

South African Youth Water Prize Award Ceremony
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Vredenburg High School, Vredenburg, Western Cape
15 August 2008

Programme Director
Honourable Mayor
Chairperson of Portfolio Committee
Honourable Members of the Provincial Legislature
Councillors
Principals, Educators and Learners
Ladies and Gentlemen

Sanibonani, Molweni, Goeie More, Good Morning:

It is an honour to share this important occasion with you. Today, we celebrate the inspiration and promise of our youth – and our country – showing the world, once again, our collective ability to achieve great things! We are here to congratulate the national winners and the finalists of the 2008 South African Youth Water Prize.

As a minister and a parent, I am heartened by the dedication and innovation displayed, not only by our children, but by the parents, teachers, and many others who have contributed to this wonderful programme. Through initiatives of such brilliant and hard-working learners, we as a nation will realise our greatest aspirations.

A few days ago we celebrated Women's Day. We commemorated the historic anti-pass march by our women in 1956. Today, I would like to say that this event, the South African Youth Water Prize, happening during woman's month, is indeed a symbol of the combined indomitable spirit of the African woman and her youth to bring about change and foster excellence and prize winning achievement.

I am so proud to be among these youth today. It is particularly notable that two out of four of our national winning finalists this year are girls. Overall, 14 of 21 participants in the national competition were girls. In addition, Claire Reed, who won this same competition in 2003, has been given the distinct honour of being invited back to Stockholm to speak at this year's event. I cannot think of a better tribute to the sacrifices by women of this country than to recognise the achievements of the girls who participated in this important event. Congratulations; these are tangible manifestations of our efforts to create a caring nation, and a better life for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is committed to the democratisation of the management of water resources, and to achieve universal access to water and sanitation service. It is important for all of us to remember that despite over 18,7 million more people having been given access to clean water and 10,9 million more people access to decent sanitation since 1994, there are still millions waiting for these services. As blessed as our country is in natural resources, South Africa is a water-scarce country – in fact, one of the 30 most arid countries in the world.

The sustainability of this resource will be achieved only if our citizens are educated about water resource management, sanitation, health and hygiene. The participation of our communities and our children as stakeholders is crucial to us achieving this goal. It is in this context that my Department is passionately driving education and awareness programmes such as the 2020 Vision for Water and Sanitation Education Programme.

Programme Director, in 1997 my department, then headed by comrade Kader Asmal, launched its 2020 Vision for Water and Sanitation Education

The project was announced with six goals:

- to develop teaching aids on water, water audits and water demand management,
- to facilitate water audits in schools and homes throughout South Africa,
- to train teachers and other educators on how to conduct water audits,
- to integrate water education into the school curriculum,
- to develop internationally collaborative programmes on water education, and
- to develop parallel programmes on energy conservation and waste management.

These goals show that for many years now we have had a very strong focus on education - of both learners and educators. We believe that the best way to educate the nation is to educate its children. The 2020 programme, which includes the South African Youth Water Prize, is aimed at educating our society about the importance of water conservation and demand management, and sanitation. This programme also includes the Baswa Le Meetse Awards which focuses on primary school learners. Through these initiatives which are both educational and fun we are able to create awareness of the limited water resources and our need to protect and conserve these resources.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we also hope through this competition to stimulate the technical minds of our youth to award-winning heights as they find innovative ways to address the very pressing water related problems of our society. The learners identify the water and sanitation-related problems; conduct research; and recommend innovative and sometimes very practical solutions to the identified problems. The learners are mobilised for participation through media and the distribution of brochures to schools. Provincial competitions are followed by a National competition.

The competition is run in collaboration with the Stockholm Water Foundation, and every year during the World Water Week, the national winners of the South African Youth Water Prize represent our country in the International Junior Water Prize Competition which takes place in Stockholm, Sweden. Learners from approximately 30 countries participate in this competition and the learners who win today will be our ambassadors in Sweden.

One of the benefits of this programme is that it further enhances the interest of learners in science and technology as well as mathematics, which are critical skills for our country. Each day, we hear of the critical skills shortage in our country. The Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) led by our Deputy President seeks to develop the skills that are most urgently needed in South Africa; and I am very proud to say that this 2020 programme is contributing to addressing the technical and scientific skills that our country requires to achieve faster economic growth. With many who have these technical skills aging and soon retiring, we need more of our children, especially girls, to study science and mathematics and go into these areas of work. The reality is that our learners are still reluctant to take up mathematics and science subjects despite the enormous employment opportunities that exist for people with skills in these areas. However, as a Department, we are taking the responsibility of encouraging them to take up these subjects and with the support of our partners and the sponsors we are providing schools with resources such as laboratories and computers.

My Department has committed itself to supporting learners that wish to pursue careers in water, sanitation and forestry; and have awarded bursaries to 105 learners that qualify.

I am very pleased that the Departments of Education, Health, Arts and Culture, Environmental Affairs, Science and Technology as well as water utilities, NGOs and the private sector are collaborating with this youth development programme. Just as we see more innovators and entrepreneurs rising to the challenges of sustainable energy worldwide, we also will increasingly need to call upon their creativity and capacity to develop long-term solutions to our water challenges. As a well known academic in the water sector (Professor Asit Biswas) said to me, "it is the youth who will solve the water challenges, not with today's knowledge but through creativity and innovation they will find as yet unknown solutions and create new knowledge to solve these challenges."

Programme Director, on that note allow me to congratulate the finalists and national winners of the South African Youth Water Prize 2008 – first place, Raksha Gosai of the Western Cape; second place, Truth Mkhize and Welcome Khuzwayo, both from KwaZulu-Natal; and third place, Bakang Gaobuse, Kealeboga Mohibidu, and Lebogang Josephs, all of the Northern Cape.

I am told that Raksha wants to be a Marine Engineer. Once again, such ambition highlights the connection between the importance of encouraging girls and women to pursue the sciences, the South African Youth Water Prize, and Government's national objectives to develop critical skills in engineering for jobs in transport, communications, energy, and our municipalities.

I am confident that Raksha will proudly represent our country in Stockholm, Sweden; and on behalf of our Government, we send you off to Stockholm with love, pride and best wishes. We hope that you will bring the Stockholm Junior Water Prize back home.

All of the finalists are eligible for prizes which they can use to further their studies and contribute to the improved welfare of their community. We hope that all participating in this initiative will learn from the experience and inspire others to enter the sciences, and tackle our challenges in water and sanitation.

I am proud to be associated with the skilful minds of our young entrepreneurs and inventors who have participated in this initiative over the years. They have invented winning projects with interesting names like Alien Busters, Plant Tea, Water Wise Reel Gardening and the Bottle Garden. The important thing about the projects is that they all work and many could even be converted into community initiatives or business opportunities.

In conclusion, programme director, ladies and gentlemen, you will find no greater concentration of young talent in the area of water conservation and demand management in the country except here at the South African Youth Water Prize. Our youth have already proven it on two occasions, when they won the International Junior Water Prize against the best in the world.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our sponsors, large and small. You are our partners in making the dreams of our youth a reality. And you are our teammates in the ongoing fight to save and manage our precious water resources. I challenge you to become even more involved in the projects developed by our youth and allow these seeds to blossom.

Finally, I would like to thank the organisers for putting together a successful function and to all of you for attending this event and for joining us from across the country, to celebrate achievements of our children.

Dankie baie. I thank you!