

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Ms Nonqubela Pieters

MEC for Economic Development and Tourism

Women in Trade Business Breakfast Session

Theme: “Unlocking Inclusive Trade, Accelerating Women and Youth Enterprises for Global Markets”

Programme Director,

Distinguished guests and representatives of government,

Leaders of business and industry,

Women entrepreneurs and business leaders,

Young entrepreneurs and innovators,

Representatives of financial institutions, development agencies and trade-support organisations,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to join you at this important Women in Trade Business Breakfast Session.

Today, we gather not merely to celebrate the achievements of women and young people in business, but to confront a fundamental economic question:

How do we move women- and youth-owned enterprises from participation in local markets to meaningful participation in regional, continental and global value chains?

Our theme — “Unlocking Inclusive Trade, Accelerating Women and Youth Enterprises for Global Markets” — speaks directly to the economic future we want to build.

It speaks to an economy where opportunity is not determined by gender, age, geography or historical exclusion.

It speaks to an economy where a woman entrepreneur from a township, rural community or small town in the Eastern Cape can access the same markets, technology, finance, infrastructure and networks that enable businesses to compete internationally.

And it speaks to a province that does not merely produce entrepreneurs, but deliberately creates globally competitive enterprises.

1. FROM PARTICIPATION TO COMPETITIVENESS

Ladies and gentlemen,

South Africa has made significant progress in promoting women's economic participation. Yet we must be honest: participation alone is not enough.

We need to move beyond counting the number of women-owned businesses.

We must ask:

- How many are sustainable?
- How many employ other people?
- How many participate in government and private-sector supply chains?
- How many export?
- How many have access to working capital?
- How many own productive assets?
- How many hold intellectual property?
- How many participate in technology-driven sectors?
- How many have become suppliers to multinational corporations?

These are the questions that must shape the next phase of our economic development agenda.

The objective must be to create women-owned and youth-owned businesses that can scale.

A business that can move from supplying one local customer to supplying ten municipalities.

From supplying municipalities to supplying national corporations.

From supplying South Africa to supplying Africa.

And ultimately, from Africa to global markets.

That is the journey we must enable.

2. THE EASTERN CAPE AS A GATEWAY TO GLOBAL MARKETS

The Eastern Cape has extraordinary economic potential.

We have globally significant automotive manufacturing capabilities.

We have ports and logistics infrastructure.

We have agricultural and agro-processing opportunities.

We have tourism assets.

We have a growing creative economy.

We have renewable-energy potential.

We have opportunities in the oceans economy, manufacturing, ICT, construction, logistics and professional services.

Our province is strategically positioned to benefit from regional and international trade.

But infrastructure alone does not create inclusive economic growth.

Markets do. Businesses do. Entrepreneurs do. Investment does.

Therefore, our responsibility as government is to ensure that women and young entrepreneurs are positioned to participate meaningfully in these value chains.

We must ensure that when investment comes into the Eastern Cape, it does not create isolated economic islands.

Instead, investment must create local supplier ecosystems.

When an international company establishes a facility in our province, women- and youth-owned enterprises should be positioned to provide logistics, maintenance, catering, technology, professional services, construction, packaging, manufacturing components and other goods and services.

That is how investment becomes inclusive.

3. OPENING THE DOORS TO TRADE

Ladies and gentlemen,

Trade can be one of the most powerful engines of economic transformation.

But for many small businesses, international trade still appears distant and complicated.

Exporting requires knowledge.

It requires standards.

It requires certification.

It requires packaging.

It requires market intelligence.

It requires finance.

It requires reliable logistics.

And it requires relationships.

Therefore, we must build an ecosystem that makes it easier for emerging enterprises to enter international markets.

We need practical support that takes an entrepreneur through the entire export journey: from product development, to compliance, to market access, to logistics, to finance, to international buyers.

Government cannot do this alone.

We need stronger partnerships between government, business, financial institutions, development finance institutions, universities, industry associations, chambers of commerce and international trade partners.

The question should no longer be: “Does this entrepreneur qualify for assistance?”

The question should be: “What intervention will enable this entrepreneur to become globally competitive?”

That is a fundamentally different approach.

4. WOMEN MUST BE AT THE CENTRE OF THE TRADE AGENDA

As we speak about inclusive trade, we must recognise that women entrepreneurs face particular structural barriers.

These include limited access to finance, limited ownership of productive assets, unequal access to business networks, market information gaps, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities.

We therefore need targeted interventions.

Women-owned enterprises must be connected to procurement opportunities.

They must be connected to export markets.

They must be connected to investors.

They must be connected to technology.

And importantly, they must be connected to one another.

Networks matter.

A woman entrepreneur should not have to build her business alone.

We need to create platforms where experienced women business leaders mentor emerging entrepreneurs.

Where established exporters open doors for new exporters.

Where large corporations identify and develop women-owned suppliers.

Where financial institutions understand the realities of women-led enterprises.

And where government creates an enabling policy and regulatory environment.

Our approach must be intentional.

5. YOUTH ENTERPRISES AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Ladies and gentlemen,

If women represent one of the greatest underutilised economic opportunities in our society, then our young people represent another.

Our young people are not simply beneficiaries of economic development.

They are economic actors.

They are creators, innovators, technology entrepreneurs and problem-solvers.

Many of the industries that will define tomorrow's economy — artificial intelligence, digital services, fintech, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, e-commerce and the creative economy — are areas where young entrepreneurs can compete globally.

But we must give them the platforms to do so.

We need to move from a mindset of “creating jobs for young people” to one that also emphasises “creating markets for young businesses.”

A young entrepreneur who develops a digital solution for a local municipality should be able to take that solution to another province.

And eventually to another African country.

That is how we build enterprises that create jobs rather than simply seek jobs.

6. AFRICA IS OUR FIRST GLOBAL MARKET

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our internationalisation strategy must recognise the opportunities presented by the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Africa is not simply a development challenge.

Africa is a market.

It is a continent of more than a billion people, with growing urbanisation, increasing consumer demand and significant infrastructure and investment needs.

The African Continental Free Trade Area provides an opportunity to deepen intra-African trade and build stronger African value chains.

For Eastern Cape enterprises, this means we must look beyond our provincial borders.

Our businesses should be asking:

What can we sell to Africa?

What products can we manufacture here?

What services can we export?

What technology can we develop?

What partnerships can we establish?

What African markets can we enter?

And how can we position the Eastern Cape as a competitive platform for African and international investment?

These are the questions that must drive our economic strategy.

7. FROM TOWNSHIP ENTERPRISES TO GLOBAL ENTERPRISES

We must also change the way we think about township and rural enterprises.

Too often, these businesses are viewed primarily through the lens of survival.

But there is another story.

There are entrepreneurs in our townships and rural communities who have products, ideas and capabilities that can compete beyond their immediate communities.

Our responsibility is to help them cross the bridge from the informal and survival economy into the formal, sustainable and scalable economy.

This requires:

market access,
business development,
digital inclusion,
access to finance,
infrastructure,
skills,
quality standards,
branding,
mentorship,
and export readiness.

We must create pathways for township businesses to become mainstream suppliers.

8. FINANCE MUST FOLLOW OPPORTUNITY

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the greatest challenges facing emerging enterprises remains access to finance.

But finance must be linked to real economic opportunities.

We must strengthen blended-finance models that combine public and private capital.

We must explore innovative financing mechanisms.

We must expand access to working capital.

We must strengthen supplier-development programmes.

And we must encourage financial institutions to look beyond traditional measures of risk when assessing viable emerging enterprises.

At the same time, entrepreneurs must also strengthen their own financial management.

A globally competitive business must have good governance, proper financial records, credible systems, sound contracts and a clear growth strategy.

Inclusion and competitiveness must go together.

9. GOVERNMENT AS A MARKET-MAKER

Programme Director,

Government has an important role to play as a market-maker.

Our procurement expenditure is an economic instrument.

Where appropriate and within the law, we must use procurement to broaden participation, strengthen local value chains and create opportunities for emerging enterprises.

But procurement should not simply mean awarding a contract.

We should be asking whether our procurement systems are helping businesses to grow.

Can a small company develop the capacity to supply a larger contract?

Can businesses collaborate through joint ventures?

Can large companies mentor emerging suppliers?

Can we create supplier-development pathways?

Can we use government programmes to prepare enterprises for private-sector and international markets?

This is how procurement can become a tool for economic transformation.

10. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS THAT DELIVER

Ladies and gentlemen,

No single institution can unlock inclusive trade.

It requires an ecosystem.

Government must provide policy leadership and coordination.

Business must provide markets, investment and supplier-development opportunities.

Financial institutions must provide appropriate capital.

Development agencies must provide technical support.

Universities and colleges must provide skills, innovation and research.

Industry bodies must provide market intelligence and networks.

And entrepreneurs themselves must bring ambition, resilience and a willingness to professionalise their businesses.

Our success will depend on how effectively we connect these different parts of the ecosystem.

11. A CALL TO ACTION

As we leave this breakfast, I would like us to commit to five actions.

First, let us increase the number of women- and youth-owned enterprises that enter formal supply chains.

Second, let us increase the number of women- and youth-owned enterprises that become export-ready.

Third, let us connect emerging enterprises directly to international buyers, investors and markets.

Fourth, let us strengthen access to finance, technology, skills and business development support.

Fifth, let us measure our success not only by the number of programmes we implement, but by the number of businesses that grow, employ people, export and remain sustainable.

These must be measurable outcomes.

12. CONCLUSION

Programme Director,

The future of trade must be inclusive.

The future of entrepreneurship must be inclusive.

And the future of the Eastern Cape economy must be inclusive.

We cannot build a globally competitive province while large sections of our population remain outside the productive economy.

We cannot speak about economic growth without speaking about women.

We cannot speak about innovation without speaking about young people.

And we cannot speak about global markets while local entrepreneurs remain disconnected from those markets.

Our task is therefore clear:

Open the doors.

Build the bridges.

Connect the markets.

Unlock the capital.

Develop the capabilities.

And then allow our entrepreneurs to compete.

Let us build an Eastern Cape where a woman entrepreneur from Mdantsane, Mthatha, Gqeberha, East London or any rural community can build a business that reaches Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi, Dubai, London and beyond.

Let us build a province where young people do not only search for employment, but create enterprises that employ others.

Let us build businesses that are locally rooted, proudly South African and globally competitive.

And let us ensure that the next generation of African businesses is not merely present in global markets — but is shaping those markets.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Inclusive trade is not simply an economic objective. It is an instrument of transformation.

When women succeed, families and communities benefit.

When young entrepreneurs succeed, jobs are created.

When small businesses enter global value chains, local economies grow.

And when our entrepreneurs succeed internationally, the Eastern Cape succeeds with them.

Let us therefore move forward with ambition, partnership and urgency.

From participation to competitiveness.

From local markets to global markets.

From entrepreneurs with potential to enterprises with scale.

And from economic exclusion to shared prosperity.

I thank you.

Ndiyabulela. Enkosi.

