

MZIGISI A KA NA SHWA:
KODUMELA MOEPATHUTSE GA GO LEHUMO LE LETSWANG
KGAUSWI

Speech by Dr Mamphela Ramphele
at the Masakh' iSizwe Centre of Excellence
Bursary Awards Ceremony (21st February, 2008)

I title my speech deliberately with an African proverb in both isXhosa and Sepedi to remind us of the wisdom that we need to draw on as we tackle the challenges of consolidating our democracy and investing in people to promote prosperity. African people living on one of the toughest continents with challenging environments were wise to focus on the saying that: “**Mzingisi a ka na shwa** – the one who perseveres can not be dogged by bad luck.” In my language, Sepedi, the same sentiment is expressed as: “**Kodumela moepathutse ga go lehumo le letswang kgauswi** - when you dig for precious metals you have to dig deep to succeed.” I would like all of you to remember this wisdom for the rest of your lives in everything you do.

Our own history is testimony to this wisdom. We struggled long and hard for our freedom. We have worked hard to achieve the gains of the new democratic order and have been courageous in tackling its challenges. We have much to celebrate today as we look back on 14 years of transformation as a society. The one major and fatal flaw in our society is the crisis in skills to govern and manage a complex socio-economic and political system in a highly competitive global economic order. The investment that the country is making in you is part of the response to this skills challenge. You represent the hopes of our nation that even this skills challenge we shall be able to overcome. Success has to involve each one of you and all of us in society to create a climate that identifies, selects, promotes, retains and celebrate talent and excellence in performance.

It is well documented that our country has experienced a remarkable economic recovery since its first democratic elections ever in 1994. We inherited a virtually bankrupt economy from the Apartheid era. At that time over 20% of the national budget went to debt servicing – ie interest payment on our foreign debt. It was the biggest single item on the budget, far surpassing the amount spent on education. It is now less than 5% of the budget. A recent study¹ by prominent Harvard University economists has confirmed this remarkable turn-around. Amongst other indicators, they point to: the GDP growth rate which reached 4.9% in 2005 and 5% in 2007 – the highest ever in over a quarter of a century – and the current business cycle upswing which was running at a record of 19 consecutive months. Another remarkable feature of our economy is that a positive growth rate (average of 3%) has been sustained during our first decade of freedom. This is to the credit of the first democratically elected government led by the ANC. Special credit for this prosperity must go to our President Mbeki and Minister Manuel for persevering against all odds and “naysayer’s.”

However, we are also experiencing teenage blues and self-doubt about our ability to tackle remaining challenges. There are persistently high levels of unemployment, poverty and growing inequality. And in the past few months we’ve experienced very dramatically the impact of an energy crisis. Recent newspaper reports (eg Sunday Independent, January 20th. ‘Everyone pays when Eskom pulls the plug’) have highlighted the impact of the **energy crisis** on the economy. JP Morgan Chase anticipates that the power cuts will slow growth to 3.7% (Business Day, 8th Feb) and some economists are predicting that there will now be a zero growth rate in job creation. But Minister Manuel’s 2008 budget speech yesterday re-assured us that the firm macro-economic foundations we have laid over the last decade should enable us to achieve 4% growth this year and 4.5% next year.

¹ Frankel, et al. South Africa (2006) *Macroeconomic Challenges after a Decade of Success*

We are also on the brink of a ***water crisis*** (The Sunday Times, 3rd February) This report quotes Jeff Rudin, a researcher for South African Municipal Workers Union: *the breakdown of monitoring and treatment services is a national disaster waiting to happen ... we're sitting on a time-bomb ... exactly replicating the electricity crisis.* A report in the Cape Argus of February 14th quotes a study by the WWF-SA that 98% of our available water resources are already fully utilised and that not one cent of our water bills goes to protecting delicate water catchment areas.

I wonder if we are also not on the brink of a ***transport crisis***? Our train services seem to be running down quite rapidly here in Cape Town, with the frequent late or non-arrival of trains. Will we have an effective, efficient and safe system in place before our roads become completely gridlocked? But these are not the only crises. We are also faced with ***rampant crime***, the ***AIDS pandemic***, the political situation in ***Zimbabwe*** which has resulted in an economic collapse with inflation rate of at least 50 000 %, and an ongoing ***skills*** crisis.

Our government has recognised and confessed to ignoring early warnings regarding the electricity supply. It needs to act with speed on the looming water and transport crises. It is very belatedly acting on the AIDS pandemic. All the law abiding citizens of South Africa are waiting for decisive and effective action on crime. Surely in the midst of this crisis, the ruling party should not have as it's main focus the dissolution of the Scorpions?

This evening I am going to focus on the skills crisis. It is ongoing and undermines the capacity of government and industry. It is now almost universally recognised that it is a critical factor in the construction industry. At the end of 2006, the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment released a report on the shortage of professional engineers, technologists and technicians in the Western Cape. The report notes that the shortage of civil engineers is the most acute of all. Last year only 10% of the demand for these professionals was met, and within current supply

constraints, matters will not improve much by 2010 (when only 15% of the demand will be met).

The energy crisis is not only due to the lack of investment in the energy sector, but is also significantly affected by the shortage of skilled personnel. This was confirmed by the President when he told Parliament that '*We are taking steps to enhance Eskom's maintenance capacity.*' This lack of engineering professionals to maintain electricity infrastructure is supported by a report released by the City of Cape Town (5th February) which highlights the fact that half of the forced power cuts in the City (over the past month) were the result of poor maintenance. With regard to the looming water crisis, Department of Water and Forestry have acknowledged that it was battling to retain skilled staff.

Masakh'iSizwe has been far sighted in its intervention. MEC Fransman is to be congratulated for an innovative approach to the skills crisis when he took over the Transport and Public Works portfolio in 2005. At that stage the Department and rest of government provided only enough bursaries for internal departmental needs. The Department was offering only 10 bursaries per annum. This has been increased under Masakh'iSizwe to a target of 300 students on bursaries per year for the foreseeable future. In addition to the larger reach, the scheme provides both academic and personal development support.

Already 69 students have graduated from this bursary programme with a remarkable throughput rate that substantially exceeds the national average. For example, at UCT students on the extended program of 4+1 years have an average 56% graduation rate. Masakh'iSiswe cohort have had an 80% rate. For national diploma students at Universities of Technology on an extended 3+1 year program the track record is a 47% graduation rate compared to our students achieving a 90% success rate. These are early figures but they do suggest that the combination of adequate financial, academic and personal development support is crucial to unlocking the potential of talented students.

The scale of the venture has attracted considerable government interest to the highest level. In answering a parliamentary question about what the government is doing about the engineering skills crisis, President Mbeki praised the Masakh'iSizwe for what it had achieved. For Masakh'iSizwe it's not only about numbers. Our vision is to make available to the province, the country and the continent of Africa, cohorts of professionals in engineering and built environment fields. These professionals are to be characterised by excellence in learning, service and citizenship.

As far as *learning* is concerned we want you all to succeed in your studies. Not only do we want you to graduate but we want you to graduate in the shortest time possible. The skills crisis is already upon us. This means that there are plenty of work opportunities just waiting to be filled. However, we recognise that your educational background puts many, if not most of you, at a considerable educational disadvantage. We recognise that you might well fail some modules and courses the first time round. The Masakh'iSizwe staff is there to assist you in all administrative, financial and academic concerns. But you need to take responsibility for your own lives.

What does this mean for you in your studies? I want to repeat what I said to the bursary recipients at last year's graduation ceremony. It means that you have to take ownership of not knowing and of not understanding things. The key is not to pretend that you do. If you do this you will never learn and you will have to keep pretending. You must be prepared to admit your weaknesses and not be afraid or ashamed to ask dumb questions and ask for help. Don't fall into the trap of despising yourself for this. It is only by being brutally honest about our needs and levels of competence, that we will develop our full potential, both as individuals and as a society.

Masakh'iSizwe lifeskills, leadership and mentoring programmes are there to help you to survive in the unfamiliar university environment, to build on your strengths and to

acknowledge your weaknesses. This is what some students said about the programme last year.

I'm very impressed (with Masakh' iSizwe). I told my family about it. They thought it's just a bursary who wanted my results but I told my dad, especially my brother. He was very surprised that there are people that are there to help you. They're not just there for the money part of it. They're for the whole package. That's' what I like about it.

Masakh' iSizwe is a very good support system to me, especially the mentorship workshop and the life skills programme. I think for Masakh' it's not just about the money that they pay to the students. Masakh' is really busy making a difference in one's life.

I must say everyone I know who has a bursary, this program is way more helpful and [The programme] is in tune with what the students are going through. And they actually listen. They don't just stay aside and expect you to do well. We get together and have programs to build yourself up and stuff. I think in that way it is a brilliant programme.

So remember that Dr Sidney Luckett and the Masakh' iSizwe staff members are there to help you. They are very willing and very competent, but they have not yet learned the skill of mind-reading! So if you don't tell them about your problems they won't know about them and therefore won't be able to help you.

Excellence in service means that we expect you to plough back in poor communities both during and after your studies. You will be called on from time to time for some kind of community service. A very successful project that our students got involved in last year was to run maths tutorials at high schools in poorly resourced schools. You will find that you benefit from this as much as do those whom you will be serving.

For me, perhaps the most important characteristic that we want our Masakh' iSizwe bursars to develop is the third one, namely **excellence in citizenship**. We want you to

become critically constructive citizens rooted in an ethos of non-racialism, non-sexism, social justice and environmental awareness.

A critically constructive citizen is someone who:

- Takes full responsibility for his/her own life and makes the most of the opportunities granted to him/her
- Takes responsibility not only for him/ herself, but also for family, community and society-at-large
- Is committed to upholding democratic institutions and social justice for all citizens
- Is able to make sound judgements and is not afraid to stand up for the weak and be critical of those in authority and in power
- Does not whinge about problems in a corner, but is constructive, gets out there and takes action to address the problem.

In South Africa we also have a skills crisis of critically constructive citizens! We don't have enough people who can think and act independently for themselves and for the common good. Too many of our citizens are still sitting back waiting for a chief, a king, a president, an idol or a saviour to come and deliver them! This is not going to happen. We are going to have to pull ourselves out of the poverty trap and out of the list of looming crises that I mentioned earlier.

Likewise Masakh'iSizwe is not going to save you from having to work hard and pass your exams. And we are not going to allow the fact that you have come from poor schools to become an excuse for failure. Instead we believe that all of you have the potential not only to succeed academically, but to graduate as critically constructive citizens! Critically constructive citizens don't pull out when the going gets tough.

The Cape Times two days ago carried the report that 50% of the healthcare professionals in the country are wanting to leave the country. And a recent report in Business Day (14th February) said that black professionals are leaving in increasing

numbers. In that report, the FNB's chief economist, Cees Bruggemans is quoted as saying that "for every 30,000 highly skilled individuals who [leave] probably reduce SA's GDP by 1% or more, starving it of critical support, thereby undermining ongoing employment of double their number".

I am the first to acknowledge that there are many good reasons for leaving South Africa for a short period – to gain experience, further education opportunities, work satisfaction and so on, but a constructive citizen does not simply pack up and leave the country because of "seasons of darkness and winters of despair."

Government has over the years put a significant amount of resources in education, but as Minister Manuel indicated yesterday even more is to be added: – early childhood development, basic adult education, schools and universities. But it needs to be acknowledged that whilst spending the highest proportion of GDP on education compared to countries at similar level of development: Chile, Brazil and others, the quality of our education has in many cases deteriorated. This is particularly the case in the majority of schools serving poor communities and in some higher education institutions. The key problem is abuse of our freedom by those not prepared to match their new found rights with responsibilities. Professionalism has taken a nose dive amongst teachers and other professionals in the public service. The common good is being sacrificed for the personal gains of incompetent corrupt people in the public service. The hard work of many is being undermined by the irresponsibility of a significant proportion that is allowed to get away with abusing their positions.

Our skills problems are multifaceted. We need to educate and train more people; we need to employ all those qualified to ensure professional leadership and management of our public services; we need to recruit, retain and utilize all citizens willing to plug the severe skills crisis we face. It is not doing enough to retain people with scarce skills. It seems to me that Government has blind-spots in some important areas.

At the beginning of last year MEC Fransman publicly suggested a moratorium on Employment Equity for scarce skills. He did this to start a debate on whether or not we were achieving the outcomes we wanted from the policy as applied now. The reaction from some Ministers and policy makers was to shut down the debate.

And at the awards ceremony last year I said:

The government also needs to acknowledge that the mistakes are being made in the implementation of Employment Equity. These are exacerbating the problem of skills shortages. Affirmative Action if understood to be “regstellende aksie” is intended to give a leg up to those with potential to succeed who have been hobbled by apartheid. It does not mean putting an unskilled or inexperienced person in a position in which performance is impossible. Such actions that are driven by political patronage objectives undermine our society’s ability to recruit and retain the best people to both the public and private sectors. Employment equity and properly applied affirmative action are essential to the transformation of our society.

It is of considerable concern to me that Employment Equity is treated as a holy cow. Given the many concerns expressed across the board, and the tough global skills market it is surprising we are not examining the impact of employment equity on our performance as a nation. Are we as much in denial about this as we were about AIDS and Zimbabwe? Why are we not debating this issue in a mature and considered manner?

Masakh’iSizwe is trying to build an ethos of non-racialism in its students. What should our students – of all colours – feel when government prioritizes employment equity targets as a factor in its appointment processes at the expense of competence? Are they and other graduating students in the engineering fields going to face the burden of being classified as white, Indian, coloured, African when they seek employment after graduation? Should we call them unpatriotic if they leave our shores when they are confronted by this practice?

I want to conclude with the same words that I concluded last year’s address:

Let's put faith in young people, black & white, male & female who are talented yet financially disadvantaged. Let us affirm them by giving them the opportunity to become professionals – in the way that the Masakh' iSizwe Centre is doing. The challenge to the bursary holders gathered here today and to all young people in whom society puts its faith, is that you have an obligation to respond to our faith in you by doing your very best. Excel in both your studies *and* in your service to those who are still trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty that still characterizes the lives of many in our midst.

Thank you.