

Salga Conference: “Building Sustainable Communities”
Address by Ms BP Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
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Chairperson, it has always been the fundamental principle of our new democratic government to improve the lives of all the people of South Africa in a sustainable manner. In other words our broad objective as government has been to ultimately create conditions whereby people will be able to create their own local livelihoods with the aim of creating local wealth. This is the ultimate development goal of our democratic government - to build sustainable communities.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme has been a fundamental policy framework in laying a secure foundation for a comprehensive overhaul of a fragmented apparatus of governance and a restructuring of a divided and under-performing economy.

As part of the legislative and policy framework that government put in place in the last decade was a two-pronged strategy that seeks to address challenges of both rural and urban development. The introduction of Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme (ISRDP) and the Urban Renewal Programme (URP) was in line with government’s approach of integrated development for sustainability.

The question we have to ask and the challenge we have to address is whether these programmes and strategies are working.

An important element of both programmes is local economic development. President Thabo Mbeki has emphasised that we cannot build a thriving, prosperous South Africa in which the majority of communities are dependent on grants and handouts.

And I would like to suggest that while we have a framework for the delivery of services, those services would only be sustainable if our people, in their rural and urban communities, have the means to maintain and improve them in the future.

The significance of the programmes and the legislative framework is that they are people-centred with an overall objective for the empowerment and meaningful participation of the people / communities.

So, government has made significant strides in meeting basic services – in the areas of housing, health (clinics), electricity, telephone system (in households, schools, clinics, police stations), land redistribution, the social network system such as primary school nutrition programme, social grant, potable water supplies and sanitation services have also been extended to the majority of needy communities.

But while we have made strides in meeting basic services and building the economy as per the RDP objectives, our communities still remain vulnerable. Unemployment and poverty are still high. In this sense, the building of sustainable communities and safe residential neighbourhoods remains a major challenge for the second decade of democracy.

The building of the second economy, which is central to the agenda of our government’s programme and vision of the second decade, seeks to integrate the two worlds that still characterise our society.

We have communities who live in better developed areas and who have always and still enjoy access to basic services and social benefits – good health, longevity, social stability, who never experienced poverty. People in such communities do not spend their time worrying about what they are going to eat but concentrate on things that would improve their social status.

On the other hand, we still have underdeveloped communities where people still lack access to basic services and wealth creation opportunities.

The difference between them is all too often in the economic opportunities that are available. Where people have jobs and other livelihood opportunities, they can afford to pay for the services they enjoy and even improve them.

In communities where unemployment is the rule, not only are services often unsustainable, despite the substantial financial transfers from central government, but they cannot be improved to the levels we would aspire to. And communities that live in a state of insecurity because poverty, we know, unemployment breeds crime and desperation.

This is the situation despite the legislative and policy framework that aims to improve particularly the lives of the previously marginalized and vulnerable communities, which happen to be the majority. This is the situation despite the fact that government has made access to basic service, specifically water, a constitutional right. This is still the situation despite the fact that we have programmes and strategies that guarantee access to services, including water and sanitation, even by the poorest.

In my view, we need to examine the effectiveness of such programmes and strategies in relation to the needs of people on the ground. For instance we need to examine barriers to implementing our indigent policy at the municipal level. We need to examine our delivery / implementation strategies and develop mechanisms to measure and quantify delivery.

I would suggest that one area in which we have not yet done enough is to catalyse the economic opportunities that exist. From my own sector, I am painfully conscious of the opportunities that are not being fully exploited. We have identified areas for new afforestation on a community basis and have financial support for this – but there are obstacles to implementation. My predecessor Professor Kader Asmal identified areas of potential for expanded irrigation, which could create tens of thousands of job opportunities, but even now, eight years later, implementation is very slow.

You need to ensure that your IDPs link to these economic activities, link to Provincial Growth and Development Strategies and that we take every opportunity available to us to promote the growth of the second economy.

One of the best ways to ensure sustainability of services and sustainable communities is to get money into peoples' pockets on a sustainable basis. To make this happen we need to turn cooperative governance into a reality and make sure that our institutional frameworks are adequate.

It will then be the responsibility of service authorities to guard against poor service delivery and interruptions, which often leads to customer dissatisfaction. Service authorities need to be aware of their responsibilities in the event of service interruptions and this is spelt out in the regulations in terms of section 9 of the Water Services Act of 1997 (Act 108 of 1997). All too often the responsibilities are ignored and SALGA can assist once again in making Water Service Authorities aware of these regulations.

Such monitoring by all stakeholders should assist in consolidating and further improving service delivery. The delivery of water and electricity has to an extent unlocked the opportunities for poverty alleviation and wealth creation especially in the rural areas. People are able to open salons in the rural areas because of access to water and electricity. There is a host of other benefits that have been positive spin-offs in this regard.

If we put people at the centre of our efforts, ensure that they are helped and informed and supported, they will in turn support us to achieve our common goal of sustainable communities.

As national departments we need to forge linkages that will contribute to building the capacity of local government. As sector leaders in our respective areas of delivery, we need to take responsibility in ensuring adequate support for the municipalities to deliver on the ground.

We appreciate the work done through our intergovernmental forums to date. However, as much as we have institutionalised IGR structures it should also be possible for people to work outside the formal structures in the interest of speeding up service delivery. To this end I am putting my officials at the disposal of the Mayors and the Councillors for any assistance that may be needed in the area of water and sanitation delivery services. I would like to appeal to Mayors to also make their senior officials available for this co-operation.

However, co-operative governance goes beyond the confines of government to include the civil society in the process of governance. The establishment of Ward Committees and Community Development Workers is a step in the right direction. A close working relationship needs to happen at this level and this should be a process that is able to assist government in quantifying service delivery and avoid duplication.

Most importantly the partnership between the Ward Committees and Community Development Workers is significant in that it presents an opportunity for the people to understand government policies and strategies for their meaningful participation in governance.

As a democracy this approach is unavoidable. We declared when we took over government that our policies are transparent and most importantly that ours is a people-centred government.

The process of building sustainable communities should be characterised by the following, among other things –

People have to know why they should pay for services and how they can avoid paying too much?

How do we make communities understand the strategies like our National Water Resource Strategy (NWRS) and Water Demand Management Strategy?

How do we ensure the implementation of our strategies and policies and the transformation effect they should have in terms of changing people's behaviour.

I have already indicated to the officials of our Department that the National Water Resource Strategy should not be an academic document but should be a South African document that seeks to address issues of service delivery and poverty alleviation. Hence it is important that all especially the ordinary people understand and own the process for sustainable development.

We need to strengthen community-based organisations such as the Water Caucus in the Water sector so that our communities get guidance on issues of governance.

As the different sectors we need to make sure that the structures we build are meaningful and make sense to our communities. For instance as DWAF we need to clarify in very simple terms why we are establishing the Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) and Water Users' Associations (WUA). People need to understand the objective of establishing these institutions and why they should participate. Most importantly the processes need to be simplified and conducive environment be created for community participation and ownership.

SALGA has an important duty to ensure that the provisions of Systems Act of 2000, pertaining to the participation of communities in the affairs of municipalities happens. This is another measure to build sustainable communities.

Our water status that we are one of the 30 driest countries in the world should not be an academic information that is limited to technical people and officials of government. It is crucial for ordinary people to understand this and be integral part of the processes towards a solution. Ordinary people have a right to know why we are building dams, as we are doing and what their role is in this regard.

We need to strike an important balance between solving the problem of dryness and our requirements as we are expanding as a country.

Chairperson, the ownership of processes of governance by ordinary people and the rest of the public help us as government to realise our development goal of building sustainable communities.

I Thank You.