

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

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Presented by

inkosi kampingo sibande

**Traditional Leadership and Collective Action for Climate Resilience in
Mzimba District**

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PRESENTATION SPACE

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**The Vice Chancellors,
University Communities,
Representatives of Governments,
Distinguished Academicians and Researchers,
Representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations and International
Development Partners,
Fellow Traditional Leaders,
Faith Leaders,
Distinguished Panel Members and Presenters,
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

It is a great honour and privilege for me to address this distinguished gathering on a matter that concerns not only governments and scientists, but every village, every household, and every generation: climate change.

I am particularly pleased that this conference brings together academia, government, development partners, civil society, and community leadership. Climate change cannot be addressed by one institution working alone. The challenge is too great, too complex, and too deeply connected to the way our people live.

Today, I speak to you not as a climate scientist, but as a traditional leader whose responsibility is closely connected to the land, the people, their livelihoods, and the generations yet to come.

For the people of Mzimba, climate change is not an abstract scientific concept.

We see it.

We experience it.

We live with its consequences.

Our farmers speak of rains that no longer come when they are expected. Our communities experience prolonged dry periods and, at other times, destructive rainfall. Our rivers and water sources are under increasing pressure. Our forests are disappearing. Our soils are becoming less productive. Families who depend on agriculture are increasingly uncertain about what the next farming season will bring.

Therefore, when we speak about climate change in Mzimba, we are speaking about food on the table. We are speaking about water for our families and livestock. We are speaking about the fertility of our land. We are speaking about the future of our

children. And ultimately, we are speaking about the survival and dignity of our communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our ancestors understood that human beings cannot live separately from nature.

Long before the language of climate change, mitigation, adaptation, carbon emissions, and resilience entered our conferences and policies, our communities had ways of protecting certain trees, water sources, forests, and other natural resources.

Some trees were not cut without reason. Some places were protected. Some natural resources were governed through customary rules. There were consequences when people violated community norms intended to protect resources that belonged not only to individuals, but to the whole community.

This knowledge was not written in scientific journals. But it carried wisdom. It carried responsibility. And it carried an understanding that the land we inherit must also be passed on to future generations.

However, we must also recognise that the world has changed. Population pressures have increased. The demand for land, energy, food, and natural resources has grown. Climate conditions themselves are changing in ways that traditional knowledge alone may not always predict.

For this reason, our way forward cannot be a choice between Indigenous Knowledge and science. We need both.

Science can help us understand what is changing. Indigenous knowledge can help us understand the places and communities in which that change is happening.

When these two forms of knowledge respect and strengthen one another, our communities become better prepared.

This is why universities and research institutions are important. But I wish to challenge our scholars and researchers today.

What happens to research after the conference has ended?

What happens after the paper has been published?

What happens after the researcher has received a degree or recognition?

If research on climate change remains in universities, journals, computers, and conference rooms, while the farmer in Mzimba still does not know how to prepare for the next drought or flood, then something is missing.

Research must travel. It must move from the university to the district. From the district to the Traditional Authority. From the Traditional Authority to the village. And from the village back to researchers and policymakers.

The knowledge of communities must also travel in the other direction. Our people are not merely recipients of knowledge. They are observers of environmental change. They have experience. They have local knowledge. They have priorities. They must be heard.

Therefore, the relationship between universities and communities should not be one in which researchers only come to collect information and leave. It should be a relationship of shared learning, shared responsibility, and shared action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Traditional leaders have an important role to play in this process.

We live among the people. We know the communities. We understand many of the local realities. We can call people together. We can support community dialogue. We can help protect forests and water sources. We can encourage the adoption of better environmental practices. We can help mobilise communities before disasters occur. We can also help connect government programmes, scientific knowledge, and development initiatives with the everyday realities of our people.

But I want to be clear: Traditional leaders cannot do this work alone.

We need reliable climate information from government and technical institutions. We need researchers to communicate their findings in ways communities can understand and use. We need agricultural and environmental extension services that reach the people. We need NGOs and development partners to strengthen local institutions rather than create temporary activities that disappear when projects end. We need resources to accompany training.

And we need communities themselves—women, men, young people, elders, farmers, persons with disabilities, faith leaders, and local organisations—to participate meaningfully.

The answer to climate change will not come from government alone. It will not come from universities alone. It will not come from NGOs alone. And it will not come from traditional leadership alone.

Our strength will come from connecting what each of us can contribute.

Government has policy, authority, technical systems, and public resources. Universities have research and scientific knowledge. Development partners and NGOs have experience, innovation, and implementation capacity. Traditional leaders have local legitimacy, community reach, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and the ability to mobilise people. Communities have lived experience, local knowledge, labour, creativity, and the greatest stake in the outcome.

The question is: are these strengths sufficiently connected?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Mzimba, we must move from reacting to disasters towards preparing for them.

We should not wait for drought before discussing water. We should not wait for floods before planning safer settlements. We should not wait until forests have disappeared before protecting them. We should not wait for harvests to fail before promoting climate-resilient agriculture.

Preparedness must become part of community life.

I therefore call for stronger collaboration among the Mzimba District Council, Traditional Authorities, universities, government departments, extension workers, disaster-management structures, NGOs, faith institutions, schools, youth groups, women's groups, and our international partners.

Together, we must strengthen practical action in areas such as:

- protection and restoration of forests;
- conservation of water sources;
- soil and land management;
- climate-resilient agriculture;
- water harvesting;
- community preparedness for droughts and floods;
- responsible use of natural resources; and
- environmental education for the next generation.

But these must not become isolated projects. They must become part of a connected and sustained system of local climate action.

I particularly call upon my fellow traditional leaders.

Our authority must carry responsibility.

What are we doing about the loss of forests in our areas?

What are we doing about the degradation of rivers and water sources?

What are we doing to prepare communities before droughts and floods?

What environmental inheritance are we leaving to our children?

Traditional leadership must not only preserve culture. It must also help preserve the conditions that allow communities and culture to survive.

At the same time, I call upon government and development partners not to engage traditional leaders only when a project needs community entry or when people need to be mobilised for a meeting.

Traditional leaders should be engaged meaningfully in planning, communication, implementation, learning, and accountability.

If we are expected to help communities act, then we must also have access to accurate information, appropriate capacity, clearly defined responsibilities, and functioning relationships with the institutions that hold technical expertise and resources.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The climate crisis requires us to rethink the meaning of leadership.

Leadership today is not only about managing the problems before us. It is about protecting people from the problems that are coming. It is about making decisions whose full benefits we ourselves may never live to see.

That is the responsibility we owe to future generations.

Our children should not inherit empty forests because we failed to act. They should not inherit degraded land because we lacked discipline. They should not inherit preventable disasters because institutions failed to work together. They should inherit communities that are informed, organised, prepared, and resilient.

As I conclude, I leave this conference with a simple message:

Knowledge is important, but knowledge alone is not enough.

Policy is important, but policy alone is not enough.

Leadership is important, but leadership in isolation is not enough.

The challenge before us is to connect knowledge with action, policy with communities, science with Indigenous wisdom, institutions with one another, and the present generation with its responsibility to the future.

Let this conference therefore not end with presentations alone.

Let it produce stronger relationships.

Let it produce practical commitments.

Let it produce communities that are better informed and better organised.

And let Mzimba District demonstrate that when government, universities, development partners, traditional leaders, and communities work together, local leadership can become a powerful force for climate resilience.

The land does not belong only to those of us who live today. We hold it in trust for those who will come after us.

May we have the wisdom to protect it.

May we have the courage to change our practices.

And may we have the unity to act together.

I thank you for your attention.