



MINISTRY

HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

**THEMBI SIMELANE, MP,
MINISTER OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
ON THE OCCASION OF
THE SOUTH AFRICAN PLANNING INSTITUTE PLANNING 2026
CONFERENCE**

01 OCTOBER 2026

CENTURY CITY CONFERENCE CENTRE, CAPE TOWN

Conference theme:

Digital Technologies and Sustainable Futures: Pathways for Urban and Regional Planning in Africa

Programme Director

President of the South African Planning Institute, Dr Johannes Mulaudzi,

Conference Chairperson, Mr Rayner Moodley,

Presidents of Planning Institutes,

Representatives of the South African Council for Planners,

Representatives of national, provincial and local government,

Representatives of planning institutes from across the African continent,

Distinguished academics, researchers, practitioners and development partners,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

Let me start by thanking the organisers of this Conference for your thoughtful and generous invitation. I am excited to be a part of this important assembly of planners and meeting of the minds, the 10th Planning Africa Conference.

I also wish to commend the South African Planning Institute for creating this important platform, that brings together representatives of government,

members of the academic community, professional planners and allied professionals under one roof. The overarching mandate for this Conference is to deliberate and engage with each other about the trajectory of planning across the African continent.

I do not doubt that we all appreciate the significance of the assignment we are called to discharge through our participation in this Conference. We are simply called upon to help find solutions for the country and the continent through the beautiful art of planning.

I am advised that a great deal of work has been covered in the last two days of this Conference. The leadership informs me that your Conference has already engaged on important themes such as digital transitions in urban and regional planning, sustainability in planning and planning for equity, equality and livelihoods.

These topics that you have already traversed are not only important for you as planning professionals, but these topics are also pillared on our national priorities in line with the National Development Plan.

You would know that the NDP notes that our entrenched spatial patterns that aggravate social inequality and economic inefficiency.

The NDP imagines a planning regime that will be guided by a set of normative principles to create spaces that are livable, equitable, sustainable,

resilient, and efficient, and support economic opportunities and social cohesion.

As the Department of Human Settlements, we move from the premise that people must live closer to the centres of economic opportunities.

Program Director,

Perhaps before I go any further, let me also commend the South African Planning Institute on your 30th anniversary – this is a great milestone. I speak with confidence when I say that this is not just 30 years on paper. This is 30 years of the promotion of professional planning in South Africa coinciding with the 30 years anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

This is a deserved celebration of 30 years of the promotion of standard of education and training of persons in the planning profession.

We look forward to three more decades of your advocacy work in promoting reforms in the laws and policies that impact on planning in South Africa. We look forward to continuing working with SAPI as you drive the vital intersection of planning theory and developmental practice.

Programme Director,

Your conference theme blends the significance of modern technologies and the art of planning.

You have converged under theme that say: “Digital Technologies and Sustainable Futures: Pathways for Urban and Regional Planning in Africa,”.

This is a clarion call. The theme calls upon us to evaluate how emerging technological innovations can mitigate deeply entrenched developmental challenges.

The theme also challenges us to embrace a blend of technology and planning as a catalyst for transformation and sustainable futures.

Some time ago I said to colleagues in the human settlements delivery space that *the way we have been building is no longer sufficient for the scale, speed, and complexity of South Africa’s housing challenge.*

I went further to challenge these colleagues to embrace Innovative Building Technologies as a pathway to addressing some of the stubborn multi-context’s challenges in the sector. As you know, these challenges include a huge housing delivery backlog and the issue of the quality and durability of the houses that have been built.

Today I paraphrase that statement and present it to you as a question, ***is the way we have been planning sufficient for the scale, speed, and complexity of South Africa's developmental challenges?***

I am asking this question because as you would know, South Africa's settlement patterns continue to reflect the spatial outcomes of colonialism and apartheid. The location of homes, the distribution of economic opportunities and the availability of infrastructure are shaped by decisions made over generations about land, investment and access.

While democratic South Africa has directed substantial investment toward housing and public services, a critical misalignment persists. Low-income households remain predominantly segregated at the urban periphery, isolated from employment hubs, transportation networks, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and other vital opportunities.

Consequently, families endure severe financial and social burdens from prolonged commuting, while municipalities are saddled with the fiscal strain of expanding infrastructure across increasingly fragmented and sprawling settlement footprints.

We must therefore recognize that housing delivery and spatial transformation, while intrinsically linked, are distinct objectives. It thus remains entirely possible to provide houses without fundamentally altering segregated settlement patterns.

The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act provides principles of spatial justice, sustainability, efficiency, resilience and good administration. We need to institutionalize these principles in our work as planners. Planning outside of this framework of principle can only help to sustain the inherited legacy of spatial injustice.

These principles must inform not only where development is permitted, but where public resources are directed and how projects are implemented.

Spatial transformation must be measured not only by the number of houses constructed, but by where those houses are located, the opportunities they provide access to, and the quality of the settlements we create.

The recent Constitutional Court judgment in the Tafelberg matter serves as a powerful reminder of South Africa's constitutional commitment to spatial justice and inclusive development.

The Court found that the Western Cape Government and the City of Cape Town had failed to adequately fulfil their obligations in relation to affordable housing and the redress of apartheid-era spatial inequalities in well-located parts of the city.

At the centre of the case was the Tafelberg site in Sea Point, a strategically located parcel of public land that could have provided affordable housing close to employment opportunities, public transport and social amenities. Instead, the disposal of the site resulted in years of litigation and a finding that the decision perpetuated exclusion rather than transformation.

Importantly, the Court affirmed that the provision of affordable housing on well-located public land is not merely a policy choice, but a constitutional imperative. The judgment underscores the need for all spheres of government, planners and development practitioners to ensure that public land and development opportunities are utilised to advance inclusion, integration and equitable access to the opportunities of our cities.

This makes planners indispensable to the human settlements mandate. Their contribution must extend from spatial vision to project preparation, coordinated investment, regulatory processes and implementation.

Programme director,

Development is not sustainable merely because the houses are complete. Water supply, wastewater treatment, electricity, roads, stormwater management and access to public transport must be considered together with settlement growth.

We cannot continue to identify land for substantial residential development without asking whether the relevant infrastructure systems have the capacity to support it. Nor can we assume that a municipality will be able to provide or operate infrastructure that has not been adequately planned, funded and sequenced.

I therefore urge planners to cultivate deeper integration with municipal infrastructure departments, water services authorities, state-owned enterprises, engineers, and fellow built environment practitioners.

Spatial development frameworks must be grounded in pragmatic infrastructure capacity evaluations; infrastructure master plans must accurately mirror established developmental priorities; and capital budgets must explicitly illustrate the necessary sequencing of investments.

We cannot build sustainable human settlements by constructing houses first and attempting to resolve the infrastructure requirements later.

Programme Director,

The planning profession also has an important role in addressing the deterioration of some of our inner-city areas. Abandoned, unsafe and unlawfully controlled buildings can present serious risks to residents, surrounding communities and the functioning of the city.

Building hijacking and the unlawful exploitation of property must be addressed through appropriate law-enforcement, legal and municipal processes. At the same time, we must distinguish the criminal conduct of those who exploit buildings from the circumstances of vulnerable residents, many of whom have limited access to affordable accommodation.

The solution is therefore not confined to enforcement. It must form part of an integrated approach to inner-city regeneration, the protection of occupants' rights, safer buildings and access to well-located accommodation. Where eviction or relocation is contemplated, the applicable legal requirements and the needs of affected households must be addressed.

This creates a significant opportunity for planners. We need integrated assessments of underutilised buildings, property ownership, existing land-use rights, building safety, infrastructure capacity, development feasibility and the possibilities for repurposing appropriate buildings for affordable rental or social housing.

We should also consider partnerships involving municipalities, social housing institutions, development agencies, property owners and responsible private investors. The objective should be to restore safe and productive uses to inner-city areas while expanding access to housing near economic opportunities.

Our inner cities must not be allowed to deteriorate while families are pushed ever further from the places where they work and access services.

I lobby the planning profession to bring forward proposals that connect urban regeneration, affordable housing, infrastructure renewal, public safety, and the rights of residents. We need solutions that are practical, socially responsive and legally sound.

Programme Director,

Digital technologies can help planners understand settlement change, identify suitable land, assess risks and monitor development. Geographic information systems, remote sensing, modelling and improved data management can strengthen decisions and give institutions a more reliable view of the work that needs to be done.

Climate resilience must similarly be incorporated at the earliest stages of development. Flood exposure, stormwater management, heat, water scarcity and other environmental risks must inform the identification of land, settlement layout, infrastructure design and investment decisions.

As I conclude, I invite you as planners to partner with government and help regenerate our inner cities. We invite you to respond innovatively to informal and rural settlement development challenges.

As you leave this conference, please be mindful of the fact that our development requires planners who are prepared to be bold: planners who are prepared to question processes that do not work, to identify where reform is necessary, and to bring forward recommendations that are evidence-based and capable of implementation.

Ultimately, the success of planning will not be judged by the number of plans we produce. It will be judged by whether more people can live in safe, well-located settlements, enjoy security of tenure, access economic opportunities and build sustainable livelihoods.

I once again wish to thank the organisers, speakers, researchers, and delegates for the contributions made to this conference. The government looks forward to your sound resolutions and proposals. We re-commit ourselves to working with you for development and complete spatial justice.

On behalf of the Department of Human Settlements, I invite you as planners to take advantage of technology to plan better, so that you can help us to build better, for a sustainable future for everyone.

I thank you.