

Northern Cape Water Summit
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Kimberley
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Role of Water in meeting the developmental challenges of the Northern Cape

Chairperson / Programme Director
Premier
Members of the Executive Council
Mayors and Councillors
Distinguished Guests
Departmental Officials
Ladies and Gentlemen

The first priority of our people is to have safe and reliable water supply and sanitation services – the better life that the Freedom Charter committed us to fight for. I must remind you that without water, there would be no economy, no services of any kind, indeed, no life.

So while the immediate priority of our people is to get access to those services that I mention – and I will come back to these - I want to start by talking about that very essence of life, the water resources on which we all depend. Without the water resources, the services cannot be delivered.

In your Provincial Growth and Development Strategy I picked up that reference is made on numerous occasions to the role that the availability of water is playing and will play in the development of the Northern Cape, such as the more efficient use of water resources, the allocation of water rights, equitable access to resources, and other.

The Northern Cape is the driest of all our provinces and I believe it is entirely appropriate for us to come together here today to consider how water can contribute even more to your economic and social development programmes – and where it may be a serious constraint.

This must be seen and understood as part of our efforts to make co-operative government, work. We must be guided by a common vision if we are to work together to achieve our common goals.

We have come together to discuss both water resource management and water services, that is water supply and sanitation and in the presentations and discussions that follow, you will interrogate these in detail.

So let me simply highlight a few critical issues on which we should concentrate at this summit.

I must start by reminding you all that South Africa is a dry country, as already mentioned, and especially the Northern Cape being the driest of all the Provinces. Because we manage water well, we sometimes forget that we are on the edge of what is internationally defined as "water scarcity" in terms of how little water we have available per person. In areas in the Northern Cape people are used to survive with even less water than is being regarded as basic minimum in the country.

Because we are so short of water, we must ensure that we get as much benefit from its use as possible.

That means we have to be careful and efficient in the way we use it and we need to be clever too – internationally they talk about how to get "more crop per drop". We must think about how to get "more jobs per drop" and "more products per drop".

We also need to protect the quality of our water because once it is polluted, there is nowhere else we can go to find other supplies.

The Provincial Growth and Development Strategy says that, to give effect to your developmental objectives, targets to be reached by 2014 include:

- To maintain an average annual economic growth rate of between 4% and 6%;
- to halve the unemployment rate;
- to reduce the number of households living in poverty by 5% per annum;
- to reduce infant mortality by two thirds;
- to reduce maternal mortality by two thirds;

- to provide shelter for all;
- to provide clean water to all by 2009;
- to provide access to adequate sanitation to all by 2009; and
- to provide adequate infrastructure for economic growth and development.

I know we are talking the same language because water and water services will play a vital role in achieving all these objectives. I applaud you for wanting to eradicate sanitation backlogs even before the National targets.

Our National Water Resource Strategy was developed precisely to address these challenges and during the presentations and discussions, I hope you will consider how its specific programmes support your priorities because we want to ensure that the way we manage our water supports the achievement of the goals that we have set ourselves as a nation.

The Northern Cape with its harsh and arid climate has less potential than our other Provinces for intensive agriculture. The limited water resources must thus be used as efficiently as possible. Your commitment in the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy to seek to diversify agricultural production and to increase high value crops is exactly in line with our recommendation of getting more “crop per drop”.

Although you have the two largest rivers in the country running through the Northern Cape the Orange and Vaal Rivers, there are great demands on the water from the upstream users, which include the economic heartland of the country. Whilst the Northern Cape’s entitlements on their water will not be downscaled, the reality is that there is currently no surplus water available in these two Rivers.

We have, however, in the National Water Resource Strategy reserved water in the Lower Orange River for 4 000 hectares of new irrigation for the settlement of emerging farmers. I also announced a policy in 2004 on how my Department can assist resource poor irrigation farmers through various subsidies. I hope that during this summit we will discuss how this water can be used to make practical progress to achieve your goals on agricultural development and land reform processes. My Department, with the Provincial

Department of Agriculture, have developed structures to ensure that movement will be shown on projects such as at Blocuso, Pella and the Karoo.

We are anxious to ensure that the Government irrigation schemes, which we have converted to Water User Associations, contribute to your programme. Indeed, we believe that the Water User Associations may be able to provide effective structures through which partnerships between commercial and emerging farmers can be established, as has happened elsewhere in the country. We know that successful and efficient farming is a challenging business and we must get all the help we can to ensure that our new farmers are successful.

Although in the Northern Cape the tourism industry around the two major rivers are already in a well developed state, we believe that there are still economic opportunities to explore, especially by bringing on board communities who had previously been excluded to a large extent from the recreational use of water.

We have an international responsibility towards our down stream Orange River neighbour, Namibia, to ensure that their water entitlement out of the River is honoured. My Department is currently involved in a joint study with Namibia on the possibility of building a new dam on the Lower Orange River to ensure future stability of water supply, as stated in the National Water Resources Strategy.

The Northern Cape will obviously benefit by such developments during construction time and beyond. So, whilst using our water efficiently and being "water wise", we must continue to ensure that we also protect the interest of our neighbouring states and contribute to economic growth in the SADC region.

Focussing now on water services, I need to highlight the successes that have been achieved by government, nationally and in the Northern Cape in particular.

At a national level we can proudly say that significant progress has already been achieved during the first 10 years of our democracy. Nationally, my Department has served 10,5 million people with the basic level of water supply and government as a whole – through

housing and municipal programme more than 15 million people. Although not all have supplies to the RDP standard, within 200 metres from the home, only 3,6 million or 8% of our population are still without any access to safe water and we are still committed to ending that backlog by 2008. As you are aware we celebrated the 10 millionth recipient in your Province, at Soverby along the Orange River in November last year.

The record with sanitation is less impressive, but 8,5 million people have been served with basic sanitation, largely through housing and municipal infrastructure programmes. Sanitation remains a major challenge with 16 million people in our country not enjoying access to a safe, healthy and convenient sanitation facility.

The Northern Cape has shared in our achievements and challenges. Although the Northern Cape has the smallest population of all the Provinces, less than 900 000 people, the unique challenges of the Province are recognised. The scarcity of water resources in large areas and the population spread over the vastness of the Province present its own logistical challenges, which cannot simply be resolved by ensuring sufficient funding.

The Northern Cape has been on the forefront in recognising the challenges associated with scarce water resources and the innovative alternative sanitation solutions you sought. I must commend you on the dry sanitation systems, which you had successfully implemented in Namaqualand. You have done very well in providing basic water supply to 90% of unserved households, as well as providing basic sanitation to 74% of unserved people since 1994.

Of course, providing infrastructure is only the start of providing water supply and sanitation. Good management of operations is critical if we are to avoid dry taps, blocked toilets and polluted rivers.

With respect to the challenge of sanitation, you will know that, in co-operation with Department of Provincial and Local Government and the National Treasury, we have made R1,2 billion available over the next three years to eliminate the bucket system once and for all. The Northern Cape bucket eradication programme has been recognised as

one of the leading ones in the country. With approximately only 16 000 buckets still remaining in the Province, you are well on your way to eliminate this stinking legacy of the past.

We all are aware of the challenges facing some municipalities in the Province where they experience problems with the management of sewage treatment works and water purification plants. It is the responsibility of each municipality to ensure proper planning, budgeting and management of such infrastructure to prevent service delivery breakdowns and pollution incidents.

Where the bucket systems are located within dense urban areas and you are planning to upgrade to full waterborne sanitation, please remember that it takes water to flush toilets. Make sure that existing water supply and sewage treatment infrastructure can accommodate this or make plans to expand it. You must also make sure that your projects are financially viable and that you have the necessary skills and resources to operate and maintain the services.

For this programme and to improve water services generally, my Department will provide hands-on support to municipalities to improve their Water Services Development Plans, implement demand and conservation measures, use their Municipal Infrastructure Grants effectively and institute proper monitoring programmes.

The quality of drinking water in the Province remains a challenge due to the fact that the natural quality of ground water is poor and because of the technical expertise demands of operating water purification plants. A recent assessment in two District Municipalities highlighted the challenges posed.

This is part of our contribution to Project Consolidate and I am pleased with the progress that my Department's Regional Office here in Kimberley, in partnership with the Provincial Department of Housing and Local Government, has made in this regard.

Finally, to alleviate poverty and to ensure equitable access to water services by all people, we have to ensure that the Free Basic Water and Free Basic Sanitation Policies are effectively applied in all municipalities. This can be done if we understand that it goes

hand-in-hand with proper financial management and functional cost recovery to ensure financial viability of the services that municipalities provide. It is recognised that the Northern Cape has progressed very far with regard to supplying Free Basic Services to its people and 100% of indigent households already have access to Free Basic Services, which is an astounding accomplishment.

In closing, I wish to state that water has played a prominent role to establish the principles of equality, dignity and equity, the right to safe and healthy living, the right to food and jobs and an unqualified opportunity to develop our human and economic assets.

The Provincial Growth and Development Strategy has set important milestones with regard to water issues, which clearly demonstrate the common goals and principles we share with you as a province. Let us join forces and minds and work together to achieve a better life for all our people in an effective and sustainable way.

Let this water summit be used to ensure that we reach our common goals with regard to the water sector.