

National Water Summit
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Gallagher Estate, Midrand, Gauteng
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Theme: WATER SUSTAINING LIVES AND ENABLING GROWTH

MEC Mahlangu
Professor Biswas
Ambassador Briet
Programme Director
Honoured Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to address you today at the start of our 2008 National Water Week. I would like to give a special welcome to our international guests – the esteemed Professor Biswas, winner of the Stockholm Water Prize in 2006 who is our keynote speaker for today; and our guests from Japan, Mr. Takamura Ichimura, a Manager of the Waterworks of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government; Mr. Masaru Oneda, Director for the Construction Section of the Waterworks. We look forward to collaborating with the Government of Japan and to receiving their support of technical training, knowledge and technology.

Ladies and Gentlemen, a few months after being appointed Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry I attended the World Water Week, which is held annually in Stockholm. World Water Week provided a good learning opportunity; and while there I saw a large number of South Africans attended the conference, presented papers, and had exhibition stands. On my return to South Africa we discussed with my officials as to how we can have a better impact on the conference by being prepared as a country. At last year's World Water Week we held a breakfast meeting in Stockholm on the first day of the conference and there were close to 50 South Africans at the meeting! We had academics, research institutions, government, water boards, the mining industry and other business people. I was impressed by the papers, research and knowledge that South Africans were bringing to the World Water Week conference; we really are doing excellent work in this country towards understanding the many challenges facing the water sector. But my concern was why are we not seeing or hearing these things at home, and the response that I got from the participants was that there was no platform for this dialogue to take place.

I felt at the time that we needed to meet in South Africa, not just on an ad hoc basis, but in a structured way where we share the extensive knowledge generated; debate issues, share ideas and share information. This year's National Water Summit is the start of something new and our first attempt to have such a platform for the diverse interests and players in the Water Sector. I am hoping that from this year's event we will be able to grow the National Water Summit so that in time it is a recognised conference for the water sector and a leading forum to present an array of research and papers.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our theme for Water Week 2008 is: "***Water: sustaining lives - enabling growth***". Through this theme we are trying to capture both the social importance of water and its contribution to economic growth and development. Water is the source of life; water of the right quality, the right quantity, in the right place, is the source of life. Water has the power of life and the power of destruction. How we develop and use our water sources is critical for society to thrive.

2. Infrastructure

For most of us here today we are able to see the direct link between provision of clean water and social development, yet we still find that despite our best intentions and hard work - millions in this country do not have access to clean water. There are still areas in this country, particularly rural areas, which require massive infrastructure investments in order to provide clean water to the people in these communities. I have visited communities who live next to major rivers and large dams, yet they do not have clean water provided to them. These are poor communities that would benefit enormously from access to clean water. Every day they see

this massive infrastructure that brings no benefit to their lives but helps to sustain those who live in far away cities. These are issues that must be interrogated by this summit.

Water can be a powerful force of destruction, through climate change we are seeing this destructive force in many parts of the world, including our neighbouring countries. Thousands of people were displaced this season in Mozambique when the flood waters rose across the flood plains. People lost their houses, their live-stock, their possessions and livelihoods. While not as badly affected some of our own people were forced to move out of their homes when the flood waters rose around their houses. The indications are that climate change will see less frequent rain but when it does rain we will have more severe rainstorms. We need more research on the impacts of climate change and this research must start to influence policy so that government is able to take the necessary measures to adapt our water resource infrastructure to cope with climate change.

As our economy expands there is a need for greater water infrastructure but that increased infrastructure cannot be seen in isolation of the need to dramatically reduce water losses, increase water conservation measures and curb the unlawful use of water. Last week I addressed Parliament on a number of water issues and to allay concerns around a perceived water crisis. While there is no water crisis as such and we have plans in place, I made it very clear that there are serious issues that need to be addressed to ensure that we do not face a crisis in the future.

On the water resource infrastructure side I spoke about the maintenance plans for our water resource infrastructure and our build programme over the next few years. I told Parliament that we will need a major new dam for Gauteng by 2019, which would be either phase two of Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme or a new dam in the Tugela River. Through the establishment of the National Water Resources Infrastructure Agency, which is well underway, we will improve our capacity to manage our existing water resources infrastructure and construct new infrastructure. The new agency will be in a position to improve the return on existing infrastructure and finance new developments by raising funds from capital markets. I am confident that the new agency will also be able to attract and retain the right skills in order to deliver on its mandate.

I also confirmed to parliament that we are very concerned about the state of our rivers and the state of our municipal waste water plants. On the waste water plants we have done an audit and found that the situation in many municipalities is dire, and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

My concern is that when it comes to municipal infrastructure there is both a skills gap and shortfall in funding; funding that needs to be allocated either directly by the municipality concerned or through the Municipal Infrastructure Grant allocations. To overcome the skills gap we are trying to support the municipalities through initiatives such as Siyeza Manje and by bringing in international expertise from amongst others Japan and Cuba; the support of Masibambane has also been valuable by helping to build capacity. We are providing support to municipalities; it is very clear that we must be stricter on the compliance side, with plans in place to expand our monitoring and compliance units. The question is whether these measures are sufficient? We must look at such issues and we need constructive inputs on how gaps can be addressed, including on the financing side. For example, do we need a national programme to ensure that municipal systems are refurbished and properly maintained? Do we need to ensure that the budgets for waste water treatment are ring-fenced? The summit will have to attempt to answer these vexing questions.

3. Water Quality

Ladies and Gentlemen, some of the pollution in our rivers can be directly linked to failure on the part of these municipal waste water treatment plants – this is an area which is deeply concerning for me as it affects the health of our rivers and impacts negatively on the wellbeing of the communities living close to and using those rivers. I reported to Parliament that we have identified 142 high risk sites where there is pollution in our rivers. In addition to failing treatment plants we see pollution being caused by industry, mines, agriculture, inadequate sanitation infrastructure, and illegal dumping of waste. I have committed my department to strengthen its oversight role so that we address this problem more comprehensively.

On the positive side we are very fortunate in South Africa to have good quality drinking water in most areas. Through our monitoring systems we can be confident that it is safe to drink our tap water, a luxury that many countries do not have. We have identified 6% of areas, which are rural areas and small towns, where we are

not confident of the drinking water quality – these areas require our urgent attention. Through our electronic drinking water quality monitoring system and the excellent team in this section of our department we are prioritizing the towns in question and addressing this challenge.

4. Water Conservation

Programme Director, no one would dispute that we have limited water resources in South Africa yet often people behave as if this resource is infinite. For our growth and development to be sustainable we need to make the most of our scarce resources and generate maximum benefit for the people of South Africa. We have remarkable ingenuity in South Africa and we must bring this ingenuity into the area of water conservation. As the Water Sector we have to work closely with other government departments and spheres of government, with the private sector, with NGOs, and CBOs to create greater awareness amongst the people of South Africa of the need to conserve our water resources.

One of the strong messages we are sending out during this water week is the need to conserve water. Water Conservation and Water Demand Management are gaining increasing importance in my department, we recognise that the costs associated with water losses are significant for municipalities and the reduction of those losses can play an important role in turning around municipal finances. To support municipalities we launched a pilot programme last year, this programme being implemented by eight municipalities has the aim of reducing water losses, estimated at 29%, to 15%. We will be holding an awards ceremony later this week to recognise those who have been successful in driving water conservation or championing this important issue.

By saving water we also reduce the need to build new dams, not only are big new dams a very expensive exercise which leads to increases in the price of the water but they also have an impact on the environment; although we try to mitigate these impacts by doing the necessary studies and improving our understanding of how to build and operate our dams.

We must also look to our agricultural and industrial sector to devise ways to use water more efficiently and reduce wastage. The largest percentage of our water goes into agriculture and while we would not want to compromise on food security there are many areas to become more water efficient that can take place in this sector – examples of efficiencies include what time of day crops are watered, the use modern irrigation methods such as drip irrigation, and the type of crops for which type of area, climate, etc. Studies have been conducted in this area and experience gained, which must now be used to enable farming communities to make the right choices.

Part of our challenge in the water sector is that there are people who unlawfully use water, which compromises water security for the rest of us. This water theft is a problem, and is committed by farmers taking more water for irrigation than their permits allow and by households not paying for the water they use and then using that water wastefully, by leaving taps running and their garden sprinklers watering their gardens all day. I committed in Parliament that to improve our water availability we will be clamping down on illegal water use.

5. Water as part of broader vision of government

Ladies and Gentlemen, in his State of the Nation Address this year, our President, Mr Thabo Mbeki challenged us to do “Business Unusual”. He challenged us all to ensure that we accelerate our drive towards economic growth and poverty eradication. We are rising to that challenge in the Water Sector. We are adopting a business unusual approach to ensure that we strengthen the role that water and sanitation play in growth and development, particularly for the poor and the marginalised.

In his address, President Mbeki set out the priorities of government - many of them are intricately linked to water. The implementation of the industrial policy action plan and the need to develop action plans in sectors where they do not yet exist, such as in mining and minerals beneficiation, must see the water needs and water availability being included into these action plans, so that we can ensure that the growth aspirations of industry are in line with our projected growth in water availability.

They need to ask if there is water available, if the water is in the right place, and if the water is of the right quality. We must tailor our water plans and our development plans to ensure that they are aligned.

The President also spoke of the need for a rural development programme and for support for land reform beneficiaries. DWAF is driving a process of water allocation reform which aims to redistribute water for productive purposes on the basis of race and gender. It is absolutely crucial that water allocation reform, land reform, and the support for beneficiaries are aligned. Receiving land without a water allocation or agriculture extension support is not a recipe for a successful agrarian reform strategy.

Access to clean water is critical in our strategy to reduce poverty levels, when President Mbeki spoke of the development of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy, and of the need for a National War Room for the war against poverty it was clear to me that the Water Sector must be present and active in this War Room. Lack of access to safe water *is* poverty. Lack of access to safe sanitation *is* poverty. We cannot claim to have won the war against poverty until all our people have access to safe water and functional sanitation systems. The President announced that by 2014 there will be universal access to basic services, which will include people currently living in informal settlements who will by that time receive housing as well as access to basic services such as water, sanitation and electricity.

6. Water for Growth and Development

Programme Director, as part of our strategy to ensure the integration of water issues into broader developments of government I will be taking a document to Cabinet later this year. This document will illustrate how water and sanitation will contribute to sustainable growth and development. This is one step in an ongoing process for better utilisation of our water resources to achieve a better life for all.

It is important that in finalizing this document we consult with stakeholders and will do so at the African Water Week at the end of March; and closer to home, the Water Sector Leadership Group in April and June, and the WISA conference in May. I hope that many of you will take part in these events and assist us to develop a strategy that is vibrant, visionary and carefully designed to contribute to growth and development in South Africa.

Some of the issues we are looking at include:

- Sharpening the message, particularly to those outside the water sector, of the contribution that water and sanitation can make to poverty reduction and the well-being of the poor;
- being innovative in how water can be used to support growth and development, at the household level and at the national level;
- Identifying new opportunities where water can be made available to support greater growth and development;
- finding innovative ways to improve access to sanitation and water, in a way that puts people back at the centre of the process and builds their capacity to ensure sustainable health improvements over time;
- focusing on practical, implementable actions;
- bringing together people and sectors to ensure that development plans and needs are aligned with water availability and plans; and
- making action possible through building capacity and mobilizing funds.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, for water to sustain lives and for it to form part of our economic growth, we need to ensure that the systems and infrastructure are in place and well maintained; that we have strong institutions which are able to respond to the needs of society; and that we have sufficient resources to develop our infrastructure. We must also partner and form social compacts with other sectors of society to drive home the message that water is a limited resource and it must be used more efficiently and lawfully.

Business unusual is not only a task for government; it is a task for each of us to ensure that we use our scarce water and human resources to achieve sustainable growth and development, and ensure that every South African citizen has access to clean, safe drinking water.

I thank you.