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## **Railway sector needs a Vision - Klaus Schade**

Namibia aims at becoming the logistics hub for southern Africa. This ambition was first articulated in the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP4), followed up in the Harambee Prosperity Plan and the soon to be released NDP5. Consequently, government invested heavily in transport infrastructure: the expansion of the Walvis Bay harbour is nearing completion increasing the capacity from 350,000 Twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) to about 1 million TEUs, while the construction of the SADC Gateway Port north of Walvis Bay has commenced. Airports, such as Walvis Bay and Ondangwa, have been upgraded, while the road network is continuously expanding as exemplified by the opening of the tarred Otjinene – Okamatapati road. The railway network, however, is seemingly left behind, although it has a crucial role to play in our logistics-hub, as well as industrialisation ambitions. It is not desirable to move all the cargo by road that could potentially be handled at the port of Walvis Bay to and from the port. The additional traffic on our roads will affect road safety, road maintenance costs and the carbon footprint to mention a few. However, only about 50 percent of our railway system complies with the SADC axle-load recommendation. Passenger transport remains suspended on some railway lines, while others are not in operation at all. Currently, we are fixing the most dilapidated parts of the railway network as a stopgap without a clear vision of where we want to see our railway sector in ten or twenty years' time.

Other African countries are leading the way: Kenya has embarked on a major investment programme in railway infrastructure with a new railway line from the port of Mombasa to Nairobi that is replacing the narrow gauge with the standard gauge. It is expected to be opened this year and is planned to further connect to South Sudan and to Rwanda through Uganda. Nigeria has taken the same step and launched the first standard gauge railway in the second half of last year. Closer to home, South Africa in the recently released draft white paper on the railway sector considers a similar move towards the standard gauge away from the Cape gauge. Furthermore, Ethiopia and Djibouti launched the first cross-border electrified railway line between the two countries end of last year, while Botswana is considering privatising - in part or fully - its railway company.

These and other aspects need to be addressed in a holistic manner in a comprehensive vision for the railway sector that transforms it into a modern, regionally leading player, before we invest large amounts in fixing an outdated system.