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Deputy Minister Mahlobo calls for science-led, coordinated national response to water crisis at UNISA Water Imbizo

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Deputy Minister David Mahlobo has emphasised the critical role of academic institutions in convening and shaping responses to South Africa's water challenges, stressing that coordinated and science-based solutions are essential to addressing the crisis. He was delivering the keynote address at the University of South Africa (UNISA) Water Imbizo that was held on Tuesday, 17 March 2026.

The Imbizo was a critical national intervention, bringing together government, academia and sector stakeholders to confront the country's water crisis through practical, evidence-based solutions.

Deputy Minister Mahlobo stressed that South Africa's water challenges are structural and systemic. While the country remains water-scarce, current shortages are largely driven by ageing and failing infrastructure, weak governance, declining municipal capacity, pollution and high levels of non-revenue water, which stands at approximately 47 percent.

"This is not just a resource challenge. It is a governance, infrastructure and capability challenge that demands coordinated action across the entire system," said Deputy Minister Mahlobo.

He emphasised that water security is a constitutional, developmental and economic imperative, underpinning public health, food security, industrial growth and human dignity. He warned that without decisive intervention, increasing demand, climate variability and system inefficiencies will place growing strain on already vulnerable water systems.

Placing strong emphasis on the role of academia, the Deputy Minister said South Africa's response must be firmly grounded in scientific evidence, innovation and technical expertise.

"Universities and research institutions must be at the centre of our national response. We need solutions that are informed by data, guided by science and capable of being implemented at scale," he said.

He called for a decisive shift from research to implementation, noting that South Africa does not lack knowledge or innovation, but struggles to translate this into practical outcomes on the ground.

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“We must close the gap between knowledge and delivery. Scientific capability must find expression in municipal systems, in infrastructure operations and in the daily management of water services,” he said.

Deputy Minister Mahlobo further stressed that water security cannot be achieved by government alone, calling for a whole-of-society response that brings together government, academia, industry and communities in a coordinated national effort.

He reaffirmed government’s commitment to stabilising the sector through infrastructure investment, improved municipal performance, stronger oversight and coordinated interventions under the National Water Crisis Committee chaired by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The Deputy Minister concluded by urging all South Africans to recognise water security as a shared national responsibility and to support efforts to protect and sustain the country’s scarce water resources.

Lebogang Maseko

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