

Conference explores innovative rail safety solutions, rail transport's potential to drive growth

If the safe operation of passenger rail transport is given the attention and priority it deserves, it can be a catalyst for economic development; if not, then it will become a catalyst for economic depression, unproductivity and unemployment. This was the assertion of Professor John Maluleke in an address at the 2021 Rail Safety Conference, hosted by South Africa's Railway Safety Regulator.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

Expanding on rail transport's impact on the economy, he said: "When an accident occurs, the disruption disturbs the 'Just In Time' movement of people, goods and services, and thus negatively impacts employment and the economy." In his powerful presentation, he shared the findings of an analysis into the root cause of a series of accidents in the Gauteng province.

"The scope of the investigation was to establish whether the accidents were the result of deliberate deviations from prescribed standard operating procedures and explore the extent to which human error contributes to fatal accidents, injury to the commuting public and loss to the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, he explained to conference attendees.

"It is important to note that the intention of this research was not to expose or blame any of the rail operating companies; but rather to advance recommendations that are aligned with the principles of efficient rail operations with the safety quality requirement viewed as the first consideration," he stressed.

Rail transport safety

Maluleke told conference delegates that his research paper concluded that the collisions investigated occurred because of human error and non-compliance with the communication procedures during train operations. His recommendations to address this and make passenger rail transport in South Africa safer included more advanced Automatic Identification Systems (AIS). "This would serve as a new technological intervention to assist drivers in their daily operations," he said.

Maluleke also stressed that safety should be prioritised and demonstrated throughout all organisational human work and should not be confined to safety-critical and safety-related grades only. "Effective communication within and across departments would stimulate the development of a safety culture across the entire organisation. A safety culture must be instilled and engineered among the total work force to improve the passenger rail transport industry in South Africa," he stated.

In addition, he recommended the development of safer machines and equipment, and an enhanced focus on strategic recruitment. Employees' technical skills should also be developed, and there should be more focus on improving employees' quality of work-life, he said.

Hosted under the theme *Embracing the new normal through innovative and sustainable rail safety solutions*, this year's annual Rail Safety Conference was held virtually. It featured presentations from local and international rail experts from various disciplines on a broad range of topics, from technology and sustainability to theft, vandalism and the impact of Covid-19 on the rail transport industry.

Case study: TransNamib

Johnny Smith, chief executive officer of TransNamib in Namibia, shared his insights on the challenges experienced by TransNamib, highlighting lessons learned and the way forward for the organisation. The impact of Covid on operations and on the economy in general; public perceptions; locomotive capacity; the external procurement process; short term cash flow; infrastructure development; operational efficiency; and maintenance backlogs were among the challenges he explored.

He told conference delegates that TransNamib's future success would be determined by several critical success factors. "These include the implementation of our business plan; increasing business; upgrading rail infrastructure; increasing rolling stock; optimising our property portfolio; improving corporate governance control, systems and processes and the visibility of operations; as well as achieving a balanced scorecard."

The changing railway environment and the need to balance safety and performance management in a public-private partnership (PPP) environment was the topic of a presentation by Tshepo Kgobe, chief operating officer of the Gautrain Management Agency.

Passenger rail transport

He noted that the global pandemic has had a significant impact on passenger rail transport. "Average service levels fell globally to below 65%. More than 70% of passengers have changed their reasons for travel, and globally, around 15% of customers will not return to public transport. Globally, 80% of the rail operators are changing their business model," he told Rail Safety Conference delegates.

Kgobe said that it was critical to adapt to the "new normal". Technology, like an overcrowding app, enhanced cleaning, and Covid-19-focused marketing and communications are among the adaptation strategies being employed by the Gautrain Management Agency and rail operators around the world, he revealed. "We must understand that rail services will not return to normal in the immediate future. Overcrowding management is a long term endeavour so it must be undertaken with

strategic intent. Enhanced cleaning will become a permanent feature of transit operations," he said.

The next important highlight on the Railway Safety Regulator's calendar is a stakeholder event on 27 October 2021. It will focus on unpacking the 2020/21 State of Safety Report. Contact events@rsr.org.za to find out more.

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