

**MABUYANE, AT THE EASTERN CAPE EXPORT SYMPOSIUM AND EXHIBITION
& CONTINENTAL ENERGY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INVESTMENT FORUM
HELD ON 19 AUGUST 2026**

Programme Director,
Honourable Ministers and MECs,
Members of the Legislature,
Mayors and Councillors,
Business leaders, investors, exporters and development partners,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Eastern Cape, a province with a strong economic base and enormous potential, but also a province that understands that potential only has meaning when it is converted into investment, production, exports and jobs.

We have an established automotive industry, two strategic ports, productive agricultural sectors, the Coega and East London Industrial Development Zones, growing opportunities in renewable energy and a young population with the capacity to drive our economic future. Our businesses already export vehicles and components, agricultural products, wool and mohair, processed foods and other products to markets across the world. In 2024, our province exported goods worth approximately R76 billion.

These are important achievements, but they are not enough. Our economy is still not growing at the pace required to address unemployment and poverty, while businesses continue to face challenges around logistics, energy, access to finance, infrastructure and entry into international markets.

This is why the work before us is not simply about promoting exports. It is about building an economy that can compete, create value and provide opportunities for our people.

Strengthening our export position

The changes taking place in global trade have made this task even more urgent. The United States remains an important market for South Africa, particularly for our

automotive industry, and we must continue engaging the US administration to protect market access and the interests of our exporters.

At the same time, recent developments have reminded us that we cannot become overly dependent on any single market. Europe, Africa and Asia already account for the overwhelming majority of Eastern Cape exports, and we must use this foundation to expand much more aggressively into Africa, the Middle East and Asian markets.

The African Continental Free Trade Area presents a particularly important opportunity. Africa must become a much bigger market for goods produced in the Eastern Cape. Our manufacturers, farmers, agro-processors and small businesses should be looking beyond our provincial and national borders and positioning themselves for the growing African market.

We must also change the nature of what we export. The Eastern Cape cannot be satisfied with producing raw materials for other economies to process. Where we have agricultural products, natural resources and industrial capacity, we must create opportunities for processing, packaging, manufacturing and beneficiation here at home.

Our livestock, citrus, honeybush, aloe ferox, honey and other natural products provide opportunities for value-added exports, while our automotive sector must continue developing local suppliers and strengthening the manufacturing base around it.

This is how we keep more value in the province and create opportunities for more businesses and workers to participate in the economy.

Building on the work already done

We should acknowledge the progress that has already been made. During the 2025/26 financial year, the Eastern Cape Development Corporation facilitated more than R664 million in exports against a target of R350 million. More than 200 businesses received export-readiness support, while 68 Eastern Cape companies participated in international and regional trade exhibitions across four continents.

These businesses were exposed to markets including India, Saudi Arabia, Canada and the United States. They met buyers, developed relationships and gained a better understanding of what international markets require.

Our responsibility now is to ensure that these engagements translate into actual orders, sustained exports and growing businesses. We must measure our success not

simply by the number of companies attending exhibitions, but by the commercial opportunities that follow.

The same principle applies to investment. The ECDC facilitated significant investment during the past financial year, including a major renewable-energy investment that reached implementation readiness following years of facilitation.

We welcome these investments, but an investment announcement cannot be the end of the process. Projects must be implemented, local suppliers must participate, skills must be transferred and jobs must be created. Government must therefore continue removing unnecessary obstacles and making it easier for serious investors to establish and expand their operations in the province.

Infrastructure is central to competitiveness

Our export ambitions will remain limited if we do not address infrastructure and logistics. A farmer must be able to move produce from the farm to the market efficiently. A manufacturer must be able to move goods from the factory to the port at a competitive cost. Our ports, railways and roads must therefore function as part of one economic system.

This is why the development of infrastructure, including the Msikaba and Mtentu bridges, the improvement of our ports and rail network, and the reliability of our energy supply, remains central to our economic programme.

East London and Ngqura must become stronger engines of economic activity. We must continue working with national government and Transnet to improve the movement of goods and reduce the costs that make our exporters less competitive.

Supporting businesses and creating opportunities

We must also recognise that smaller businesses often face the greatest barriers to entering export markets. A small enterprise in Mthatha or a rural municipality may have a good product but lack the finance, market information, packaging, certification, logistics or international contacts needed to reach buyers.

Our export support programmes must therefore remain practical and focused on helping businesses become genuinely competitive. We must pay particular attention to young entrepreneurs, women-owned businesses and enterprises from rural areas and townships, because broadening the export base is essential if economic growth is to reach more people.

The same applies to our creative economy. The Eastern Cape has talented designers, artists, filmmakers, craft producers and cultural entrepreneurs whose work can reach markets well beyond the province. The progress made by businesses such as Birth Maark and Shiba Designs demonstrates what can happen when local talent is connected to markets.

Our film industry also presents an important opportunity. Through the Eastern Cape Film Investment Fund, the ECDC supported 21 productions during 2025/26, creating work for actors, crew and a wide range of small businesses. These industries must be treated as part of our economic development strategy, because they create income, employment, skills and opportunities for young people.

The direction we must take

Programme Director, the task before us is clear. We must protect the markets we already have while deliberately building new ones. We must make Africa a much bigger destination for Eastern Cape products. We must pursue opportunities in Asia and the Middle East. We must strengthen agro-processing and local manufacturing; improve our ports, rail, roads and energy infrastructure; and create a more responsive environment for investors and exporters.

Above all, we must become more disciplined about implementation. When we take businesses to an international exhibition, we must follow through until the buyer becomes an order and the order becomes production. When we attract an investor, we must work with that investor until the project is implemented and local businesses and workers begin to benefit. That is the standard we must set for ourselves.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, the Eastern Cape has the resources, industries, people and opportunities to become a much stronger export and investment destination. What is required now is greater urgency, stronger coordination between government and business, and a much sharper focus on results.

The changes in global trade should not cause us to retreat. They should encourage us to diversify our markets, strengthen our industries, add more value to what we produce and become more competitive.

To our businesses, investors and development partners, I say: let us use this symposium to move beyond discussion and identify the partnerships, investments and markets that can be taken forward immediately.

The people of the Eastern Cape need an economy that works for them, and it is our responsibility to build that economy together.

I thank you.