



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MESSAGE OF SUPPORT BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

AT THE

**JOINT DIALOGUE ON THE REVIEW OF THE WHITE PAPER
ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

ON

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Thank you, Programme Director,
Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Hnr Velenkosini Hlabisa,
Deputy Ministers Hnr Dr Dickson Masemola and Hnr Zolile Burns-Ncamashe,
Executive Mayor of the City of Ekurhuleni, Alderman Doctor Xhakaza,
represented by MMC Nomadlozi Nkosi,
All government officials present,
Leaders from civil society, youth and women's formations,
Representatives of organisations of persons with disabilities and LGBTI movements,
Esteemed Traditional Leaders,
Partners in governance and transformation,

A good morning to you all.

We are gathered here today to reflect, to rethink, and most importantly, to reimagine. Today is not just another event on the policy calendar, but it serves as an urgent call to action for the whole-of-society to play a part.

For too long, we have spoken of transformation in the local sphere as a technical challenge. However, for us to formulate any meaningful response, we must appreciate that it is a moral and constitutional imperative.

The White Paper on Local Government of 1998 gave us a powerful vision of a developmental local government that is democratic, participatory,

accountable, and responsive. It reminded us that local government is the sphere closest to the people where they live, play, pray, learn and dream. Where democracy must not only exist, but breathe.

Albeit 27 years later of our efforts to attain these aspirations, we are now tasked with asking an important question going into the future:

“Has that promise truly materialised for women? For the youth? For persons with disabilities? For queer communities?”

As the White Paper on Local Government envisioned a developmental local government, it offered a blueprint for rebuilding municipalities as the bedrock of post-apartheid governance, to undo the spatial and social injustices of our past.

It defined local government not as an administrative backwater, but as a transformative agent tasked with integrating social justice into everyday service delivery.

And in many respects, it gave rise to important achievements:

- The institutionalisation of Integrated Development Planning (IDPs).
- The constitutional protection of local government as a distinct and autonomous sphere.
- The election of more women to council positions.

- The establishment of municipal units focusing on youth, women and disability programmes.

These milestones must be acknowledged. They are the fruits of tireless effort by many present in this room.

Nevertheless, we must be equally bold in confronting where we have failed. Because a vision unrealised is no less dangerous than no vision at all.

Despite the policy intent of the White Paper, the daily lived reality for too many South Africans, particularly women, youth, persons with disabilities, and LGBTI individuals, remains one of exclusion.

Indulge me, ***Programme Director***, to ask all of us some uncomfortable but necessary questions:

- Why is it that, decades into democracy, some communities still lack access to clean water, dignified sanitation, reliable waste management, or accessible public transport?
- Why have youth desks in municipalities become symbolic gestures, rather than hubs of genuine economic opportunity and innovation?
- Why are our IDP consultations still failing to include persons with disabilities in ways that are meaningful, accessible and empowering?

- And how is it possible that queer people who are equally citizens of our Republic continue to face violence, invisibility and exclusion in local service delivery?

The painful truth is that inclusion has not been mainstreamed into the DNA of local governance. Often, marginalised voices are invited to participate only at the end once decisions are already made, once budgets are already spent, once spaces have already been built.

This is not transformation. This is tokenism. All our contributions today must address this anomaly with tangible solutions and interventions at the legislative level.

Minister Hlabisa, access to local government services is not just a matter of roads and buildings. It is about universal design and access, restoring dignity to those previously marginalised and ensuring that power is utilised to unlock access to services and development by all citizens in their diversity. It is about who is seen and who is served.

Let me offer a picture of real inclusion:

- A young woman in a rural village must be able to log into a free municipal Wi-Fi hub to check clinic times and book a child support grant appointment.
- A blind man in an informal settlement should have access to use a text-to-voice mobile app to report a water outage.

- A trans woman should be able to walk into a municipal building without fear of being misgendered or violated.
- A mother with a child with disabilities can access social workers, therapists, early childhood support and economic opportunities without travelling 40km to the nearest town.

These are all not a big ask. They are what the Constitution guarantees. It is what the White Paper promised. And it is what we must now fight to realise, not only in words, but in institutional culture, budgetary allocations and implementation.

One of the most tragic failures of our post-apartheid governance model is the unrelenting youth unemployment crisis. We have youth with degrees but no work. Skills but no networks. Dreams but no platform.

And we must ask: where is local government in responding to this crisis?

The Local Economic Development (LED) mandate cannot continue to operate on the fringes of municipal development. It must become the heartbeat of a new generation of inclusive, safe and youth-responsive municipalities.

Let us learn from others:

- In Gauteng, youth procurement targets have helped incubate township entrepreneurs.

- In Kenya, 30% of all public procurement is legally reserved for youth, women and disability-owned enterprises.
- In Vienna, Austria, youth participatory budgeting has empowered young people to shape their neighbourhoods with real money, real decisions and real accountability.

Should we not do the same? Should we not mandate that each municipality earmark a percentage of its budget to support youth innovation, women-owned cooperatives, and disability-run enterprises?

Empowerment is not about intention. It is about allocation.

Colleagues, gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) is not just a national emergency, but a local one. It takes place in real spaces. In taverns. In homes. In taxi ranks. In churches. On dark streets. And these are the spaces under the jurisdiction of local government.

So we must ask:

- Are our IDPs gender-responsive?
- Are our municipal budgets making provision for safe shelters, local GBVF response teams, street lighting and community-based protection services?
- Are our by-laws aligned with the values of dignity and safety for all, including women, queer persons, children, and the elderly?

If not, then we are complicit. Because local government is the sphere with the power and the proximity to prevent violence before it happens.

Around the globe, municipalities are showing us what is possible when inclusion is not an afterthought but a starting point.

- In San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Spain, every tram, building and service is fully accessible. Persons with disabilities sit on advisory boards and review every plan before it is implemented.
- In Seoul, South Korea, safety apps and escort services allow women to navigate the city at night with dignity and assurance.
- In Sandoná, Colombia, the town declared itself a “Protective Municipality” for women and LGBTQI+ persons by committing resources, policies and political will to end violence and foster belonging.
- In Barcelona, the Mapp4All app empowers residents with disabilities to locate accessible venues in real time, transforming the relationship between city and citizen.
- In Rwanda, local government centres provide grants and infrastructure support to disabled entrepreneurs as part of economic development.

These examples are not utopias. They are working models. And we, too, can be bold.

Deputy Minister Burns-Ncamashe, we must also reflect on the importance of traditional leadership, particularly in rural municipalities. Our traditional leaders are custodians of culture, land and community cohesion.

Their role in inclusive development cannot be overlooked.

Let us work hand in hand to ensure:

- Customary systems affirm the dignity of all, including women and LGBTQI+ persons.
- Land use decisions are equitable and gender-sensitive.
- Traditional courts serve justice in a manner consistent with the Constitution and human rights.

Only by effectively coordinating the relationship between our systems of governance, traditional and constitutional, can we build communities that are safe, inclusive, and sustainable.

Programme Director, in this era of the 4th Industrial Revolution, we have at our fingertips the means to leapfrog our efforts to eradicate exclusion from our legislative and moral character as a nation. Disruptive technologies, when deployed with purpose, can equalise access and amplify voices.

We must be bold to imagine:

- AI-driven municipal helpdesks that provide 24/7 service in multiple languages.
- Blockchain platforms for transparent municipal procurement.
- Gender-based violence alert apps integrated into local response networks.
- Virtual town halls where persons with disabilities and rural youth can participate in planning processes.

Digital inclusion has never been optional, it is essential for just governance as access to broadband has been dubbed the great equaliser of opportunity in the 21st century.

In a world increasingly defined by the regressive impact of the digital divide, broadband access determines not only who is connected, but also who is empowered. For women running home-based businesses, youth seeking skills development, students accessing remote learning, or job seekers completing online applications, connectivity is the bridge between marginalisation and opportunity.

Across the globe, municipalities that have prioritised broadband infrastructure particularly free public Wi-Fi are already witnessing transformative outcomes.

In Barcelona, Spain, the “Barcelona WiFi” initiative has expanded free access across libraries, parks, and public buildings, boosting digital literacy and civic engagement.

In Kigali, Rwanda there has been a roll out of Smart Kigali zones that offer free Wi-Fi in public transport hubs and commercial centres, enabling youth to access gig economy jobs and e-learning platforms.

Closer to home in Tshwane under the leadership of Minister Ramokgopa, our capital city became one of the first African cities to pilot free municipal Wi-Fi, and early assessments showed improved student access to online learning, better access to e-health platforms, and the growth of small township tech start-ups.

These are not luxuries they are modern public services, as vital as water and electricity.

When municipalities invest in connectivity, they invest in dignity. They unlock tools for education, health, safety, economic inclusion, and social mobility. For persons with disabilities, broadband access also enables digital assistive technologies and access to municipal services. For LGBTI youth, it opens platforms for community, counselling, and visibility in environments that may be unsafe physically.

In reviewing the White Paper, we should be bold to assert that digital access is not a side issue. It is central to justice, inclusion, and transformation in local governance.

Deputy Minister Masemola, today's gathering must remind us that the local sphere is not a side room of governance. It is the living room of democracy. It is where people experience the state or its absence.

And the data has proven that when citizens have equitable access to local services, trust grows. Crime declines. Social cohesion strengthens. Economic activity increases. Families flourish and society thrives.

So yes, equitable access to local services is not just a human rights issue. It is a growth strategy. A peace strategy. A development strategy.

Programme Director, we must appreciate that local government is the frontline of service delivery that fuels the engine room of national, continental, and global development commitments. Without inclusive, effective and responsive municipalities, we simply cannot meet the aspirations of the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The NDP calls for capable, developmental local government that responds to community needs, drives inclusive economic growth, and advances spatial transformation.

The SDGs, particularly Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, Goal 5: Gender Equality, and Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities, are anchored in local capacity and action.

Similarly, Agenda 2063's Aspiration 1 envisions a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth, while Aspiration 6 calls for development that is people-driven, with women, youth and persons with disabilities at the centre.

It is local municipalities that manage land use, public transport, informal economies, basic infrastructure and disaster risk reduction — all critical to these frameworks.

Therefore, the success of these bold development visions depends on how we reimagine, resource and reform our municipalities. Local government is where the SDGs are implemented, where Agenda 2063 is brought to life, and where the NDP is made tangible — not in spreadsheets, but in lived realities.

Minister Hlabisa, Women and Youth

Key targets for municipalities focusing on women and youth should center around economic empowerment, social justice, and participation in decision-making processes. This includes ensuring equal access to education, skills development, and employment opportunities, as well as addressing gender-based violence and promoting safe communities. Additionally, municipalities should prioritize the development of tailored programs and policies that address the specific needs of women and youth.

Specific Targets:

1. Economic Empowerment:

- Increase women's and youth's access to finance, entrepreneurship training, and business support.
- Promote women's and youth's participation in the formal economy through skills development and job creation initiatives.
- Facilitate access to markets for women-owned businesses and youth-led enterprises.

2. Social Justice:

- Implement policies and programs that address gender-based violence and discrimination.
- Ensure access to quality healthcare, education, and social services for women and youth.

- Promote gender equality in all aspects of municipal operations and service delivery.

3. Participation in Decision-Making:

- Increase women's and youth's representation in municipal councils and decision-making bodies.
- Create platforms for women and youth to voice their concerns and participate in policy development.
- Engage women and youth in community development initiatives and decision-making processes.

4. Education and Skills Development:

- Provide access to quality education and skills training for girls and young women.
- Promote STEM education and careers for women and girls.
- Offer vocational training and apprenticeship programs tailored to the needs of youth.

5. Safety and Security:

- Implement strategies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and femicide.
- Create safe and inclusive public spaces for women and youth.
- Promote community-based safety initiatives that involve women and youth.

6. Health and Well-being:

- Ensure access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for women and youth.
- Promote mental health and well-being programs for women and youth.
- Address issues related to teenage pregnancy and provide support services for young parents.

By focusing on these key targets, municipalities can create a more equitable and inclusive environment for women and youth, promoting their empowerment and well-being, and contributing to overall community development

As I close, let me offer this challenge:

Let this White Paper Review not be about rewriting old paragraphs with new fonts. Let it be about revolutionising our imagination. Let us centre those who have long been excluded, not as beneficiaries, but as architects.

Let us co-design municipalities that reflect the full beauty and diversity of our people.

Let us commit, each of us, to ensuring that the next generation will not sit in another conference in 2050 asking the same questions we are asking today because without local government, we cannot build a better South Africa.

But without inclusive, people-driven, equitable local government, we will never build a just South Africa.

I thank you.