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PREMIER MANDLA NDLOVU'S OPENING REMARKS OF THE MPUMALANGA PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE LEKGOTLA HELD IN NUTTING HOUSE, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, 26-27 FEBRUARY 2026, AT 9h00

Honourable Members of the Executive Council,

Executive Mayors present,

Traditional Leaders and representatives of the House of Traditional and Khoisan Leaders,

Chairperson of our entities,

Commissioners present here,

Director General, Ms MM Skosana

Heads of Departments and Municipal Managers,

CEOs of entities,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning.

OPENING AND PURPOSE

1. Today, we gather to open this Executive Lekgotla at a time that demands clarity, urgency, and unity of purpose. We meet not for ceremony, but for direction. We meet not to admire our plans, but to interrogate our performance, close gaps and accelerate delivery.
2. This Lekgotla is where we align our political leadership, our administrative machinery, and our partnerships with communities behind a single commitment: to build a province that works, one that is capable, ethical, and development-focused, while driving inclusive growth, job creation, and reducing poverty and the high cost of living.

PERFORMANCE IN 2025: WHERE WE STAND



3. Colleagues, 2025 has been a year of mixed outcomes, real progress in some areas and stubborn constraints in others.
4. But the overall picture is this: Mpumalanga continues to push forward in a low-growth environment, with increasing pressure on public resources and rising expectations from our people.
5. As a country, we entered 2026 with modest but improving economic conditions, marked by easing inflation around 3.2%, a strengthening rand, and hence our GDP growth in the province grew to around 1 % in 2025.
6. The Statistics South Africa report indicates that our unemployment has decreased from 34% to 32.3%. in Q4 of 2025, with youth unemployment around 44.7%. While unemployed youth graduates sit at 26,5%.
7. 38.4% of Mpumalanga's population lived below the lower poverty line in 2023, highlighting the extent of vulnerability, especially as households face rising costs, unstable incomes, and disruptions in service delivery.
8. We continue to congratulate the Department of Education for 86.5% pass rate on the class of 2025.
9. For 2026, we expect a 91% pass rate; we know it is doable, and we are going to do it.
10. We are even more excited about the quality of results we delivered; we have observed an increase in learners who achieved a university entrance qualification at Bachelor's level.
11. We continue to encourage our learners to choose the mathematics subject because the challenges we face as a country require critical and logical thinkers. Our youth is the future.

12. There is a lot that we need to do to improve the economy of our province. It is in this lekgotla, as we receive the SERO report, that we need to reflect, evaluate, and provide solutions to improve the Province's economic outlook.
13. On the broader policy and governance direction, our Executive Council adopted the provincial Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) as an integrated guide for all state institutions to intensify job creation, service delivery interventions, and institutional support, anchored in three apex priorities: inclusive growth and jobs creation, reducing poverty and the cost of living, and building a capable, ethical and developmental state.
14. These are important gains. Yet we must be honest: performance is not the same as impact. Communities judge us by the water in the tap, the stability of the electricity, drivable roads, functioning clinics, teaching schools, and municipalities that respond.

2025 ACHIEVEMENTS: WHAT WE MUST PROTECT AND SCALE

15. This year's achievements must be framed in terms of what they enable for the future. First, we have strengthened strategic alignment through the MTDP and integrated planning, focusing government attention on a few high-impact outcomes rather than scattered initiatives.
16. Second, we have evidence of improved human development outcomes, including a higher Human Development Index (HDI) than in earlier periods, signalling progress in education, life expectancy, and broader well-being indicators.
17. Third, while unemployment remains unacceptably high, we have seen measurable employment levels and sectoral job concentration that can guide targeted interventions, especially in community services and trade, which carry large employment shares.
18. Fourth, we are aligning our provincial approach with national priorities, including inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and building a capable state, which are also reflected in the national SONA priority framework.

19. But colleagues, achievements only matter if they are defended against regression and scaled into sustained improvements.

“EDGE” COMMITMENTS: WHAT WE PRIORITISE FROM SHORT TO LONG TERM

20. This Lekgotla must adopt what I call our **“EDGE commitments”**—commitments that sharpen execution and expand delivery:

E – EXECUTION DISCIPLINE (SHORT TERM: 3–6 MONTHS)

21. We need to fix project management by tightening planning, procurement readiness, contract management and monitoring. We also need to reduce “planning-to-ground” time, meaning no project should spend years in studies with no delivery. Then, we must stabilise critical vacancies and strengthen consequence management where performance fails.

D – DELIVERY THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS (MEDIUM TERM: 6–24 MONTHS)

22. We must build practical partnerships with business, labour and communities to unlock investment and local procurement.

23. This says we need to focus on economic sectors where Mpumalanga has a comparative advantage, such as agriculture value chains, tourism, mining-related beneficiation, and logistics corridors, while supporting SMMEs and township/rural enterprises.

G – GOVERNANCE THAT RESTORES TRUST (MEDIUM TO LONG TERM: 12–60 MONTHS)

24. We have been discussing improving audit outcomes through stronger internal controls and transparent spending, by, amongst other things, strengthening municipal financial recovery and revenue collection, including addressing arrears to service providers like Eskom and water boards, because weak municipal finances have collapsed service delivery and public confidence.

25. We are happy with the audit outcomes of the 2024/25 financial year achieved by Municipalities, and we congratulate Ehlanzeni DM for maintaining a clean audit; we are saddened by Nkangala DM, which regressed to an unqualified outcome. We now have only 1 municipality in the province with a clean audit. There is, however, a significant improvement when comparing the 2021/22 financial year outcomes with those of the 2024/25 financial year. We will receive the report from the AG on these outcomes.

26. We congratulate those municipalities that improved their audit outcomes, and we should do more for all of us to achieve clean audits.

E – EQUITY AND RESILIENCE (LONG TERM: 2–10 YEARS)

27. Our collective duty is to reduce poverty through economic inclusion, effective social protection, and targeted spatial investment.

28. This can be achieved by strengthening climate and infrastructure resilience, as droughts, floods, and ageing infrastructure could otherwise erase progress.

ARE WE WINNING ON WATER CHALLENGES?

29. Let us speak plainly: on water, we are not yet winning, but we are not standing still either. The Department of Water and Sanitation reported high water levels in our dams after the heavy rains, but we need to acknowledge that water is a scarce resource.

30. We are seeing what is happening in Gauteng, and as such, three of our Municipalities, namely Thembisile Hani LM, Victor Khanye LM and Govan Mbeki LM, are affected as supplied by Rand Water. MEC COGHSTA was directed to intervene and provide possible solutions to these challenges. The question before us is, have we done enough to provide water to our communities?

31. That data is important because it shows that the issue is not only “availability”; it is also variability, management, and local distribution. We must therefore define “winning on water” correctly, which is not only having full dams. Instead, winning is reducing outages, fixing leaks, protecting infrastructure, ensuring treatment works function, and delivering reliable water at the household level.
32. The same statement from DWS reminded the public that South Africa is water-scarce and that water conservation, leak repairs, and infrastructure protection are essential for water security.
33. So, this is what should be done in the short term: We need to aggressively reduce non-revenue water by fixing leaks, managing pressure, and upgrading metering. We need to protect infrastructure against vandalism and illegal connections and stabilise municipal operations and maintenance.
34. In the medium term, rehabilitate ageing reticulation networks and water treatment works, improve regional bulk supply coordination, and enforce credible maintenance schedules.
35. In the long term, we need to invest in new water resource schemes, reuse, and catchment protection.
36. We also need to include climate adaptation in every infrastructure decision, because drought cycles and extreme weather are no longer rare occurrences. Our message is clear: water has become the new symbol of legitimacy in service delivery.

WHAT IMPACT WILL WATER HAVE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS?

37. Colleagues, water and sanitation are not only technical issues but also political trust issues.
38. In the upcoming local government elections, voters will not be mainly persuaded by policy documents. They will be influenced by daily service experiences: water

supply, refuse collection, road maintenance, and the responsiveness of local leaders.

39. If communities continue to face prolonged water interruptions, they will see it as a sign of municipal failure and government apathy. By showing clear improvements, such as swift repairs, open communication, credible recovery plans, and reliable water supply, we can rebuild trust, encourage participation, and reduce social discontent.

40. Therefore, our strategy must be to regard water and municipal services as both development priorities and matters of democratic stability. We are looking forward to receiving a report on the state of local government to evaluate where we are as a province.

FUNCTIONALITY OF THE DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT MODEL (DDM) AND ALIGNMENT WITH PROVINCE PRIORITIES

41. The District Development Model was designed as an *all-of-government* approach to improve coordination, planning, budgeting and implementation across spheres, anchored in a single “One Plan” per district or metro.

42. What does this mean for Mpumalanga? It means our district spaces must become delivery engines, not meeting platforms.

43. The DDM only works if planning is integrated across provincial and municipal budgets; projects are prioritised and costed properly; implementation is monitored with consequence management; and **communities and social partners are co-owners of solutions.**

44. We must also ensure that DDM priorities directly support the provincial priorities, driving inclusive growth and jobs, reducing poverty and the cost of living, and building a capable, ethical state.

45. In practical terms, this Lekgotla must instruct that: every district “One Plan” identifies the top catalytic projects for water, roads, energy resilience, human settlements and local economic development.

46. Those projects must be procurement-ready and funded through aligned budgeting, in partnership with the private sector, and performance must be tracked publicly, with quarterly delivery dashboards.

THE HARD REALITY: SOCIO-ECONOMIC, SOCIO-POLITICAL AND BUDGET CHALLENGES

47. As I close my inputs, we must locate our provincial ambitions within the national constraints facing the country.

48. South Africa is operating under severe fiscal pressure even though the country's debt is reducing, the cost of borrowings went down and our credit rating has improved we are still having limited budgets and we need to spend it efficiently.

49. This reality tightens the government's ability to spend on new priorities and forces sharper trade-offs.

50. At the same time, state-owned entity risks remain significant, and infrastructure backlogs, especially in electricity and logistics, continue to constrain growth and raise the cost of doing business.

51. Socio-economically, we face high unemployment, persistent poverty, and inequality, conditions that fuel frustration and reduce social cohesion.

52. Socio-politically, public trust is fragile, and service delivery failures become triggers for protest and instability, particularly at the local government level, where the state meets citizens every day.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND TRADE IMPACT

53. Finally, we must not ignore the international environment. Geopolitical instability, trade policy uncertainty and disruptions in global supply chains affect investment flows, export demand, and input costs.

54. Our own provincial planning has noted that geopolitical conflicts can threaten growth targets and development plans. For Mpumalanga, an economy linked to mining, agriculture, tourism and cross-border movement, trade disruptions and higher logistics costs directly affect jobs and revenue.

55. Slower global growth forecasts and trade uncertainty amplify the urgency of **improving our domestic competitiveness**: reliable infrastructure, efficient logistics, water security, and ethical governance.

CONCLUSION

56. Colleagues, this Executive Lekgotla must be remembered not for what we said, but for what we changed. Let us leave here with clear priorities, procurement-ready plans, strong DDM coordination, a water and municipal services turnaround that communities can see, and a disciplined focus on impact, not activity.

57. Because the country faces deep socio-economic pressures, rising fiscal constraints, and a complex socio-political climate, and in a volatile world, South Africa's trade and investment prospects depend increasingly on whether we can fix the basics at home.

58. I therefore declare this Exco Lekgotla officially open.

I thank you