



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

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

CLOSING REMARKS

BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

AT THE

**SIGNING CEREMONY: MEMORANDUM OF
UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH
AFRICA AND THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS**

ON

20 JULY 2026 | PRETORIA | 09:30



women, youth &
persons with disabilities
Department:
Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Thank you, Programme Director, Dr Praveena Sukhraj-Ely, Acting Director-General in the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities;

Ms Sindisiwe Chikunga, Minister of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities;

Your Excellency, Ms Joanne Doornewaard, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Republic of South Africa;

Dr Sunshine Myende, Executive Chairperson of the NYDA Board;

Ambassador Martin Slabber, Director: Western Europe, DIRCO;

Officials from the Department, DIRCO and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands;

Distinguished guests

We have now placed our signatures on this Memorandum of Understanding. But the significance of today will not be determined by how carefully the document is worded, how warmly we speak of friendship, or even by the ceremony we have just witnessed. It will be determined by what changes after we leave this room.

Will a woman confronting violence find a stronger system of prevention, protection and justice? Will a young person encounter a real pathway into leadership, peacebuilding, learning and economic opportunity? Will a person with a developmental or intellectual disability have greater freedom to live within the community, make choices and participate on an equal basis? Those are the questions by which this partnership must ultimately be judged.

The formal relationship between South Africa and the Kingdom of the Netherlands reaches back many decades and was renewed on a different moral foundation after our democratic transition in 1994. A mature partnership does not require us to pretend that history is simple. It asks whether we can use the lessons of history to build relations grounded in equality, mutual respect and a shared defence of human dignity. This MoU is important precisely because it places people who are too often pushed to the margins of public policy at the centre of bilateral cooperation: women, youth and persons with disabilities.

This partnership also takes shape in a year of three important South African jubilees. We mark 70 years since the women of 1956 marched to the Union Buildings and demonstrated that women were not auxiliary participants in the struggle, but architects of freedom. We mark 50 years since the youth of 1976 confronted an education system designed to reproduce racial domination and insisted that young people had both the right and the capacity to shape the country's future. We also mark 30 years since the adoption of our Constitution, through which the demands of generations of struggle were translated into a democratic promise of dignity, equality, freedom and non-sexism.

These jubilees are connected. They remind us that rights advance when those pushed to the margins organise, speak and insist on being recognised as full participants in society. The MoU signed today carries that democratic inheritance into our international cooperation and asks us to turn memory into present-day action.

It is also being signed at a difficult moment for human rights. Across the world, rights that many believed had been secured are again being

contested. Organised anti-rights and anti-gender movements travel across borders, use disinformation and moral panic, and attempt to turn vulnerable communities into convenient political targets.

The consequences are felt in attacks on women's autonomy, in the violence and exclusion experienced by LGBTI+ persons, in the persistent segregation of persons with disabilities, and in the shrinking democratic space available to young people. It therefore matters that our two countries have committed themselves to developing a common understanding of how to counter the pushback against progressive rights. This is not a secondary matter in the MoU. It goes to the heart of whether democracy can protect every person, especially when doing so becomes politically difficult.

The areas of cooperation give practical content to that commitment. Our work on youth, peace and security must recognise young people not merely as beneficiaries of programmes, or as a population to be managed when societies become unstable, but as political actors, peacebuilders and co-authors of the future. Youth exchanges must therefore open real pathways for learning, leadership, innovation and economic participation, with deliberate attention to young women, young persons with disabilities, rural youth and young people whose sexual orientation or gender identity continues to expose them to exclusion.

Our cooperation on gender-based violence must move beyond exchanging documents and describing the scale of the crisis. It must help both countries strengthen prevention, survivor-centred services, justice and accountability, while confronting the economic and social conditions that allow violence to reproduce itself. We should be able to show, through

this partnership, how policy learning becomes better practice and how better practice reaches a person before violence occurs, as well as after harm has been done.

The disability component of this MoU is equally significant. The focus on deinstitutionalisation, community-based care and participation in society affirms that care must never become a justification for segregation, and protection must never become confinement. The mutual working visits planned for 2026 and 2027 should not only be exchanges between officials. They should bring us into direct conversation with persons with developmental and intellectual disabilities, their families, representative organisations and community-based practitioners. ***Nothing About Us Without Us*** must be the method by which this partnership is implemented, not merely a phrase we repeat at formal occasions.

The MoU gives us a mechanism for turning these commitments into work. A bilateral working group under the Joint Commission for Cooperation, a two-year work plan and annual status reports may sound administrative, but they are where political intention either becomes public value or disappears into process. The working group should now be constituted with urgency. Its work plan should identify responsible institutions, timelines, resources and measurable outcomes. Its annual reports should tell us more than how many meetings were held. They should tell us who benefited, what policy or practice changed, what resources were mobilised, where implementation fell short and what will be done differently.

That work must be shaped with, and not merely for, the people whose rights we seek to advance. Women's rights organisations, youth

formations, organisations of persons with disabilities, LGBTI+ movements, researchers and frontline practitioners must have meaningful routes into implementation and review.

Bilateral cooperation is strongest when it is reciprocal and honest. Neither South Africa nor the Netherlands arrives in this partnership as a completed project. Both countries bring experience, institutions and lessons; both also have inequalities and blind spots that require continued democratic work. We will learn most when the exchange moves in both directions and when lived experience is treated as a form of expertise.

I am especially pleased, and genuinely excited, that this MoU has been signed shortly before I travel to Amsterdam for WorldPride.

WorldPride is, of course, a celebration of visibility, community and the freedom to live openly, but it is also an important global human rights platform at a time when LGBTI+ persons and other progressive movements are confronting organised resistance. My visit will now take place against the background of a newly signed framework that commits our countries to countering the pushback against progressive rights and to deepening the participation and inclusion of the people represented in this MoU.

Subject to the appropriate diplomatic and administrative arrangements, I would welcome the opportunity during my stay to visit or engage the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, the competent authorities identified in this MoU. Such engagements could help us identify immediate priorities, connect the

relevant implementation teams and ensure that the momentum created here in Pretoria travels with us to Amsterdam.

Honourable Minister and Your Excellency, today's signature is therefore a beginning, not an achievement to be placed in a filing cabinet. Our responsibility is to ensure that the political will expressed by the principals and the dedication shown by officials survive beyond this ceremony. When we meet again under the Joint Commission for Cooperation, we should be able to return not only with expressions of goodwill, but with evidence that this partnership has enlarged freedom, participation and dignity in the daily lives of the people we serve.

Your Excellency, please convey our appreciation to the Government and people of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for their friendship and partnership. I thank Minister Chikunga for her leadership, and I thank the teams from the Department, DIRCO, the Embassy and the relevant ministries in the Netherlands whose careful work made today's signing possible. The quality of the MoU reflects that effort. Its ultimate value will now be determined by the seriousness of our implementation.

May this partnership be remembered not simply for what South Africa and the Netherlands agreed to do, but for what women, young people, persons with disabilities and LGBTI+ persons were better able to become because we acted together.

I thank you.