

Water Sector HIV and AIDS World AIDS Day
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Leratong Hospice, Atteridgeville Township, Gauteng Province
28 November 2008

Goeie Môre, Dumelang, Good morning

As I stand here before you, 20 years after the first World AIDS Day was commemorated, it is a good opportunity for us to reflect on where we have come from and where we are going in responding to HIV and AIDS. Today's event has been organised by the water sector to bring together government, civil society and other partners in support of the fight against HIV and AIDS and to highlight the sector's role in this fight.

World AIDS Day will be observed on 01 December and serves to raise our awareness of the AIDS epidemic caused by the spread of HIV infection. It is also an opportunity for South Africans to remember those we have lost to AIDS and the millions who fight the disease everyday. The theme for World AIDS Day in 2008 centres on leadership and focuses on the need to lead-empower-deliver. Each one of us is a leader and each of us has something unique to contribute to stop AIDS. In the water sector, we acknowledge that we have a **leadership** role to play in service delivery that will improve the lives of people living with HIV and AIDS. We recognise the need to work to **empower** water and sanitation service delivery agents as well as individuals and communities to respond to AIDS. Finally, we are committed to supporting **delivery** of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support through adequate water and sanitation services and HIV and AIDS education and support.

Leadership in the fight against HIV and AIDS is still vital despite the real progress that has already been made in responding to the epidemic in South Africa. It is heartening to note that the South African HIV epidemic is on a downward trend but we still have an estimated national prevalence of 28% which puts us amongst the countries with the highest prevalence in the world. Approximately 5.27 million South Africans are infected with HIV and many more are affected by the impacts of HIV and AIDS. In Tshwane Municipality itself, one in five people are HIV positive which means we still have a lot of work to do. We are all involved in this fight and the first step is for us to acknowledge and accept people living with HIV and AIDS. Sadly, stigma and lack of knowledge have become our worst enemies in the fight against HIV and AIDS. However, by overcoming these problems and taking responsibility, we can all bring our own unique expertise to lead, empower and deliver.

Many people think that fighting HIV and AIDS is the responsibility of the Department of Health, clinics and hospitals and female care-givers. In fact, we all have something to offer. HIV and AIDS is not a health problem but a development problem that means it cannot be business as usual for anyone committed to improving access to services, reducing poverty and increasing economic growth in the country.

In the water sector we recognise that there is a clear relationship between water and sanitation services and HIV and AIDS. On the one hand, lack of access to water and sanitation can worsen the impacts of HIV and AIDS and on the other hand, HIV and AIDS can hinder water and sanitation service delivery. The water sector recognises that insufficient access to water and good sanitation contributes to slowing down of development and worsening of water-borne and water-washed diseases to those infected by HIV and living with AIDS. People suffering from AIDS may be more

susceptible to illness from water-borne diseases and poor water quality because of their compromised immune systems. For instance, studies have shown lower child mortality amongst populations with improved water and sanitation facilities. In addition, home-based care is made more difficult when carers do not have access to sufficient quantities of water for nutrition and cleaning as well as good sanitation facilities. Research has also shown that women and girl-children bear the greatest burden from both the disease and from lack of water and sanitation. Females are more vulnerable to HIV infection and generally carry the responsibility for caring for sick family members in the household. Women and girl-children often have the added responsibility. In addition, improved water services provide an opportunity for growth and development for households badly affected by HIV and AIDS-related income declines.

Access to clean water and sanitation are thus crucial elements in the battle against the spread of HIV and AIDS, the struggle to extend the life and well-being of people living with HIV and AIDS and efforts to reduce the debilitating impacts of poverty on a large proportion of the South African society.

In the Water Sector, we are also aware that HIV and AIDS affect our own ability to deliver services. We are not immune to the impact of HIV and AIDS on our workforce through loss of staff from ill-health and death. In addition, the sustainability of our community based water supply and sanitation systems are jeopardised by users' inability to maintain systems or to pay for water and sanitation services. HIV and AIDS are thus critical issues for the water sector in South Africa.

In 2005, the Water Services Sector Leadership Group took a decision to mainstream HIV and AIDS within the water services sector. To us, it is about joining two streams, one of water and the other of HIV and AIDS in order to find solutions that will enable the poor and vulnerable groups to be better off through improved access to water and sanitation. We are dedicated to a multi-sectoral approach that involves all stakeholders. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry itself is committed to a three-pronged approach. Firstly, we focus on reducing the susceptibility of sector employees to infections and giving support to those already infected by HIV. Secondly, we are looking at ways of assisting individuals, households and the community to cope better with the impacts of HIV and AIDS. Finally, through reviewing and updating our policies, we want to create an enabling environment for the first two processes to take place.

The Department is in the process of developing a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in the Water Sector. The Strategic Framework identifies priorities and key actions that will guide the response of the water sector in addressing to HIV and AIDS. Some challenges that we seek to address include provision of water and sanitation to informal settlements; addressing HIV and AIDS in health and hygiene education; providing assistance to water institutions heavily impacted by HIV and AIDS and ultimately supporting poverty eradication, gender equality and environmental rights. Already some water service providers have started to introduce innovative solutions to these challenges. The Working for Water team in Mpumalanga has chosen to meet the challenge of HIV and AIDS by addressing them in their social outreach and education work. The "condom squad" as they are known are actively working in the community to provide much needed services in both water and sanitation service delivery and HIV and AIDS education and counselling.

Whilst we are dedicated to mainstreaming HIV and AIDS within DWAF, our approach through the Masibambane Programme has always been "let's work together" and this

also holds true in responding to HIV and AIDS. There are numerous partners who collaborate with us in meeting shared goals in the water sector and these partnerships are extended further in our fight against HIV and AIDS. The epidemic is a serious challenge to South African development and it is necessary for us to all work together in leading, empowering and delivering a response to HIV and AIDS.

I thank you, Dankie, Ke a leboa