

Statement At The National Research & Technology Foresight Launch

Pretoria, 23 March 2000

Minister Ben Ngubane
Deputy Minister Bridget Mabandla
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen:

In 1932 an Afrikaner prospector named Van Graan approached a strange-looking outcrop in the Limpopo valley known as Mapungubwe Hill, in the area where the borders of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe meet. Mapungubwe Hill held great mysterious power over the local people who always turned their backs on it when outsiders attempted to discuss it. It was said that they believed that some untold misery may befall anyone who even pointed at the Hill. The structure of the hill made superstition understandable. It was some thirty meters high of sandstone but its sides were so steep that it was thought to be impossible to climb. Van Graan was determined to master this place of apparent secrets by getting to the top of the Hill. Together with his son who was a University of Pretoria student and a group of friends, they made their way to the top.

They discovered a site of obviously ancient occupation, and in the dust, spotted the gleam of gold and found gold beads, bangles and treasures. We are told that they spent two days searching and scratching over the loose soil, and in the process found more large pieces of plate gold, a tiny golden rhinoceros of thin plate gold, with gold tails and ears, which were beautifully made. A skeleton was also found, dug out carefully, but it crumbled to dust on being exposed to the air.

Their immediate reaction was to keep their discovery secret, but Van Graan's son broke ranks and told his archaeology professor. The professor and his colleagues found yet more marvellous objects. Seventy ounces of gold in various forms were found on one skeleton. The legs of another skeleton had over a hundred bangles of coiled wire while more gold, and some 12 000 gold beads were among the items discovered in Mapungubwe Hill.

I think we will all agree that much still needs to be learned about the full significance of Mapungubwe, her civilisation and her technological advancement. As Noel Mostert observes in his book, *Frontiers*, Mapungubwe Hill sat like a hierarchical citadel surrounded by intense economic activity at its base. Two large settlements below the citadel were involved in agriculture, the maintenance of large herds of cattle, the working of ivory, copper and gold and possibly the manufacture of cotton.

As we launch the Foresight Outputs today, we must realise that in doing so, we are also re-discovering ourselves and the ancient technologies which our people founded here on African soil and which are still in use in some parts today. The source of our power comes not only from our present, but from our past wherein the people of our land were seriously engaged in efforts to better the quality of their lives through the use and continuous improvement of technology. It is this past that together with ongoing creative approaches to present-day realities must shape the future. Our insights into our past and our present are that which will produce the necessary foresight in planning for the future.

Scenario planning, as the Foresight Outputs demonstrate, happens not through chance, but through rigorous, meticulous and carefully worked out strategic plans. These are the blueprints with which we plot our future development. Indeed the key to our success is knowledge creation which leads us to a better quality of life and positions us at a better vantage point to face current realities, enabling us to conquer ignorance, poverty, disease, underdevelopment.

The Foresight Report suggests ways in which we can play an active role in the knowledge society of the new century. It identifies relevant sectors for development such as agriculture, biodiversity, crime prevention, energy, health, tourism, information technologies and others. The strength of the report is in

its recommendations regarding technologies for the sustainable development of our country in the next century. Globally, there is now remarkable consensus that emerging technologies will have a revolutionary impact on both economic activity and the social fabric of a nation. I am convinced that basic science and intellectual capital will play a more fundamental role in socio-economic development than has been the case in the immediate past. Most countries see the promotion of innovation as one of the key elements in revitalising their economies. In South Africa, with our tremendous social and economic needs, the promotion of innovation is also the key to development. Thus the Foresight Project must be seen in the context of beginning a process that informs our National System of Innovation.

The Foresight Report now requires our serious reading and analysis as we seek to prioritise areas of implementation. We have to be careful that the technological and scientific advancement that emanates from this initiative does not end up being the preserve only of scientists and researchers. We must ensure that the languages of technology do not become arcane metalanguages only for the initiated yet inaccessible to ordinary people.

Technological and scientific advancement must belong to all the people of South Africa, so that they use it to face the every-day challenges of our world and also prepare them for the encounters that lie ahead. South Africa has a solid foundation in terms of institutions and infrastructure for research and advancement of technology. Government, private sector and civil society, especially our scientists, are faced with the enormous task of sustaining scientific and research institutions so that we do not lag behind while the rest of the world is advancing at a furious pace.

We are therefore very glad to note that some of the leading researchers, academics and scientists, especially from many parts of our continent have chosen to come and work in South Africa. We will therefore like to, once more, use this occasion to welcome them and encourage many who are still in the Diaspora to return to Africa so that together we can participate in this challenging yet exciting process of our own renewal.

At the same time, we must find a permanent solution to the challenge of retaining and keeping at home the skills and expertise that we ourselves produce. It is something we all have to grapple with, but scientific institutions must lead us in finding the correct answers so that the resources we pour in the area of training and equipping our scientists remain to benefit our people.

As society in general we must ask ourselves whether we give due recognition, accord sufficient respect to and therefore support for our scientists, our researchers, our writers, for all those whose task it is to be our knowledge producers.

We must thank the foresight project team, the twelve sector working groups, the three cross-cutter working groups, the NGOs, the community, all the scientists, researchers and government officials for the valuable work that has been done.

We started at the hill-top of Mapungubwe amidst an ancient settlement that was intensely depended on economic activity, in agriculture, in the refinement of ivory, copper and gold. We are now at Muckleneuk Ridge, this hill-top, the centre of learning overlooking Pretoria.

This Foresight Report gives us the benefit of being at many different hill-tops and vantage points at the same time. We are now more equipped than ever before to survey our present and plan our future, thanks to all your good work.

THANK YOU.

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