

NEDLAC Summit calls for human-centred AI transition that advances decent work and inclusive growth



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NEDLAC SUMMIT CALLS FOR HUMAN-CENTRED AI TRANSITION THAT ADVANCES DECENT WORK AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

PRETORIA – 4 September 2026: The National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) convened its 31st Annual Summit at the CSIR International Convention Centre under the theme “Advancing Inclusive Growth and Decent Work in the Age of AI”, bringing social partners together to consider how South Africa can harness rapid technological change while protecting workers, expanding economic participation and ensuring that no one is left behind.

The Summit followed a symposium hosted by NEDLAC, on 3 September 2026, under the theme “Advancing Productivity and Social Dialogue through Decent Work in Southern Africa.” Convened in partnership with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Productivity South Africa, the symposium laid the groundwork for the Summit by examining the interconnected role of productivity, decent work and social dialogue in building a resilient economy.

The gathering brought together Minister of Employment and Labour Nomakhosazana Meth; Deputy Ministers Jomo Sibiya and Minister of

Electricity and Energy Dr Kgosientsho Ramokgopa; NEDLAC leadership; and representatives of government, organised business, organised labour and the community constituency. Also participating were representatives of the Portfolio Committee on Employment and Labour, Department of Employment and Labour entities, the ILO and other United Nations agencies, as well as regional and international organisations.

Opening the programme, Labour Overall Convenor Gerald Twala reflected on NEDLAC’s more than three decades as a platform for social dialogue and said the Summit provided an opportunity to assess the institution’s performance while confronting emerging questions around AI adoption, productivity, business confidence, jobs, collective bargaining, digital inclusion and inequality.

Minister Meth calls for a practical social compact on AI and the future of work

Delivering the opening address, Minister Meth said the Summit came at a time when artificial intelligence and digital transformation were rapidly reshaping economies and labour markets,



creating opportunities for improved productivity, service delivery and new economic activity, while simultaneously posing risks of job displacement, widening inequality and social disruption.

She said South Africa's response had to be anchored in social dialogue and ensure that technological advancement contributed to inclusive economic development, job creation and the protection of workers' rights.

Minster Meth emphasised that productivity, decent work and social dialogue were mutually reinforcing, arguing that economic competitiveness could not be pursued separately from human dignity and meaningful participation by workers and communities.

"Investing in people and their voices is not a cost, but the single most powerful and sustainable driver of long-term productivity."

The Minister challenged NEDLAC and its social partners to ensure that the discussions did not end with the Summit, calling instead for a practical programme of action and a shared social compact on AI and the future of work.

She said the compact should identify the skills South Africa needed to develop, policies requiring strengthening, workers and enterprises that needed support and safeguards necessary to manage technological change. She further called for clear and measurable recommendations capable of informing government policy, business practice, collective bargaining and skills development.

"The test of our success will not be the quality of the conversations we have today, but whether those conversations result in tangible improvements in the lives of workers, opportunities for young people, stronger and more inclusive enterprises, and a more productive and competitive economy."

Minister Meth reaffirmed government's commitment to a human-centred digital economy that promotes innovation and competitiveness while safeguarding workers' rights and sustainable development.



Minister Ramokgopa: AI is a development issue

Delivering the keynote address on behalf of Deputy President Paul Mashatile, Minister of Electricity and Energy Dr Kgosientsho Ramokgopa said AI held enormous potential to improve productivity, support innovation, strengthen service delivery and create new opportunities for entrepreneurship. He cautioned, however, that technological progress was not automatically inclusive and could deepen existing inequalities if workers and communities lacked the skills and infrastructure to participate. Ramokgopa called for investment in education, reskilling and lifelong learning, particularly for young people, while emphasising shared responsibility between government, business, labour and communities.

"We must move beyond viewing AI simply as a technological issue. It is an economic issue. It is a labour market issue. It is a skills issue. It is an inequality issue—and ultimately, it is a development issue," he said.



NEDLAC reflects on performance and the value of social dialogue

Acting NEDLAC Executive Director Nobuntu Sibisi reported that the institution achieved 94% performance during the 2025/26 financial year and received an unqualified audit outcome, reflecting progress in institutional performance, governance and accountability. Sibisi nevertheless stressed that institutional success must translate into stronger responses to unemployment, economic pressures, the cost of living and technological change. Reflecting on NEDLAC's role in enabling constituencies with different interests to seek common ground, she said: "Social dialogue is at

its most valuable when the issues before us are difficult."

Constituencies call for implementation and protection of workers

Constituency leaders used the Summit to underline the need for social dialogue to deliver tangible outcomes. Acting Community Overall Convenor Themebinkosi Josopu argued that communities could no longer afford prolonged diagnosis without implementation, saying: "We know what is broken and what needs to be fixed. Most of us know what must be done — it must just be done."

Representing organised labour, the 1st Deputy President of COSATU highlighted unemployment, pressures on workers and challenges affecting the UIF and Compensation Fund, while warning that AI and digitalisation could deepen inequality if workers were not adequately prepared for the transition. Labour called for stronger investment in skills, affordable access to digital technologies and better alignment between training and future economic needs, warning: “Time is not on our side. If we fail to act and deliver collectively, it will be the working class and communities that will pay a price they simply cannot afford.”

Panel examines skills, local innovation and a just digital transition

Moderated by Nozipho Tshabalala, the expert panel examined how South Africa could capture the productivity and economic benefits of AI while ensuring workers and communities were not left behind.

Anisa Khan of Microsoft South Africa stressed that “AI is not just a technology project; it is a transformational discussion,” highlighting the importance of skills and broader adoption.

Professor Vukosi Marivate of the University of Pretoria cautioned that South Africa should aspire to more than simply consuming technology, arguing that “using the technology is the end of the supply chain,” and calling for greater investment in research, local capability and innovation.

Presidential Climate Commission Commissioner Thandile Zonke urged an integrated approach to the digital and green transitions centred on human dignity, saying South Africa needed to “approach this through a human-centred lens and understand the value of workers and how they drive the economy.”

Professor Michael Sachs, Special Advisor to the President, emphasised both the potential of AI to improve government efficiency and the risks posed to employment and the distribution of economic value, arguing that “AI is going to massively increase the responsibility of government.”

Minister Meth calls for skills alignment and workforce reskilling

Reacting to the panel discussion, Minister of Employment and Labour Nomakhozazana Meth said the challenge was now to translate the

conversation on AI, skills and jobs into practical interventions. She highlighted the Department's Labour Activation Programme as one of the mechanisms that could be used more strategically to ensure that training responds to actual labour-market demand, rather than producing skills for which there are limited employment opportunities. Meth called for stronger partnerships with institutions of higher learning, business and other social partners to develop relevant skills programmes, while also stressing the need to equip leaders and decision-makers with a better understanding of technological transformation. She said particular attention had to be given to reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce so that the adoption of AI did not unnecessarily result in job losses and workers were able to transition into new and increasingly knowledge-intensive roles.

Across the discussion, the emphasis shifted from simply asking whether South Africa should adopt AI to how the country prepares for it, through investment in research and innovation, labour-market-aligned skills development, reskilling of existing workers, stronger local technological capability and a just transition that ensures the benefits of technological progress are broadly shared.

Deputy Minister Sibiya: Summit outcomes must translate into meaningful action

Closing the Summit, Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour Jomo Sibiya said the discussions had demonstrated that AI was not simply about technology, but about the future of the economy, work, skills, employment, productivity and competitiveness.

Reflecting on the depth of participation during the panel and plenary discussions, Sibiya praised the “bright minds” represented both on the panel and among delegates, saying the level of engagement demonstrated that South Africa possessed significant intellectual capacity and expertise to help shape its response to AI and the future of work.

He stressed, however, that the value of the Summit would ultimately depend on what happened after delegates left the venue.

“Our responsibility is to ensure that today's discussions translate into meaningful action.”

Sibiya said the Summit had reinforced the need for a renewed commitment to social dialogue, a

shared understanding of the opportunities and risks presented by AI, improved workforce readiness and stronger collaboration on employment creation.

He said workers needed to be prepared for changing workplaces, young people equipped with future-oriented skills, businesses supported to innovate and grow, and communities included in opportunities arising from technological advancement.

Concluding the gathering, Sibiya called on social partners to leave the Summit with a renewed commitment to partnership, inclusive development and preparing South Africa for the future of work.

“Let us work together to ensure that South Africa is ready for the future of work, while ensuring that the future remains one in which there is decent work, dignity and opportunity for all.”

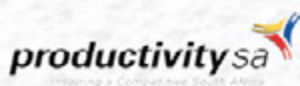
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