

OPENING REMARKS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE, ON THE OCASSION OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION FOR THE BUDGET VOTE DEBATE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

23 MAY 2023

Programme Director;
Deputy Minister, Mr Buti Manamela;
Director- General, Dr Phil Mjwara;
Esteemed panelists;
Principals, teachers, parents and learners from Ministerial supported schools;
Distinguished guests;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is my honour and privilege to deliver these opening remarks for this panel discussion on the eve of our presentation of our budget vote this afternoon.

This panel discussion forms part of a set of public engagement activities for this week and serves as a build-up to the delivery of our Budget Vote for the financial year 2023/24, later today in the National Assembly.

Our 2023/24 Budget Vote takes place as the 6th administration draws to a close and our country is grappling with a number of complex development challenges. In highlighting these challenge, in his February 2023 State of the Nation Address (SoNA), President Ramaphosa, also sought to urge us to respond boldly and imaginatively to these challenges.

The President described the period we are going though as a "time of crisis" in our country. He proceeded to highlight the debilitating electricity shortage and loadshedding and the damage that these are causing to the economy and the livelihoods of our people.

The President also highlighted the fact that poverty has increased due to the loss of life and jobs as result of the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and further highlighted the catastrophic floods that devastated parts of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and the North West.

As part of government and as the Department that is responsible for managing our country's National System of Innovation (NSI), we responded to the President's call to action and made our contribution by establishing the STI Presidential Plenary Forum which will be convened under our Decadal Plan. This plenary will bring together senior government, business, science and civil society leaders, to commit through South Africa's first Innovation and Skills Compact, to implement an agenda, which can best be described as one for science for social justice.

Ladies and gentlemen

In support of government's national response to the global COVID-19 outbreak and furtherance of our long term goal of ensuring health security for the African continent, we engaged several partners with the objective of bringing capacity for innovation and the manufacturing of products to South Africa through technology transfer, capacity building and skills transfer.

These engagements have yielded tangible results in the form of local facilities medicine production and skill transfer. Additionally, we have continued with our research, development and innovation in African natural medicines.

We are particularly proud that the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority approved a Phase II clinical trial on Covid-19. Further to this, the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Africa, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and other international partners visited South Africa.

The purpose of the visit was to assess our country's capacity to conduct clinical trials and manufacture good-quality, safe and efficacious African medicines. The feedback we got from this assessment visit was positive and encouraging.

Additionally, through our entity, the Technology Innovation Agency, we led an initiative to respond to the local and continental demand for testing by setting up a fund to develop COVID-19 diagnostic tools.

It pleases us to indicate that this initiative resulted in the development of two diagnostic tests, one by Medical Diagnostech, which became the first test manufactured in Africa to receive approval from the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA).

A second partnership, between another one of our entities the CSIR and CapeBio, resulted in the successful production of a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) COVID-19 diagnostic test kit approved by SAHPRA.

In response to the challenge of ensuring energy security, in February last year, I launched the Hydrogen Society Roadmap for South Africa. This Roadmap seeks to guide our country in creating new growth sectors while transitioning to a carbon-neutral economy.

In response to the catastrophic floods, through our entities and international partnerships, we provided assistance in the flood recovery efforts in KwaZulu-Natal. This assistance came in the form of satellite imagery of the affected sites, along with relevant expertise, through the South African National Space Agency (SANSA), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the South African Risk and Vulnerability Atlas (SARVA) and the National Policy Data Observatory (NPDO).

In response to the recent floods in the Eastern Cape, led by our Department's Deputy Director-General for Socio-Economic Innovation Partnerships and our entities the CSIR and South African Space Agency, we met our colleagues from the Office of the Eastern Cape Premier and jointly identified possible interventions.

As an outcome of our engagement with the Eastern Cape government, the support provided by our Department included a data centre to support distribution of relief resources, data analyses, decision support tools, high resolution imagery and possible assistance with resolving communication challenges and water purification technologies.

Our response to the catastrophic floods made it even clearer to us that science, technology and innovation are absolutely critical if we are to meaningfully mitigate the economic and social impacts of climate change.

It is for this reason that we continue to invest significantly in R&D that builds the adaptive capacity and resilience of key sectors to climate change impacts, and mitigates the risks to society, but also forms part of our contribution to a just transition in our country.

Related to this, our Risk and Vulnerability Science Centres (RVSCs) have also played a crucial role in building the capabilities of rural-based universities to engage effectively in global change research to identify and profile local environmental risks and vulnerabilities.

Some of these centres have been able to leverage funding through the RVSC programme to forge strategic research partnerships. It also pleases us to indicate that, funding support for postgraduates and researchers and knowledge generation through a wide range of knowledge and innovation products form a central part of the RVSC programme.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are some of the practical ways in which we as the Department of Science and Innovation have responded to some of our most urgent national challenges, as articulated in President's Ramaphosa's 2023 SoNa.

Naturally, as part of our Budget Vote presentation later today and informed by the imperatives of our White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation and our Decadal Plan, we will announce additional interventions and programmes that build on the ones I have mentioned and will constitute part of our key focus areas for the current financial year.

Guided by all this, we hope to use today's panel discussion and other public engagement activities to show the public how our country's science, technology and innovation sector is growing from strength to strength.

Most importantly, we also intend to use this week's public engagements to show how our Department and its entities are continuing to contribute to South Africa's development, using science, technology and innovation to improve our country's economy, create employment, and improve the quality of life of all citizens.

We will profile more of our country's science, technology and innovation successes during one of our flagship public engagement events- our National Science Week in July. We invite you to join us for this event.

Informed by all this, today's panel discussion is held under the auspices of the theme "Growing Our Country Through Empowering Youth In Science, Technology and Innovation'

The overall message we seek to communicate through this panel discussion and related public engagements during this week, is that, in addition to remaining committed to supporting government's recovery and reconstruction efforts, we also have a number of science, technology and innovation interventions that seek to empower the young people of our country.

Some of these youth focused programmes included our Grassroots Innovation Programme (GIP). We use this Programme to identify grassroots innovators, especially women and young people, and to assist them to enhance their innovations and skills.

The other is our Living Labs. Our Living Labs are located within community learning centres and they are intended to provide support to another our tech enterprises, registered intellectual property and commercialised prototypes through accreditation through the Media, Information and Communication Technologies (MICT) Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA).

Our other youth focused intervention is the Education and Innovation Precinct in Pietermaritzburg. This is a pilot project to combine the delivery of education and relevant STI initiatives in a well-planned local space. The Imbali Precinct strives to give effect to a post-school education and training system that is interconnected, collaborative and mutually supportive.

All our youth led interventions are of course supported by the science engagement work that is being done through our entity, the National Research Foundation and its agency, the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA).

A key objective of our science engagement work is aimed a popularising science, technology and innovation among the young people of our country, with the view to not just to excite them about taking up careers in science, technology and innovation,

But to also help produce from among our country's young people, high calibre and word-class scientists, engineers and innovators, who will be at the forefront of helping our country solve its most urgent development challenges.

In conclusion, as stated earlier, we hope to use this week's public engagement activities to show the people of our country that our science, technology and innovation sector is not only growing, but is also playing a critical role in improving the lives of our people and in particular, the lives of the young people of our country.

Thank you once again to our esteemed panelists and the Director General, for agreeing to lead today's conversation on our youth focused science, technology and innovation initiatives.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank all the principals, teachers, learners and parents of the schools that I support through the Ministerial Projects for joining us this morning. I am so glad that you made it here in Cape Town and looking forward to engaging you further today and tomorrow. We have a jam-packed programme for you and I wish you well in your engagements with us.

I wish you a robust and enlightening dialogue and look forward to some of the practical ideas that will come out of today's engagement.

Thank you.