KEYNOTE ADRESS: HON MEC TS THOMO

CESA MPUMALANGA BRANCH FUNCTION

THE CAPITAL HOTEL, 23 JUNE 2026

PROGRAMME DIRECTOR,

- **Chief Executive Officer of Consulting Engineers South Africa, Mr Chris Campbell,**
- **Dr Makhubela from the Department of Water and Sanitation,**
- **Chairperson of the CESA Mpumalanga Branch, Mr Chalmers Pagiwa,**
- **Distinguished guests,**
- **Consulting engineering professionals,**
- **Young professionals,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I greet you

1. Let me begin by expressing my sincere appreciation to Consulting Engineers South Africa for inviting me to address this important gathering of consulting engineers, infrastructure practitioners, industry leaders and emerging professionals.

2. I must confess, Programme Director, that when this invitation first arrived, my diary had already been committed to several other departmental responsibilities scheduled for today. In fact, I had convinced myself that my team would represent the Department today.

3. However, I quickly discovered that this was not going to be an easy decision. As many of you know, our Department is blessed with an abundance of engineers, technicians, built-environment professionals

and infrastructure specialists. The moment they learned about this invitation, I received what can only be described as a highly coordinated lobbying campaign.

4. Everywhere I turned, in the department, there was another engineer explaining why this engagement was strategically important and I simply cannot afford to be absent.

5. Programme Director, one thing I have learned about engineers is that once they have applied their minds to a problem and reached a conclusion, your chances of successfully arguing against them become very limited.

6. Unlike politicians who may debate an issue for days, once engineers arrive with enough supporting evidence to support their position. By the time they have explained their reasoning, the discussion is usually no longer about opinions.

7. When they say, "MEC, according to the technical advice before us, this is an engagement you cannot afford to miss," the safest option is usually to comply.

8. So program director, after receiving numerous professional opinions, technical motivations and what appeared to be overwhelming engineering consensus, I realised that resistance was futile. And that is why I am delighted to be here with you today.

9. Allow me to welcome all our visitors and dignitaries to Mpumalanga. To those who have travelled from various parts of our country to be with us today, we extend our warmest greetings and appreciation.

10. Welcome to a province we proudly call the Province of Dust. Not the dust carried by the wind. But the dust rising behind excavators, graders, bulldozers, TLBs, asphalt pavers and tipper trucks out there in every corner of Mpumalanga.

11. The dust generated by roads under construction, bridges taking shape, public buildings being modernised and communities witnessing infrastructure investment in action. As the Department of Public Works, Roads and Transport, we have adopted a tagline and expression called: Kubhunya Lutfuli. In Seswati, it literally means "raising dust."

12. But in developmental terms, it means far more than that. It speaks to a government that is actively building, investing and transforming.

13. Here in Mpumalanga, From Ehlanzeni to Bohlabelo, from Gert Sibande to Nkangala, ours is a province under construction.

14. Across the province, roads are being upgraded and rehabilitated. Bridges are being constructed. Schools, libraries, offices, clinics and increasingly sophisticated healthcare facilities are being delivered to support service provision and economic growth.

15. Yet behind every completed project, there is a profession whose contribution is often invisible to the public. There is an engineer, an

engineer who conceptualise the project, an engineer who produce the design, an engineer who anticipate the risks and mitigated them for our government, an engineer who transform a developmental aspiration into a technically viable reality. Indeed, infrastructure is first built in the mind of an engineer before it is built on the ground.

16. Programme Director, For that reason, I find today's theme particularly compelling: "If Not Engineers, Then Who?"

17. When I first reflected on today’s theme, I thought of a common experience familiar to many households. There is always that one person who believes they can fix everything in the house.

18. When the television stops working, they volunteer. When the vehicle refuses to start, they volunteer. When the roof leaks, they volunteer. Unfortunately, after their experiments, the problem somehow becomes more complicated than it was at the beginning.

19. Programme Director, this meeting takes place at a critical moment in our province's developmental trajectory. Two weeks ago, the Department tabled its 2026/27 Policy and Budget Speech in the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature.

20. Our speech, was anchored on the vision articulated by the Honourable Premier during the State of the Province Address which places infrastructure-led growth at the centre of economic transformation.

21. This is consistent with both international experience and economic evidence. Throughout history, no society has achieved sustained development without investing in infrastructure. Infrastructure lowers transaction costs, Infrastructure improves productivity, Infrastructure expands market access and Infrastructure enables growth.

22. For this reason, the 2026/27 priorities of the Department remain firmly anchored on infrastructure development, maintenance, rehabilitation and preservation.

23. Programme Director, as a Department, we are heavily reliant on the expertise of consulting engineers and built-environment professionals. The modern developmental state cannot function effectively without technical capability. Government may provide policy direction. But successful implementation depends significantly on technical excellence.

24. For this reason, we continue to attract and recruit highly skilled engineers and professionals while simultaneously working to enhance technical capacity within the department.

25. We recognise that the complexity of infrastructure delivery requires the highest levels of professional competences. This is precisely why we do not regard Consulting Engineers South Africa merely as a professional association, but as a strategic partner.

26. Most importantly, we regard CESA as an important policy and infrastructure think tank capable of contributing meaningfully to our developmental agenda.

27. Program Director, however, partnership must be accompanied by accountability. The overwhelming majority of consulting engineers continue to distinguish themselves through technical excellence. Many consulting firms continue to design world-class infrastructure, and contribute significantly to economic development.These professionals deserve our recognition and appreciation.

28. At the same time, we must be honest enough to acknowledge that there are occasions where inadequate designs, weak project preparation, poor professional oversight and compromised standards have contributed to infrastructure failures, project delays and escalating costs.

29. When design quality suffers, public resources are wasted. When professional standards decline, communities are disadvantaged. This is why technical excellence and professional integrity must remain non-negotiable.

30. For this reason, we commend Consulting Engineers South Africa for continuing to create platforms such as this one. For this reason, I remain convinced that today's theme captures a profound truth. Because whenever societies seek solutions to their most complex developmental challenges, they inevitably return to the same question:

31. "If Not Engineers, Then Who?", I thank you, Ngiyabonga.