



**DEPUTY MINISTER  
WATER AND SANITATION  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

Private Bag X313, PRETORIA, 0001 Tel: (012) 336 7941, Fax: (012) 328 4254  
Private Bag X9052, CAPE TOWN, 8000 Tel: (021) 464 1500, Fax: (021) 465 3362

**SPEECH BY DEPUTY MINISTER ISAAC SELLO SEITLHOLO AT THE SALGA  
SANITATION CONFERENCE, 5 FEBRUARY 2026, COASTLANDS HOTEL,  
DURBAN**

Theme: *“Municipalities scaling up water efficient sanitation solutions.”*

**Programme Director**

**Provincial Chairperson of SALGA KZN, Cllr Xolani Dube, and the entire  
Leadership of SALGA present here.**

**All Mayors, with special greetings to our host mayor, the Executive Mayor of  
EThekwini, His Worship Cllr Cyril Xaba (Nonkosi)**

**Councillors from EThekwini and all other municipalities**

**Municipal Managers, and Technical Directors**

**Officials from the Department of Water and Sanitation, led by our Acting  
Provincial Head in KZN, Ms Angela Mansefield and the Chief Director for  
Sanitation Support Services, Mr Andre van Der Walt**

**Officials from our key partners, including UKZN, BORDA and the WRC**

**Distinguished Guests,**

It is an honour to stand before you in this important gathering of local government leaders, where we will be speaking about the important and urgent task of *municipalities scaling up water efficient sanitation solutions (WESS)*.

Programme Director, before we dive into the technicalities of pipes and pumps, we must acknowledge one of the key institutions that has brought us together.

Born out of our democratic transition and mandated by Section 163 of our Constitution, the **South African Local Government Association (SALGA)** has spent three decades serving as an indispensable voice of the sphere of government closest to our people. Since its inception, SALGA has been the bridge between national policy and local reality, transforming from a voluntary association into a constitutional pillar of cooperative governance.

To the leadership of SALGA, your role in strengthening local government has never been more critical than it is today. You are one of the most important institutions of our multi-sphere democracy. I therefore want to offer, on behalf our Ministry led by Minister Pemmy Majodina, a message of unwavering support to you as this important institution.

We need a strong, principled, and technically-minded SALGA to navigate the turbulent waters ahead. My presence here is testament to our commitment to working with you, as a Ministry, not just as sector regulators of your municipalities, but as partners in the urgent task of state-building.

Provincial Chair and colleagues, partnerships important as this one require honesty. And today, honesty and patriotism requires us to speak about **uncomfortable truths**.

I stand before you in this beautiful province of KwaZulu-Natal, a province that represents both the incredible potential of our nation and, unfortunately, the most visible scars of our water infrastructure decline. A province that faces serious sanitation challenges. And when we speak of **sanitation**, colleagues, we are speaking about the most fundamental boundary of human dignity.

I am therefore here because I am deeply passionate about that critical element of our human dignity, sanitation. And because human dignity is a sacrosanct and inalienable right in our Constitution, it convicts us to *tell no lies and not musk difficulties*.

Colleagues, the crisis we face in the sanitation sector is not a natural disaster, it is a governance disaster. Let us be nuanced about why we are failing. The decline we see is a result of a **triad of failure**: technical incompetence (which breeds the lack of innovation), financial mismanagement, and a culture of impunity in local government.

In many of our municipalities, maintenance has become a scary word. We have seen a shift from preventative maintenance to crisis management. Why? Because crisis management allows for the emergency procurement of water tankers, a business model that has become a parasite on the municipal fiscus. As the Minister often says, we as a Ministry vehemently oppose and condemn this phenomenon. We must work together to rid ourselves of this betrayal of our country. We need to instil a more patriotic relationship with our infrastructure, if our nation is to survive and thrive.

Look at **eThekweni**, our host city. Once the jewel of African metros, it now struggles with a wastewater system in intensive care. Executive Mayor and colleagues, we must work tirelessly to turnaround this bleak situation. Our tireless work must have at its center an intense focus on *scaling up innovative water efficient sanitation solutions (WESS)*, which we have gathered here to discuss. I will turn to this topic in a moment, Programme Director.

Right next to us, Provincial Chair, there is **Msunduzi**. Despite being the provincial capital, it has faced crippling water curtailments because it cannot manage its billing or its leaks. If our province and country are to succeed, we must work tirelessly to look for innovative solutions to urgently solve these existential challenges.

We must have a better culture of financial management. Municipalities now owe our Water Boards over **R24 billion**. When a municipality collects water rates but uses that money to pay for non-essential items or bloated administrative salaries instead of paying the Water Board, that is theft from the future of our water security.

These are some of the **uncomfortable technical and financial truths** we must always echo.

For decades, technical positions have been filled based on political loyalty rather than technical mastery. Wastewater treatment plants and other sanitation infrastructure know no political affiliation, colleagues, all they require are the right expertise. They require no loyalty to old ways of thinking about sanitation, they require technically-minded people who will help our municipalities scale up *innovative sanitation solutions*.

The **Green Drop** reports tell us that over **330 wastewater systems** are in a critical state and this is because the person in charge often doesn't know the difference between a primary clarifier and a sludge digester. We cannot continue in this path.

My message today is therefore clear colleagues, if *municipalities are to scale up the uptake on innovative water efficient sanitation solutions*, we must recruit and hire the best technical expertise.

As part of the **Water Services Amendment Bill**, we are introducing a mandatory **licensing system**. If your municipality cannot demonstrate that it has qualified, technically skilled personnel, it will **lose its license** to provide water. We will bring in competent, licensed providers to take over.

We need scientists in our sanitation, not politicians in our pump stations.

Beyond governance, Provincial Chair, we must also confront a technical fallacy, the belief that the 19th-century Victorian model of "flush-and-forget" is the only solution for a 21st-century water-scarce nation. We have been obsessed with massive, centralized, water-intensive sewerage networks that we clearly cannot afford to build, let alone maintain. It is time for a radical, pragmatic shift toward **Water-Efficient Sanitation Solutions (WESS)** and decentralized wastewater infrastructure.

We must leverage the world-class research coming out of our own backyard. The **Water Research Commission (WRC)**, through the **South African Sanitation Technology Enterprise Programme (SASTEP)**, has already proven that non-sewered sanitation is not second-class sanitation. These are sophisticated, closed-loop systems that treat waste on-site without a drop of water for flushing. These technologies will be crucial for country, which we all know is a water-scarce country.

Similarly, the **WASH R&D Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)** is leading the global charge in "reinventing the toilet."

I attended an IWA conference in Thailand in December, Executive Mayor, where these institutions won prestigious global awards for all of this innovative work. The world has immense recognition and respect for South Africa's sanitation innovation.

The critical question therefore is why are these technologies being exported to the world while our own municipalities are still waiting for multi-billion rand pipe networks that will never be adequately funded? Let us deeply rethink traditional and water-intensive sanitation infrastructure.

Colleagues, I am therefore calling for the mass adoption of **Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems (DEWATS)**. These systems allow us to treat waste at the source, whether in a school, a clinic, or a housing development, turning what we once called "sewage" into recycled water for irrigation and organic fertilizer.

This is not just an environmental choice; it is a fiscal one. Decentralization removes the burden from our collapsing central plants and eliminates the astronomical costs of pumping waste across vast distances. We must stop building monuments to old technology and start building resilient, localised systems that actually work for the people. It is also an economic choice, as these innovations create secularly economies.

In one of the oversight programmes we conducted here in EThekweni last year, these innovative sanitation technologies were demonstrated to us. I saw an incredible way in which we can improve sanitation service delivery whilst also creating jobs and economic participation for communities.

And for us to do this effectively Executive Mayor, we must strengthen our **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)** approach. We must partner with research institutions and the private sector, scale up our uptake on innovative sanitation solutions. The **Water Partnership Office** is our vehicle, in the Department, to bring in private sector capital and, more importantly, **project management discipline**. We encourage municipalities to utilise it.

Programme Director, in conclusion, I thought I should speak strongly about the challenges we face and juxtapose them with the available solutions, in order to persuade us that we have a choice between two paths. A path of continued decline or a path of focus on *new ways of thinking that can bring us hope*.

But hope, cannot be a feeling, it has to be a **result**. A result born out of the right and innovative choices.

Hope has to be a beach that stays open in Durban because the pumps are actually working.

Hope has to be mother in Msunduzi who can trust the water from her tap 24 hours a day.

Hope has to be a professional engineer who chooses to work for a municipality because they know they will be judged on their work, not their party membership.

Hope has to be communities knowing that they create a secular economy to benefit them because our engineers have made the right and innovative sanitation choices.

Finally colleagues, to the leadership of SALGA and the mayors here, we therefore have a choice. We can be the generation that presided over the collapse of our nation's sanitation, or we can be the leaders who embraced the turnaround.

Let us end the excuses, get the right skills to our pipes and pumps, and start building a South Africa where every citizen can live with the dignity they were promised.

The era of accountability has arrived. The era of innovative sanitation have is here. Let's get to work.

I thank you. Ngiyabonga!