SA's vision of sustainable cities revealed

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Johannesburg - Government on Friday unveiled a plan that authorities hope will turn the country's major cities into sustainable economic hubs.

Part of the new strategy, unveiled to Cabinet ministers, mayors and top local government officials, would be to unlock the mineral beneficiation potential in the country's mining cities, speeding up the building of new human settlements closer to where people work and building an integrated public transport system that incorporates rail, taxis and buses.

The launch of the Strategic Integrated Project 7 (Sip 7), by Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) Minister Richard Baloyi is crucial to the country's wider infrastructure programme announced by President Jacob Zuma in his State of the Nation Address, earlier this year. Experts say without the successful implementation of this particular Sip, the entire programme could be in jeopardy.

Baloyi acknowledged that Sip 7 projects were crucial in reversing the apartheid special development plans still detectable in most of South Africa's major cities.

The minister sits in the powerful Presidential Infrastructure Coordinating Commission chaired by Zuma.

As minister of COGTA, he chairs the Sip 7 which is part of the 17 Sips contained in the Presidential Infrastructure Plan announced by the PICC last month. They cover a range of economic and social infrastructure projects and cover all nine provinces with emphasis on poorer regions. Investment in rail, water pipelines, energy generation and transmission infrastructure have been identified for Limpopo.

Sip 7 focuses on 12 of the country's major cities in Gauteng, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, North West and the Western Cape.

The cities include major metros like Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane in Gauteng, Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela in the Eastern Cape, eThekwini in Durban, Cape Town and Mangaung. The cities were chosen because of their demographic and economic features. "They are the lifeline of our economy," Baloyi said.

He said these cities are to be given implementation powers with the PICC expected to exercise an oversight role.

In Gauteng, some of the projects that are up and running include the roll out of the bus transit system in all of the province's three metropolitan cities. Tshwane will spend more than R1.6 billion on its BRT system which is expected to be up and running later this year. Johannesburg is busy finalising plans for a major rehabilitation of Diepsloot and Ivory Park townships. Projects there include the construction of clinics, schools and community libraries.

About R45 million has been set aside to turn Ekurhuleni into an aerotropolis.

An amount of R2 billion has been earmarked for a new rail link that connects Cape Town International Airport and the city centre while in other provinces such as the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal the focus would be on expansion of ports and rail services.

Baloyi said government was convinced the implementation of the programme over a 20-year period will not only change the country's landscape but will also help create the much needed five million jobs the country foresees by 2020.

"It will also play a crucial role in the development of skills in such critical areas as engineering and project management," said Baloyi. Government departments have been criticised in the past for lacking the necessary capacity to deliver on major infrastructure projects.

But on Friday, Economic Development Minister Ibrahim Patel, who was also present at the launch, pointed out that while government was aware of the capacity challenges, the national infrastructure plan was "explicit" in dealing with these problems.

He said strategies were in place to attract engineers and unlock the potential of the country's higher education system in supplying the much needed skills that would ensure the mass roll out of the programme.

"When you speak of a vision to have sustainable cities, there is no blue print, what is important is to ensure that we put pressure on ourselves as government to ensure that implementation takes place because the plans are there," he said.

The PICC will soon announce the establishment of a Project Office that will manage the implementation of the Sip.

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