

Address at the launch of Arbor Week
Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Soweto
31 August 2004

Ladies and gentlemen - Good Morning, Dumelang!

Arbor Week is an important event in our calendar as it celebrates the advent of spring and pays tribute to trees and their benefits to us. The celebration this year is even more special as we also celebrate ten years of democracy. Our Arbor Week has therefore been designed around these two celebrations: celebrating trees as our heritage and celebrating our ten years of freedom.

I am very glad to record that this year is also the tenth year of our association with TOTAL South Africa, who have supported us very generously through for ten Arbor Weeks to date! They not only give us funding (which we always appreciate), but also give generously of their time in planning the Arbor Week and we appreciate their involvement and generosity. It is their fiftieth anniversary this year, so all round this is a very special day and we are in a very special place.

As you all know, Arbor Week is celebrated annually, and it is during this week that we recall the value that trees have in our lives. We know that they soothe us, they provide us with shelter in this hot and sunny country of ours. Trees provide us with fruit and their wood provides us with construction material and firewood. The most important heritage we all remember is that trees have provided meeting places for us in the past and have been classrooms in other situations. These are sad memories but memories that are an important part of our history. Remember a country that remembers its past, it is a country that will be able to plan its future better.

Trees are certainly our friends, our heritage and we need to acknowledge them not only today, not only during Arbor Week, but we should always remember and always value them. We should always remember that one of the reasons that led to our colonization was the realization of the richness of Africa in natural resources which would include our forests, our trees and our vegetation. It is therefore important to note that the colonial and the apartheid regimes respectively, appreciating the value of trees, used the trees to beautify their residential areas consequently dividing our communities along racial lines. This led to them enjoying a better quality of life because of the less polluted environment because trees give oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide.

This legacy still lives with us today. If you fly over most cities in South Africa, one can easily see the legacy of apartheid - the glaring spatial divide based on racial separation that existed before 1994. The urban sector has always been divided between the "townships" and the "suburbs", the former look dusty and unhealthy while the latter look healthier because of the green environment. This is what we need to change especially in the context of creating habitable human settlements for even the poorest.

It is therefore appropriate that we launch this project in Soweto whose contribution to South Africa's struggle for liberation is internationally acclaimed.

I wish to congratulate this region for the initiative of Siyathukutha project. It is heartwarming to know that this region, this ward 15, including the townships of Phiri and Senoane won R50 000 by entering the 'Bontle ke Botho' clean schools and clean wards campaign two years ago, during July 2002. Well done!

I note that it was a condition of the competition that the money should be used to improve the environment within the ward, and it is indeed pleasing to note that the community decided to develop four parks as a means of greening the environment in which they live and so that sport and recreation services to the community could be enhanced.

It is also good to note that the Food and Trees for Africa Organization was identified by the community as partners who could really assist in making the money go a long way to realizing their dreams. I know that the communities were able to identify Food and Trees for Africa as a likely partner in this regard because they had seen the work, which Food and Trees for Africa had done in their area previously. Government is very aware of the wonderful and enriching work that Food and Trees for Africa does in many areas of our country and we warmly applaud them for this work, here in this community and in all other communities in which they work.

The Urban Greening Fund approved a further R100 000 for capacity building and for the purchase of plant materials for this project, which is a significant contribution, and in addition your local authority is helping too. Johannesburg City Parks is contributing another R163 000 to these parks, which is wonderful and shows what we can do if we all work together with a common dream.

This project is great because the people have thought about their needs, and have gone out and met those needs through enlisting the help of those who can contribute. The contributions are not always in terms of money. Expertise can be donated, time can be donated and we all know that things we work hard for are very precious to us for a much longer time.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us give everyone who has contributed to the development of these parks, whether through hard work or through financial contributions, a warm and heartfelt round of applause as together they have made it happen!

I would also like to say that our government is committed to the development of both urban and rural areas especially the local socio-economic development. As the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, we believe that forestry can offer a lot in terms of job creation and wealth creation to the citizens of this country. The forestry section of the Department has a new vision and it believes that -

Forests are managed for people and we (the Department) need to create an enabling environment for economic and social development through sustainable forestry, especially at local level.

We believe that this people-centred approach, which places people at the heart of forestry is very important and is really a challenge to communities like yours to use the opportunity to discuss the types of projects that will be beneficial to the your area and communicate this to government. We all know that many of our rural brothers and sisters are struggling financially and we believe that we can assist to bring economic activity to them through forestry. One of the great advantages of forestry is that it does not necessarily require high skills levels or big investments. People who never had an opportunity to obtain higher education, can also find opportunities in the forest sector.

I know that we can assist people in the rural areas through forestry, and I know that we need to do this. Just as you needed parks to help to beautify your area and to provide areas for sport and recreation, people in the rural areas need economic activity to meet their needs.

I am pleased to say that forestry is an important part of my Department and that I also see the commercial forestry industry as an important part of South Africa's economy. We are very proud of the forestry industry and the contribution it makes to our economy.

The industry has built itself into a highly successful, competitive and sustainable one, which is a world player. But on the other hand, forestry is an industry, which is often ignored or misunderstood and we need to realise an important role it plays, both economically and socially in the rural areas of our country. The industry has shown great sensitivity to the impact it can

have environmentally and it is also an industry that continues to make wise and judicious use of two of our most precious natural resource, soil and water.

The industry has taken careful note of environmental concerns and at present owns the largest number of registered national heritage sites (more than 70), which is more than any other land based sector activity.

The economic benefits which forestry bring to this country are clear : it ranks amongst South Africa's foremost export industries, contributing no less than R5 Billion every year to the country. It also contributes 2% to the total Gross Domestic Product of our country.

We will continue to strengthen this industry through afforestation, in other words planting trees where there were none – we have started in the Eastern Cape and KZN respectively. There is also a need to continue to restructure the industry and to that end, we are coming up with a BEE Charter to ensure the transfer of ownership to the previously excluded people.

We will also ensure that two identified nodal points will be given projects on "Trees for Poverty Alleviation" for and R600 000 has been set aside for this. All of these efforts will help to boost the rural economy while addressing the ills of the second economy. We also note with appreciation that the industry is already offering a lot of employment especially to rural people.

I am looking today at a partnership that is happening. I appeal to organizations such as Johannesburg Parks Department to keep coming forward to assist in projects such as this one, to NGO's such as Food and Trees for Africa to continue to work with us and our communities to assist the people.

And most of all I appeal to you, the citizens, the people who have enjoyed ten years of freedom, who have enjoyed ten years of democracy and whose ten year olds have not known anything else, and whose children will never have to know oppression or discrimination, to join hands in making sure that the environment in which we live is beautiful, and helps us to relax and enjoy life and that economic activity through forestry can happen in this country.

Ladies and gentlemen I thank you for your kindness in inviting me to launch Arbor Week at such a special place where good things are happening!

Thank you