

Keynote Address by the Minister of Public Works, Ms Thoko Didiza, at the occasion of the welcoming ceremony for Cuban Technical Advisors

Venue: St Georges Hotel, Centurion

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Programme Director

Honourable Deputy Minister of Public Works, Ntate Kganyago

Honourable Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba to the Republic of South Africa,
Madam Armenteros

My colleagues, Honourable MEC's from various provinces

Director General of the Department of Public Works, Mr Manye Moroka

Chief Executive Officers from our public entities

Deputy Directors-General of the Department of Public Works

Representative from Salga

Heads of Department from various provinces

Officials of the Department of Public Works

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to start off by extending a special greeting to these great Cuban patriots and internationalists, who have crossed the seas to come and offer their skills to our country. What a great day this is for us and all those who dream about a skills revolution in our country. It really is an exceptional privilege for us to welcome you to our country. For us, this day confirms all that we have heard and have known about the Cuban people: revolutionary, internationalists and practical.

We are very proud to be associated with the Cuban government and Cuban people. We have always been aware that we can bank on a mutually beneficial relationship with the people of Cuba. Madam ambassador, we have traveled a long way with the Cuban people, from our days as freedom fighters, fighting side by side with the gallant Cuban armed forces for our freedom and democracy up to the early years of our democracy when Cuba provided both the training of our doctors as well as supplying us with doctors. We remember proudly the days we spent in the trenches with the Cuban fighters during the freedom struggle. We remember in particular the decisive defeat inflicted on the imperial and apartheid forces and Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in 1989 that greatly paved the way of Namibian freedom and thus ours too. Indeed, we salute the Cuban revolutionary spirit.

After the visit of the Cuban Deputy Minister of Construction, the ball was set rolling on the conclusion of this agreement and the launch of this project. The memorandum of Agreement was signed in Havana between myself and the Minister of Construction in Cuba, the Honourable Fidel Segeroa de la Paz, in July last year during my visit to Cuba. So you can see that the two governments have moved very quickly in ensuring that this project takes off in double quick time. This is no co-incidence. It is because we are serious about our objectives. Service delivery, poverty alleviation and job creation are paramount objectives of our government. The recruitment of these experts is one way of dealing with the legacy that we have inherited: lack of skilled artisans to carry out all the massive infrastructure projects we are planning for. Dear comrades from Cuba, your arrival here is being viewed with great optimism. We are confident that you will help us to meet our acute needs for skilled artisans.

At the launch of JIPSA in March 2006, the Deputy President formally declared a skills crisis with particular reference to the type of skills required by built environment professions. Indeed our country is in a grip of a great skills shortage

and need. Ladies and gentlemen, our country is in the throes of a massive infrastructure development and improvement programme. With growth rates in construction spend of around 10% per annum, the highest that it has been in the last 30 years, construction spend is in fact growing at a higher rate than Gross Domestic Product. However, there are many challenges that need to be tackled in a range of public and private sector partnerships to further unlock infrastructure bottlenecks and to create capacity and skills.

The challenges in the built environment are huge and need urgent attention as the deadlines are so tight as well. Even as the government accelerates the infrastructure development, the demographic profile of registered built environment professionals is a long way from reflecting the demographics of the country. As the economy begins to boom with upward trends predicted well beyond 2010, there are increasing demands for professional services, and the pool of skills represented by built environment professions should increase accordingly. However, current trends, with specific reference to the built professions, indicate that this important skills base is in decline, with very few new entrants compared to the large numbers who are leaving the profession.

Due to the interdependence of infrastructure and the economy, the economic prospects pose a major challenge to the sector to replenish the skills base rapidly; failing which projected economic growth may not be achieved. There are many reasons for the decline in the numbers of built-environment professionals, among them:

- retirement trends of senior professionals, especially civil engineers;
- emigration
- a legal loophole requiring only those persons who, in essence, are liable for the work of a professional to register;
- declining student enrolments at tertiary institutions (due in part to the low number of school-leavers with higher grade mathematics);

- unattractive working conditions (particularly in civil engineering);
- comparatively low levels of remuneration; and
- poor career and promotion prospects;

Another greatly worrying fact is the ageing profile of the built environment professionals.

We are all agreed that urgent steps need to be taken to arrest this situation, especially among the black graduates. There is an endemic shortage in South Africa of high-level professional and managerial skills. Particular shortages are in the science, engineering, technology and financial occupations. These are also the fields in which current demands are the greatest. Enrolment trends at tertiary institutions also indicate that they are not meeting this need, neither in terms of numbers nor in fields of study.

The decrease in the number of enrolments at tertiary institutions is the result of a number of factors including the sharp decline in the number of school-leavers with matriculation exemption – a prerequisite for university entry. This is particularly true of even lower rate of matriculants passing sciences and mathematics. For example, to study civil engineering at university a higher grade mathematics symbol of A, B, or C is required and for most Universities of Technology with a minimum of a C symbol in standard grade mathematics required. These criteria present an immense challenge, especially to Black learners, more than 50% of whom are schooled in poorly equipped rural and township schools.

Although the number of learners gaining endorsement has increased from 1996 to 2005, the low numbers of Black learners who pass higher grade mathematics is a stumbling block in the supply of entrants to occupations with high-level skill requirements such as the built environment professions and is therefore severely hampering the transformation of these professions.

To ensure sufficient competent built environment professionals, an adequate supply of high-calibre entrants into the professions is essential. In order to arrest the situation we need to come up with innovative ideas like this recruitment of Cuban experts.

The lack of awareness of career opportunities in the built environment professions leads many school leavers with appropriate mathematics and science symbols to take up more popularised careers, for example in the IT, finance or medical fields. The professional bodies in this field must do better, they need to market their field.

Growth presupposes capacity to deliver at the rate and scale needed. But indications are that the sector lacks capacity to deliver, specifically at the level of the professional sub-sector.

Given that JIPSA has already declared a skills crisis, and should current output by tertiary institutions not improve, the lack of capacity in the professions will have a crippling effect on future public infrastructure delivery programmes. The complicating factor is that it takes between four and six years to train a typical built environment professional, and that is why we have had to come up with other alternatives to avoid delivery bottlenecks in the industry.

In terms of the pipeline for supply of potential built environment professionals, there appears to be a lack of attractiveness of the professions to young people as a whole, and therefore the lack of a resource base to constitute a dependable supply of professionals. I repeat once again: professional bodies must please look at vigorously marketing this sector in order to attract great number of potential artisans and professionals.

Tertiary institutions will have to modernise academic programmes both in terms of teaching methods and programme content. Secondly, tertiary institutions must provide incentives in terms of better working conditions as there is an inadequate supply of appropriately qualified teaching staff.

So, this great venture has come at the right time for our country. We need creative solutions to our problems. We need to face the challenge head-on and strive to work together to pull our country out of this challenge.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to suggest the following in order to alleviate some of the problems alluded to in my speech regarding the built environment

1. Bring back retired professionals to enable them to transfer skills to young professionals entering the built environment.
2. Encourage sharing of best practice: The need to encourage sector organizations to learn from others on what they are doing in terms of closing the capacity gaps and learn from them.
3. Mentoring Programmes - the sector organisations need to start looking at innovative ways of improving the knowledge base of professionals such as mentoring programs with a view to empowering emerging young professionals.
4. Intense Project Management Training Programs - there is a strong need for intense project management training programmes for new professionals to enhance their Programme and Project Management capacity to be able to handle infrastructure delivery programmes.
5. Training and Skills development for the industry - as mentioned above, training is a very critical component of capacity building and development. There is a need for the industry to invest in the training of both existing and new capacity to improve the production and quality of delivery. There is also a need for collaborative efforts with regard to the development of

capacity for the industry between the public and private sector client bodies.

Ladies and gentlemen, I firmly believe that with the launch of this project, we will be able to meet our objectives. All three spheres of government will need to forever look for ways to tackle the challenge of skills acquisition. Our collective effort and dedication will see us through the challenging tasks we are facing as a country.

I would like to congratulate these comrades, who were selected after intensive interviews with a team of technical experts from South Africa. We welcome you to our country with open arms but I would like to sound a word of caution: this will not be a hunky dory experience all the way. There will be challenges, there will be problems. But we know that you are a resilient people, so you will not abandon us at the first sign of difficulty.

We thank you for availing yourselves to our country and offering your expertise in the build environment. Our focus on the construction sector and allied sectors takes full cognizance of the immense potential of the industry as a creator of job opportunities. Under the impact of growing investment and the EPWP, employment in the construction sector has risen greatly. With construction output set to double, the industry has the potential to generate thousands of jobs by 2014, contributing greatly to the goals of accelerated growth. Many of those who will be employed, will need to be skilled. As we are gathered here today, we are the engines of this skills revolution. We are all working to ensure that we overcome bottlenecks in the development of critical skills.

I want to congratulate DDG Solly Malebye and his team as well as Uneca, the Cuban company that provides us with technical assistance, for moving very fast in recruiting the first 51 experts for this project. I know that you started with your recruitment drive in August last year and now, only four months later we have the

first batch of experts arriving in the country. This shows the diligence and the enthusiasm we all need to ensure success of this project. Your hard work, coupled with working together with other government departments like the Department of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, the DPSA and Treasury all bode well for the success of this project. We really do need to entrench the culture of working together with other government departments so that we can all shine at the end of the day. A successful carrying out of this project will move our country further down the road of development and poverty alleviation.

I am sure that everyone is aware of the strides we have made in the last 13 years of our democracy. And it is exactly for those successes that we cannot allow our country to regress because of the scourge of poverty and underdevelopment. And surely the acceleration of skills acquisition will ensure that we defeat these challenges in our country.

Once again, welcome to our Cuban experts and please, take good care of them in the provinces where they will be deployed.

Thank you.