



MINISTRY
WATER AND SANITATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

REMARKS BY ACTING MINISTER THEMBI SIMELANE ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 7TH SADC GROUNDWATER CONFERENCE

"Investing in Groundwater for Climate Action"

19 NOVEMBER 2025 (BIRCHWOOD HOTEL, EKURHULENI)

Programme Director,

Mr. James Sauramba, Executive Director of SADC-GMI,

Representatives of the SADC Secretariat,

Delegates from SADC Member States and River Basin Organisations,

Your Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,

Distinguished Experts, Researchers, Professionals and Young Innovators,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to welcome you, on behalf of the Government of South Africa and the SADC region, to this important gathering. Your presence affirms our collective resolve to confront one of the defining challenges of our era: the security, sustainability, and equitable management of water resources in a rapidly changing climate.

We meet under a theme that is both urgent and visionary: “Investing in Groundwater for Climate Action.”

Across Southern Africa, the manifestations of climate change are no longer abstract projections but lived realities:

- Prolonged and intensifying droughts,
- Erratic rainfall patterns,
- Devastating floods and extreme weather events.

These events undermine our economic development, strain our environmental systems and threaten the dignity and well-being of millions of our people.

Groundwater, once regarded as a hidden, peripheral reserve, has now proven to be one of the most reliable buffers in a climate-stressed world. Yet, it remains undervalued, under-managed, and under-invested across much of our region.

This conference provides a critical platform to elevate groundwater as a strategic asset for climate resilience, socio-economic development, and ecosystem stability. I commend SADC-GMI and its partners for convening this distinguished assembly of global and regional expertise to build on the foundation laid by the Sustainable Groundwater Management Programme, particularly Phase II, which focuses on:

- Capacity building for sustainable groundwater management,
- Knowledge generation and advocacy,
- Strengthening resilience and inclusive groundwater governance.

The outcomes of this conference must inspire policy influence, institutional strengthening, and practical implementation across SADC Member States.

Ladies and gentlemen. South Africa's National Water Resource Strategy III (NWRS-3) finalised in 2023, places groundwater at the heart of equity, sustainability, and climate resilience. It recognizes that groundwater is no longer an optional supplement, but a central pillar of national and regional water security.

The NWRS-3 calls for decisive action in six priority areas:

1. **Strengthening Groundwater Governance** – Clear mandates, institutional coherence and collaborative action across sectors.
2. **Investing in Data and Monitoring** – Expanding observation networks, improving data accessibility and enabling evidence-based decision-making.
3. **Protecting Aquifers and Recharge Zones** – Preventing pollution, regulating abstractions and safeguarding ecological integrity.
4. **Integrated Water Resources Planning** – Promoting conjunctive use and regional approaches for systemic resilience.
5. **Building Technical and Social Capacity** – Empowering institutions, communities, and future professionals to manage groundwater sustainably.
6. **Climate Adaptation and Preparedness** – Positioning groundwater as a stabilising force in an increasingly unpredictable hydrological future.

Because of this strategic direction, South Africa has already begun regulating groundwater use beyond domestic purposes and investing substantially in groundwater schemes, especially in rural and underserved communities, through conditional grants and other national interventions. These measures have provided much-needed relief, expanded water access, and brought us closer to fulfilling the promise of SDG 6, despite the realities of our water-scarce environment.

Collaboration with SADC–GMI

South Africa appreciates the support received from SADC-GMI, particularly during Phase I and II of the programme. These contributions have strengthened our national capacity through:

- Training of departmental officials,
- Development of hydrogeological maps,
- Enhanced data systems such as the Groundwater Information Portal,
- Establishment of a baseline groundwater monitoring network in the Upper Vaal,
- Sub-grant projects that deepened hydrogeological knowledge and supported planning at local level.

We also acknowledge SADC-GMI's support in establishing the National Groundwater Focal Group in April 2024. I encourage all stakeholders to help operationalise this structure, ensuring that it becomes a vibrant and influential mechanism for advancing sustainable groundwater management in South Africa.

Alignment with Continental Initiatives

At the continental level, Africa has taken a decisive step forward. On 29 September 2025, the Ministers of Water and Sanitation convened under AMCOW in Dakar, Senegal, and approved the Strategic Programme on Groundwater for Water Security and Resilience in Africa (2026–2033). This programme envisions an Africa where:

“Groundwater is used sustainably and equitably, increasing water and food security, resilience, and improved livelihoods.”

It seeks to harmonise policy, strengthen institutions, and enhance the management of transboundary aquifers across the continent. It is therefore essential that the SADC Groundwater Programme aligns with this continental vision, ensuring coherence, synergy and shared impact.

Ladies and gentlemen, this conference must not be remembered merely for its dialogue, but for its decisions and commitments. I call on governments, development partners, scientific institutions, civil society and the private sector to join forces and invest in:

1. Data, Monitoring and Research

Modern systems that illuminate the status, trends, and vulnerabilities of our groundwater resources.

2. Strengthened Governance and Regional Cooperation

Effective institutions and robust frameworks for managing shared aquifers.

3. Innovation and Technology

Scalable solutions—from efficient water-use technologies to nature-based and community-centred innovations.

4. Human Capital Development

Training, mentorship, and support for young professionals who will lead this sector into the future.

5. Community Knowledge and Participation

Empowering citizens with the information and tools needed to manage groundwater sustainably at local level. Let us turn knowledge into action, research into implementation, and commitments into measurable progress.

The SADC region is not short of expertise, innovation, or determination. With strengthened partnerships and renewed ambition - supported by our governments, development partners, and our scientific community - we can unlock the full potential of groundwater as a cornerstone of climate resilience.

Let this conference reignite our collective hope and inspire purposeful action towards a future where every community, every ecosystem, and every nation in our region is more secure, more resilient and more prosperous.

It is now my honour and privilege to declare the 7th SADC Groundwater Conference officially open.

I thank you