South Africa's Critical Minerals and Metals Strategy: Challenges, opportunities and call to action

The recent publication of the Critical Minerals and Metals Strategy marks a significant milestone for the minerals industry in South Africa. The Strategy outlines the country's critical and strategic minerals and metals that are essential to modern industrial technologies, economic development, and employment creation. The timing of the strategy document is profound in that it comes at a time when there is strong convergence among all stakeholders on the need to intensify the local beneficiation of our minerals. By leveraging the unique and abundant reserves of critical and strategic minerals and metals such as platinum group metals, manganese, vanadium, chromium, and titanium, among others, South Africa has the potential to create and sustain a thriving industrial ecosystem capable of generating high value products and services. Most importantly, the strategy underscores commitments by the state to providing enablers and interventions aimed at increasing the levels of value-added processing of the mineral products. These include bold declarations towards improving the regulatory stability and regulatory flexibility, facilitating the establishment of local and regional beneficiation and manufacturing hubs, and addressing critical bottlenecks such as energy availability and public infrastructure readiness.

Holistic implementation of the strategy has immense and long lasting benefits to the country. The full implementation of the strategic objectives will not only create jobs and national wealth through export of value-added products and services, but will also increase the endogenous and sovereign capabilities in manufacturing and value-added services. The strategy positions South Africa as an integral hub for regional minerals beneficiation and market for value-added products and services, thereby unlocking potential for growth of new industries and drive the expansion and diversification of the manufacturing and services value chains. By placing particular emphasis on areas where the country can build strong competitive advantages, such as in the emerging clean energy technologies value chains, and placing emphasis on applied research, technology development, and innovation, South Africa can positions itself as a regional innovation hub with the capacity to drive technologies of the future.

There is no doubt that the strategy comes at a time of intense geopolitical tensions and economic disruptions. Increased competition for investments to fund new and existing mining projects, coupled with unstable economic conditions due to fluctuating commodity markets, necessitates the need for targeted government policy and fiscal support to de-risk investments in strategic beneficiation projects. Public-private partnerships thus become a critical factor to ensuring holistic investment and resource allocation decisions; prioritise the investments in high demand multi-disciplinary skills, and ensure the development and robustness of innovation systems. Obviously, the alignment of the strategy to the broader economic and fiscal imperatives, including the political will to drive economic transformation and reduce barriers to entry for SMEs and SMMEs, is a critical determinant of the successful implementation of the strategy. Building international partnerships to leverage shared competencies through bilateral technical exchange platforms, such as Horizon Europe, African Mining Vision, and other pan-African initiatives, is a crucial element for creating synergistic impact.

In conclusion, the publication of the Critical Minerals and Metals Strategy is a notable achievement for South Africa. For SAIMM and its stakeholders, the strategy provides a platform for more rigorous discussions and engagements through our conferences, webinars, and colloquia.

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