

CESA Media Day: 3 February 2026

Presidential Address by Dr. Vishal Haripersad

2026 Theme: “If Not Engineers, Then Who? Reclaiming Our Purpose, Securing Our Future.”

FINAL

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the media, members of Consulting Engineers South Africa, representatives of other South African industry bodies and guests,

Good morning,

It is a true honour to stand before you today as the newly elected President of Consulting Engineers South Africa. I am deeply grateful for the trust that has been placed in me to lead our profession.

Let me begin with a story, one that shaped my understanding of what it means to be an engineer.

Over thirty years ago, I was on a bridge construction site in rural KwaZulu-Natal. We had delivered a good design, built well, on time. As we prepared to

hand over the work, an elderly woman who had observed the progress over many weeks approached me. She looked carefully at the new concrete and steel and then asked a simple but profound question:

“Who will fix this when you are gone?”

Her question was not merely about a single bridge. It spoke to the entire ecosystem of infrastructure: to trust, capability, and legacy. It challenged me then, and it challenges us all today, to look beyond technical specifications and budgets, **AND ASK OURSELVES WHAT KIND OF FUTURE WE ARE BUILDING?**

That question echoes across our nation. It resonates in the vast backlog of maintenance and repairs. The weight of not just a lack of infrastructure development but a lack of maintenance affects everyone: citizens, businesses and government alike. It is felt in daily frustrations, in communities where roads, water systems, and schools are under strain, travel commutes to work, and in missed opportunities for economic growth.

South Africa’s infrastructure challenges are being felt every day. 2025, and the beginning of 2026, has exposed in stark terms, the consequences of the failure of no or underinvestment in infrastructure development and, more critically, the persistent neglect of infrastructure maintenance. What we are facing

should be recognised for what it is: **a national infrastructure maintenance crisis.**

Yet, even amid this crisis, we must acknowledge an important truth: South Africa has not lost its engineering capability. Where expertise is respected, where planning is sound, and where maintenance is prioritised, infrastructure still works. Across the country, there are projects - often less visible, often underreported - where collaboration between engineers, clients, and communities have delivered reliable services, safer systems, and long-term value. These examples remind us that decline is not inevitable. When engineering judgment is placed at the centre, outcomes improve. The challenge before us is not whether success is possible, it is whether we choose to replicate it at scale.

Government's commitment to invest more than R1 trillion in public infrastructure over the next three years is an important and necessary step. However, investment alone will not reverse years of decline unless long-standing structural issues are addressed.

Over the past decade, infrastructure investment has averaged just 15.7% of GDP, according to the Government Technical Advisory Centre – well below the 30% target set out in the National Development Plan (NDP). With less than

four years remaining to 2030 for us to reach these goals, the gap between ambition and reality is widening.

This is further endorsed in the National Planning Commission's report entitled: "Advisory on NDP Implementation Priorities for 2024-2029 MTDP", where it states that "the failure to grow the economy not only missed the NDP targets but also resulted in a reversal of earlier improvements in the share of the population living below the lower-bound poverty line, and significantly reduced the prospect of the targets for poverty or inequality being achieved by 2030. It states that:

- Real GDP per capita has declined, averaging an annual growth rate of 0.99% during the period under review.
- Unemployment rose to 33.9%, deviating markedly from the NDP's job creation target, and is concentrated among the youth (15-34 years), where the unemployment rate is currently over 45%.
- Investment levels have consistently missed the annual 30% of GDP target.
- The private sector's investment, crucial for growth, accounted for 9.9% of GDP in 2021, and public investment was at 4.1%, both less than half the targets.

And the result according to the report: “The trends point to job creation constraints, a lack of business confidence, and infrastructure deficiencies, among others.”

All of this has been compounded by a culture of reactive asset management.

The South African Institution of Civil Engineering’s *Infrastructure Report Card* consistently identifies neglect of maintenance as a persistent challenge, noting that local and provincial governments continue to manage assets reactively, responding only once systems fail. The result is a growing backlog. Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure Dean Macpherson, said in September last year, that maintenance backlog stands at R30 billion, affecting more than 56 000 state-owned properties.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the water sector. Earlier this year, Parliament was told that R400 billion is needed to rehabilitate South Africa’s water and sanitation systems. For many communities, for all of us in this room, the impact is already clear - not because water does not exist, but because ageing infrastructure can no longer deliver it reliably.

WE MUST BE HONEST: over the last decade, amid various crises and the struggle to stay afloat, South Africa has faced fundamental questions: Are we prioritising long-term safety, quality, and sustainability in infrastructure, or are

short-term cost pressures driving decisions? Are we empowering the people who build, design and maintain our systems, or are we leaving them out of the conversation until failures occur?

The flooding experienced at the beginning of January, particularly in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, along with wildfires across other provinces, has highlighted the consequences of a largely reactive approach to infrastructure risk. These events reinforce the urgent need to be far more proactive in assessing and strengthening existing infrastructure in the context of climate change. Building more resilient infrastructure is critical, not only to reduce the impact of extreme weather events, but to move away from crisis response and towards prevention, preparedness, and long-term resilience.

Amid renewed planned infrastructure spending of over R1 trillion in the medium term, as highlighted by National Treasury, and mentioned earlier, as CESA, we will continue to call for credible multi-year project pipelines, accelerated approvals, and enforced timely payments to stabilise workloads and counter persistent cancellations and delays. And the result? Real infrastructure built on the ground and less funds directed to bailing out State-owned enterprises.

Our nation, and indeed our profession, is at a crossroads. We must reclaim the role of our engineering expertise, and accountability in both the public and private sector space as the foundation of development.

Let me ask a simple question: Why did people choose engineering as a profession?

It is rarely because they want to spend their days navigating tender clauses or reducing fees to unsustainable levels. Most engineers enter into this profession because they wanted to build things that matter. They, just like me, dreamed of shaping a better future, of designing the systems that would power our economy, dams that would secure our water, and roads that would connect our people and build a better future for generations to come.

But what is our reality today? Too often, engineers are perceived, and perhaps we have started to perceive ourselves, not as visionaries, but as implementers or as a commodity to be procured at the lowest price. Increasingly, the focus can sometimes shift to spending more time trying to win over tenders than innovating. More effort goes into managing risk created by others than into imagining a better future. In this environment, the profession becomes consumed by the “what” and the “how”, and risks losing sight of the “why”

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Reclaiming our purpose does not begin elsewhere, it begins with us.

Engineers are problem-solvers by nature. We understand systems, risk, trade-offs, and long-term consequences. These are precisely the skills South Africa needs at this moment. When engineers step forward into leadership, public discourse and decision-making spaces, we do not complicate progress; we enable it. Our voice matters, and our absence has come at a cost.

So, how can engineering professionals find our way back? How do we reclaim our purpose?

I want to touch on this concept, which informs the theme by which I will lead my presidency into 2026: “If Not Engineers, Then Who? Reclaiming Our Purpose, Securing Our Future.”

This theme draws on *Ubuntu*, the profound belief that “I am because we are.” It reminds us that engineering is not merely a technical endeavour, but a relational one, grounded in shared responsibility for people and communities and the future we create.

To be an engineer means embracing three fundamental responsibilities: our duty to the profession, to society, and to ourselves.

First: Accountability for building capability

South Africa faces a severe engineering skills shortage. The Engineering Council of South Africa reports roughly one engineer for every 3,100 people, which is a stark contrast to developed countries, which average around one engineer for every 300 people. This means we have a shortage of over 60 000 engineering professionals for our nation. Thousands more young people are failing to make the leap into meaningful employment. **This is a failure not just of policy but of collective will.**

For years, fragmented skills levies and compliance frameworks have failed to deliver a robust pipeline. As consulting engineers, we must continue to advocate for and support STEM education, mentorship, and practical exposure at every level. We must do more to ensure that young people are not just trained but empowered to thrive and lead.

The question we must pose to every level of society, government and industry is this: **Are we doing enough to prepare and empower the next generation of South Africans to build, maintain, and innovate the infrastructure that underpins our nation and its growth?**

Reports show that many capable young professionals leave engineering and related fields due to the lack of opportunity or support. As South Africans we have a responsibility to expand efforts in education, mentorship, structured

development, and retention. Careers in infrastructure must be rewarding, respected, and sustainable.

And, as CESA, we will continue to leverage our branch functions, networking engagements, communication channels, and resources across the country - as platforms where we engage with member firms, stakeholders, media, the public and clients to advocate for skills development, mentorship, and opportunity, and to drive meaningful collaboration.

We will engage with like-minded partners across the public and private sectors to join CESA in shaping the future we seek, and to commit collectively to addressing the critical skills gap.

Second: Accountability for the value we deliver

Our current procurement systems often prioritise the lowest upfront cost over quality, longevity, and social benefit. This “price-only” mentality endangers both infrastructure and communities. As a result, our members have little choice but to participate in this procurement cycle to stay afloat.

Ongoing failures and deferred maintenance **have measurable social and economic consequences**. Prioritising short-term savings in design and

construction frequently leads to higher long-term costs and increased risks to public safety.

Recent tragedies, such as the tragic George building collapse in 2024 and the recent collapse of a religious property in Verulam in December 2025, serve as sobering reminders. When cost and compliance are prioritised over quality and safety, the consequences can be devastating.

Our roads, bridges, transport infrastructure, and facilities bear the weight, literally and figuratively, of lives and economies. When infrastructure fails, the consequences can be tragic and far-reaching. Independent assessments of South Africa's infrastructure, and our experiences as citizens of this country, paint a sobering picture of ageing, unsafe, and poorly maintained systems. Millions of South Africans live with the impact of poor school infrastructure, unsafe bridges, poorly maintained roads, water systems under strain, and economic opportunities unrealised.

We will amplify these insights to press for resilient, people-centred infrastructure capable of withstanding climate change and urban pressures.

The question we must ask government is: Are we willing to accept avoidable failures in the name of short-term savings? Or will we commit to procurement

and project decisions that recognise true value, risk mitigation, and long-term benefits – most importantly the entire lifecycle of infrastructure development?

As CESA, we will continue to advocate for reforms that place engineering expertise at the centre of planning, design, and oversight. This is **not a matter of preference - it is a matter of public safety, economic growth, and building trust.**

We cannot be the custodians of tomorrow, if our judgment is sidelined by a procurement system that worships the lowest price!

Third: Accountability for Integrity

Trust is the foundation of public confidence and professional respect. In South Africa, infrastructure delivery has too often been compromised by corruption, poor oversight, and weak governance. According to Corruption Watch's 2025 *Annual Report*, procurement-related corruption remains one of the most reported forms of misconduct, with infrastructure projects featuring prominently. The Auditor-General confirms billions in irregular expenditure each year.

The question for all stakeholders is: How will we collectively insist on ethical conduct, transparency, and accountability in infrastructure delivery? How will we ensure that public resources serve the people, and not private interests?

Integrity is not just what we do; it is who we are, and the culture we foster.

However, this integrity also extends to site safety as a shared *Ubuntu* duty: We are ready to collaborate and we are ready to lobby for government to enforce dedicated policing – talk is welcomed, but enforcement is critical. For years, CESA has like many other organisations across various sectors, called for better implementation and roll-out of the country's policies and plans in ensuring safety and security on project sites.

Further, in relation to construction mafia and corruption, we must implement disruption protocols, and anti-corruption controls to protect workers, clients, our member firms, and communities from criminal activities.

Fourth: Securing a meaningful seat at the decision-making table

While accountability for capability, value, and integrity must guide our mission internally, there is an urgent external challenge: engineers remain vastly underrepresented on government boards, statutory bodies, and strategic advisory forums.

So, I must ask:

- Who is making decisions about infrastructure if the people, and by people I mean engineers and engineering professionals, ladies and gentlemen, who design, build, and maintain it, are not in the room?
- Why are engineers consulted only after projects fail, rather than before decisions are taken?
- Why do we call on engineers to fix collapsing systems, but exclude them when strategies, budgets, and priorities are set?
- For how long must engineers **continue knocking on doors**, offering expertise, while critical decisions are made without technical accountability?
- **And let me be direct**, when engineers are present, why are we so often a ‘needle in a haystack’? One voice among many, easily ignored, easily overridden. Why are we seen as the cheapest commodity?

Is it any surprise, then, that projects overrun, infrastructure fails, and public trust erodes? This exclusion is not abstract. It has consequences, measured in unsafe bridges, roads, unreliable water systems, stalled projects, and billions lost to corruption.

If we are serious about infrastructure delivery, governance, and value for money, then engineers **cannot remain on the margins**. We must be at the centre of decision-making, where accountability begins!

We will continue, as CESA, to take bold steps to push for effective representation. But success requires active participation by both the public and private sectors. If we are not present and engaged, our future will be shaped by others, often without technical insight.

This calls for renewed engagement, collaboration and partnerships encouraging lively, constructive dialogue on the challenges we face.

To the woman in KwaZulu-Natal, and the many across our land who ask, “Who will fix this when you are gone?”, we will answer with strength and unity:

We will fix it. We all have a responsibility to fix it! Through thousands of skilled, empowered engineers, and not forgetting the valuable contribution of technicians, boilermakers and all professional artisans, nurtured in our ranks; through institutions, through public and private sector partnerships; and through communities united by trust - we can all share in the future of infrastructure that builds.

This is not simply our profession's task. It is our moral duty and practical mission as all South Africans.

Together, grounded in *Ubuntu* and accountability, let us show South Africa what collaboration looks like: where expertise together with industry, government, and communities align to build a better future. Economic growth does not happen on spreadsheets; it happens on the roads, in the ports, and across the power grids that we design and help to build. It happens when policy turns into implementation. This is the legacy we must be worthy of.

Imagine a South Africa, where:

- **Infrastructure is no longer discussed only when it fails;**
- **Maintenance is planned, not postponed;**
- **Engineers are trusted partners in shaping policy, not emergency responders after a collapse; and**
- **Young professionals choose engineering, not despite the challenges, but because it is once again a respected, impactful, and a rewarding calling.**

This is not an abstract vision, it is a future within reach if we choose accountability over complacency, collaboration over fragmentation, and long-term value over short-term gain.

Let us ALL be the custodians of a safe, sustainable, prosperous future our country deserves.

This is my invitation to all of you!

This bridge to the prosperous future is ours to build.

Our collective future depends on it.

Thank you.

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