

**ADDRESS BY DR STELLA KHUMALO,  
The Acting Director General  
of The Department of Sport, Art and Culture  
at the National Language Stakeholder Engagement Forum  
19 October 2023**

Programme Director, Dr Tebogo Rakgogo  
Acting CEO of Ditsong Museum, Mme Tersia, our host today and tomorrow,  
Representing the CEO of Pansalb, Mr Julius Dantile  
Prof Thabo Ditsele, our guest speaker today  
Representing the South African National Deaf Association: Mr Mosala  
Makhetha  
Senior Government Officials at national, provincial and local level  
Senior Officials from national entities and enterprises  
Senior Academics present  
Language activists and members of book and reading clubs  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I bring you greetings from Minister Kodwa and the Deputy Minister Mafu who could not be with us today due to parliamentary commitments in Cape Town.

They would have wanted to have been here to have an opportunity to engage with language practitioners and we hope they will be able to do so in the near future.

Since this forum has been reconstituted, this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> forum to be held in successive years. This forum would not be able to have been sustained without the attendance and full participation of language practitioners. Without you, this would not be possible.

It is in this context that we meet today under the theme: “Strengthening our Language Capacities Through Sharing Best Practices.”

A study done by the South African Cultural Observatory on “The economics of language” estimated that there are 70 000 language practitioners in South Africa.

The same study explains that:

“Language practitioners generally provide specialised language and communication services. These services cover several fields including: interpreting, translating, language training, copywriting, creative writing, language research, publicity, development of literary and language programmes, developing computer assisted language packages and providing organisations with language-related advice. ... Another critically important “language” occupation is teaching....This is rather broad (all teaching includes some aspect of language) or a narrower definition that includes language teachers. They also include language therapist, speech therapists and pathologists.”

It was also estimated that this sector contributes R10 billion towards the GDP.

It was further acknowledged that the work is labour intensive and creates many jobs and has the potential to create more. Therefore it is important to recognise that this is a growing sector with great potential.

The continued creation of sustainable jobs is an important priority for government and the challenge to language practitioners in general and to this Forum in particular is how to open the discussions on job creation in this sector.

The job creation mandate should also be seen in the context of new and timely developments. Recently on 19 July 2023, this sector was given a boost with President Ramaphosa signing into law the 15<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill which officialized SA Sign Language as one of the 12 official languages of South Africa.

The recognition of the SA Sign Language was and still is a historical moment for us as a people. It also have implications for language policy and language units throughout the country as we seek to implement SA Sign Language as one of the official languages. There are also further challenges in that it is a visual language; and this needs particular sets of skills in order to communicate, to record, to capture and disseminate.

This is why I am glad that representatives of Deaf Communities and their organisations have been with us today to help hold our hands and guide us as we implement South African Sign Language. A lot of work has been done

already by PanSALB, South African National Deaf Association, the Department of Basic Education and other stakeholders in this regard, but more needs to be done. It is important to emphasize that this work goes beyond interpreting and includes standardisation, use of human language technology applications, videography and encompasses a sense of understanding deaf culture and the needs of the deaf community.

We are also at this time in our history when we commemorate and celebrate almost thirty years into freedom and democracy, we need to take stock of what has been done and ***what still needs to be done to strengthen language practice, to improve and enhance qualifications and skills in his field especially among the youth, and what should be done so that we serve our people better*** when it comes to information access and offering services in the languages of their choice.

The question is now about how in the area of language practice, you practically set the agenda and pave the way forward.

DSAC through the National Language Service (NLS) plays a leading role in promoting and developing official languages through activities such co-ordinating national language stakeholders in government, through translation and editing work, through supporting human language technologies, engaging in national terminology development and language planning. It takes its marching orders from the Constitution and from the Use of Official Languages Act of 2012 which bestows on us a co-ordinating function.

The Use of Official Languages (UOLA) Act of 2012 further designates what it refers to as the National Language Unit as responsible for promoting good language management within national departments, national public entities and national public enterprises; and providing guidance on the functions of language units as well as liaising with and promoting the general co-ordination of language units.

I have mentioned the importance of what needs to be done **to strengthen language practice**; and it is important that given new developments, that we take a look at the Use of Official Languages Act and its implementation with the view of reviewing it.

While PanSALB carries out annual assessments of how the main activities required in the Act is carried out in government departments, entities and

enterprises, it is important that an overall analysis and assessment is done on the 11 year existence of this Act. Similarly, the PanSALB Act (1995 and amended in 1999) may need a similar review process.

I understand that the PanSALB Board is already making recommendations on the strengthening of the their Act.

Beyond the strengthening of legislation and their accompanying regulations, ***the importance of improving and enhance qualifications and skills in his field especially among the youth*** cannot be underestimated.

Firstly, it is important to note that Minister Kodwa has recently appointed the inaugural board of the SA Language Practitioners Council who have a lot of work to do on registration and qualifications in particular. They have had their first induction meeting and are meeting among themselves as a board in October.

As the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture we also have taken it upon ourselves to offer bursaries for language studies in partnerships with universities; and this includes studies for those who wish to be SA Sign Language specialists and professionals.

Since 2015 the department has awarded **3430** bursaries to students to the amount of **R 56 264 000.00** (Fifty-six million two hundred and sixty-four thousand only).

In the previous financial year, **312** students were funded by six universities that are participating in the current three-year cycle. These are North-West University, University of the Free State, University of Venda, University of the Western Cape, University of the Witwatersrand, and Fort Hare University.

This is the final year of the current cycle. The Budget for language bursaries for the current year is R6 608 million which will be divided among six universities. While this may not appear to be much, it is the only national bursary programme that specifically addresses the need for language qualifications.

Adverts have already gone out for the next three-year cycle. And applications have been received from around 13 higher education institutions around the

country. The creation of jobs for new language graduates is also under discussion.

In order to strengthen capacity, we also fund projects that seek to develop human language technologies and are currently supporting two major projects in utilising HLTs for the purpose of developing SA Sign Language.

I also want to address the issue of **what needs to be done to better serve our people through and with our languages.**

While much is already underway in ensuring equality of our languages, especially the historically disadvantaged indigenous languages, the example I would like to provide is the use of South African Sign Language.

Guided by the South African Sign Language Charter it is important to share how we are paving the way forward and how it may assist you as you grapple with the same issues we do in implementing the officialization.

- Our Department is intending to employ three permanent South African Sign Language specialists / practitioners towards instilling SASL as part of the institutional culture. So our first step is to bring these services inhouse, as well as outsourcing for events where the need arises. We have worked with our Human Resources department on Job Evaluation for permanent new sign language practitioners posts.
- We are also undertaking to develop a toolkit that can also be used by other departments. That toolkit will include an identification of sign language development needs within our governmental spaces and the kinds of posts, job descriptions, performance management issues, qualifications that this would entail.
- We are engaging our Human Resources division to organise basic training in SASL for all Department of Sports, Arts, and Culture staff. This process should make use of Deaf-centric providers. We are starting with frontline staff but also extending this to everyone.
- We are working together with PanSALB and other stakeholders, to foster strategic collaborations that the growth of a functioning and robust national Sign Language culture requires.
- We have commenced with meeting Deaf Stakeholders.
- We are also meeting with national government departments' language practitioners, doing at least two engagements every month where we begin to understand each other's work and needs and sharing best practice.

- We are also in partnership with the Department of Women, Youth, People with Disabilities given the pivotal and strategic position they occupy in championing the needs of people with disabilities.

Finally at last year's National Language Stakeholder Forum, we launched a Roadmap of Milestones as part of the UNESCO driven campaign for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 to 2033) and the development of SA Sign Language was identified as one of the deliverables.

One of the concerns of UNESCO is how only a few languages dominate the digital space and how indigenous languages are losing speakers rather than gaining them. As those at the coalface of delivery you and we are uniquely placed to encourage linguistic diversity and unite behind this. Let us continue to strengthen the indigenous languages agenda in government and beyond.

In conclusion, I thank the language practitioners from far and wide for joining us for this 3<sup>rd</sup> National Language Stakeholder Engagement Forum. I also look forward to receiving the deliberations of these discussions, including presentations I may have missed.

And I hope that this Forum, as an interactive and robust platform, goes from strength to strength.

I thank you.