

## **MINISTER N. METH**

### **KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO THE SADC EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR SECTOR SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING**

**24-26 FEBRUARY 2026**

**ROODEPOORT, SOUTH AFRICA**

Madam Angele Makombo Ntumba, the SADC Deputy Executive Secretary for Regional Integration,

Mr. Yitna Getachew, Director of the Sub-Regional Office for Southern Africa, International Organisation for Migration (IOM),

Mr Alexio Musindo, Pretoria Director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO),

Both Deputy Ministers for Employment and Labour,

Distinguished Delegates,

Representatives of Organised Workers and Employers

Colleagues and Friends.

Look at the world map today. The tectonic plates of global power are shifting beneath our feet. We are not merely navigating change; we are navigating an era of disruption. Supply chains are being weaponized. Trade corridors are being redrawn along ideological lines. And the multilateral consensus that many of us grew up relying on is facing a stress test unlike any we have seen since 1945.

In this volatile environment, the old playbook of going it alone is not just obsolete, it is dangerous. Isolation is a vulnerability. Today, I want to talk about a different kind of power. The power of proximity. The power of regional collaboration as our first line of defence.

#### **Salient Issue: Geopolitical Fragmentation**

#### **Let us be brutally honest about Geopolitical Fragmentation.**

We are witnessing a fracturing of the global order. The rise of protectionism, the resurgence of conflict and the "friend-shoring" of economies are creating a world of blocs. For working people, this is terrifying. Because when geopolitics turn sour, it is always the worker who pays the price. When sanctions are imposed, factories close. When

trade wars escalate, the cost-of-living rises. We cannot solve every global conflict in this room. But we can build a shock absorber at the regional level.

Regional collaboration allows us to diversify our supply chains within our own neighbourhood. It allows us to create “min-laterals” agreements between neighbouring states that keep goods and people moving, even when global consensus is fraying. In a world where the global village is fragmenting into gated communities, regional resilience is our safety net.

### **The Mandate Under Siege: The Stark Reality of Our Labour Market**

This brings me to the state of our mandate here at SADC. The "Report on the Status of the Labour Market in SADC" (document SADC/ELS/SO/2026/3A) is in front of you. Its findings are a call to arms. It paints a stark picture of persistent decent work deficits. We see unemployment ranging as high as 36.9%, with women disproportionately affected in 14 of our Member States. We see the hidden crisis of labour underutilisation; the millions who have given up hope and are no longer actively seeking work. And we see our youth, with unemployment soaring to 62.5% in some places, trapped in a cycle of disengagement from education, employment or training.

Compounding this is the pervasive nature of informality, which exceeds 90% in several of our countries. This is not just an economic statistic; it is a failure of social contract. It leaves the majority of our workers without protection, without a voice and without a safety net.

As geopolitical tensions rise, the very concept of universal workers' rights comes under attack. We see a dangerous narrative emerging; a narrative that says labour standards are a "luxury" we cannot afford during a cost-of-living crisis. We must ensure SADC remains not just vigilant, but relevant. We must be the watchdog that barks loudly when the pressure to be "competitive" is used to weaken collective bargaining or dismantle occupational safety.

### **Building the Architecture for Decent Work: The Tools We Have**

In response to these challenges, we have been working to build the policy architecture for decent work. But we face a critical gap between policy ambition and on-the-ground reality. Our agenda reveals this tension clearly.

First, consider the SADC Protocol on Employment and Labour. It has been two years since we revised this instrument to address earlier concerns, yet today, only one Member State has ratified it. Ten have signed, but ratification is pending. Six have yet to even sign. We are aware that we cannot operationalise our vision if the foundational legal instrument remains in limbo. The Secretariat's report (SADC/ELS/SO/2026/2) is seeking to understand the blockages.

South Africa approaches the draft SADC Protocol on Employment and Labour with a firm commitment to regional integration and the advancement of decent work for all. While we support the objectives of the Protocol, we have identified several areas of significant concern that, in their current drafting, present legal obstacles to signature and ratification. These concerns are not mere technicalities; they go to the heart of our sovereignty, our constitutional processes and the integrity of our domestic labour market transformation agenda. The concerns raised in this note are not insurmountable. They require:

- Clarification that race-based affirmative action falls within Article 7.3.
- Recognition that financial commitments under Article 22 must align with national budget cycles.
- Reassurance that Annexes under Articles 26 and 33 will not circumvent national parliamentary oversight.
- Consideration of a reservations mechanism to accommodate constitutional diversity; and
- Practical dispute resolution provisions that account for the current status of the SADC Tribunal.

We offer these comments in a spirit of constructive engagement. South Africa wishes to be a Party to this Protocol. But we must do so in a manner that respects our Constitution, honours our transformative journey and protects the hard-won rights of our people. We shall continue working with the secretariat to see how best we navigate these challenges to us ratifying the instrument.

Second, we have developed Regional Guidelines on National Employment Policies (SADC/ELS/SO/2026/4) to address the shortcomings in our current approaches; the weak coordination, the lack of integration with macroeconomic planning. The core issue here is a needed policy shift: treating employment creation not as a byproduct of other policies, but as a central objective of national economic strategy. We cannot afford to have employment as an afterthought in our fiscal planning.

### **Tackling Persistent Challenges: Migration, Child Labour, and Dispute Resolution**

The agenda also asks us to look at the effectiveness of our specific tools.

On labour migration, the report on the Joint Sector Meeting (SADC/MCO/1/2025/17A) shows progress, but also fragmentation. The 2005 Protocol on the Facilitation of Movement of Persons is not yet in force. Our "visa openness" is a patchwork; some states are fully open while others require visas from up to 12 of their neighbours. This inconsistency, combined with high unemployment and widespread informality, complicates our ability to govern labour migration safely. It is a driver of irregular movement and exploitation. Emphasis should be made on the heightened need for legal and controlled labour migration, we thus must do better to harmonise our approach.

On child labour, the second regional Score Card (SADC/ELS/SO/2026/6) shows progress in policy alignment; up to 82% but this has not translated into a significant reduction in the problem. The data is old or missing. Enforcement is weak. Prosecutions are rare. And most National Action Plans are chronically underfunded. We are good at making plans, but we are failing at funding them.

On labour dispute resolution, the Forum's report shows that while countries like South Africa, Lesotho and Tanzania have advanced systems, most face common hurdles: case backlogs and difficulties enforcing decisions. The slow pace of institutional reform means that for many workers, justice delayed is justice denied.

## **The Bridge: Regional Collaboration as the Vehicle**

Regional collaboration is the vehicle through which SADC stays relevant. It is how we turn these tools into results.

- Through regional collaboration, we can harmonise labour migration policies so that people are treated with dignity, not trafficked.
- Through regional collaboration, we can align our just transition principles, ensuring that as we move to green energy, a miner in one region is not abandoned while a tech worker in the next town prospers.
- Through regional collaboration, we can share the burden of data collection for the Labour Market Observatory, so we are not flying blind.
- Through regional collaboration, we can learn from each other, as the Decent Work in Construction Project has shown us, by embedding decent work principles into public procurement.

We must use our regional bloc to enforce the Decent Work Agenda. If global governance is stalling, let us build the elevator of social justice floor by floor, starting right here at home.

## **Institutional and Financial Sustainability: Our Achilles Heel**

However, a thread running through nearly every agenda item is the challenge of institutional capacity and sustainable financing.

The evaluation of the SADC Decent Work Programme (2021-2025) could not be completed due to funding shortages. We are planning our future without a clear diagnosis of our past.

A proposal from social partners to establish a regional capacity-building fund was deemed legally unfeasible under the SADC Treaty. Instead, we are forced to pivot towards joint resource mobilisation from external partners. This is a path, but it is not a stable foundation.

Even in areas of progress, such as the ratification of International Labour Standards, we see the same pattern. We commend Angola and Mozambique for their new ratifications. But outstanding reporting obligations persist and several Member States are still bound by outdated conventions, risking protection gaps. The ILO can provide the compass, as it did with the Regional Workshop on the 113th Session, but we must be the ones willing to walk the path together.

## **The Call for a New Mindset**

This requires a shift from competition to cohesion. It requires trust. It requires sitting at this table and admitting that a precarious worker in the neighbouring country is not our competitor but our shared responsibility.

The document before us presents a region with robust plans and a clear vision. But we must now confront the difficult work of securing the resources, the political will and the technical capacity to turn our ambitious agenda into reality for the workers of Southern Africa.

## **The Conclusion: A Call to Action**

Distinguished delegates, the geopolitical winds are howling. They are trying to knock us off balance. The SADC is built to be our anchor.

Let us leave this meeting committed to tangible action.

- Let us commit to removing the blockages to ratifying our Protocol.
- Let us commit to adequately resourcing our National Action Plans.
- Let us commit to harmonising our migration policies.
- And let us commit to using our regional collaboration to build a future where no worker is left behind.

The future of work is not just about technology. It is about justice. And justice requires collaboration.

Thank you.