

CESA Presidential Media Address – Olu Soluade

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, members of the media, partners, and colleagues. Thank you for joining us for this presidential address. It is indeed a privilege to have been elected CESA president for 2022 to 2023 and my honour to address you all today as we continue our efforts to shape our industry and indeed our country towards growth and prosperity.

On the 15th of May 2004, in Zurich, FIFA announced our country as the host country for the 2010 world cup. This single announcement created HOPE and excitement within our nation and our people. What a moment that gave birth to working together as a nation to signify that we can be and do anything.

Due to the common goal of hosting the world and creating a spectacular event, HOPE brought about the entire state machinery and the nation to have a purpose to show that we can do it.

Fast forward to 2010 and the first game as the host nation. On the 11th of June 2010, in the opening game between South Africa and Mexico, the country was hopeful:

That goal ignited HOPE and ensured that we can do it.

As we start our presidential year, it is our commitment to reignite the passion of our nation along a common goal towards success and grace for all. We can be hopeful again that we are able and available to make a difference and build our nation again.

We have the ability to rewrite the gloomy narrative which has dominated our lives in recent years – the pandemic and its challenges. We can overcome, we can recover.

But we have a lot of work to do – as an industry we need to ask ourselves, where do we even begin?

In contemplating a presidential theme for this year, it became quickly apparent to me that whatever goals we are looking to achieve, whatever message we want to convey and whatever progress we want to make are underpinned not by the what, but by the how. We know what needs to be done to move our industry and our country forward – it is the way we do it which will define our success.

With this in mind, my focus this year is on the ‘TEAM’ concept – together each achieving more. The success of any group of people is completely dependent on working together as a team, being on the same page, with a united outlook. To meet CESA’s mandate, to execute our strategic plans and to face the challenges of our industry together, my presidential theme for 2022 is “*A Call to Service*”. The time has come for us all to get involved in contributing to the economic recovery of our country to get all hands on deck!

In reference to a recent article (Sunday Times 9/1/21) on the great achievements of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, I would argue that we need not be asking simply whether only one segment of our population can live up to Ubuntu, the African philosophy that Tutu globalised, but rather whether we as a collective in our own country could ourselves yet again prove that we can. We need to build on his dream right in our own backyard. Let me share with you some of our thoughts on this matter, which begins with narrowing these down into what we may call focus areas.

We have, as a start, identified five key focus areas for 2022. These are the core areas which will underpin our activities for the year ahead.

1. Increase our advocacy efforts in the area of sustainable transformation in respect of race, gender, and technology in our sector.
2. Maintain the standards of professionalism and build on the levels of quality management whilst encouraging the increased need for our members to integrate sustainability into the solutions offered to their clients.



3. Improve on the business and advisory support to members and clients with an emphasis on best practice procurement guided by the precepts of Section 217 of our Constitution at all times.
4. Continue our efforts towards building and strengthening partnerships with government, private sector client bodies of our members as well as with other stakeholders.
5. Ensure that good governance and integrity prevail within our industry and profession, particularly amongst our members as the apex body for the consulting engineering sector in the country.

These focus areas respond to industry challenges which we have become all too familiar with, and which are reflected in our 2021 CESA Bi-Annual Economic and Capacity Survey or BECS as we call it. Respondents highlighted concerns with regulation, procurement, skills development, and private sector participation in public sector challenges. Ethics, accountability, and corruption were – as expected – high on the list of concerns from survey respondents.

CESA aims to tackle these issues with the support and service of our team, our members, and our stakeholders.

At the same time, we want to be inclusive of our next generation of professionals. We want to set our young people up for success and in turn be able to develop the next generation of practitioners that may sustain and build the industry and CESA, the industry organisation, which incidentally will have been in existence for seventy years later this year, well into the future. In this light, it may be appropriate to add that there are three additional goals for 2022 that we would also be focusing on, namely, to:

- enhance our student branch footprint. CESA has the potential to shape young graduates into the skilled, accountable, and ethical professionals we need. We have the ability to influence the next generation and to guide them into their chosen career path as Consulting Engineers.
- to begin an annual sponsorship of graduates in an internship every year, with the aim of building the feedstock for our Young Professionals Forum.
- to increase focus on the next generation leadership. This does not just mean shaping our future leaders, but instilling leadership skills more broadly into our industry, particularly through our successful and much spoken of Business of Consulting Engineering Programme.



Finally, of course, we will continue to pursue the strategic goals as determined by the CESA Board, all of which remain relevant.

Let us for a few minutes take stock of the world around us.

The construction industry was again the worst-performing sector in the economy in 2021. The consulting engineering profession experienced some highs and lows last year, which were captured in the data in our Bi-Annual Economic and Capacity Survey – or BECS report as I previously mentioned.

With infrastructure development having been hailed as one of the key elements for South Africa's economic recovery, the public sector trends are most interesting. While tender activity has improved, there is still little evidence that these tenders are being awarded at any sort of reasonable pace. It also raises questions about the claim that any of the gazetted Strategic Infrastructure Projects from 2020 were indeed 'shovel ready' or being fast-tracked on any sort of broad base. There has however been some progress, with a few high-profile projects being awarded.

The BECS report has also shown a decrease in public sector clients, especially SOEs, with 50% of projects now coming from private sector clients. This is higher than 2020 and 2019. The public sector is generally regarded as the most important client to the industry, and the role of the public sector remains critical to the engineering profession.

The report also uncovered an alarming number of project cancellations, a poor ability for companies to break even and a decrease in fee earnings year on year. Competition among bidders has thus increased to a fierce level.

On a more positive note, however, firms have indicated a greater need for engineers and technologists, signifying great opportunities for our graduates. Firms are also expecting profitability to increase – although margins remain low.



Overall, the consulting engineering confidence index improved significantly, coming off the back of fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. While we face many challenges, it is encouraging to know that our industry remains positive and resilient.

As an industry, we call on President Cyril Ramaphosa, as he prepares for his State of the Nation address next week, to focus government's efforts on unlocking the much publicised, close to R900billion project pipeline into shovel-ready projects. We believe the state can achieve this by leveraging as much of the technical and built environment capacity in the private sector as is needed to fill the gaps that exist in public sector as a matter of urgency!

On another positive note, the first part of the State Capture Report has been published and is indeed a great milestone in the fight against corruption. We hope that the outcomes of the report will help boost investment confidence for SA as we push for greater integrity and professionalism in our state. The push for integrity and professionalism must be increased in the public sector, through the work which we have contributed to in the government's efforts toward professionalising the state and needs to be echoed in the private sector. CESA is proud of the code of ethics we instil in our members – if our industry and our clients can abide by such codes, we stand to grow our opportunities, develop the sector sustainably and honestly and in turn our economy and our country.

SO, WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR US TO BE OF SERVICE?

Referring to the theme of *a Call to Service*, I believe it is important to unpack what this really means. Service is the action of helping or doing work for someone. Most relevant to CESA, it can also be defined as the system supplying a public need.

I believe consulting engineers are indeed servants – we are responsible for ensuring the quality and integrity of much social infrastructure and are called to protect lives and livelihoods of our people, whilst at the same time contributing actively to ensuring that economic infrastructure is designed and built affordably and sustainably.

Being called to service should come naturally to our members, but we know that everyone is juggling priorities in today's times. I believe there are four requirements for service which we can all work on.



- Availability: We need to set aside and volunteer some of our time. Are you ready for the task ahead?
- Willingness: We cannot be coerced into service. Are you willing?
- Sacrifice: There will be tough decisions to make. Are you ready to go out of your way?
- Vision: We must keep an eye on the end goal. Do you have a vision for the future?

Importantly, I believe that leading by example is the hallmark of great service. This means talking the talk and walking the walk – with integrity and excellence.

Successfully working in service for this public need will greatly aid in achieving our goals and motivating our industry.

- It is time for engineers to more proactively contribute to South Africa's rebuild project – we need everyone to become involved in ensuring that we make our economic recovery plan a reality.
- In every project, we must look to optimise its positive impact on big issues impacting our country, such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment. We must apply our minds to ensure even the smallest projects have a significant impact.
- We must actively and effectively advocate and communicate with decision-makers and politicians, ensuring that the voice of our industry is heard, so that we can shape the way forward in terms of policies and regulations.
- We must continue to advocate Quality Cost-Based Selection and value for money. South Africa cannot afford the dire consequences caused by the prevalence to choose “cheap and nasty” professional services, over “sustainable and functional” professional services based on present and future technology best practice.

CESA IS CALLED TO SERVICE

In our act of service, CESA looks forward to fostering continued engagement and partnerships this year.

CESA will continue to make a strong case for the public sector to meaningfully collaborate with the private sector to ensure that we have better outcomes in terms of our infrastructure development programmes, as well



as to utilise private sector capacity and expertise to supplement the limited capacity that is available in the public sector.

We continue to make positive strides in our focused stakeholder consultations with National Treasury, Office of the Auditor-General, SANRAL, Department of Water and Sanitation, Development Bank of South Africa, and Infrastructure South Africa, to name but a few, all of which have been ongoing.

CESA will continue to serve on the Ministerial Task Team of the Public Service Administration to give input to the *Framework for Professionalising the State* in order to improve the competency levels in the public sector with reference to the built environment practitioners who are charged with being the custodians of public infrastructure asset management.

We will also continue to play a pivotal role in many industry-related organisations, where for example CESA is part of the Construction Alliance South Africa (CASA) management committee – an organization borne out of the 2020 restrictions placed on the construction sector which now seeks to be instrumental in the development both of the industry recovery plan as well as in the development of a masterplan for the industry.

CONCLUSION

CESA is committed to acting in service of our industry and our country, to protecting lives and livelihoods, and to encouraging others to do the same. We remain available and willing, to make sacrifices to achieve our vision. As a voluntary association, we are by nature in service and we call on others in our industry to set the example of serving with pride, integrity, honour, and discipline, like good soldiers serving the needs of our country and all of its people.

I call on all of you therefore to be available to make a difference and leave a long-lasting legacy for future generations.

Finally, I give thanks to God that has brought me here for such a time as this, my wife, my best friend, my two daughters and lastly the Consulting Engineering Industry, where as engineers we are able to contribute to making a difference in the lives and livelihoods of our people.



Indeed, TOGETHER EACH ACHIEVING MORE!

I thank you. GOD BLESS OUR INDUSTRY AND OUR NATION

