

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BE NZIMANDE, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SCIENCE CENTRE IN COFIMVABA, EASTERN CAPE

6 October 2021

Programme Director, Dr Phil Mjwara;
Premier of the Eastern Cape, Mr Lubabalo Oscar Mabuyane;
MEC of Education for the Eastern Cape, Mr Fundile Gade;
Executive Mayor of the Chris Hani District Municipality, Cllr. Wongama Gela;
Executive Mayor of the Intsika Yethu Local Municipality, Cllr. Jongumzi Cengani;
CEOs of science councils;
Traditional leaders;
Government officials, including Deputy Directors-General and Heads of Department;
Distinguished guests;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen

Sanibonani

We have gathered here this afternoon to launch a brand-new science centre and we do so in a celebratory mood.

What is even more lifting is the fact that we celebrate the completion of this science centre in a rural community of Cofimvaba and it is named after one of our outstanding and leading leader of our country and the revolutionary movement our own Albertinah Nontsikelelo Sisulu. The centre took us five years to complete. We indeed turned our dream into a plan and then into a reality.

The idea of building a science centre in Cofimvaba arose from the Technology for Rural Education and Development (Tech4RED) project, a partnership between the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) and the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform.

The project was aimed at improving education in rural areas by piloting technological innovation for water and sanitation, energy, nutrition and health.

This Science centres will be an educational facility that will house interactive exhibits and will use hands-on approach to enable people of Cofimvaba and the surrounding villages to experiment and engage with science. It is an expression of bring science to the people so we also enhance prospects for grassroots innovation.

The centre will also be an integral part of the infrastructure for science communication.

The centre will also afford the local communities opportunities to explore science and research in order to better their lives by developing new knowledge and innovation which can improve their livelihoods.

Premier Mabuyane,

Before I could go into details on the project we are to handover today, let me indicate that my Department of Science and Innovation is also spearheading in the Eastern Cape the Ndlambe Eco-Sun Green Village project, in partnership with the Eastern Cape Department of Human Settlements, Ndlambe Local Municipality, Nelson Mandela University and Potsdam University in the Netherlands.

This is a climate change adaptation and mitigation flagship project that showcase the potential for off-grid settlements on a small scale.

The Ndlambe Eco-Sun Green Village project demonstrates how the use of green technologies and other innovations can contribute to the sustainability of human settlements across the country. The project comprises of the Multipurpose Centre and the construction of 10 houses.

The development of this Centre is now 95% complete.

Coming back to our project for today, the development of the Cofimvaba Science Centre is aligned with the government-championed District Development Model, as all three spheres of government have brought their resources together to establish the centre.

In addition to the contributions of the DSI, DBE and ECDoE, the Intsika Yethu Local Municipality donated the land on which the science centre has been built.

The construction and associated civil works were jointly funded by my Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and the Eastern Cape Department of Education to the tune of R47,5 million and R13 million respectively.

I once-more congratulate all the stakeholders. Siyabonga kakhulu kuzo zonke izinhlaka zikahulumeni.

This centre will serve 26 high schools in the area, schools that previously relied on a mobile science unit donated by the DSI and Sasol.

The centre is the first in South Africa to be purpose-designed, with green science, technology and innovation used in the actual building. It is the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) - an entity of the DSI - that designed this centre. Its design demonstrates how extremely environmentally friendly buildings can be designed, constructed and utilised.

The centre will produce the energy it needs through solar panels on the rooftop and small-scale wind turbines. This will make it a grid asset, as energy generated on site can be fed back into the grid when the building has a surplus.

The establishment of this science centre provides the DSI and its partner research institutions with an opportunity to test some existing technologies in a public setting, as well as some new ways of doing things, in a manner that will ultimately help to inform new policy and strategic decisions.

In conceptualising and overall planning of the centre, the intention has been to create a distinct ambience characterised by a local design approach.

As you will have experienced during the site tour, the science centre building was itself designed to be a science exhibit. This manifests in the site layout, the innovative technologies used in construction, and the technologies to be used for daily operations.

In addition, a new approach was adopted, in which local scientists based mainly at science councils and universities, were awarded grants to develop some of the exhibits.

This new approach is aimed at closing this gap by building local science exhibit manufacturing capacity, particularly for exhibits that respond to current science issues.

This centre will support the teaching of maths, science and technology in the local schools, as well as act as a teacher development centre to better equip maths and science educators.

In total, fourteen (14) institutions participated, with an equal split between science councils and universities.

It is exciting that one of the scientists involved – Dr Usisipho Feleni, who is attached to the Institute for Nanotechnology and Water Sustainability at UNISA, is a child of Cofimvaba.

The moment she learnt about the establishment of this science centre, Usisipho felt challenged, stood up and offered to contribute to the centre's development objectives. Siyabonga Dokotela ngenxhaso nokuzinikela kwakho.

On another note, this science centre is also a research project. However, we do not yet have deeper knowledge of some of the technologies used in the construction of this building.

Through the CSIR, we will spend the next five years monitoring and evaluating the performance of these technologies.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is for this reason that we view this centre as a trailblazer, enabling us to test a model in which all three spheres of government collaborate in the establishment and management of science centres.

If the centre is successful – and we have every reason to believe it will be - the framework for science centres that the DSI ultimately draws up will be based on the intergovernmental partnership approach being pioneered by the Cofimvaba science centre. We aim to build more of such centres in the coming years in other parts of the country.

Ladies and gentlemen

We are aware of several construction projects in our country that were started but never completed. Some of these failures were the direct result of the scourge of corruption and state capture that has been undermining government's effort to improve the lives of citizens.

We are celebrating today that no such behaviour has been associated with this project.

This should give us courage that it is possible to complete a project without unnecessary disruptions. This should also give us courage to stand up, talk and act against corruption by insisting on doing things correctly.

A further cause for celebration is the manner in which the local business forum has conducted itself, by collaborating with the project management team to ensure the meaningful participation of local SMMEs as sub-contractors in the construction process.

As a country, we have seen a number of construction projects worth billions of rands being violently disrupted and even brought to a halt. No such behaviour took place here.

Although there were sometimes heated discussions between the business forum and the project team, amicable and collaborative solutions were always found. I congratulate you in this regard.

I also call upon the community of Cofimvaba to protect this centre and ensure that it is not vandalised.

Ladies and gentlemen

While we have all these reasons to celebrate today, we remain mindful of the challenges that lie ahead.

The challenge that requires our collected attention, is to ensure that this infrastructure does not become a white elephant.

Our record as government when it comes to maintaining infrastructure is a cause for concern. This is evident from the number of dilapidated buildings across all spheres of government.

It is for this reason that the decision was taken to hand this centre fully over to the Eastern Cape government, which, through its Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, will ensure that the centre is well taken care of.

To this end, the conveyancing process was completed in August 2021, transferring ownership to the provincial government.

We are also aware of the need to work hard to attract other institutions of government and the private sector to support and invest in the work of this centre.

I therefore call upon the our national system of innovation and the private sector to partner with us in this project and many more that we will be establishing throughout the country.

The fact that we have enlisted the support of the Railway Safety Regulator is a good sign that we will succeed in this endeavour.

The Railway Safety Regulator has committed to provide science laboratory equipment for the Lab Equipment Loan Scheme, which the centre will host to assist local schools that lack laboratory facilities.

Another existing partnership is with the establishment of the weather station that has been commissioned by the South African Weather Service.

Without compromising its primary purpose, the weather station will serve as a useful outdoor and indoor science exhibit. We thank the South African Weather Service for partnering with us in this initiative.

Ladies and gentlemen

In conclusion, we have signed a post-construction agreement that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the DSI, the Eastern Cape Department of Education, and the national Department of Basic Education.

Although it is work in progress, the parties have already started honouring this agreement.

The DSI has provided some indoor and outdoor science exhibits to enable the science promotion programme to run smoothly.

The Eastern Cape Department of Education has provided office furniture and equipment for running the maths, science and technology education support programme.

And the Department of Basic Education has provided 35 laptops for advancing the objectives of all programmes at the centre.

It is commendable that all parties have acted in a manner that promotes the spirit of cooperative governance as enshrined in our Constitution.

Again, as part of our endeavour to use science, technology and innovation to create a prosperous society, the knowledge generated through this assessment will be shared with all relevant stakeholders and role players.

This will be done through platforms such as policy briefs, conference papers, and articles in peer-reviewed journals.

As indicated earlier, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research – which acted as project manager throughout the development of the centre – has been assigned the role of post-construction monitoring and evaluation. We will at scheduled periods receive report on this development.

As I conclude, I would like to thank Premier Mabuyane and the entire Eastern Cape Provincial government, including local government for their cooperation in this project. This project would not be a success if you did not put your weight to it.

Going forward let us ensure that this infrastructure is safeguarded from all those who might have ill intentions to destroy it.

I also thank the local professionals, the Intsika Yethu Development Initiative, and all the individuals who equally contributed to the success of this project.

I thank you.