

SPEECH BY DR PHOPHI RAMATHUBA, PREMIER OF LIMPOPO, AT
THE 24TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN
ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT
(SAAPAM), PREMIER HOTEL, THOHOYANDOU, VHEMBE DISTRICT

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Chairperson of the Public Service Commission, Professor Somadoda
Fikeni,

Deputy Directors-General,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ndi matsheloni, Avuxeni, Thobela, Good morning, Goeie môre.

It is a great pleasure to be part of this 24th SAAPAM Annual Conference, here in the heart of Vhembe District. This gathering is a profound moment of reflection and renewal for all of us entrusted with the responsibility of public service.

Programme Director, Vhembe is no ordinary place. It is a land soaked with the wisdom of great leaders and shaped by the resilience of its people. It is a land where history is alive, reminding us daily that leadership must always serve humanity. Vhembe has given South Africa visionaries who carried their people's struggles with dignity, guided by an ethic of care and consideration.

Standing here, one feels the spirit of those who understood that leadership is not about privilege, but sacrifice. It is about carrying the hopes of the poor, the dreams of the young, and the dignity of the elderly. It is about ensuring that public service becomes a calling, not a career ladder. This district, this province, and this country deserve nothing less than leaders who embody ethical governance in all they do.

It is therefore fitting that the 24th Annual Conference of the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM) is convened under the theme "Building State Capacity – Prospects and Challenges." The question before us is simple yet profound: How do we build a state that works, a state that earns the trust of its citizens, and a state that truly transforms lives?

Last year, on 18 July 2024 we signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Office of the Premier and SAAPAM, it was a step to show commitment towards building capacity in the public service. Through this partnership, we have committed to joint research, capacity building, public lectures, and knowledge exchange.

But let me sound a caution: South Africans are weary of elegant plans that gather dust. They are tired of conferences that end in applause but leave no footprint on the ground. Our people want implementation. They want to

see clinics with medicines, municipalities with clean water, schools with qualified teachers, and streets that are safe. They want proof that the state is not distant, but responsive and ethical.

If we are to build a capable state, we must confront our governance challenges with honesty. We cannot ignore that many of our municipalities are in financial distress, some placed under administration, others struggling with poor audit outcomes year after year. When municipalities fail, service delivery collapses, and the promise of democracy becomes hollow.

Programme Director, the municipality's capacity should be strengthened because municipalities are the backbone of development. They are the closest to the people. When potholes go unrepaired, when taps run dry, when refuse is uncollected, it is not abstract, it is the daily lived experience of ordinary citizens. Our collective task is to restore municipalities as reliable delivery engines of the state.

Equally pressing is the challenge of coalition governance. Across our country, unstable coalitions have created paralysis in councils, leaving residents without services. We must develop governance models that prioritise stability, accountability, and the public good over narrow political interests. Conferences such as this should provide thought leadership on how to make coalition governance work in the South African context.

We cannot continue to govern with outdated systems when the world has moved into the digital era. Technology too, must become our obsession. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the gaps between those who could adapt digitally and those who could not. In the public sector, this divide is stark. Manual systems delay service delivery, breed inefficiency, and sometimes enable corruption.

If we are to match world standards, we must embrace e-governance, digital skills, and technological innovation. Universities and institutions of higher learning must play a central role in equipping the next generation of public servants with these competencies. The 4th Industrial Revolution must not be a slogan; it must be a lived reality in the daily operations of the state.

Programme Director, allow me to bring this closer to home. In Limpopo, and particularly in Vhembe, we face complex public health challenges. We record unusually high incidences of renal failure, keloids, and breast cancer compared to other provinces. These are not just statistics; they are families devastated, lives disrupted, and communities in pain.

We cannot continue to treat symptoms without investigating causes. With the wealth of professors, researchers, and medical practitioners in our province, we should already have been at the forefront of groundbreaking research. Our universities must lead community-based research that tackles the unique socio-medical challenges we face. We must move from theory to applied solutions that improve lives in real time.

Colleagues, let us also reflect on the culture of public service. Too often, our institutions are weakened by corruption, lack of accountability, and an erosion of professional ethics. To build state capacity, we must return to the fundamentals of integrity, competence, and consequence management.

The public service must be professionalised. Appointments must be based on merit, not patronage. Training and capacity development must be continuous, not sporadic. And accountability must be enforced. Without consequences for wrongdoing, corruption festers and trust in government erodes.

The great Oliver Reginald Tambo once said: “The responsibility to serve one’s people is the highest honour that can be bestowed upon a citizen.” This honour is sacred. It calls upon us to put service above self, ethics above expediency, and people above politics.

This conference must not only debate but resolve. It must not only reflect but act. It must leave us with a blueprint that can be implemented across all spheres of government. Our task is to ensure that the state becomes a force for good, a protector of rights, and a catalyst for development.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 24th SAAPAM Annual Conference must be remembered not for its eloquence but for its outcomes. It must stand as a turning point, where thought leaders, policymakers, and practitioners united around one mission: to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state that delivers.

Let us leave here with a renewed commitment to act, to translate knowledge into solutions, ideas into policies, and policies into tangible change. Let history say that here in Thohoyandou, in 2024, we resolved not only to talk but to act with courage and integrity.

Together, let us build the South Africa that our people deserve.

I thank you.