



Speaking notes by Mr Fish Mahlalela, Deputy Minister for Tourism at the Pongola Community Engagement in the Zululand District Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal Province

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At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions that accompanied it, some businesses that had no appreciation on how they benefitted from the activities of tourists suddenly realised that their businesses were reliant on tourism for survival.

They now have a renewed appreciation of the tourism sector.

The 1996 Tourism White Paper argued, in giving us a policy direction, **Tourism is “Government-led, private sector driven and community based.”** Therefore, without cooperation and collaboration between Government, the private sector and communities – the country will not be able to service the needs of the tourists in a way that will ensure that our visitors stay longer, spend more and most importantly come back. Repeat visitation is critical to the survival of the sector.

As the saying goes, “not all destinations are created equally”, – **uPhongola** is one of those municipalities that are blessed with tourism assets and a very critical transit hub for tourists going to Richards Bay, iSimangaliso Wetland Park, the Greater Durban from the Kingdom of Eswatini as well as the Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces. Like places such as Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore – uPhongola Local Municipality can both be a transit point for tourists as well as a destination. However, to achieve maximum benefit from the transit status, the municipality will have to put the right infrastructure in place to capture maximum value from tourists in transit. The private sector and communities will need to cater for those needs by providing services and products that transit tourists need.

Here are the **competitive advantages** that makes this municipality by implication, the Zululand District Municipality, tourism rich even though like most tourism rich areas of our country, they tend to be underdeveloped in terms of the packaging of tourist experiences which leads to tourists visiting these areas, often in transit not extending their trips and spending less.

- The **Jozini Dam**, which as you know lies along the eastern boundary of the Zululand District Municipality, and is the province’s largest dam, which has a comparative advantage in terms of fishing tourism, as the best place in the country to catch tiger fish. Activities that could be introduced or enhanced in order to attract more visitors, include; water-based sports such as fishing, paddle boarding, SCUBA diving, canoeing, sailing, surfing, etc. Some of these activities might already be happening but might need to be enhanced in order to gain maximum benefit possible.

There are lessons that can be taken from Emnothweni/Dullstroom in the Nkangala District Municipality in Mpumalanga Province – which is now known as a flyfishing Mecca of South Africa. It was not always like that, but it was due to a deliberate effort from local stakeholders aimed at attracting more tourists to this high-altitude destination. While

Kamberg Nature Reserve, which is also known as trout fishing destination, albeit, an underdeveloped one has not taken full advantage of this potential, so is Matatiele in the Eastern Cape. The Jozini Dam is known for its abundance of Tiger Fish and hosts annual events; however, we do not think this has been fully exploited. We need to maximise on turning these opportunities presented to us into tourism experiences that will ensure that tourists visit our municipalities while staying longer and then returning.

- **Geographical Advantage:** uPhongolo Local Municipality and the Zululand District Municipality are strategically located providing access to other destinations. For instance, linking the Kingdom of Eswatini with other tourism destinations or attractions such as Isimangaliso Wetland Park, St Lucia, Richards Bay and Durban. It also links tourists visiting Mozambique through Eswatini. Tourism packages that include attractions and activities in Mozambique, Eswatini and South Africa (KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga) could be very attractive to tourists and tour operators from this region are strategically placed to collaborate with their counterparts in the neighbouring countries in order to deliver what tourists and tour operator selling South Africa

in countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, the Middle East, India, China want. We need to maximise on some of the opportunities presented by this close proximity between the three countries. Ground work had already being done through the East3Route, which in addition to the two provinces in South Africa (KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga – there is Eswatini, Mozambique and Seychelles).

Another cross-border idea that could be a game-changer in uPhongolo Local Municipality, worth exploring is the **cross-border cable car** starting from the Pongola Nature Reserve over the Jozini Dam to the top of the Lebombo Mountains on the Eswatini side, which might be the first of its kind in our continent. A cross-border offering would be attractive to tour operators, tourists as well as the donor communities since some of the development aid funding is often targeted at cross-border projects with donors looking for more impact.

The European Union-Africa Infrastructure Trust Fund is one such instrument – It provides grant support for infrastructure projects in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) aimed at reducing poverty and fostering economic growth in the region. Four months ago, Italy and Switzerland launched what they call, a “first of its kind” cable car project that let you cross border between the two countries while offering breath-taking views of the famous Alps Mountain Range.

The Pongola Nature Reserve “Cable Car” to the Lebombo Mountain Range, if it was to become a reality, would offer something that the Alps might not be able to offer, that is, the Big 5 Safari experience. Other added experiences could be cross-border cruise tours that we will offer a rare experience in this part of the world. The cross-border cruises do not require massive capital investment and therefore can be our low hanging fruit.

The Cultural Advantage: The three countries are also endowed with cultural experiences that are interrelated but retain their uniqueness that should be enhanced as products to attract more tourists to the region as well as encourage our people to visit each other’s country since domestic tourism should be the backbone of our industry, a lesson that we were reminded of by the Covid-19 pandemic, that is, you cannot be over-reliant on international tourists as they are very sensitive to geo-political events as well as global and regional economic uncertainties. Hence, we should prioritise domestic tourism, followed by regional tourism and then international tourism as the backbone of the sector’s long-term sustainability. The most successful and sustainable destinations are those that are dependent on their domestic markets.

In order to unlock these opportunities, Government needs to invest in support infrastructure and address challenges that impede tourism development. For example, investment in critical infrastructure such as roads and airports could play a crucial role in unlocking access between the Zululand District Municipality and major cities.

Tour operator buses instead of transiting via Nongoma and Ulundi Municipalities where there's cultural based experiences – they often opt for the N2 highway because of the poor condition of the road linking Pongola and Ulundi.

It is encouraging that the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs invested more than R70 million in the Mkhuze Airport in the uMkhanyakude District Municipality – an airport that is very strategic to the uPhongola Local Municipality as it is located about 65km from the town of Pongola. This is more like the OR Tambo International Airport, which is located in Kempton Park in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality but plays a critical role in the economy of Sandton, which is located in the City of Joburg Metropolitan Municipality.

The province has invested enormous resources in regional airports, perhaps, as a response to some of the tourists that want to land closer to the attractions they are visiting. However, for these efforts to bear fruits, there needs to be collaboration between the Government and the Private Sector with the private sector providing the necessary insights and markets in order to inform government interventions that will unlock the full potential of our economies.

The inclusion of strategic infrastructure projects in the integrated development plans (IDPs) of municipalities is a step in the right direction since project prioritized in the IDP have a better chance of receiving project preparation funding from the Municipal Infrastructure Grant.

Therefore, the inclusion of the Ulundi Airport and the Pongola Nature Reserve in the IDP of the Zululand District Municipality is a step in the right direction. The inclusion of the Ulundi Airport and subsequent upgrade could unlock the full potential of key attractions within the District such as iHluhluwe-uMfolozi and the Royal Palaces as well as to major cultural events such as the uMkhosi Womhlanga (Zulu-Reed), to name just a few.

Furthermore, a functional regional airport could prove to be a catalyst for crowding in further private investment into the district creating employment and business opportunities our people so desire.

In one of the Tourism and Trade Seminar hosted by the South African Embassy in Thailand, some of the tour operators selling South Africa indicated that their clients would like new experiences such as Sani Pass in the Drakensberg Mountain and it should not end there, that they would also like to go over to Lesotho. This tells us that tourists and tour operators are always in search of new experiences and uPhongolo Local Municipality and the Zululand District Municipality are strategically located to offer those new experiences beyond what Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg offer.

American tour operators have also expressed the same sentiment that the Big 5 Safari, Golf and Wine tourism can propel our tourism to new heights. Eswatini, Mozambique and the Zululand and uMkhanyakude could offer the unique Amarula/umganu brews that could change the game.

One of the fastest growing tourism segments is the **star gazing** that rely on skies that have not been polluted by light. This is where municipalities that are underdeveloped like uPhongolo could capitalise as you should be able to see some of the darkest skies. The

Department of Tourism has collaborated with the Department of Science and Innovation to develop a National Astro-Tourism Strategy. Investment in stargazing experiences is not an expensive endeavour and there is no reason why municipalities, businesses and communities cannot take advantage of those market. The National Astro-Tourism Strategy is there to guide your planning.

As indicated earlier, these insights assist us in ensuring that the infrastructure such as telecommunications, roads, accommodation, hospitals, shopping centres, national parks and cultural villages cater for the needs of the tourists as well as those of local residents.

From the **investment perspective**, what are the investors looking for in order to invest in our municipalities and villages. There is a case for this region as a compelling proposition for visitors – the basics are there.

Women and tourism businesses in general, need to know what opportunities are presented by cultural villages, by national parks, the regional airports, Golela Border Post as well as cultural routes.

As the UNWTO indicated, this sector has the power to liberate vulnerable groups as some of the tourists have indicated that they want to see how the money they spend benefits the most disadvantaged in our communities.

As Government we working with our key stakeholders to make significant strides in assisting tourism businesses to respond to the needs of the visitors by capitalising the **Tourism Transformation Fund (TTF)**, the **Green Tourism Incentive Programme**, the **Market Access Support Programme**, the **Tourism Grading Support Programme** as well as interventions like the **Expanded Public Works Programme**.

As I conclude, the Tourism White Paper (1996) recognised the critical role played by the tourism sector in the broader economy, when it stated boldly that “Tourism provides enormous potential to create linkages with other sectors and dynamize other sectors of the economy – agriculture, manufacturing and services.”

It is important to reiterate the point that, our job as tourism stakeholders, is about ensuring that we respond to the needs of our visitors in order to ensure that the spend more and stay longer in a sustainable way that also respects local cultures and communities.

It is through, partnerships that we will be able to achieve those objectives. Collaboration between the Government, private sector and communities is non- negotiable.

Some of our private sector stakeholders have informed us that they would invest more resources if some of the regulatory, financial and infrastructure barriers were addressed – these are issues such as long-term leases on state-owned land, which will unlock funding from the development finance institutions and commercial banks.

Security of tenure, is non-negotiable in accommodation establishments, airports and other amenities that are capital-intensive in nature – with return on investment taking a minimum of at least eight years.

In order to unlock private sector investment, especially in areas under traditional leadership – the long-term leases of the land will be critical since private sector will be able to borrow from the banks. A permission to occupy is not transferable and will therefore not unlock private sector investment. A long-term lease - shifts the risk from government or communities to the private party with the private party taking the risk of financial viability.

