

Water Institute of Southern Africa Conference
Opening Address by Mr Mike Muller, Director-General of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, on behalf of Ms B Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
International Convention Centre, Cape Town
3 May 2004

Mr President and members of the WISA Council
Councillors and officials of municipalities across the land
Members and officials of the Water Boards
Representatives of the private sector
Members, colleagues and friends of WISA

I must begin by passing on to you greetings of our new Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Buyelwa Sonjica. She would have loved to be here and asked me to convey her best wishes and sincere apologies but, as those of you who saw her on TV this morning will have noted, she is really not well and while she was allowed to spend 10 minutes in the SABC studio, she was told not to travel to Cape Town last night. What you may not know is that she was part of the committee that managed the inauguration, a task that would have exhausted the best of us.

I am sure that all delegates will wish her well. Many of you who knew her as chair of the Portfolio Committee from 1999 to 2003, have already told me how delighted they are to have her back in the sector. Arts, Culture, Science and Technology's loss is our gain!

She has asked me to reciprocate the good wishes and promises faithfully to meet with WISA at the earliest possible opportunity.

In her absence, I have been asked to open the conference with some thoughts about the priorities that lie ahead and I am going to do this in two parts. I would like to start by addressing some of the key priorities for the next decade. I would then like to focus on the role of WISA in tackling them.

- The first priority will be to help local government to fulfil its responsibility to deliver quality water services.
- Within that, there is a special role for sanitation, which must be a focus for us over the next five years.
- We cannot forget the need to keep our new water supply and sanitation systems running, their sustainability is what we will all be measured on by water users.
- And finally, we must never forget the importance of protecting and managing the water resources on which all our services depend.

Let me turn to these priorities one at a time.

The second decade of democracy marks a historic moment for the water sector, as we pass responsibility for service delivery squarely into the hands of local government.

The budget of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry for new water services projects in 2004/5 has been incorporated into the Municipal Infrastructure Grant, which is gazetted in the Division of Revenue Act and transferred directly to municipalities by the Department of Provincial and Local Government.

So, in July, many municipalities will have a lot more money in their budgets than last year.

But there should be no illusions. These funds are not an early Xmas present but a heavy responsibility. Municipalities will be expected to use them to achieve goals established for them in the Constitution. An important task for the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry will be to work with Municipalities and help them to use the money to deliver on Government's contract with the people of South Africa, which promises:

- an end to the bucket system by 2006

- an end to the water supply backlog by 2008
- an end to the sanitation backlog by 2010.

A particularly important focus, and Minister Sonjica has already confirmed that this is a personal concern for her, will be to ensure that sanitation is given priority it deserves. We cannot wait until we have outbreaks of cholera before we begin to act.

There can be no doubt that the current cholera outbreak in Kanana and Klerksdorp is a result of the fact that people are still using bucket toilets. To make matters worse, I can tell you from my visit there that the bucket toilets were not being well managed, they had no lids, they were not being emptied regularly, and when they were emptied, their contents were often spilt outside houses as they were carried away. In these conditions, it is hardly surprising that an imported case of cholera should spread through the community.

While we understand that local municipality has many challenges, it will have to plan how to replace the buckets using the funds it has received through the Municipal Infrastructure Grant. In the interim, they know that there must be greater effort to manage their buckets properly and, to their credit, they have already begun to do this.

Sustainability is the third priority. The word is used a lot these days, especially since we hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. It is used so much that sometimes it is not clear what it means. In our sector, there should be no confusion. But it is helpful to identify three dimensions to sustainability.

The first is technical sustainability. There is no point spending lots of money on building new water and sanitation projects if the result is that we have taps with no water, toilets that no-one wants to use. So it is important to ensure that services we provide continue to work and meet peoples' needs once they have been built.

Then there is financial sustainability, closely linked to the question of technical sustainability. If we build schemes that require highly qualified (and expensive) technicians to run, that use a great deal of electricity and chemicals to pump and purify the water, we need to be sure that we have money to pay for those things. So even before we build a project, we need to know how much it is going to cost to run and where we are going to get the money from, in other words, we have to plan the finances as well as infrastructure. If we don't do that schemes will stop working, they will not be sustainable.

This is not a theoretical problem. In the poorer rural areas of the Eastern Cape to the far north of Limpopo, there are water schemes that are not delivering water because the electricity bill has not been paid, because there are no staff to maintain the pumps and motors - I will come back to this.

Finally we must not forget environmental sustainability. If we build sewer systems to provide sanitation, we must know where the water to flush the toilets is going to come from. Even more important, we must know how we are going to purify the sewage before we dispose of it back into the environment. Already, there are municipalities on the Vaal River whose sewage is causing so much pollution that water services providers downstream have difficulty - and spend a great deal of money - purifying water to supply to their users, and recreational users on the Barrage have had to forgo their water sports.

Municipalities will have to realise that they cannot simply dump their waste on other peoples' doorsteps - or into other peoples' rivers - and expect them to accept it. They will have to plan to manage their sanitation properly and they must avoid building schemes that they cannot afford to run.

These are some of the challenges of the second decade of democracy, these are some of the areas in which the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is going to work with municipalities, through cooperative programmes that we will continue to develop with SALGA,

such as the well-known Masibambane Programme which is now moving into its second phase.

But there is another priority that we dare not forget in this year of drought, although thankfully, the late rains alleviated what might otherwise have become a crisis. The drought has reminded us that we cannot take water for granted in South Africa. So we will pursue vigorously the development projects that have been initiated to achieve water security by storing more water in the good years to see us through in the lean.

Tenders will shortly be awarded to construct the dam on the Berg River, to meet the Cape Peninsula's growing needs; preliminary work on access roads has already begun. Important decisions will be taken this year on the expansion of storage in the Olifants River system, to meet the needs of the burgeoning platinum industry in Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. Several other emergency projects will go ahead to enable us to move water from one area to another and ensure that when the next drought strikes, we are even better prepared than we are now.

Well before the end of the year, I hope that Minister Sonjica will be releasing the National Water Resource Strategy. This has been completely redrafted to take into account thousands of comments that were received on the first draft. This is the strategy that will ensure that South Africa never runs out of water. It is our "blueprint for survival".

So there is no shortage of work to do. And that is even before we tackle:

- The transfer of DWAF's schemes to municipalities,
- The review of the role of the water boards and their relationship to local government.
- The challenge of enforcing the National Water Act and stopping the unauthorised use of water.
- The implementation of the environmental reserve.

In all this we will have to remember that we work in a wider world. Not only do we have to collaborate with our neighbours over management of rivers that we share but, we have leadership responsibilities in the African water sector. This requires us to participate in international programmes such as that of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which has just come to an end in New York where South Africa again played an important role.

This comes to the role of WISA and I would like to return to the question of sustainability.

I suspect that majority of people who are members of WISA are not the people who actually build water projects, the ones who get all the attention from the media for their delivery achievements, the ones who have their photographs taken when their schemes are opened with great fanfare, the ones who spend the big bucks (although some of them are here).

Most of WISA's members are people who keep the country's water services running. We only hear about you when there is a problem; when the water is cut off in Lynwood in Tshwane or when the residents of St James in Cape Town are over-charged (you don't hear nearly as often when the water goes off in Peddie or Mafefe); when the chemicals run out and there is a quality problem; when we investigate an outbreak of cholera in Kanana, Klerksdorp.

You are the people who have to take difficult decisions:

- about how to keep services running with shrinking budgets;
- about how to maintain user discipline needed for effective service delivery without penalising the poor;
- about how to provide services without the skills that are really needed to maintain our country's excellent record for the delivery of quality water services.

But without you, services would not happen; all the investments we make would be wasted.

We hear a lot of claims about how many peoples' water has been cut off for non-payment and the Department is very clear about how consumer discipline should be established. But what is missed in all this discussion is a much bigger problem. What is not highlighted is the problem of people whose supply is interrupted because of poor management and maintenance, because of a lack of consumer discipline, which allows some people to water huge gardens through illegal connections while whole communities go without any water at all.

Without breaking any confidence, I can tell you that research to be published shortly by the Human Sciences Research Council has indicated that for every one person who is without water because the supply has been cut off for non-payment - and there are thousands of them, but not the millions some claim - there may be as many as ten people whose water supply has been interrupted because of technical and management problems.

That is why it is so important to focus on the boring, invisible, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year job of operating water services and not just on the high profile very visible business of building the infrastructure.

And that is what WISA, a vibrant professional society, is about as we can see from our programme for the next three days. It is about bringing together people of the water sector to share experiences, consider solutions to common problems and to learn from each other as well as from people from further afield.

And this brings me to my second point. Colleagues, I think I speak for all who care about water services when I say that the biggest challenge that we face is to find people who can do the jobs that need to be done.

We know that we are still suffering from the legacy of an education system that has failed to deliver enough students who can be trained to be engineers and scientists, the professionals of the future.

We still face shortages of numerate high level; financial and management skills that we need to run what is actually a very complex service

We do have some strategies in place to meet these needs.

At the base, the water sector, including WISA - works actively with local government and water SETA to ensure that training needs of the sector are met in a systematic way.

The Water Research Commission, funded by water users, is one of the most important producers of high-level technically trained people. Through their projects, they have produced at least 750 post-graduates in water related fields, a third of whom are black, over the past ten years.

By making research grants conditional on training post-graduates, and particularly black post-graduates, the WRC makes major contribution to high-level skills development in the water sector, even before we count the great value of research itself.

Technicians are being produced, in considerable numbers although we know that they can only develop to their full potential in a well structured environment which in turn needs strong technical management oversight which we are struggling to provide.

We all know that you only really start learning once you have graduated. The greatest experience is that gained by working with the realities, on the job.

Indeed, one of the major successes South Africa has had in the Commission for Sustainable Development and other international fora has been to convince our rich world colleagues that never-ending capacity building and institutional reform projects - without actually getting on and doing the job of service provision - simply produces theoretical skills that are too often never used.

We need to learn by doing. And that requires not just people and committed organisations but people committed to their own development.

This is where WISA comes in. WISA, as a professional association, provides ongoing opportunities for professional development for engineers and scientists, managers and technicians.

I would suggest that any municipal or water board manager who wants to employ a water official who is NOT a WISA member needs to ask him or her:

- do you think you know everything that there is to know about water?
- why are you not interested in learning more?
- how are you developing your skills?
- why should I employ you if you are not prepared to develop yourself and contribute to the development of your staff?

I was shocked to learn recently from WISA that the number of DWAF officials who are WISA members appears to be on the decline and I have undertaken to turn around that trend. I would like to call on all water managers to make their contribution to professional development by promoting membership of WISA in their organisations.

Colleagues, we have a hugely challenging programme of work ahead. It will only be possible to achieve our goals if we work together and work to develop both our own skills and those of the teams around us.

This is the point on which I would like to conclude. The transformation of DWAF will continue, as we build a new organisation to respond to the new challenges. But there is no way that we can achieve what we need to, working alone. That is why it is appropriate to start the second Decade of Democracy with this conference. You, the members of WISA are part of the team that is going to achieve the goals, which we have been set.