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Dear Honourable MEC

Unsafe and Collapsing Bridge at Tsengiwe Location, Cala, Eastern Cape

It is with the utmost respect that I am writing you this letter just over 12 years since the aftermath of the bridge tragedy that occurred at Tsengiwe Location, Cala, in the Eastern Cape. The tragedy, in which a number of lives were lost on that fateful morning of 18 November 2008, one had hoped, would have been a wakeup call to those entrusted with ensuring that such avoidable tragedies do not ever recur. Unfortunately, for some of us, the future remains an abstract concept as we show a remarkable ability to forget past disasters, or minimise their imagined impact. One of the lessons from tragic events is that there are always gaps between what we know, what we do, and why things go wrong, as was demonstrated by the bridge failure on that fateful day in November 2008.

I have just been to my home at Tsengiwe Location, Cala, for my Aunt's funeral, and the first thing I noticed as I was driving home from town, is the poor state of the access road, a road which in 2019 had supposedly undergone major repair work. The real shock was when I had to drive through the same bridge which on that fateful morning in November 2018 cost the lives of a number of local residents. What shocked me most was that the bridge has deteriorated to nothing more than a death trap, a disaster waiting to happen particularly in the context of the current rainy season, notwithstanding the viral pandemic that locals have to contend with.

The sight of such callousness on the part of those who are entrusted with ensuring that there is adequate infrastructure for the community has remained etched on my mind. For me, the failure not to have a proper bridge constructed during the time that the road was being resurfaced and supposedly repaired/upgraded a mere two years ago constitutes partial or 'silo' thinking. This lack of 'joined-up' thinking and inertia constitute a lost

opportunity as the tragedy, with foresight had presented an opportunity to take stock of the state of infrastructure within the district as part of a holistic approach as well as a broad socioeconomic strategy that recognise the value of strong governmental investment in infrastructure in support of the economy. Bridges serve as links, they connect people and communities, and therefore contribute to our personal well-being, welfare and quality life. They can help whole regions to develop socially and economically. Thus the immediate aftermath of the tragedy presented an opportunity for the municipality to conduct a critical assessment of both the state of local roads and bridges in order to map out a plan and a strategy to upgrade these as part of rural infrastructure development.

The aftermath of the tragic event should have set in motion a drive to conduct an inspection and audit of all the bridges within all the locations, some of which are archaic as most of them are much older than sixty years, as part of a drive towards modernisation of rural infrastructure. Such an approach would have to be located within the context of sustainable local and regional economic development requiring a coordinated holistic approach, while recognising that our rural areas including towns and villages have a key role in supporting economic development. Views of communities could have been solicited on crossing points requiring bridge construction, as well as on the possibility of constructing an alternate bridge instead of continuing to use the one posing a significant risk to the community.

Modernisation of road infrastructure has to be seen in the broad context of local and regional economic development, not in isolation as a stand-alone endeavour to be dealt with in a piecemeal fashion just like the issue of repairing collapsing bridges. The objective is to improve connectivity that will support the network of towns and their associated rural hinterlands for access to services and economic opportunities. Thus the overarching aim should be to develop road and rural infrastructure which promote equitable access and meet wider economic and social requirements, while limiting environmental impact. Thus with a little foresight the tragedy presented an opportunity not only to prevent future occurrence of similar tragic events but for initiating meaningful socioeconomic changes through investment in local infrastructure development.

This is what has prompted me to bring this to your attention in your official capacity as the person responsible for Transport, and Safety in the Province.

In the aftermath of the 2008 tragic event, at the memorial service held for the victims of the tragedy, one of the declarations was that 'it must never happen again', a phrase always genuinely meant, and too often repeated. Unfortunately, and all too often, history does repeat itself. Despite all kinds of undertakings, and promises, it sometimes seems that we want to learn lessons but we just fail to implement them. Tragedies just keep on occurring, and to attest to this, as I was drafting this correspondence, I received troubling news from home of a person who had fallen into this death trap of what is supposed to be a bridge, the same bridge that had cost so many lives in 2008. Fortunately, by the Almighty's grace the hapless victim survived the fall but has had to be rushed to hospital in East London, almost

300 kilometres away! The immediate question that came to my mind is: How many people should perish before anything is done to address this anomalous situation? The reality is that failure conditions incubate over long periods, the onus is on us to identify them and have them attended to promptly as opposed to the tendency of burying our heads in the sand hoping that they will simply disappear. One is clear-minded of the fact that any risk could be mitigated and not necessarily eliminated.

This state of affairs is contrary to the brilliantly conceived principle of *Batho Pele* (seSotho/seTswana phrase for People First), requiring the public service to be at the service of the people of this country. This principle to put people first is unfortunately being breached in an inordinate and unconscionable manner in regard to the residents of Tsengiwe Location. It is an injustice being perpetuated with impunity. It is now just over twelve years since that tragic day, yet still nothing has been done to construct a proper, safe and well-functioning bridge after all that had been said at the memorial service for the victims. To have ensured that a proper and safe bridge is constructed would have been a fitting honour to the memory of all the victims of that tragedy. To date, there is absolutely nothing demonstrable to pre-empt or prevent any recurrence of a similar tragedy. What a travesty!

We, as the affected community in 2008, emerged from our collective grief with the resolve to heal and to be vigilant about risks our community faces and try to be rational about which risks are the most significant, hence I am bringing this matter to your attention. It is my understanding and belief that a community whose people know and care about one another is the one that will pull through. However, the truth of the matter is that many of the most important actions a community wishes to undertake can only happen with the assistance of its government. For instance, most of the local bridges become impassable after a downpour, and it does not take rocket science to see that there is a need to construct bridges with better elevation as most if not all are low-lying, a design defect that makes them prone to flash flooding as soon as it rains. Surely, this is the work that the government has to undertake as the community can only do so much.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presents deep and long-lasting crises, economic and social, and therefore necessitates that there be an adequate capability to respond, recover and rebuild on the part of government, particularly at the local sphere due to its leading role in service delivery, economic development and infrastructure investments. How does one then ensure that public services are uninterrupted and accessible to the rural citizens if the reality of archaic and aged infrastructure persists? How will it be possible to access the local clinic when there is no bridge, which not only services the residents of Tsengiwe Location but also other neighbouring locations such as Mnxe? How will those requiring emergency medical care/services access the hospital when there is no functioning bridge?

To conclude, a bridge is not supposed to represent tragedy, as bridges are built by people for people to improve connectivity as well as to enhance movement. As individuals we build

a people bridge whenever we make a new friend, or work with a new colleague. We maintain people bridges through our social lives. Thus the bridge metaphor is deeply embedded in our thinking, and it is our wish to see not only the construction of a sorely needed physical bridge in our location but also a creation of a people bridge, a mutual relationship with a responsive and helpful government. It is time to demonstrate compassion for the victims, honour the dead, and save the living. It is never too late to do the right thing!

Yours respectfully

As signed

MILILE KRABA

DATE: 11 January 2021