

Limpopo Province Water Summit
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Polokwane
21 February 2005

Honourable Premier Sello Moloto
Honourable members of the Provincial Executive Committee
Honourable members of Parliament and the Provincial Legislature
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to stand in front of you at this auspicious occasion of the Water Summit of the Limpopo Province. For this, I wish to thank the Honourable Premier for his vision in holding this summit, and the invitation he extended to my department. As we are all aware, water is life. And in our country water is a scarce resource whose usage needs to be managed by all levels of government for the benefit of the entire country.

At the advent of democracy in 1994, government undertook a fundamental review of the principles underlying water policy in South Africa. We immediately saw that there was a difference between the management of water services (water in pipes, the provision of taps and toilets) and water resources (the management of water in rivers and dams). As a result, two White Papers were produced, a White Paper on Water Services (in 1994) and the White Paper on a National Water Policy in 1997.

These laid the basis for new laws governing water resources (the National Water Act 1998), and water services (the Water Services Act 1997).

The most important principles guiding these two pieces of legislation is that everyone has a right to safe water and sanitation that ensures an environment not harmful to health; and that water resources belong to all the people of South Africa, with government the custodian of water, responsible to ensure its sustainable management for the long-term social and economic benefit of the people. These are principles that derive from the Freedom Charter of 1956, that found resonance in the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994 that are guiding us as, in 2005, we come together to take another step forward in the process of building the democratic non-racial South Africa of our dreams.

Through the National Water Act, we want to ensure that our water resources – rivers, dams, underground reserves – are managed equitably and sustainably.

Through the Water Services Act, we want to ensure that water is delivered to the people safely, reliably and efficiently with local government taking the leading role. Honourable Premier, I would like to take this opportunity to announce that The Water Services Act Amendment Bill is currently being drafted by my department to recognise local government's leading role in water services and align the Water Services Act with broad local government legislation.

In the water services area, my department has been given the role of sector leadership, a role that was confirmed last year when Cabinet approved the Strategic Framework for Water Services. Our task is to ensure that policies are developed and the necessary institutional framework is in place for local government to deliver water services. We see ourselves as managing a system of "developmental regulation" in which support for the provision of basic services is as important as our monitoring and oversight role.

In this province, the priority must be to ensure that water services, safe water, decent sanitation, reach every member of our community. We need to ensure that all have access to at least Free Basic Water; we need to transfer the existing water supply schemes to local government which

are closer to the people and can ensure that they are adequately managed and maintained – although we will stand by to support and assist.

In the area of water resources, we have more direct responsibilities for this is a national competence, as it must be because water respects no boundaries, municipal or provincial. But we are nevertheless committed to enabling local stakeholders to participate fully in local water management issues. For this reason, we are establishing Catchment Management Agencies to manage water at catchment level and we support the establishment of Water User Associations so that groups of water users, particularly farmers, can be assisted to cooperate in their management of this scarce resource.

In this province, we must pay particular attention to the needs of small farmers who were often ignored in the past and we are collaborating actively with the provincial Government to do this. We must ensure that the water is well managed and that the challenges of drought and variability are scientifically addressed. And we must ensure that, where there is scope, we develop our rivers to yield more water to meet the growing needs of our Province's people.

I am, therefore grateful that this intergovernmental summit will tackle issues of water and sanitation together in the spirit of co-operative governance. I also wish to challenge the summit to develop models for how each sphere of government can support the other spheres in the Limpopo Province in managing water resources and delivering water services to our communities.

Indeed, ladies and gentlemen, this call for co-operation and support within the sector comes at a particularly difficult time of drought and water scarcity. As we are all aware, the country has experienced below-average rainfall over the past two years leading to water shortages in many areas of the country-including Limpopo.

In some areas, including some in Limpopo, dam levels are far below average for this time of the yearly rainfall cycle.

This calls for co-operation between my department and all water users including municipalities. I would therefore, like to confirm that my department will continue to offer information on the water situation and help them to plan to meet their needs – for it is by planning to use what we have that we can best avoid crisis situations. Where there are real challenges of drought, we will provide technical support to users through established disaster management systems, and financial assistance through the routine national government disaster management funding to alleviate the effects of drought.

I can confirm that in Limpopo, DWAF has allocated R51 million in the 2003/04 and 2004/05 financial years to municipalities under the Drought Relief Programme. This funding is aimed at relieving our communities of the most severe affects of the drought.

Honourable Premier, the above illustrates the need for on-going co-operation between all the three spheres of government to tackle the pressing issues relating to water. My department remains committed to this constitutional requirement.

But, I repeat, we must avoid crisis by planning at the right time. So we are collaborating closely with the Province to support one of Limpopo's key economic sectors, as identified in the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy. The mining, agriculture and tourism sectors have been identified in the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy (PGDS) as the key sectors that shall support the growth and development of the province.

As we are all aware, in June last year, Cabinet approved the proposed development of a dam on the Steelpoort River at De Hoop. The main objective of this development, which forms part of the Olifants River Water Resource Development Project (ORWRDP), is to supply water to

communities in the Sekhukhune, Waterberg and Capricorn Districts, and to support mining along the Dilokong corridor. Furthermore, the water from the ORWRDP will support the revitalised small rural agriculture schemes along the Olifants River in the Sekhukhune area.

It is estimated that the total cost of developing the infrastructure for this project shall be in the order of R4billion. Ladies and Gentleman, this is a significant requirement for investment. But it is an investment in the future, and upliftment of rural communities that have borne the brunt of poverty and deprivation. In line with policy, government had sought funding from potential users to fund part of this project and the mining industry had indicated keen interest in taking up the water that the project could provide.

I am afraid that, more recently, when we went to them to sign the water supply agreements that are fundamental to project development, they indicated that they were not presently in a position to do so. This may delay the project somewhat. We are however committed to promote it and, in consultation with National Treasury and other agencies, I am sure we will be able to find a solution to this challenge that does not unduly delay our progress.

I have also instructed my department to see to it that in all new water resource development projects, the communities directly affected by the schemes must benefit – through improved water services, jobs, long-term black economic empowerment, and local economic development arising from the schemes.

There are a range of other areas in which important progress is being made. We need to complete the transfer of water supply schemes to municipalities so that there can be an end to the split responsibility where one organization provides the service and the other manages the users. Until we do that, we will not achieve user discipline and effective service management.

We need to complete the institutional review process, which will clarify the role and governance of the Water Boards which can play such an important part in achieving effective regional supplies that, by their nature, must cross local government – and even provincial – boundaries.

The Water Boards are statutory bodies whose function is to supply bulk water primarily. Their area of jurisdiction may or may not coincide with the boundaries of local and district municipalities.

We have also established Water Services Authorities who may choose to utilize service providers or provide services themselves.

The section 78 process that has been undertaken by the Water Services Authorities seem to have taken further the existing tensions between the Water Boards and the Water Services Authorities.

The process seems to have created an environment where some Water Services Authorities see an opportunity of getting rid of the Water Boards who are supplying bulk services within their area of jurisdiction.

I believe that this is not a correct approach. I am not saying that the Water Boards are doing all the Water Boards are doing well and therefore meeting the expectations of Water Services Authorities. I am suggesting we should approach the challenge systematically so that we do not end up throwing away the baby with the bath.

I wish to ask the Water Service Authorities to work with my department as we go through the institutional reform process. The process will assist us to systematically determine which Water Boards have capacity and which ones do not. This process, I think will help us come to conclusions that may be less disruptive.

Therefore, I would like to appeal to the Water Services Authorities to support the process of institutional reform, but in the meantime work with the Water Boards.

One option, which should be considered seriously, is entering into service level agreements with the Water Boards. That I believe will help us to manage the relationship between the Water Services Authorities and the Water Boards. Hopefully this will also lower the tensions between the two institutions.

We must make real inroads on the scandalous backlog in sanitation in peoples' homes – for without proper sanitation we cannot have healthy communities. I am happy to say that this priority is now well recognized by Cabinet and I expect important announcements to be made shortly. As the President said in his State of the Nation Address, we must also iron out the rough creases between Departments that have slowed down our progress in ensuring that all schools and clinics have safe water and sanitation.

But we can only make progress in all these areas if we work together, as one team. So, Honourable Premier, in conclusion, I would again want to thank you and your Provincial Government for arranging this summit which provides a basis for us to plan our work together. I close by urging all participants to work together to find practical solutions to the problems of water in the province.

KEA LEBOGA, NDO LIVHUHA, HI KENSILE, DANKIE, THANK YOU.