in our country. Apartheid, however, was imposed in South Africa as a purer form of colonialism than in other parts of Africa, and particularly southern Africa. If we consider the histories of our neighbours and look cursorily at the colonial political, land, labour and social policies implemented there, we can trace similar experiences to our own. The result, of course, that even though the political independence of Africa predates our own quite substantially, the ravages of poverty are a continent-wide phenomenon. Thus, I would submit to you that in our deliberations here we should also keep in mind that whatever solutions we come up could very possibly assist in the eradication of poverty elsewhere in our region and the continent as a whole. Poverty elsewhere dehumanises us; it casts a pall over the joy of celebrating our own livelihood.

An important contrast between the Congress of the People and initiatives to eradicate poverty since 1994 is that, for the first time, government, at all levels, is a conscious and willing partner, an innovator and initiator in all of these efforts. We should not take for granted the idea that 1994 ushered in a democratic system in our country. There are many countries in the world that espouse democratic constitutions and practices, with

varying degrees of success. South Africans, represented by their delegates in the Constitutional Assembly, adopted a constitution in 1996 that goes far beyond most constitutions in the democratic world. Our Bill of Rights includes civil and political rights. But this inclusion, often clouded by legal debates about the justifiability of rights, actually makes it an obligation for government to ensure that all these rights are honoured and advanced. The people of South Africa, in other words, have for the first time instructed their governments, now and in the future, to pursue actively the programme of building a better life for all.

Your government, the Mandela government, has already taken important steps to address the question of poverty in our society. Delegates to this National Poverty Summit will be aware of the various programmes undertaken so far by government. Earlier this month government representatives provided detailed responses to the Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa. I am not going to repeat the details of what we have achieved so far, except to indicate the broad terms of our engagement with the poverty as a major issue that can undermine not only the essence of our young democracy, but also our ability to pursue independent forms of economic development and social integration.

We have created an enabling environment for people-centred development based on the need to empower people for self-reliance. We have already ensured greater and increasing access to basic infrastructure and improved social services. Sustainable job creation strategies already in place have received an additional boost with the release yesterday of government's Employment Strategy Framework, with which you will all be familiar. Emerging business is supported and assisted through the provision of targeted training, credit access and government tenders. Social protection has been extended to vulnerable groups such as pregnant mothers, young children, and the aged. Gender equity is emphasised in all our programmes. Environmental concerns, particularly the knowledge that we need to preserve, maintain and regenerate our resources are cardinal to whatever plans we develop. Education for self-reliance, the creation of safe and healthy work environments, access to basic health support systems, the identification of viable and widespread disability programmes, and a secure home environment must be part of our plans.

In order to fulfil the above, we attempt to ensure that government programmes are designed in an integrated manner. We engage frequently and consistently with NGOs, CBOs, the private sector, labour unions, religious and charity organisations. But we also take advantage of and pride in our acceptance in global institutions such as the UN and ILO to articulate our country's experience, assessments and proposals. Thus, our continuous participation in the deliberations and work of the Copenhagen processes enriches our work as we are able to draw first hand from the trials, tribulations and successes of other developing countries. Another example; just this week, the Minister of Welfare and Population Development led our South African delegation to the UN to report on South Africa's progress in implementing the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. This represents a critical component in our campaign against poverty as we all know that women, and African rural women in particular confront sexism and poverty head-on in a manner where sexism reinforces and often reproduces their poverty.

Closer to home, other government policy initiatives such as the Poverty and Inequality Report and the Job Summit, provided a framework in which the practical operation of all the programmes gathered under the umbrella of the Deputy President's Co-ordination and Implementation Unit can take place.

Master of Ceremonies, the programme of the Summit includes inputs, amongst others, from Dr. Punday Pillay on the economics of poverty, Prof. Francis Wilson on the current realities of poverty, and Adv. Rams Ramashia on the very important evidence of the Poverty Hearings themselves. I do not want to pursue those topics here, partly as we have covered these details at the launch of the Poverty Report, but more importantly, because time tonight does not allow me to deal with them in sufficient detail.

I wish to conclude my comments this evening by outlining some of the challenges that face us all.

Poverty is an all-embracing phenomenon. Its tentacles reach into all areas of our society. Hunger, ill-health, disability, lack of motivation, dulled senses, fatigue, long-hours devoted to working out how to survive from one small crust of bread to the next, the struggle to keep warm and dry, the desire to smell the fresh air instead of the fumes of glue used to stave off hunger pains; these are but some of the elements that deny individuals and ultimately communities the ability to be human. There are many motivations for combating poverty. Whether you fear being mugged by street-kids, or your home burgled by desperate people, or your car stolen, or your children subjected to the wiles of drug-dealers, or whether you acknowledge the simple horror of the inhumanity and suffering of it all, poverty is something that touches all of us.

To combat it therefore requires the efforts of us all. Symbolically, none of us should turn our heads from the beggar's plea in the street as if we did not hear. We must also know that struggles against poverty and its cousin inequality are too often fought in private, in darkness, by people alone in their misery and desperation. The affront to dignity which it represents also brings a fierce resistance to handouts, to misguided do-gooders, and generally to policies that seek merely to soften the blows, to alleviate rather than eradicate the problem.

The task is enormous, the will tremendous. But government cannot do it alone. Neither should government do it alone. It is our acknowledged responsibility to provide the impetus, the seeds of success and to create the channels through which society's efforts can be gathered. Co-operation and respect for all our strengths and specific talents and expertise will underlie our ability to succeed. Our experience as government so far has been encouraging and educative. But we will be the first to acknowledge that our joint efforts with business, labour, NGOs and CBOs can be extended, better co-ordinated and frequently run more smoothly. Our commitment to do this is one of the issues I place before this summit. Prof. Benny Khoapa I am sure will provide much food for thought when he addressed the Summit on the will to make a difference.

In particular we want to draw attention to the challenges that face business and the NGO sector. In many ways we have already been able to get used to the idea of working with each other since 1994. Government would like to see a more aggressive involvement by the private sector and co-operation from labour in introducing ideas and projects. We would like to see a rapid expansion of private and public partnerships, both at the level of implementing programmes and in securing financial and investment assistance. I am sure that Clem Sunter will identify many of the challenges in his talk tomorrow.

Master of Ceremonies, this Summit was called by His Grace, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane. Government is grateful for the initiative he and the religious community has taken in this regard. But because we believe that success comes from joint ventures, that the best ideas are those which are produced through interaction and exchange, government accepts the invitation not only to participate, but also to take seriously the conclusions of this Summit. Frequently, children ask of their parents, "What did you do in the struggle?" Let's embark on a path which allows children in the future to ask? "What did you do to help eradicate poverty?"

Our collective aim is to be able to sing along with the Old Testament prophets:

No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days,
or and old person who does not live out a lifeline

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

Or, in the words of the Holy Qur'an:

And we have shown humankind to two paths.
Let them therefore take the higher path.
And what is the higher path? It is the liberation of those in bondage, feeding of the poor in times of poverty and deprivation, caring for the orphaned child of kith and kin;
Then only, are you of those who strive for truth and strive for compassion!

Frederick Engels reminded us if I may paraphrase slightly;

that before we can have politics, religion, philosophy and government,
people need to be able to work, feed, and clothe themselves.

Master of Ceremonies,
Archbishop
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

If I may be indulgent, let me conclude with a quote I have used before but which to me sums up the challenge we face. In his well-known novel, *Petals of Blood*, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote:

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 on 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 ripen 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 all be put in the ground and they would once again sprout and flower in rain and sunshine.

Tomorrow let us get down to work; let us find the seeds, we'll put them in the ground together, and we will watch them sprout and flourish when the rain comes and in the sunshine. We can do it; we shall do it.

I thank you.

[top](#)