

A glimmer of hope at day 1 of the Top Empowerment Conference 2021

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Mike Brown, chief executive of Nedbank was quoted saying, "Remote conferences are certainly better than no conferences." The virtual Top Empowerment Conference has kicked off at a pivotal time in South Africa's history. As parts of our country have been affected by the unrest, renowned South African attorney and politician, Mathews Phosa, has pleaded with members of our country to vow to never let this happen again on our soil and on our watch. He has passionately called for us to band together to form a united front rather than being divided.



Re-addressing the problems of the past and the present requires a great deal of collaboration, which is precisely what unfolded on day 1 of this pivotal conference. According to Priya Naidoo, group executive at Nedbank, Covid-19 has placed great urgency on growing our economy. Mike Brown echoed that transformation will boost economic growth, labeling transformation strategies as both moral and business imperatives that contribute to a sustainable future for all.

Simo Mkhize, chief commercial officer at Cell C, has reiterated that "in order for a country to thrive there is a social compact required between business, civil society, the community, and government at large." Mkhize also highlighted the importance of empowering the youth of South Africa through digital skills development, outlining that in this digital age, connectivity is a necessity in every household.

Juliet Mhango, chief human capital and transformation officer at Cell C, reminded us that our youth unemployment stats are staggering over 40% and Nazrene Mannie, executive director for the Global Apprenticeship Network in Geneva, Switzerland, has indicated that perhaps the answer lies in a continued effort to raise the profile of technical and vocational colleges.

In a panel discussion hosted by Nedbank on repurposing the economy for growth and making sure nobody is left behind, Tanya Van Lil, CEO of SAVCA, was quoted saying that, "we need more capital flowing into these [venture capital] funds and more variety of funds so that we can see more entrepreneurs being supported." Priya Naidoo, group executive at Nedbank went on to say that partnerships will move us to great economic growth.

In a positive panel discussion hosted by the KZN Convention Bureau, Ravi Pillay, MEC for Economic Development, Tourism

& Environmental Affairs in KwaZulu-Natal has been quoted saying that, "we triumphed over apartheid, we will get through this." The overarching sentiment of the discussion was that local tourism is how we will recover post-Covid-19.

Zodwa Ntuli, commissioner of the B-BBEE Commission has called for creativity and for empowered entrepreneurs to continue to empower others. The resounding message from day 1 of the conference, as Xolile George CEO at SALGA, has put it, "the deeper the crisis the better the opportunity."

Clem Sunter closed day 1 of the conference with an excellent talk about post-pandemic scenarios for South Africa. Although Sunter stated that our country is in tough shape and also made reference to the increasing unemployment rate, his call is to promote new business and entrepreneurship. Both Simo Mkhize and Tanya Van Lil resounded that this is a necessity and in the words of Ralf Fletcher, in a Q&A session with Sunter, "there needs to be an SME entrepreneurial revolution."

All in all, the belief in our people and the potential of our country will carry us through these tough times.

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