



**MINISTRY
TRANSPORT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**OFFICIAL OPENING SPEECH BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF
TRANSPORT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, BARBARA CREECY,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 13TH EDITION OF THE SARA RAIL
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION
20TH AUGUST 2024 – SANDTON CONVENTION CENTRE, SANDTON -
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**Honourable Ministers from SADC Countries,
Permanent Secretaries and Directors- General,
President of the Southern African Railways Association, Mr. Hishaam
Emeran,
Vice President of the Southern African Railways Association, Mr. Nixon
Dlamini,
Executive Director of the Southern African Railways Association, Mr. Babe
Botana,
Chief Executives of SADC Railways,
Members of the Media,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning and welcome to the 13th SARA conference, an event that charts the course of Southern Africa's railways. We are not merely attending another event; we are standing at the crossroads of opportunity and transformation for the rail industry in our region.

Railways in Africa have long captured the imagination since their introduction in the 19th century, beginning in Cape Town. Today, our task is to shape the next chapter of the story of rail, ensuring that we harness the power of rail to improve socio-economic prosperity and to fully utilize its potential in easing the movement of goods and people across our region.

Hosting the Southern African Railways Association's annual International Conference and Exhibition is not just a privilege for South Africa; it is a testament to our commitment to contribute to dialogue about the future of rail transport across the SADC region and the entire African continent. This commitment aligns with the vision set forth by the African Union's Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa and the AU Agenda 2063. Let this gathering move us closer towards this important vision.

I am honoured to be part of these proceedings. This gathering represents more than a formal obligation—it embodies a collective mission to drive forward an industry that is vital to the SADC region's economic health and global competitiveness. To all our guests and delegates, I extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to South Africa.

We are all acutely aware that the region's rail sector faces significant challenges—from aging infrastructure and inadequate funding to issues of safety, security, and capacity. These challenges are further complicated by the need for greater regional integration, interoperability, and the harmonization of standards to ensure efficient and competitive rail services.

The rail industry has a direct impact on the cost structure of our economies, influencing the prices of commodities, manufacturing inputs, and exports. Given the critical role of rail in transporting bulk goods—such as minerals, agricultural products, and energy resources—railways within the SARA region are essential in enhancing the competitiveness of SADC products and services in global markets.

The SARA Rail Conference and Exhibition is a gathering of innovators and collaborators who are driving the future of railways. This conference must serve as a forum where we critically evaluate our competitiveness and explore ways to overcome the barriers that limit logistics integration.

We should use the SARA Conference to seize growth opportunities not just for SADC, but for the entire African continent. The decisions and discussions over these next few days should significantly influence how we trade, move goods, and connect people.

It is worth remembering that the SADC region has a combined railway network that spans some 40 000km of rail, excluding local branch lines. This demonstrates the vast expanse of our railway infrastructure and why it remains at the centre of an efficient passenger and freight transport system for the region.

Sustainability and Environmental Stewardship in Railways

Our region must be conscious of the need to protect our planet, and we must capitalize on the advantages that railways offer as an environmentally friendly and sustainable mode of transport. This is a strength we must harness and expand upon.

Our commitment to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles must be at the forefront of rail operations. Within the entire integrated transport value chain, the rail sector, with its lower carbon footprint compared to other modes of transport, is uniquely positioned to lead the way in reducing environmental impact.

I therefore call on all of you gathered here at the SARA Conference to embrace the challenge of integrating clean fuels and new technology into our railway operations. By doing so, we can position the SADC railways sector as a leading voice in the global transition to sustainable transport.

Boosting Continental Trade via Rail

The theme for this year's conference, "*Boosting Continental Trade via Rail: Investments in African Railways for the Sustainable Development of the Continent*," is not just a slogan; it is a call to action. It challenges us to ensure that our railways are safe, secure, reliable, and innovative. We must focus on regional interoperability and competitiveness if we are to realize the full economic potential of our region.

SARA has demonstrated its capacity as a regional think-tank by bringing together key stakeholders—governments, industry leaders, the private sector, suppliers, and financiers—to forge a path forward. SARA brings under one roof the most comprehensive expertise to ensure that railways reclaim their place as the backbone of public and industrial transport. Each of the countries in our region that has rail operations must fully implement its rail strategy because only in this way will the promise of SARA be realized.

Our deliberations must be guided by the realization that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has become a reality and South Africa sent its first batch of products to other countries trading under the agreement in January this year.

South Africa is committed to doing its part to create an efficient, connected and modern rail sector. We are implementing policy and interventions, such as the Freight Logistics Roadmap, to revive, support, and modernize the capacity and competence of our railways. This holistic plan includes regulations to ensure market competitiveness, improving safety standards, and developing human capital at every level.

A significant aspect of this vision is South Africa's commitment to developing and supporting the rolling stock manufacturing sector, a role that aligns with the African Union's 2015 decision designating South Africa as the rolling stock manufacturing hub for the continent.

The state-of-the-art Gibela factory in Nigel stands as a testament to this commitment. This facility, operated on behalf of PRASA, is not only a world-class rolling stock manufacturing plant but also a symbol of our dedication to driving industrialization and economic development across the continent.

The Gibela factory is producing modern, efficient passenger trains that meet the highest global standards. Whilst the Electric Multiple Unit trains that are coming out of this factory are destined for use within South Africa's Metrorail service, the factory has the capacity to meet the rolling stock requirements of the region and the continent. PRASA and Transnet have the very important task of ensuring the manufacturing capabilities respond to the needs and developments of the region and continent taking cognisance of technological and infrastructure requirements.

The Role of Skills Development in Building a Robust and Future-Ready Rail Sector

A robust and future-ready rail sector is not solely built on infrastructure and technology; it is underpinned by the skills and expertise of the people who work within it. As we look to modernize and expand our rail networks, the need for investment in appropriate skills across logistics, engineering, infrastructure development, and digitization cannot be overstated.

We must work together, across the SADC region, to ensure that our people have the skills they need to support the continued growth and modernization of the rail sector. Investing in these skills today will not only help us address the challenges we face but will also enable us to take advantage of new opportunities for economic growth and development.

Strategic Regional Corridors

On the freight side, key strategic corridors—such as the North-South Corridor, which links the port of Durban with the DRC and Zambia—are vital for regional trade. However, these corridors face significant challenges, including congestion,

delays at border crossings, and the need for better coordination among the SADC countries.

Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to enhance infrastructure, streamline customs procedures, and improve the efficiency of rail operations. The connectivity among SADC railways provides opportunities for cooperation to offer cost-effective, seamless rail transport services, as outlined by the SADC Protocol on Transport, Communications, and Meteorology.

We are aware of the many challenges facing the rail sector, including aging infrastructure, lack of funding, and the persistent threat of looting of rail infrastructure and assets. These challenges are significant, but they are not insurmountable. With the resources at our disposal, especially new smart security technologies, we can overcome these obstacles.

Conclusion

Let me call on each of you to support the rail sector initiatives that will unlock the full potential of our region. Be assured of our support for the decisions you make here, knowing they will shape the future of transport in our region. They will determine how we integrate, how we compete, and ultimately, how we succeed in global markets.

Ladies and gentlemen, the SARA Rail Conference has grown into a respected brand recognized across the region as the premier event for the rail industry. It is a platform where ideas are shared, innovations are showcased, and partnerships are forged. The success of this event is a testament to the dedication of everyone involved in SARA and to the strength of our collective vision.

It is now my pleasure and privilege to officially declare the 13th Edition of the SARA Rail International Conference and Exhibition open. Let us work together to shape a future where our railways drive the prosperity of our region and continent.

Thank you.

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