

Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the launch of the 100th Thusong Service Centre

Inhlazuka, Richmond Municipality, Umgungundlovu, KwaZulu-Natal, 11 June 2008

Minister in the Presidency, Dr Essop Pahad,
Minister of Communication, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri,
Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi,
Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Dr S'bu Ndebele,
MECs,
Our Mayors and public representatives from all spheres of government,
Traditional Leaders,
Distinguished guests,
Fellow South Africans from Inhlazuka and from across Umgungundlovu:

It is indeed an honour to join the people of Inhlazuka, Richmond, today, and the province of KwaZulu-Natal, to launch the 100th Thusong Service Centre, further to ensure that the needs of our people are served with the required speed and efficiency.

This historic event marks yet another milestone in the overall transformation of the service delivery mechanisms of our government.

The launch of the 100th Thusong Service Centre in this area affords us a rare moment to reflect not only on the achievements of government in extending vital services to our people, but also, on the challenges we have faced in this process. Those who have been closely engaged in this process have learned many lessons which are important to all of us.

Although we continue to face many challenges, at the same time government always try its best to bring services as close to the people as possible. Government also continues to ensure that the services rendered help to improve the lives of especially the poor.

Thusong Service Centres serve as an effective means of bringing information, in a two-way process, to the communities in a manner that ensures government-to-citizen interaction.

We are proud as government to announce that plans are afoot to establish an additional 20 centres of this nature in the 2008/2009 financial year.

A wide range of services will be made available at the centres in an integrated and coordinated way.

Therefore, this initiative is an outstanding example of 'integrated services delivery' in line with the Batho Pele principles.

In addition, one of the critical government strategies in uplifting the lives of our people is to ensure that they have access to valuable government information.

All of us know very well that information is power. Those who have information can use it the way they want, especially if the rest of the people don't have information. So, let us use this centre to empower ourselves with information and knowledge about everything that government is doing as well as the services that are due to our communities.

As a community that is using this centre, you must act as partners with government, because your feedback will help to improve things and ensure that government structures respond better to your needs and your views.

Your feedback and participation in the local organising committees of the Thusong Centre will also help to determine which services are needed at this Centre and how we can improve it.

We would therefore like to appeal to all communities here today to make use of this Centre and continue providing the Centre workers and service providers with your feedback and requests.

One of the objectives of the Thusong Centres is to bring to an end a situation whereby our people are referred from one place to the other, often at great expense and across long distances for the services they deserve.

In such conditions our people invariably find themselves faced with frustration and uncertainties that lead to disillusionment with the government's service delivery efforts.

In the past, many of our people faced numerous obstructions in their attempts to obtain identity documents, birth certificates and other documents, which are very critical to the lives of many people.

In some cases, some of our people fell victim to criminal syndicates who could steal their identity documents and other personal documents so as to commit crime with those documents.

Chairperson,

This Centre is about government bringing services closer to the people. We are therefore pleased that the Departments of Home Affairs, Labour, Social Development, the South African Post Office, Government Communications, the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Office of the Mayor of Richmond are already offering services at the Centre.

This is all part of the overall programme of government to ensure access for all citizens to quality services.

The challenge is to make sure that they reach everyone. To this end, government has initiated a number of access channels or methods of which the Thusong Service Centres is but one.

We are also using modern information and communication technology to improve services and communication. Around the country, sixty-six Thusong Service Centres have Telecentres installed through the work of the Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa and this is also the case here at Inhlazuka.

This is a very important point of access and we are using the Inhlazuka Centre as a model to roll these out in all other Centres.

When you enter the Thosung Centre, you will find a counter. At the counter you will also find an access point to the Internet. The people working at the Centre will assist you to get into government information sites to get information. This will enable you to get the service you need much quicker than was the case in the past.

Our Department of Public Service and Administration is leading the process to ensure that these counters are made available everywhere and function well and have therefore put made every effort to ensure that this pilot counter here at Inhlazuka works well.

The important thing about this counter is that we learnt lessons in 2006 and 2007 from the first efforts to set these up - initially we had problems with ICT connections and now we are pleased that these have been solved.

I was also pleased to learn that two young people from Inhlazuka have been enrolled in a learnership which is a partnership between the Richmond Municipality and the Umsobomvu Youth Fund so as to ensure the efficient functioning of this Centre.

This learnership will equip these two young people with skills and a qualification which will allow them to progress to the world of work after their time at the Thusong Centre.

There are also other ways in which you can get better access to government - we have established the Vuk'uzenzele Magazine, a popular magazine with many useful and entertaining articles, but which also has a very active readers column; there is the 1020 toll free number as well as the Batho Pele e-Gateway - the government portal which you will be able to use. For those who cannot use the computer, the staff at the Centre will be able to help.

The Thusong Service Centre Programme is about partnerships - partnerships across all the spheres of government and between government, community organisations, business and civil society.

In this regard, we are particularly pleased to acknowledge the role which the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government through its Department of Local Government and Traditional Affairs Department has played in establishing this Thusong Centre.

The Department has made significant progress in ensuring that the Thusong Service Centres flourish in the province. In addition to the existing Centres operating in this province, an additional five Centres will be operational by the end of March 2009. Here at Inhlazuka, the Centre would not have been a success without the leadership role played by the Umgungundlovu District Municipality and the Richmond local municipality. The Richmond Municipality has now taken over from the District and will be responsible for the management of this Centre.

We want to congratulate the Mayor and his team as our research into key determining factors for the success of this Thusong Centre shows that local government must be a key player. This is similarly the case with the local House of Traditional leaders which has been crucial in ensuring that the Centre meets the needs of communities in the catchment area of the Centre.

Nationwide, the Thusong Service Centres serve as hubs for local development and assisting communities to access opportunities from government.

Since last year, an average of 1500 people, on a monthly basis, has received the necessary services at the centre. Government events and campaigns like Women's Day celebrations, State of the Nation Address (SONA) live screenings in 2007 (1 500 people attended) and in 2008, (1 200 people attended), have been held at this Centre.

The Richmond Municipality, through funding from the Department of Minerals and Energy and the Free Basic Electricity Grant, handed out Gel stoves to local communities together with a once-off consignment of gel supplies to assist the people to meet their energy needs.

I have been informed that every Wednesday a youth meeting is held at the indoor sports centre where different stakeholders are invited to address the youth on different issues. I also understand that the hall (indoor sports centre) is also used by the community for different events, i.e. weddings, social gatherings, Mayoral Izimbizo, Ward Committee meetings, etc.

As we strive to meet the 2014 target of establishing one Thusong Centre in each of the country's 283 municipalities, let us keep this in mind - the access we speak about is the key to unlocking the potential of our people and ensuring that they become active participants in improving their lives and building a nation to which we all truly belong.

I am happy to have been part of this important event which represents yet another step forward in our continuing efforts to achieve the goal of a better life for all our people.

Please make full use of this facility, and protect it from vandalism, theft and abuse because it is yours. Please take care of it and make sure that it contributes to the attainment of the goal of a better life for our people.

I am honoured to declare the Inhlazuka Thusong Service Centre open.

Thank you.