

OPENING REMARKS BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES, HONOURABLE MR A. N. MASONDO, ON THE OCCASION OF THE MINISTERIAL BRIEFING SESSION ON THE VACCINE ROLLOUT STRATEGY AND A VACCINE ACQUISITION PLAN

DATE: 25 FEBRUARY 2021 **VENUE:** VIRTUAL **TIME:** 14H00

Greetings!

Programme Director, Deputy Chairperson of the NCOP, Honourable Ms Sylvia Lucas

Minister of Health, Honourable Dr Zweli Mkhize

Deputy Minister of Health, Honourable Dr Joseph Phaahla

House Chairpersons of the NCOP, Honourable Ms Winnie Ngwenya for International Relations and Members Support and Mr Jomo Nyambi for Committees and Oversight

Chief Whip of the NCOP, Honourable Mr Seiso Mohai

Honourable Permanent and Special Delegates

Representatives of the South African Local Government Association

Ladies and gentlemen

Programme Director, this year provides an opportunity for all of us to demonstrate our ability to act in unity in representing the interests of the people of South Africa.

On the 5th of March 2020, South Africa recorded its first confirmed positive case of COVID-19. To date, there are more than 1, 5 million confirmed cases. About 50 000 people have since succumbed to the virus or related illnesses.

We deep our banners in honour of the thousands of South Africans who lost their lives from this invisible enemy. These include the public representatives and officials who served our Parliament, the Provincial Legislatures and Municipal Councils. They have served and served our people well.

Without doubt, many more people would have died were it not for the measures that were introduced by government and authorised by the Disaster Management Act. As the legislative sector, we have had the difficult and at times complex task of overseeing the implementation of these measures.

We are grateful to all our healthcare and other frontline workers for their hard work and for ensuring that as many lives as possible were, and are, saved.

One of our first responses, as the National Council of Provinces, was to initiate the programme of Ministerial Briefings. The programme was aimed at enhancing co-operation amongst the three spheres of government in order to combat the spread of the coronavirus and to address the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these Ministerial briefings, we sought to ensure that the three spheres of government worked together.

As Members would recall, the first Ministerial briefing on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Health took place in May 2020. Many more briefings, which focused on those sectors that we viewed as critical to our response to the pandemic, ensued thereafter. We thank the Members of the Executive for their great co-operation and contribution. These engagements assisted the public representatives across the legislative sector. It assisted:

- To get the necessary up-to-date information on the COVID-19 pandemic so as to enable them to join hands in broadening and intensifying the fight against the virus; and
- To undertake the important work of overseeing the implementation of government commitments in a manner that is in keeping with the Constitution and the laws of the country.

In particular, I wish to thank the Minister of Health and his colleagues for their leadership, transparency and ability to work with all the different

sectors in society in charting and leading the country's response to the pandemic.

In opening this year's first Ministerial briefing, I would like to stress the fact that the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic remains one of our main priorities.

In his State of the Nation Address earlier this month, the President of the Republic, Honourable Cyril Ramaphosa, stated that "fundamental to our nation's recovery is an unrelenting and comprehensive response to overcome the coronavirus". And that we must do everything in our means to contain and overcome this pandemic, through amongst other things:

- Intensifying our prevention efforts and strengthening our health system; and,
- Undertaking a massive vaccination programme to save lives and dramatically reduce infections across the population.

Notably, in his reply to the debate on the State of the Nation Address in this past week, the President appealed to everybody not to get distracted by the political intrigues of the day. But rather, irrespective of our differences, to strive together to overcome this pandemic that has had such a devastating effect on people's lives and livelihoods.

Hence my assertion that 2021 gives us this rare opportunity to demonstrate solidarity in the manner in which we represent the interests of the people. I am convinced that we will all heed this call and respond accordingly.

In light of this common enemy, we saw it fit that as part of our initial engagements this year, we should start with a briefing from the Minister of Health on the strategy to roll out the vaccines and the vaccine acquisition plan. We are aware, Programme Director, that this is a very difficult undertaking in the overall fight against the pandemic. It involves making available the resources to acquire the vaccines, engaging the manufacturers and suppliers of the vaccines, ensuring that the logistics for transportation, security, storage and so on are in place, and preparing the people to administer the doses amongst other things.

We note that this occurs against the backdrop of the unacceptable practice of “vaccine nationalism”. This practice has seen some of the rich countries buying and hoarding huge supplies of COVID-19 vaccines. The World Health Organisation has warned that this could increase the risk of the coronavirus mutating further, thus increasing the burden of the disease not only on poor countries but globally. It is because of this that “vaccine nationalism” is generally viewed as medically and morally indefensible.

However, we appreciate the foresight of our government which saw the country participating in the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (Covax) facility, which amongst other things seeks to guarantee fair and equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccines. Through our chairship of the African

Union, our country has also led significant efforts to ensure the access of all African countries to sufficient doses of the vaccines.

Programme Director, if we work together in pursuing the best interests of the people, we stand to make early gains in reversing the negative impact of the virus. As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on the lives, livelihoods and health of the people in our country and as well as globally.

Nonetheless, as it is often said, every crisis contains the seeds of an opportunity. During the course of the pandemic many of us as public representatives have been able to hone our skills in the use of technology.

Many of our institutions have, though to a limited extent, seized this period to educate communities on viruses, bacteria and pandemics. This is critical in that people tend to be responsive and learn quickly in a crisis.

We are therefore better positioned to enhance the potential of the citizens to be their own liberators. In this way, our vision of an empowered and prosperous nation will be realised.

In spite of the devastating nature of the pandemic, it was also imperative that we balance the important question of saving lives and livelihoods. Otherwise we risked the total collapse of the economy and the worsening of the triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Programme Director, allow me as I conclude to note, reflect and recall the passing on in December of the Permanent Delegate from KwaZulu-Natal, Mr Simo Mfayela, of the Inkatha Freedom Party. We take this moment to say: May his family, his party and colleagues, find solace and strength in the work he has achieved in his time in the NCOP. He was a good example of a leader dedicated to the upliftment of the people. May his soul rest in peace.

With these few words, allow me to say: I do appreciate the opportunity and your audience.

Thank you