

Social cohesion, nation building high on SA's priorities

Social cohesion, nation building and promoting national identity are all high on the list of South Africa's priorities, says Jacob Zuma. Speaking at the Social Cohesion Summit at the Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication in Kiptown, Soweto, yesterday, Zuma said the summit itself was confirmation of the importance government placed on these issues.



(Image: GCIS)

However, while government was embarking on a number of programmes to promote unity, reconciliation, nation building and cohesion, Zuma was quick to point out that reconciliation was a continuous two-way process, particularly in a society that had emerged from three centuries of colonialism and apartheid.

Crucial dialogue would take place at the summit, the President said, including discussions on how to bring to fruition the legacy left by the nation's forebears, which acknowledges that South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

"As we gather here, to develop a National Strategy on Social Cohesion and Nation Building, we felt that this was not a strategy that government should design alone. It is a national effort that requires the views of many sectors and stakeholders," he said.

South Africans had on many occasions proven to be a nation that thrives and finds solutions to difficult problems through dialogue, discussion and reaching out to one another, the President pointed out.

Challenges

However, there were bound to be challenges along the journey to social cohesion.

"... We are under no illusion that it is going to be easy. The South African nation is a product of many streams of history and culture, representing the origins, dispersal and re-integration of humanity over hundreds of years. We have to build one national identity out of multiple identities based on class, gender, age, language, geographic location, and religion," he

said.

While there had been progress in institutionalising the principle of an inclusive citizenship since 1994, certain matters still caused "divisions and frustrations".

"The challenges of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, landlessness, and the divisions around race, class and gender make it difficult to arrive at a socially cohesive and united society as fast as we would want to," he noted.

Government's responsibility was to lead South Africans toward a national, democratic society.

"This is a society that is united, non-sexist, non-racial, democratic and prosperous. It is a society with a value system that is based on human solidarity and ubuntu, which promotes a society which prioritises caring for and respecting others."

A primary tool

Zuma noted that the socio-economic transformation programme was a primary tool of national reconciliation, nation building and social cohesion.

Continuous programmes of democratic transformation as well the expansion of basic services and improving the performance of the economy to create jobs, were all designed to create a united, cohesive society.

In addition, the heritage transformation projects helped promote reconciliation, unity and nation building.

Government, through the Department of Arts and Culture, had identified 28 heritage projects.

"Through the upgrading and declaration of historic sites, we will ensure a more representative and inclusive South African history and heritage. More importantly, this will also contribute towards shared values and a common national identity in the country," said Zuma.

The President also noted the power of sport as a social cohesion tool.

"As a result of the value of sports in nation building, government is now investing in school sports more than ever before. The school sport budget has been increased from R27.3 million in the previous year to R42.6 million," he said.

An on-going process

The on-going process of geographical names change and standardisation was also one of the tools to bring South Africans together, to promote a common nationhood and craft a new and inclusive narrative for the country.

In addition, government developed the Use of Official Languages Bill as part of promoting social cohesion.

The Bill is in response to the provisions of Section 6 of the Constitution that not only identifies 11 official languages, but also obliges the State to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages.

He noted that the languages spoken by the majority were marginalised and this should be corrected.

Another important part of promoting social cohesion was the protection and promotion of indigenous knowledge systems, which included promoting formal indigenous knowledge education and assisting indigenous communities to establish cooperative structures to organise themselves, Zuma added.

Arts and Culture Minister Paul Mashatile called for the summit to be a platform to strengthen efforts to building a caring and

humane society, while also healing the wounds of the past, supporting social cohesion and building national pride.

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