

Address at the Official Opening of the De Beers Industrial Diamond Research (Debid) Laboratory

1 November 2001

Chairman of De Beers, Mr. Nicky Oppenheimer
Managing Director of DEBID, Mr. Christian Hultner
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pleased to be here today at the opening of the Diamond Research Laboratory of De Beers Industrial Diamonds.

In Rodney Davenport's history of South Africa, he has the following to say about the importance of diamonds in the history of South Africa.

"With the discovery of diamonds in the Orange river valley in 1867, the first revolutionary change in South African society began to take place. Diamond-digging started as a speculative enterprise engaged in for the most part by men of substance, both immigrant fortune-seekers and local speculators, several of whom were Dutch-speaking, and some were subjects of the Tlhaping chief Mothibi of Dikgatlong....

"At the time of Union, this very important industry accounted for over 98% of the world's total diamond production, and still accounted for more than half at the time of the Great Depression in 1929.

He goes on to give the following analysis:

"The Diamond Fields contributed in a variety of ways to the shaping of South African society. Quite apart from the capital which they unlocked, which would prove beneficially available for the opening of the gold mines twenty years later, they provided a significant bonus for the Cape's export trade after the incorporation of Griqualand West, and also had a decisive influence on the consolidation of labour patterns, promoting the immigration of artisans and helping to reinforce that socio-economic stratification between the races which had already begun to develop into a rigid pattern on the farms."

(*South Africa: A Modern History*, Macmillan South Africa, Johannesburg 1987, p. 516)

From this extract we can see that clearly in the last 134 years or more, minerals especially diamonds and gold have played an important role in the building of South Africa in general and in the growth of the economy in particular.

Within that broad sweep of South African history, De Beers has played a crucial role in the production of both gem and industrial diamonds, its expansion through the Anglo-American Corporation into other parts of Africa, its development in the 1960s of artificial diamonds and so forth.

The mineral resources of South Africa have brought great riches, but for the most part has not improved the wealth of the majority of our people. The impoverishment of the African people was as a result of systematic processes of colonialism, the workings of the international economic systems and neo-colonialism. Primarily Africa's impoverishment was as a result of the way in which it was integrated into the world economy as a supplier of cheap labour and raw materials, through the extraction of Africa's resources without direct benefits to the great majority of African people. Diamond mining in South Africa has been associated with both migrant labour practices but also the struggle of workers for their rights and for trade unions to see themselves as part of a bigger struggle for freedom.

With the development of mining came what Davenport called "socio-economic stratification between the races", what we now recognise as segregation and which was later refined as apartheid.

Not only in this country, but on a continental scale, we saw European enrichment and African impoverishment, for Africans resources were harnessed to create the wealth for the developed world; with manufactured goods expanding wealth creation in Europe while Africa was relegated by the world economic system to a mere producer of raw materials that were sold at as low a cost as possible, cheap labour and little else.

It is in this continental and national context, I believe, that the launch of this research laboratory becomes so important and takes on a meaning that has far-reaching implications not only for the industry itself, but for how we as Africans use our own natural resources to empower and equip ourselves to be competitive in our own right and take our rightful place among the best in the world.

I have been told that De Beers Industrial Diamond Company was established in 1946 and that shortly thereafter the Diamond Research Laboratory was set up to advance this development. I believe that this new Diamond Research Laboratory here in Springs is one of the most advanced laboratories in the world, especially in the field of diamond synthesis technology. The location means that the laboratory will provide support to the large synthesis plant, thus implementing the idea of a truly integrated science and industry complex. In so doing, you are also recognising the valuable contribution that science and technology can make towards economic development and for creating sustainable development in South Africa.

Clearly this development will enable De Beers Industrial Diamond (DEBID) to assert itself favourably in the field of synthetic industrial diamonds and related products.

The neighbouring synthetic diamond manufacturing plant, which is to expand next year will, I understand, be the largest plant in the industry and in the world. In the rapidly changing global environment we find ourselves in, we have no choice but to strive to assert ourselves as a country and as a continent into the world economy in a manner that benefits all our people and truly addresses local needs.

Through the Foresight Project and others of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, innovation is recognised as a mechanism for growth and development. This vital investment in technology, the results of which we witness here today, puts us on the right road towards that innovation we talk about, creates the necessary conditions for us to add value to our products through beneficiation.

You are demonstrating to us that this will be the place where this value is added. This is the location from where we as South Africans shall be able to say proudly that we have truly transformed ourselves from a mining country to a mineral beneficiation country. We are succeeding in harnessing our comparative and strategic advantage to lead the development of an industry.

Moreover, we shall then be able to say that we have indeed overcome the legacy of the past, that our exploitation of natural resources can indeed be used to transform South African society, not through a return to the social stratifications and apartheid of the past, but so that we can move forward and this time create a better life for all our people and give birth to a people who are united in action and building a country wholly beautiful and new.

I am also encouraged that De Beers Industrial Diamonds is investing in training so that this technologically advanced infrastructure can be used to its full potential when we have a wide pool of creative people, scientists, innovators, information technology specialists, working together to improve our lives.

We have come a long way from the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and the periods of suffering and conflicts that followed and kept our people divided for more than a century.

The Oppenheimer family has played a pivotal role in developing the mining industry in this country. You have demonstrated your commitment to development and shall no doubt continue to do so in the future.

Now a new era has begun. We see the results of this new time right here in Springs, throughout South Africa and on the rest of the continent. The role of the private sector in partnership with government is critical if we are to succeed in this new period of our history.

I declare the De Beers Industrial Diamonds Research Laboratory officially opened.

I thank you.