MINISTRY
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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SPEAKING NOTES FOR THE MINISTER OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS AT THE SALGA 30TH ANNIVERSARY LAUNCH 26–27 NOVEMBER 2026, PREMIER HOTEL, UMHLANGA

Programme Director;
President of SALGA, Councillor Bheki Stofile;
Members of the SALGA National Executive Committee;
Leaders of Local Government, past and present;
Mayors and Councillors;
Representatives of National and Provincial Government;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good evening.

It is a privilege to join you this evening as we celebrate 30 years of SALGA, and through this important milestone, reflect on three decades of democratic local government in South Africa.

This anniversary is rightly a moment of celebration. But it is also an opportunity for reflection.

Thirty years gives us sufficient distance to appreciate how far we have travelled, while also compelling us to confront honestly the work that remains before us.

Tonight, we recognise the men and women who helped build SALGA; those who have led our municipalities; the councillors and officials who have served our communities; and all those who have contributed to building democratic local government over these three decades.

Indeed, SALGA has deliberately framed this anniversary as more than a celebration. It is an opportunity to reflect on its 30-year journey, recognise those who helped shape the institution and the local government sector, and look ahead to its future.

THIRTY YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The story of SALGA cannot be separated from the story of democratic local government itself.

Our Constitution placed local government at the centre of our developmental project because it is the sphere of government closest to our people.

It is where the promises contained in our policies meet the everyday realities of communities.

For many South Africans, government is experienced through very practical things: whether there is water when they open a tap; whether refuse is collected; whether the roads they travel are maintained; whether settlements are safe; whether planning systems work; and whether the communities in which they live provide access to opportunity.

The effectiveness of government must therefore ultimately be measured not simply through plans and expenditure, but through what citizens actually experience in their daily lives. This citizen-centred understanding of public administration has also been a recurring theme in our engagements during this year.

Over the past three decades, local government has been at the centre of an extraordinary transformation.

We have had to build democratic municipal institutions while simultaneously addressing the deeply unequal spatial and service-delivery inheritance of apartheid.

Municipalities have been expected to extend services to millions more South Africans, facilitate development, help transform our towns and cities, and enable economic growth.

We should therefore never allow the difficulties we face today to erase the progress of the past 30 years.

But neither should the progress of the past become an excuse for avoiding the difficult questions of the present.

And perhaps our most recent Local Government Elections have presented us with another important lesson in our democratic journey.

The electorate has given us a political landscape in which, in many municipalities, no single party can govern alone. Approximately 65% of metropolitan and local municipal councils did not produce an outright majority for any one political party.

Whatever our political differences, that reality places upon all of us a profound responsibility to learn again how to work together in the interests of the people we serve.

DEMOCRACY DOES NOT REQUIRE US TO AGREE ON EVERYTHING

It does, however, require us to find sufficient common purpose to govern.

And perhaps that is one of the most important lessons this moment offers South Africa: political difference need not become institutional paralysis; contestation need not come at the expense of cooperation; and the mandate to govern must always remain subordinate to the obligation to serve.

Our people should never become casualties of our inability to find one another.

A family waiting for water, sanitation, a title deed, a housing opportunity or the repair of a road is not ultimately interested in which political party controls which portfolio.

They expect government to work.

The challenge of this new era, therefore, is to demonstrate that cooperative governance is possible not only between the three spheres of government, but also across political difference.

Where voters have required parties to share responsibility, the maturity of our democracy will be measured by whether we can convert that shared responsibility into stable institutions, responsible leadership and uninterrupted service delivery.

Government's recently issued guidelines on stable coalitions make precisely this point: prolonged political instability and frequent changes in municipal leadership can weaken municipal institutions, disrupt administration and ultimately compromise the services on which communities depend.

Perhaps, then, the message of this moment is quite simple: we may contest elections separately, but once entrusted with public office, we carry a shared responsibility for the functioning of the state and the wellbeing of its people.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS CENTRAL TO HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

As Minister of Human Settlements, this principle of working together has very practical meaning for me.

There can be no successful Human Settlements programme without capable and functioning local government.

A house does not exist independently of the municipality in which it is located.

Before a family can occupy that home, there must be suitable and well-located land.

- There must be planning and development approvals.
- There must be bulk and connector infrastructure.
- There must be water.
- There must be sanitation.
- There must be roads, electricity, refuse removal and community facilities.

And long after a housing project has been completed, somebody must maintain those services and infrastructure.

That is why municipalities do not sit at the end of the Human Settlements delivery chain.

They are integral to it.

Our engagements with SALGA have underscored precisely this need for closer alignment across the spheres of government, stronger intergovernmental coordination, and a sharper focus on practical delivery at municipal level.

If municipal planning is not aligned with provincial Human Settlements plans and national investment priorities, delivery slows down.

If bulk infrastructure is not available, houses cannot be occupied.

If land-use management and development approvals are delayed, projects stall.

And when municipal services deteriorate after people have moved into new developments, we undermine the very objective we sought to achieve by providing the house in the first place.

That is why our Integrated Development Plans, Spatial Development Frameworks, provincial Human Settlements plans and infrastructure budgets must increasingly

speak to one another. The alignment of these instruments has been a consistent feature of our recent engagements on sustainable Human Settlements.

Working together, therefore, cannot remain a slogan. It has to become a method of government.

THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US

Colleagues,

We must also be honest about the scale of the challenge ahead.

Our municipalities operate in circumstances of rapid urbanisation and expanding informal settlements.

They face ageing infrastructure, constrained finances, increasing demands on municipal services and communities whose expectations of democratic government are understandably high.

At the same time, climate change is introducing additional pressures through floods, droughts and increasingly severe weather events.

The answer cannot simply be to build more infrastructure without considering whether that infrastructure can be operated and maintained throughout its lifecycle.

Nor can we continue planning settlements independently from the infrastructure required to sustain them.

The future of Human Settlements therefore depends increasingly upon integrated planning, infrastructure investment and capable municipal institutions.

Importantly, this is not a responsibility that national or provincial government can simply place at the door of municipalities.

The Constitution gave us three distinct spheres of government.

It did not give us three separate countries.

When a project fails because national, provincial and local plans are not aligned, the citizen does not distinguish between spheres of government.

They simply see government failing to deliver.

That is why cooperative governance cannot remain an administrative concept.

It must become a practical method of delivery.

And perhaps the current political moment makes that principle more important than ever.

If cooperation is necessary between our spheres of government, then in an increasingly diverse political landscape it must also become part of the culture of governance itself.

Our differences are legitimate. They are part of democracy.

But our communities cannot afford for those differences to make government incapable of acting.

THE ROLE OF SALGA IN THE NEXT CHAPTER

This is where I believe SALGA has an increasingly important role to play.

For 30 years, SALGA has provided organised local government with an institutional voice.

The challenge for the next phase is to ensure that this voice translates increasingly into stronger municipalities and better outcomes for communities.

Our partnership must help us answer practical questions:

- How do we strengthen municipal capability?
- How do we improve infrastructure planning and, just as importantly, infrastructure maintenance?
- How do we accelerate the upgrading of informal settlements while reducing the growth of new areas of vulnerability?
- How do we improve coordination around land release, township establishment and development approvals?
- How do we develop settlements that are resilient to climate change?
- How do we build municipalities capable of navigating an increasingly complex political environment while maintaining administrative and institutional stability?
- And importantly, how do we ensure that the investments government makes today remain functional for the communities that must depend upon them tomorrow?

The answers will require stronger partnerships between national departments, provinces, municipalities, SALGA, communities, the private sector and our development partners.

But they will also require us to be honest about what is not working and sufficiently courageous to change it.

BEYOND HOUSES, TOWARDS COMMUNITIES

From a Human Settlements perspective, our ambition must remain clear.

We are not simply building houses.

We are building communities.

And that distinction matters.

The true measure of a successful Human Settlement is not the number of housing units standing on a piece of land.

It is whether a family living there can reach work.

- Whether children can reach school safely.
- Whether people have access to reliable water and sanitation.
- Whether the settlement is connected to economic opportunity.
- Whether public spaces are safe.
- Whether families have security of tenure.
- And whether the infrastructure we build today will still function ten, twenty and thirty years from now.

This is why the future of Human Settlements and the future of local government are inseparable.

Our task is therefore to align our investments much more deliberately around place and people, rather than allowing individual institutions to pursue disconnected projects.

That requires discipline from all of us.

It requires nationally developed policy to recognise municipal realities.

It requires provinces to coordinate implementation effectively.

And it requires municipalities to strengthen planning, financial management, infrastructure maintenance and accountability.

Most importantly, it requires all three spheres to accept that our success is shared, just as our failure is experienced collectively by citizens.

LOOKING TOWARDS 2056

Programme Director,

I was particularly struck by SALGA's intention that this anniversary journey should ultimately carry a message to the local government sector of 2056.

As part of its 30th anniversary programme, SALGA envisages a time capsule carrying messages to the local government sector of 2056. There is something profoundly valuable in asking ourselves what those who come after us should inherit.

So, what local government do we want the next generation to inherit?

I hope that when those who lead our municipalities in 2056 look back at this period, they will say that ours was a generation prepared to make difficult choices.

That we moved beyond fragmented planning towards genuine integration.

That we built capable institutions instead of becoming comfortable with dysfunction.

That we restored a culture of maintenance and care for public infrastructure.

That we confronted spatial inequality rather than perpetuating it.

That we used technology and innovation to improve people's daily lives.

That when our politics became more complex, we chose cooperation over paralysis and the interests of communities over narrow political interests.

And that we understood that accountability to citizens is not an inconvenience of democracy, but the very essence of public service.

May they inherit towns and cities in which the address of one's home no longer determines one's access to opportunity.

May they inherit municipalities with the institutional and financial capability to serve communities effectively.

And I hope they inherit a system of cooperative governance in which national, provincial and local government understand that none of us can succeed sustainably while another sphere fails.

That, I believe, should be part of the legacy we begin shaping today.

Indeed, I hope SALGA intends the reflections during this anniversary period to contribute to its broader legacy programme and to a forward-looking dialogue on the future of local government at its National Conference in February 2027.

CONCLUSION

Programme Director,

As we mark this important milestone, let us celebrate what SALGA and democratic local government have achieved.

Let us honour those who built this institution and those who continue to serve our communities, often under exceptionally difficult circumstances.

But let us also make this anniversary about the future.

The next 30 years must be about strengthening the ability of municipalities not only to plan, but to implement; not only to build infrastructure, but to maintain it; not only to spend public resources, but to demonstrate the difference those resources make in people's lives.

And in this new chapter of our democracy, perhaps we must add one more commitment:

We must get better at working together.

Across spheres.

Across institutions.

And, where the electorate requires it of us, across political differences.

Because when all is said and done, we share the same constituency.

We serve the same families.

We build in the same communities.

And we will ultimately be judged by the same measure:

- whether the lives of the people we serve are changing for the better.

For those of us in Human Settlements, our commitment is to deepen our partnership with SALGA and with municipalities as we work towards that objective.

Congratulations to SALGA on reaching this historic 30-year milestone.

May the next chapter be one of stronger municipalities, deeper partnerships, mature democratic cooperation and, above all, tangible improvements in the lives of the people of South Africa.

I thank you.