

CESA warns of national infrastructure maintenance crisis

3 February 2026: Consulting Engineers South Africa (CESA) has warned that South Africa is facing a deepening national infrastructure maintenance crisis, driven by years of underinvestment, reactive asset management and a growing shortage of engineering skills. CESA hopes that this issue will receive clear and decisive attention during President Cyril Ramaphosa's State of the Nation Address.

Speaking in Sandton at the organisation's annual media address, and ahead of his first year as President of the organisation, CESA President **Dr. Vishal Haripersad** said the country's infrastructure challenges are no longer abstract policy concerns but are being felt daily by citizens, businesses and government alike. "What we are facing should be recognised for what it is: a national infrastructure maintenance crisis," Dr. Haripersad said.

While government's commitment to invest more than R1 trillion in public infrastructure over the next three years is welcomed, Haripersad cautioned that funding alone will not reverse the decline unless long-standing structural issues are addressed.

CESA pointed to findings from the National Planning Commission, which show declining GDP per capita growth, unemployment at 33.9% – over 45% among youth – and persistently low public and private investment levels. According to the Commission's report, these trends reflect job creation constraints, weak business confidence and infrastructure deficiencies.

The consequences of underinvestment are evident in the growing maintenance backlog across public infrastructure. Haripersad noted that many local and provincial authorities continue to manage assets reactively, responding only once systems fail. For example, Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure **Dean Macpherson** has estimated the maintenance backlog at R30 billion, affecting more than 56 000 state-owned properties.

Nowhere is the crisis more visible than in the water sector, Dr. Haripersad explained. Earlier this year, Parliament was told that R400 billion is required to rehabilitate South Africa's water and sanitation systems. "For many communities, the impact is already clear – not because water does not exist, but because ageing infrastructure can no longer deliver it reliably," he added.

Recent flooding in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, along with wildfires across several provinces, has further highlighted the consequences of a largely reactive approach to infrastructure risk. Dr. Haripersad said these events underscore the urgent need for proactive assessment, maintenance and resilience, particularly in the context of climate change.

Against this backdrop, Dr. Haripersad introduced the theme that will guide his presidency: "**If Not Engineers, then Who? Reclaiming Our Purpose, Securing Our Future.**" Drawing on the

principle of *Ubuntu*, he emphasised that engineering is not only a technical profession, but a shared responsibility grounded in accountability to society.

CESA highlighted South Africa's severe engineering skills shortage, with roughly one engineer for every 3 100 people, compared to significantly higher ratios in developed economies according to the Engineering Council of South Africa. This equates to a shortage of more than 60 000 engineering professionals. Dr. Haripersad described this as "a failure not just of policy, but of collective will", calling for stronger investment in STEM education, mentorship and structured professional development.

The organisation also raised concern about procurement systems that prioritise the lowest upfront cost over quality, longevity and social benefit. This "price-only" mentality, he warned, endangers both infrastructure and communities, forcing professionals into unsustainable procurement cycles simply to remain operational.

CESA further stressed the importance of integrity and governance in infrastructure delivery. Procurement-related corruption, weak oversight and delayed enforcement continue to undermine public confidence and compromise outcomes. Dr. Haripersad said restoring trust requires ethical conduct, transparency, enforcement and improved site safety.

Finally, CESA called for engineers to be meaningfully represented at decision-making tables across government and public institutions. "If we are serious about infrastructure delivery, governance and value for money, then engineers cannot remain on the margins," Haripersad said.

"As a nation, we must decide whether we are ready to stand for accountability, build capability, deliver real value and uphold integrity," he said. "Our collective future depends on it."

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About Consulting Engineers South Africa (CESA):

CESA is the national body representing consulting engineering firms in South Africa. With over 600 member firms employing close to 17,000 people, CESA is committed to promoting excellence in consulting engineering for the benefit of society.

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