

19 May 2015

Statement of Hon. Edna Molewa, Minister of Environmental Affairs

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the conference, Africa Rising: Mobilising Biodiversity Data for Sustainable Development; and welcome to South Africa.

It is our country's great honour to receive you at the historic Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden to deliberate on the role of biodiversity data in Africa's sustainable development. Your presence here today speaks volumes about: your passion for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity; your commitment to the principle of African unity; and your confidence in the 'Africa rising' narrative.

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy was one of the world's most iconic testimonies of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. The transition was a victory for all Africans: and our country shall never forget the friendship, assistance and solidarity that foreigners – especially our African brothers and sisters – accorded to us in our darkest days.

The recent attacks on foreign nationals that we experienced violated the values that South Africa strives to espouse: respect for human life, human rights and human dignity, as well as Ubuntu, which was a guiding ideal during South Africa's liberation struggle – Ubuntu is also the first value to which SANBI ascribes as an organisation. The South African Government condemns the violence in the strongest possible terms.

President Jacob Zuma has mandated an Inter-Ministerial Committee to speedily address the situation and its underlying causes. We are making determined efforts to show each other and the world that these attacks are an unfortunate situation.

We urge all South Africans and all foreign nationals to operate within the laws of our country and respect our Constitution. It is important that we all respect the rule of law.

As Africans, we have witnessed many liberation struggles. It is by working together that we have been able to come so far in banishing the scourge of oppression and intolerance from our land.

Yet in the words of the late President Nelson Mandela, "After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb."

Perhaps the greatest challenge we now face is to usher in a new era of sustainable development; one in which human well-being and social equity are meaningfully improved, and one that is underpinned by healthy ecosystems that deliver so many essential services. Our continent's vast wealth of biodiversity – our variety of life from genes, species and ecosystems – offers us a suite of natural solutions in the face of unemployment, rising poverty and climate change. It is a formidable challenge, but Africa is equal to the task, especially if we continue working together to unlock the social and economic potential of biodiversity.

In South Africa we speak about our ecological infrastructure - nature's equivalent of built infrastructure. It includes our mountain catchments, wetlands and coastal dunes, and is increasingly being recognised for its importance to service delivery in both the rural and urban contexts.

However, this has not always been recognised as such, largely because the goods and services provided by ecological infrastructure have to date been freely available in relative abundance. Land degradation and climate change, however, are rapidly undermining the world's ecological infrastructure and its ability to support sustainable service delivery.

We live in a vast continent, brimming with natural resources, rife with spectacular wildlife and bursting with human ingenuity. Africa is alive with possibility, this is our Century and we are rising. So let us show the world that we are a strong, unified, and progressive.

Let us continue working together with common cause for greater good. If biodiversity is the bedrock of sustainable development and data is the currency of the information age, then let us mobilise biodiversity data; and let us put Africa at the forefront of research and innovation in this exciting field. This inaugural gathering is a momentous occasion and one which should fill us with pride and hope. I regret that I cannot be there with you in person, but I will keep abreast of the conference from afar and wish you every success in the days ahead. It is with great anticipation that I look forward strengthening our regional cooperation.