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'Railways an engine for economic growth'

Governments in southern Africa have recognised that railways are not simply about providing a mode of transport for the movement of goods, but, if properly managed, can contribute ‘significantly’ to a country’s economic growth.

This was the main message from an inter-ministerial panel discussion – which included transport ministers from Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Swaziland and Botswana – at the fifth annual Southern African Railways Association (Sara) conference which kicked off in Johannesburg yesterday.

“Governments need to invest in their railways and actively facilitate and seek funding. Yes, it is expensive to build a new railway line and invest in rolling stock, but in the long run it is much cheaper to operate and maintain the stock and infrastructure,” said Lindiwe Dlamini, minister of public works and transport for Swaziland.

Her statement was supported by the CEO of Swaziland Rail, Stephenson Ngubane, who commented: “An investment in a properly constructed railway line lasts for 50 years, with minimum maintenance required. A new road, in contrast, lasts a maximum of ten years.”

The ministers all noted that their governments were actively driving policy changes with regard to a modal shift from road to rail and investing heavily in new infrastructure and equipment for their national railways. Improved road safety, a lowering of logistics costs and enhanced service delivery were some of the main reasons put forward for a modal shift from road to rail.

“Another efficient, cost-effective and viable alternative land-transport option would encourage competition and force all transport operators to pull up their socks and provide a better service to customers,” said Tshenolo Mabeo, Botswana minister of transport and communications.

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