

Statement of the chairperson of SADC and the president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to the 28th Ordinary SADC Summit of Heads of State and Government

Sandton Convention Centre, South Africa, 16 August 2008

Your Majesty,
Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,
Your Excellencies, Heads of Continental and International Organisations,
Your Excellencies, Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Your Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, I would like, first and foremost, to take this opportunity to thank President Manawasa, the President of Zambia, for his leadership of SADC during a very challenging period of our history.

We are proud to have had such a leader at the helm of SADC and we are pleased that His Excellency, President Manawasa, continued to espouse the noble ideals of the SADC family of nations. I would also like to take this opportunity to wish our brother, President Manawasa, a speedy recovery from his illness.

We meet during the year of the 28th anniversary of our premier Organisation, SADC. As we know, when SADC was constituted in 1980, it comprised only eight independent States. However, these eight states were united in their noble determination to end colonialism and apartheid so that all the people of this region could be free to determine their own destiny.

Indeed, SADC inherited the proud record of the Frontline States under the leadership that never wavered in their resolve to ensure that none but ourselves would continue to be our own liberators. This leadership was consistent and courageous despite some of the most horrific human suffering and huge military and economic damage visited on the Frontline States.

Indeed, Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, that leadership sought to infuse into SADC the same virtues and values that united and defined the Frontline States.

Accordingly, for many years SADC's strength was its political unity and cohesion. This strength allowed the region effectively to participate as an important player at continental and global forums. In recent times, however, we have had numerous challenges that have tested the very cohesion that acted as a potent weapon against those forces that have an interest in our perpetual weakness and marginalisation.

Undoubtedly, we still need the same determination that brought about the total liberation of our region in the struggle against marginalisation, poverty and underdevelopment, because in reality, our actions should still define us as the Frontline States.

It should be through our extraordinary actions in the promotion and the execution of the tasks aimed at the Renaissance of Africa, that we would be defined as belonging to the Frontline States. Indeed, it should be through the extraordinary things that we do, including engaging in fearless and leading work to promote the interests of Africa and the countries of the South, that we should be worthy of the honorific term, the Frontline States.

In this regard, Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, quite correctly, SADC has for some time being committed to assist the sister people of Zimbabwe to overcome the challenges they confront. I would like to take this opportunity to salute the leaders of the people of Zimbabwe for the enormous efforts they have made to agree on a common programme to address those challenges.

This Summit afford us the possibility to assist the Zimbabwean parties to finalise their negotiations so that together they can engage the work to achieve national healing and reconciliation and attend to the matter of reconstruction and development of Zimbabwe and in this way extricate the masses of the people from the dire straits in which they find themselves.

As we have said already, we must over this weekend draw on the inspiring legacy of the Frontline States to help put Zimbabwe on the right road to its recovery and the resumption of its role as a major driver of the process of the up-liftment of our region.

I am certain that the millions of Zimbabweans, both inside and outside Zimbabwe, awaits with great expectations and high hopes a positive outcome from our deliberations, that we communicate to them that we are, towards them, our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, we need the commitment and courage of those who led the Frontline States because the challenges facing our continent and our region require of us an engagement of extraordinary proportions so as to ensure that we defeat our modern-day enemies of marginalisation, poverty and underdevelopment.

The masses of our people demand of us to do everything in our power to help pull the poor from the morass of wretchedness. Indeed, the SADC International Conference on Poverty and Sustainable Development in Mauritius early this year was clearly part of this necessary response to an imposed century-old legacy that has defined Africans as poor and marginalised.

The task facing all of us is the finalisation and implementation of the recommendations and action plans of the Regional Poverty Reduction Framework, which was the outcome of that important conference.

What makes this work more urgent are the soaring food and fuel prices and the general negative global economic climate that has driven more and more people into poverty.

We need extraordinary efforts to face the numerous challenges facing us because even though the overall economy of our region has continued to grow at a steady pace, we are still far from achieving a better life for all our people.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, we need extraordinary efforts to turn the resources' boom into permanent economic development, ensuring that today's yields become the harvests for all seasons.

Clearly, the launch of the SADC Free Trade Area brings to our region an important era in our on-going efforts radically to change for the better the lives of our people.

Accordingly, let us implement the necessary protocols and programmes that will take us further towards economic integration. As we do what we have to do, let us keep in mind that the success of our integration will be measured by the extent to which it contributes to our shared developmental goals.

The launch of the Free Trade Area is thus much more than a simple acknowledgement that the majority (85%) of traded goods in the region are duty free. Rather, we should view the achievement of this milestone as a major step towards addressing the fundamental challenges of poverty and underdevelopment through deeper integration and economic development.

The challenge facing our region during this era is to do extraordinary things so as to build the Free Trade Area and consolidate its gains for the mutual benefit of the region's economies and development.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, as we all know, the SADC region is extremely vulnerable to and negatively affected by the vagaries of nature. Over the past two decades, the region has been

experiencing increased frequencies of extreme weather and climatic conditions such as droughts, floods and tropical cyclones. These have clearly impacted negatively on our agricultural productivity, water resources, biodiversity and the environment in general.

Part of the challenge in thi regard is the need to put to better use our limited capacities, particularly scientific and technological resources that would help with better prediction and responses in order effectively to lesson the impact of climate changes.

Further, infrastructure development is central to our efforts to stimulate economic growth, accelerate regional integration and enhance global competitiveness. It is important therefore that SADC should continue to address investment in infrastructure, because this is critical to our regional economic development and growth.

Clearly, the funding of infrastructure projects remains one of our major weaknesses to development and the region has to come up with more innovative ways to address this issue. The involvement of the private sector is pivotal to success in infrastructural development. In this regard, our key role is to create an appropriate and enabling environment for the private sector's involvement either on its own or through public-private-partnerships.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, as part of our integration efforts we should continue to pay due attention to cross-border infrastructural development and sectoral cooperation with the objective to build the region's production structures.

Obviously, the capacity of the Secretariat and the Member States remains critical for the successful implementation of our programmes. In this regard, the Secretariat has executed a Job Evaluation Exercise which seeks to address, among other things, the Structure of the Secretariat, the capacity, skills requirements, remuneration systems and other related imperatives, some outcomes of which are already being implemented.

As we review this process, I have no doubt that we can reposition the Secretariat and the Member States effectively and speedily to implement our regional programmes.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, one of the biggest challenges in our region is the health of our people. All of us have an obligation to continue to respond appropriately to the challenges, among others, of Malaria, TB, HIV and AIDS. As we do this, we have to make an assessment of the resources that we expend on these diseases and the outcomes that will help to introduce corrective measures without undue delay.

In addition, we should ask ourselves as to whether we are doing enough to confront other illnesses that kill many of our people, such as hypertension, diabetes, heart ailments as well as illnesses affecting children.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, if the masses of our people were to ask: what are the major challenges facing SADC today? What will we say! I am confident that part of the work we will be doing during this weekend will be to respond to this kind of question.

However, let me hazard a response. The major challenges of SADC and our people can be summarised as:

- The successful implementation of the SADC Free Trade Area and faster economic integration, thus allowing this region to be globally competitive;
- The sustained and sustainable development of the SADC region;

- The consolidation and deepening of democracy, respect for the rule of law and respect for human and peoples' rights;
- The empowerment of the ordinary working people of our region and freeing them from the scourges of unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment;
- The acceleration of the process of the emancipation and empowerment of women and building on the relevant resolutions of SADC in this regard;
- Creating a firm basis for our region successfully to respond to the challenges of globalisation, including strengthening South-South relations of equitable and mutually beneficial cooperation;
- Contributing to the realisation of the African Renaissance, the successful implementation of NEPAD programmes as well as contributing to the successful outcome of the project of African integration and unity; and,
- Enhancing our capacity to contribute to the emergence of a new world order that would fully restore Africa and the African Diaspora to their rightful place among the world community of nations.

None among us can achieve any of these objectives on their own. Even if we were to make progress on any one of the above matters, the achievement will not be sustainable if we fail to make similar progress on the rest of the objectives.

Your Majesty and Your Excellencies, SADC has a critical role to play with regard to the achievement of a better life for all our people; it has a critical role in helping further to advance the unity and integration of our continent as well as contributing towards a new world order in which the countries of the South and the African continent occupy their pride of place.

I have no doubt that the deliberations of this Summit will be successful.

Thank you.