

Opening of the WISA 2008 Biennial Conference
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Sun City, North West
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Professor Otieno, President of WISA
Vice President and Members of WISA Council
Members of Parliament
Members and officials of our Public Entities
Councillors and officials of Municipalities
Programme Director
Honoured guests
Members and friends of WISA

1. Introduction

It is an honour to address you today and I thank you for inviting me to this important gathering of professionals and stakeholders in the water sector. Since my appointment in this portfolio two years ago I have seen a lot of good things happening and identified many challenges that confront our sector.

Challenges may result from our past, future water demand and economic growth, aging infrastructure, the changing global setting or as part of natural phenomenon, such as climate change. To understand the potential impact of these factors or phenomenon requires a deeper understanding of the social, economic, environmental and international situation and how they have an impact on our water resources and water services. A gut reaction that we see by some commentators or in the press that water is the next crisis after electricity does not help us; I, more than most, am aware and deeply concerned about the many challenges in the water sector and that they will not disappear overnight. We need to understand these different challenges, how they impact on us and what needs to be done to address them. With this understanding we must assess if we have the right legislative and policy tools at our disposal, then be decisive in our response and work in partnership to address these challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the importance of partnerships cannot be underestimated. With something like climate change and the many unknown factors and impacts, we require collaboration with academic organisations, international institutes, and others so that we are able to look at both mitigation and adaptation measures. Government through the Department of Environment Affairs and Tourism is spearheading a process to develop Long Term Mitigation Scenarios on climate change; WISA needs to be involved in this process, as we know that the water sector has to understand and prepare itself thoroughly in order to adequately respond to the impact of climate change. My question to WISA then is 'do we fully understand the impact of climate change on water? If yes, is WISA in a position to advise government on responses to this issue?'

Having only returned yesterday from the 16th session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD 16) where issues of climate change, drought, desertification, rural development, food security amongst other critical issues were discussed, there are some valuable insights we can learn from this important forum. Importantly for us water was a common thread that was woven into all of the themes. CSD-16 also gave us another opportunity to review progress on the implementation of Agenda 21 and the concrete goals we set at the WSSD as reflected in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

It has been recognised and raised at CSD16 that Africa is seen as one of the most vulnerable regions that stands to be highly impacted by climate change. Indeed even when we speak of the food crisis, it is Africa that bears the brunt of these and other impacts of climate changes. As we are all acutely aware food security is intricately linked to water security.

The following areas were identified where Africa together with the international community will have to give focus to achieving sustainable development:

- Mobilising finance for agriculture, rural development and the water sectors on such a scale as to make an impact in dealing with the food crisis.
- The role of development partners in supporting appropriate technologies, and capacity building to improve agricultural production and investing in infrastructure for water and sanitation. In this regard, in South Africa, we will have to examine the way in which water is used in the agricultural sector to ensure greater efficiency in the use of water;
- The impact of climate change and the constraints to Africa's adaptive capacity;

- Efforts to address and reduce poverty, improve access to adequate water supply and to achieve food security which will be severely undermined as a result of land degradation and desertification.
- The need to implement effective policies to address gender inequality in the area of agricultural production.

Having identified and explored the barriers and constraints to implementation, CSD-17 will give us the opportunity to develop, define and agree on clear actions to unblock and expedite implementation.

2. National Water Act

Programme Director, this year marks the 10th Anniversary of the promulgation of the National Water Act, Act No 36 of 1998. This Act [to quote Minister Kasrils in the preface to the Guide to the National Water Act] ‘recognises that the ultimate goal of water resource management is to achieve the sustainable use of water for the benefit of all South Africans’ and that ‘the Act aims to protect, use, develop, conserve, manage and control water resources as a whole, promoting the integrated management of water resources with the participation of all stakeholders.’

Our National Water Act and water policies have been hailed the world over. When it was promulgated we recognised with good reason, that we would require progressive implementation of the Act; and we have made tremendous strides during the past ten years, yet it is clear that we have not reached our destination. There are still regulations outstanding and sections of the Act that require a stronger institutional response if we are to say that we are complying with the desired outcomes of the legislation.

It is befitting, therefore, that in this tenth anniversary of the Act we reflect on the gaps and some of the challenges we have had to face as part of implementation of our policies. Our journey has not ended - there is still a great deal to be done in transforming the sector in line with the vision of the National Water Act. For one, there is still a long way to go towards changing attitudes in the allocation of water, in particular the move away from riparian rights to the national government being the custodian of the sources of water. Attitudes towards water conservation and protection of water resources and the environment also require a huge shift.

The principles of “some for all forever” or “some for all forever, together” remain as critical today as they were at the time of drafting the National Water Act. As we move towards concepts such as “Water for Growth and Development” and how we utilise water to contribute towards economic development and addressing the issues of poverty eradication, we cannot lose sight of these principles.

With the water stressed environment that we face, along with the impacts of climate change, these principles require sharing and collaboration around the use of this precious resource.

3. Our policies are able to address the challenges

Ladies and Gentlemen, for a young democracy like ours the challenges we face come on the back of the massive backlogs linked to our past, of which significant in-roads have already been made to address them. Addressing these backlogs, however, must be done concurrently with the implementation of our other policy imperatives. For example, we cannot ignore the detrimental impacts of untreated waste water going into rivers while we focus our attention on supplying sanitation to un-served communities; more importantly however we cannot be focusing all of our attention on running world-class waste water treatment plants when only a small fraction of the community has access to decent sanitation. Our policies require that we give attention to both (and other) aspects.

Programme Director, we need to accept that the changes brought about by our policies are not only in many ways ground-breaking, but also come with tremendous challenges associated with their implementation.

A few weeks ago I made a statement to Parliament to discuss the concerns about the potential for a ‘water crisis’ in South Africa; and there I highlighted some of the challenges that we face as a country. While I do not believe that these challenges can be categorised in the form of a ‘crisis’ such as we have experienced in the energy sector, they are of concern to me, and require attention. Challenges that I highlighted include infrastructure management; drinking water quality, particularly in the rural areas and smaller towns; the need to increasing the efforts to address pollution of our rivers; the skills limitation within the sector; the impacts of urbanization; and climate change.

The question we must ask ourselves is, is our legislation and our policies strong enough to address these challenges?

After some thought what is clear to me is that our legislation and policies provide an excellent framework within which we should be able to systematically address these various challenges. It is therefore not surprising that very often our debates have mainly been about how best to implement these policies. And while after ten years of the National Water Act and 11 years of the Water Services Act there are invariably areas that could be improved, I am however doubtful that any review would result in fundamental changes.

What this tells us is that “half the battle is won” and to address the challenges in the water sector we must apply ourselves to increasing efforts on developing and implementing the regulations, filling the gaps, and establishing the necessary structures. Professionals also need to respond by providing the necessary tools to ensure that these policies are implemented effectively.

4. Examples of Drinking Water Quality and Health of Rivers

If we take the case of drinking water quality, we need to look at both the National Water Act and the Water Services Act for what must be done to ensure that potable water is supplied to households. Through our legislation and through the excellent partnerships we have established in the local government sphere, we have established a strong oversight role on drinking water quality. The electronic Water Quality Management System (eWQMS) that we have established is able to pick up problem areas and allow us to work with relevant structures and organisations to deal with these problems. I have been informed that this system only a few days ago won the Project Innovation award from the International Water Association for excellence and innovation in water engineering throughout the world; we won first place in the category Operations/Management in our zone. I am informed that we will be competing for the global award with a ceremony taking place during the World Water Congress in September 2008.

Winning the award is recognition of our innovation but we have to do more. In order to deal with some of our challenges we need to consistently develop cutting edge and appropriate technology. How do we use technology in order to conserve water? For example, as a water scarce country are our irrigation methods the best we can find or do we need to develop more appropriate irrigation methods in order to conserve water?

Of course it is important to note that even in a situation where we are able to show high level of compliance with norms and standards - there is, as I reported to Parliament, a small percentage of municipalities that do not comply with our standards. Non compliance can result in the loss of lives and requires an urgent response. The Mayors of the municipalities that have been identified through our monitoring system as consistently not complying would have received a letter from me a few days ago, where I informed them of the serious consequences of their non-compliance and requested their urgent intervention and response.

The strength of our legislation and regulations will be tested where we find municipalities that are unwilling to respond to our calls for compliance and continue to place their communities and the most vulnerable in those communities at risk.

A second case to consider is the state of our rivers. Over the years we have had a number of programmes aimed at monitoring the health of our freshwater resources, and some of you would have been involved in this initiative in different contexts and at different levels. One such monitoring programme is the River Health Programme which assists us with assessing and understanding the status of our water resources. Recently, my Department has started bringing in the aspect of voluntary monitoring in the form of the Adopt-A-River initiative. What becomes important is how we expand the programme and integrate the information from this programme with other data collected on the quality of fresh water so that we are able to apply it when we take on and fine polluters. Coherency is therefore required in our regulations for the Waste Discharge Charges and our scientific data where we analyse and record the state of our rivers.

In both of these examples clear actions are required as part of addressing the challenges, and we will in many respects be entering uncharted territory with some of our actions - and we will see if our legislation and policies holds up.

5. Skills

Programme Director, Ladies and Gentlemen, our ability to address challenges in the water sector very much depend on our capacity and skill levels so that we are able to do the necessary oversight, monitoring, analysis and generation of information, which would inform our decision making, planning and interventions.

It is therefore critical that we nurture the skills that have been developed during the past few years through various programmes and increase our efforts to accelerate development of the badly needed skills across the board. As you may know my Department has established the Learning Academy and we continue to work with

the Water Research Commission (WRC) and Universities, through various processes, and other interested parties to contribute to this very critical aspect of transformation of our country. It is also therefore heartening to see that this conference includes the issue of education and capacity building in the programme but a question arises as to how are we going to accelerate skills development initiatives in a way that responds adequately and swiftly to our challenges.

When we look at the skills set that is required to respond to these challenges and for water to contribute to economic development, it must be more than just engineering, science and technology; we need to look at economics, resource economics, social science, and financial skills. There are a wide range of fields that need to be attracted to and nurtured in the water sector.

As you engage in debates on various aspects covered in the sessions I request that recommendations should come out of these sessions.

The issue of gender equality also needs to be brought into the fore, as it forms a critical part of the priorities in the sector which in the past has largely been male dominated. As you are aware my Department has for quite some time been promoting increased involvement of women in the sector through the Women in Water, Sanitation and Forestry initiative, amongst other programmes. We need to collectively raise awareness so that we support and attract more women into this sector whilst consciously targeting young women in our initiatives.

6. SA in the international arena

Before concluding, it is important to mention the necessity of partnerships and collaboration with organisations in the international environment, as it brings with it significant opportunities for enhancing our expertise and benchmarking ourselves so that we are able to become world class.

We certainly also have a lot to offer the world as evident from the various initiatives we have led, and the events hosted in various areas from the recent AfricaSan and UNESCO International Hydrological Programmes, amongst others. However given the challenges that Africa faces with regard to water, is WISA in any position to assist, share expertise and experiences with the rest of Africa, especially those countries with whom we share river basins.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, WISA as a family of water professionals and organisations involved in every aspect of water industry is well positioned to address many of the challenges we face and to ensure that the gains we have made continue to produce and surpass the results we have achieved so far.

Through continued engagement with the issues, strong partnerships, robust legislation and policies, and consistent implementation of our policies we will be better placed to respond to the challenges of climate change, broadening access to water services, ensuring acceptable drinking water quality and other challenges that confront us.

It is for these reasons that we must continue to support the relationship between WISA and the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and its entities. Over the years your conferences and exhibitions have played a significant role of bringing together water professionals across the board. WISA's motto of "*Building expertise, Sharing Knowledge, Improving Quality of Life*" encapsulates the vision that the sector on the whole should espouse. As professionals and friends of WISA there is no need to remind you of the challenges – with more than 70 years of existence albeit in different forms and having witnessed and participated in the transformation process from the early nineties one can safely say you have been there from the start!

The fact that the programme also includes workshops dedicated to address various aspects related to infrastructure such as Institutional Reform, Service Delivery, Information Management; and puts an emphasis on Water for Growth and Development, shows that indeed WISA and its partners such as the WRC, Water Boards, Municipalities, Universities, Private Sector, International Water Association and so on, are responding to our call to address the challenges with the urgency they deserve. Indeed we can safely say we are all in this together.

I wish you a successful Conference and encourage you to be robust and open in your deliberations. WISA is a key organisation in the sector and this conference brings many players from the sector into one room to discuss and debate the issues and identify possible solutions. I will keenly be interested to see the outcome of this Conference and see if it will assist us in refining and improving our strategies.

I thank you.