

Minister of Transport, Ms Sindisiwe Chikunga,
Premier of Gauteng, Mr Panyaza Lesufi,
Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Provincial MECs of Transport,
Representatives of the South African Local Government Association,
Representatives of organisations representing and working with persons with disabilities,
Representatives from business, labour, academia and civil society,
Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here with you just days before we celebrate Freedom Day.

This coming weekend, as celebrations take place across the country, we will reaffirm our commitment to build a South Africa that truly belongs to all who live in it.

We will reaffirm our commitment to a South Africa where we are united in our diversity, to build a nation founded on equality and human rights for all.

Over the past 30 years, guided by our Constitution, South Africa has made considerable progress in both protecting and advancing the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.

In 2007, South Africa adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which makes provision for the rights of South Africans with disabilities to equality, dignity, safety and freedom of movement.

Through the Presidential Working Group on Disability, we have sought to ensure that our policies, programmes and practices are inclusive and that persons with disabilities are able to participate fully and freely in all aspects of our national life.

It is a pleasure to be part of this important conference on universal accessibility.

This forum has been convened to address the persistent barriers that persons with disabilities face in accessing transportation services.

Transportation is, after all, the backbone of any economy.

Whether it is walking on safe roads, cycling, driving, taking a minibus taxi or an e-hailing service, travelling by bus, train or air, transportation is a catalyst for economic growth and social integration.

As we review our performance over the past 30 years of democracy, we have to ask whether our policies and programmes have achieved the changes we seek.

The National Land Transport Act requires universal access as a minimum requirement in forms of land-based public transport. This includes rail and road, buses, minibus taxis and coaches.

The legislation covers persons with disabilities, elderly people, children, pregnant women and people accompanying children.

Despite this enabling legislation there are still many areas where a lot more work is needed to make the national transport system fully accessible.

To this end, the revised White Paper on National Transport policy was published in 2021, and commits to a number of implementation strategies.

There is an acknowledgement that transport is not sufficiently accessible to all categories of passengers, including persons with disabilities.

As part of a reformed approach to urban planning, integrated public transport programmes are being implemented in a number of municipalities.

The Public Transport Network Grant is one of the mechanisms being used to promote the implementation of universal design and universal access.

There are now ten integrated public transport network municipalities receiving the grant, with specific conditions on universal accessibility.

Work is underway to roll out a standard for the universal accessibility of all road-based vehicles.

This will be introduced with the support of vehicle manufacturers and covers both public transport passengers and drivers of vehicles.

The Department of Transport has gazetted a national policy for parking discs that will enable drivers with disabilities to use a disc obtained in one part of the country everywhere in South Africa.

The Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa – PRASA – has developed a universal access policy with norms and standards.

It has committed to speed up its work to ensure that trains are accessible and station platforms are level.

The Gautrain has had level boarding on its trains since its inception.

It is important that in all future infrastructure development, these kinds of design and usability considerations are factored in from the outset – rather than being retro-fitted later.

Airports Company South Africa, working with airlines, is working to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities across its facilities.

These efforts include the introduction of designated parking spaces for persons with disabilities, assisted passengers' lounges, and designated private search facilities at security gates.

There is already a growing awareness within the aviation industry that passenger issues have not been dealt with from a universal access perspective and that more needs to be done.

In the maritime sector, industry partners and state-owned entities are looking at improvements to the universal accessibility of inland waterways, river crossings, ports, sailing and yachting clubs.

No discussion on universal access would be complete without considering the impact of emerging technologies and new business models on transportation, including e-hailing, car sharing and the like.

These new systems are rapidly transforming the sector and must be factored into planning, in collaboration with the service provider companies.

While we must prepare for new technologies and business models, we also have to fix our established systems, where serious shortcomings persist.

We have to address issues of safety and accessibility of learner transport system.

We have to address similar issues in the taxi industry, which transports around 70 percent of the South African population and is the dominant mode of public transport.

It is pleasing that the minibus taxi services have, where tasked, been able to demonstrate reasonable accommodation of passengers with disabilities.

With more universally-designed vehicles, they can help to provide better and safer access as part of an integrated public transport network.

Safety around and on our roads is paramount.

Road standards and signs need to be improved so that pedestrian crossing infrastructure is accessible and integrated.

Walking and cycling should not cost anyone their life. The last 27 years have seen little improvement in the accident rate among cyclists and pedestrians.

This must change. It requires a change in the behaviour of drivers and in the culture of enforcement.

There is much that we can achieve in the short term.

Organisations in the transport space can train staff on the needs of persons with disabilities.

Information materials on routes and timetables can be made more accessible for persons with disabilities.

Municipalities can improve road signage and pedestrian access.

We are confident that the incoming Transport Economic Regulator and the Public Transport Regulator will play important roles in supporting universal access.

This conference must move beyond diagnosis of challenges to concrete solutions.

As you go into your discussion groups, these areas should be debated and solutions found.

How, for example, do we bring the taxi industry on board to facilitate greater accessibility for passengers using wheelchairs or guide dogs?

How do we address and overcome the skills deficit in the engineering and planning sectors with respect to the design of universally accessible built environments?

How do we step up engagement with users themselves to better understand their challenges and their needs?

The disability sector's rallying call has always been 'nothing about us without us'.

Solutions cannot be designed in offices far away, but must be developed in direct response to user needs.

I have great hopes for this conference and its outcomes.

The goal of a universally accessible national transport system is not only within reach. It is also a vital part of our efforts to build a South Africa that truly belongs to all who live in it.

I thank you.