



**Opening remarks at MISTRA's Tenth Anniversary Conference
31 August 2021**

Dear MISTRA family

It gives me great pleasure to see you in all your numbers from all parts of the country and indeed from different parts of the world. This talks to the enduring power of an idea whose time has come.

The theme of this conference is 'Celebrating strategic research as a driver of human progress and antidote against irrationality'. The theme speaks to not only the *raison d'être* of MISTRA's existence but also the challenges we face in a society marked by the irrationality of fake news and attacks on the rationality of both 'natural' and 'social sciences'. Populism and religiosity have been galvanised in these attacks, requiring us as intellectuals to reflect on the role we should be playing today.

This conference has been so structured so that we can reflect on the founding of this Institute, we can look at how the MISTRA Way continues being consolidated as well as the research issues it is dealing with, and then takes a look into the future by listening to the young people the Institute has fostered and has been associated with.

More than ten years ago the founding mothers and fathers of MISTRA released a statement which pointed out: 'South Africa has not had a think tank that devotes its attention to strategic approaches to the country's challenges, from a long-term perspective.' The universal accolades which poured in as we launched this organisation bore testimony to the need for such a centre of strategic reflection

MISTRA's independent research agenda has been guided by the need to build a new society based on non-racialism, unity, respect for diversity, democracy and social justice. This independence has allowed us to bring laser-like attention to issues without fearing possible reprisals. It is an independence which future generations of MISTRA leadership and staff must guard jealously.

As the world contends with the numerous issues of this decade – notably COVID-19, rapid changes in technology under the rubric of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and geopolitical realignment impacting on all parts of the world – South Africa also has to address the challenges of poverty, hunger, extreme inequality and unemployment while creating a socially cohesive nation and a capable, ethical state.

MISTRA has not only been at the forefront of tackling these issues – its work has been taken up by and with policymakers. Furthermore, several of its research projects were focused on Africa as a whole – whether it was addressing the economic balances within and amongst the different regions or whether it was looking at how Africa was being impacted by global geopolitics or whether it was addressing the impact of epidemics on African health systems. It did so with researchers and experts from the various parts of the continent.

MISTRA is well located to help our society and humanity address these many challenges. Its management and staff work to address these issues of today with the long term in mind. In these past ten years MISTRA has produced some of the most far-sighted reports to be seen. I cite only three:

- On the Hydrogen economy and the platinum group metals sector in 2013, which has laid the basis for thinking on a PGM commodities exchange based in Johannesburg;
- On social compacting, commissioned in 2014 by the National Planning Commission, which to this day remains the starting point of any conversation on social cohesion;
- This laid the basis for the Indlulamithi 2030 scenarios which MISTRA guided with its expertise in scenario formulation as well as provided thoughtful research.

The quality of MISTRA's research work, facilitation skills and convening power has attracted a huge array of clients. These have ranged from the Presidency and national, provincial and local government departments to the private sector to organisations like the National Union of Mineworkers and Harambee.

Its output has been acknowledged by its peers - for example the University of Pennsylvania's Global Go To Think Tank Index Report issued earlier this year listed MISTRA among the best think tanks with policy and institutional response to COVID-19.

All this work would not have been possible without the vast network of researchers MISTRA has been able to tap into, locally and internationally, from a variety of disciplines. Our own hardworking researchers are overwhelmingly female, black and young.

At the centre of this web is the MISTRA management and staff: a dedicated band who diligently work long hours producing rigorous scholarship which can stand up to any scrutiny. I must especially single out Executive Director Joel Netshitenzhe who has steered the ship since MISTRA's founding with acumen, balance and rectitude. It has been my great joy to work with him from those early, uncertain days when we started imagining a think tank of this calibre. I also want to celebrate the long service of Thabang Moerane, Rose Ngwato and Xolelwa Kashe-Katiya who, apart from Joel, are MISTRA's longest serving staff members.

I think all of you are aware of Joel's intellectual prowess. What you must not forget is that he and his management team has ensured that MISTRA has received a clean audit in each of its ten years. I encourage you to read the Institute's latest Annual Report and Ten-Year Review which will be released in a few days' time.

I want to use this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to all who have served on the Council of Advisers and the Board of Trustees over this decade. Some of you will be talking about your experience in the first panel discussion of this conference. You have all brought to bear the three T's which ensures the success of any NPO: talent, time and the treasure of networks and experience.

To all the funders who have made this project the success it is, a big thank you. The major part of our funding came from South African corporates and individuals, as well as clients who made use of MISTRA's consultancy services. MISTRA enters the eleventh year of its existence facing several challenges on the funding side, due to the impact of COVID-19 on the Institute's traditional funding base. We call upon you to continue looking upon us favourably so that we can complete another decade of independent, strategic reflection. Our thanks go to the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) for having generously sponsored this conference.

My appeal to this conference is please contribute as much or as little as you can, as individuals or as corporates. The participation of all the peoples of South Africa is essential for the creation of a globally competitive nation and for finding solutions to its key socio-economic challenges.

I also want to extend an invitation to all of you to attend MISTRA's Tenth Annual Lecture, to be delivered by Jonathan Ostry of the IMF. It starts at 16h00, so you can have a break after the conference before joining us for that event.

Prof Sibusiso Vil-Nkomo
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees