

## **CESA Presidential Message 2021**

### **REBUILDING WITH PURPOSE**

When I delivered my presidential address this time last year, I had little idea of what was to come in 2020 – the unprecedented trials and tribulations that would face our industry, our country, and our global society. However, the words I said then, 12 months ago, were more apt than I could have imagined. You might remember, I said: “We are certainly in a period of great change. In times such as these, there is always uncertainty as to how events may unfold, and a certain amount of trepidation as to what the change may entail, and what the future may hold.” This was before COVID-19 reached our shores.

Uncertainty and trepidation aside, South Africa faced and continues to face economic and social challenges with resilience and determination. Our nation’s President has had the difficult task of leading us through these hardships and, together with his cabinet, establish a way forward which will see our country prosper. The outcome is, of course, the *South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan* which places emphasis on infrastructure development. This has created some much-needed optimism for our industry, which has been suffering from decreased spending. With this plan in mind, the important role of the consulting engineer becomes ever more clear, and so Consulting Engineers South Africa has chosen our theme for 2021: **“Rebuilding with purpose”**.

Honourable members of the media, members of the CESA Board, and esteemed guests, I warmly welcome you to CESA's annual Presidential Media Briefing, to share my 2021 Presidential message for the year ahead.

Despite the hardships facing our country – hardships we cannot expect to dissipate soon – CESA remains committed to improving the business landscape and playing our part in creating a conducive procurement environment as well as shaping the requisite talent to see that our country's developmental goals are met. We aim to mould our industry of consulting engineers to ensure we continue to **protect lives** through quality and safe infrastructure, and **protect livelihoods** through the creation of economic opportunities for the wider construction value chain.

I thank you for this opportunity to discuss some important industry topics aligned with our 2021 themes, the factors at play, and the goals and objectives of our organisation.

In order to look for a positive way forward for our industry and society, let us review what the last year presented.

- I am proud to report that CESA placed much emphasis in 2020 on strengthening the relationship between government and the private sector. The strength of this relationship will be instrumental in effecting the regrowth of our economy.
- An important part of this was our involvement in the Sustainable Infrastructure Development Symposium South Africa in June, which marked a positive step in developing a roadmap for our country's recovery.
- However, it has become clear that South Africa still faces many of the same challenges as in prior years, with an ongoing demise of public decision-making processes, a lack of checks and balances within procurement systems, and a



loss of accountability of those tasked with leading change.

- Building a more capable state was one of President's Ramaphosa's core plans for last year and while his efforts to fight the ongoing coronavirus pandemic have been honourable, his efforts to fight corruption are slow and laborious.
- Testament to these issues, last year's AG's report was very concerning, with a dismal 7.5% of municipalities receiving a clear audit.
- We also face continuously delayed infrastructure delivery, and those projects which do see progress are hampered by obstructions from the so-called construction mafia. CESA is in ongoing communication with SAPS in this regard, and we encourage our members and the wider industry to report any incidents.
- While we indeed face many hurdles, let's not dwell on negativity. Last year saw progress in the reopening of bidding for the REI4P, which will provide opportunities for contractors in the medium term, and help improve the energy landscape in the longer term.
- I believe that last year also showed a greater focus on people rather than profit. As compassion and empathy gained momentum amid a public health crisis, we are now seeing an industry of people who act with more care for others, and we hope this spirit of ubuntu continues through 2021 as we stand together.
- Ultimately this spirit of ubuntu and caretaking is what CESA aims to promote to industry – to protect lives and livelihoods, and consider the tangible social and economic outcomes of our work.

Taking into account where we have come from, the problems we face, and the strengths we possess, let's examine our 2021 theme. What does it mean for our industry and our country?



## Rebuilding

- Firstly, as we have seen recently in the US, democracies are precious and fragile, and need to be nurtured. Democracy will become less and less meaningful to those in our society that are stuck in poverty, with no access to basic services, and with no opportunities. Thus, as we embark on this massive rebuilding project, let us try to rebuild in a conscious and “mindful” manner, so that rebuilding doesn’t just become about providing infrastructure, but that it is consciously engineered to address poverty, inequality, and unemployment.
- As we focus on rebuilding our country and economy, we need to be understanding of the immediate needs of our society. Without doubt, the most pressing requirement is the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine. CESA encourages the industry to be patient and understanding as resources are diverted to funding the vaccine initiative.
- As CESA and as engineers, we have the necessary skills and expertise to assist government in the roll out of this massive task. Whilst we may not be able to contribute directly to the health-related aspects, we can most certainly contribute to the areas of project management, logistics management, etc. We hold ourselves available to contribute as and when necessary, and indeed are already doing so through our participation at BUSA and B4SA.
- We need to be aware that municipal budgets set for infrastructure may be diverted. And we should stand ready to assist in infrastructure that might be prioritised, such as hospitals and clinics. This may also give the country an opportunity to create legacy infrastructure rather than temporary structures, and if carefully planned, resources that are currently being utilised for short term interventions can rather be used to develop long term solutions.
- Let this be our legacy – as we go beyond the call of duty to save lives and strengthen the social compact, where the state and society work together to



address issues of governance and resources to achieve inclusive growth.

- Moving into 2021, we encourage greater community involvement in the infrastructure we build and maintain, both in terms of communities as end users, as well as creating employment opportunities during infrastructure delivery. This means embodying the concept of “saving lives and livelihoods” into everything we do. Effective local government is critical if we are to achieve success in this area, and must be fixed as a matter of extreme urgency.
- This year may also present us with the perfect chance to rethink spatial planning. With the pressing need for development in more rural areas, and the loss of emphasis on metros due to remote work and teleconferencing, there is a real opportunity to decentralise our development focus away from cities. Agriculture has been one of the better performing sectors in the economy, and if services can be decentralised to those communities, it will relieve pressure on the metros and cities. Thus, smaller scale farmers can be supported, food security can be enhanced, and local communities can be gainfully employed in construction and maintenance activities close to where they live.
- A further opportunity lies in maintenance – rebuilding in the literal sense. South Africa’s dismal performance in the recent SAICE Infrastructure Report Card means that it is vital that we undertake comprehensive infrastructure maintenance. It is essential for protecting lives. Further, more emphasis on maintenance efforts can protect livelihoods too, as local communities benefit from such initiatives.
- With new opportunities on the horizon, we need to remember the lessons learned.
- For rebuilding to happen effectively, we need collaboration between all spheres of government. We need coordination between all role players.
- And we need to partner to build state capacity and ensure the necessary skills



development takes place.

- Professionalisation of the Public Service has been in the spotlight recently, as government strives to improve the skills of public servants and the role of the state in producing skilled professionals. CESA stands ready to support this initiative in any way we can.
- When we consider the opportunities for rebuilding, let us not forget the importance of our workforce in the consulting engineering profession. This year, we want to see more mentoring of young people in the industry. They will build the future, and will see our industry innovate.
- We must also continue with the “rebuild” of workforce demographics. CESA has witnessed great success in industry transformation, and will continue to encourage diversity and inclusion within the consulting engineering profession.

### **Rebuilding with purpose**

As we rebuild, we must consider the pace of change. Currently, it is too slow. There is a need for speed in the infrastructure development plan, although it must be done carefully, or it will fuel corruption. CESA’s stance of zero tolerance toward corruption remains one of our most prominent agendas.

- In our efforts to rebuild, let us maintain our focus and purpose on doing so with quality and integrity. If we are to truly save lives and livelihoods, we must operate with an unwavering focus on value, reliability, and sustainability.
- CESA’s emphasis on quality has been further highlighted by the new mandated management systems for CESA members based on international standards for quality, integrity, and sustainability. This demonstrates CESA’s commitment to accountability, which we hope to see reflected in public sector spheres.
- Added to this, the Draft Public Procurement Bill has seen industry lobby for a



more transparent procurement process with decentralised authority structures to ensure the necessary checks and balances are in place. CESA calls on policymakers to listen to the voices of industry and ensure the bill promotes integrity, localisation, transparency, and accountability.

### **Let's focus on recovery**

- The identified SIPS will play a great role in economic recovery, if they can break ground. Getting a few selected projects off the ground early will be valuable in giving impetus to the programme, providing reassurance to the public, and encouraging investment confidence in South Africa. It will be like an “immune booster” to our ill economy.
- CESA looks forward to engaging on this and other important topics at our Annual Infrastructure Indaba, which is scheduled as a hybrid event later in the year. We are sure to see some constructive engagements with multilevel stakeholders which should aid in coordinating recovery.
- In the same vein, we welcome the forming of Construction Alliance South Africa (CASA). We will support this initiative which will provide further industry coordination, which is much needed for achieving our national recovery plans.

### **Concluding Remarks**

At CESA, we are committed to contributing to effective and sustainable solutions, and will continue to guide our members and the industry at large towards more transparent and prosperous infrastructure delivery processes. Every person in South Africa stands to benefit from this goal which would see improved use of taxpayers' money, an appropriately capacitated state, and the delivery of safe and reliable national infrastructure offering a strong foundation for further economic growth. However, as Minister for Public Works and Infrastructure, Patricia de Lille said at our Infrastructure



Indaba last year: “We need to start implementing, the patience of our people is running out!” The preservation and deepening of our precious democracy will depend entirely on the success of our recovery.

Our task is not easy, as the nuances at play make for a bumpy road to recovery. Regardless, CESA will continue to actively engage through the relevant platforms and to remain your ‘Partner in enabling Consulting Engineering Excellence’.

Thank you!

