

**Water Allocation Reform in South Africa: National Consultative Workshop**  
**Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**CSIR Conference Centre, Pretoria**  
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Ladies and gentlemen, facilitator, friends and colleagues, today marks an important step in the process of water management in South Africa and its contribution to the transformation of our country.

We are all well aware that South Africa is a country of great inequities. Despite the fact that we are a middle income and relatively well developed country, more than 40% of our population live in poverty. Despite the major changes we have made over the past ten years of democracy, our natural resources such as land, water and minerals are still largely in the hands of a relatively wealthy white minority (and may I say, largely in the hands of a male dominated minority).

This is a picture that has to change. It has to change not only because it is inequitable and unfair, but because we need to harness the developmental potential of all of our people, not only a few. The harnessing of the developmental potential of all our people will lead us towards sustainable and fair economic growth, will lead us towards a more stable society.

We have, over the past ten years, heard much about land reform, and the issues of ownership of mineral rights. Today it is the turn of water. Today we are declaring WAR; WAR on wasteful use, WAR on inequity in water use and WAR on poverty.

The WAR I am talking about is Water Allocation Reform. Over the past ten years, our Department focused on the delivery of basic water supply & sanitation. This was important in restoring the dignity of the lives of our people. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade, having ensured access to clean water for more than 10<sup>th</sup> million people, the agenda is shifting towards ensuring fairness in access to water for productive purposes and fairness in sharing the benefits from that use.

The National Water Act, through which we will address this matter, is a remarkable piece of legislation - one of the finest pieces of water legislation in the world. It is, to my mind, particularly fine not only because it comprehensively addresses the balance of protection and use, but also because it specifically addresses the issue of redressing the inequities of the past. It is built on the three principles – that of sustainability, efficiency & equity. These are three principles that we need to address in water allocation. Three principles that, as custodians of the nation's water resources, the Department must ensure that there is adherence thereto.

Achieving the principle of equity is a particular challenge. As I have mentioned, access to natural resources, including water, is still a predominantly white (and male) privilege. This needs to change. We need to ensure that water can be made available to black entrepreneurs, to women, to the disabled. We need to ensure that water is available to a wide range of users, from small-scale farmers and SMMEs to the biggest and most wealthy industrial and agricultural users. We need to make water available in a way that will sustain and grow the first economy while allowing the second economy users to develop into the first economy. And all this we must do in a water scarce country where our water resources are already fully allocated in many catchments and where environmental needs have often been neglected. This is no small challenge.

The "Draft Water Allocation Reform Framework" that we are here to discuss addresses this challenge by suggesting methods that could be used to:

- Take proactive steps to meet the water needs of historically disadvantaged individuals, women and the poor;
- Ensure participation by these groups;

- Establish partnerships to build capacity to use water productively because it is not enough to give access to water and expect poor people to prosper if they do not have the land, the start up capital or the skills to grow products or to access markets; and
- Through all this, to promote the sustainable, efficient and beneficial use of water in the public interest.

In South Africa and internationally, water resources management has often been seen as a highly technical process. Through our approach, however, we want to demonstrate that people sit at the centre of water allocation. The water allocation reform process is fundamentally a socio-political process. However, in order for it to be effective; it must be based on sound and appropriate technical, economic and environmental approaches.

Just as there are growing demands on our water resources, there are equally loud demands to address the inequities in access to and use of our water resources. To balance these demands, it may be necessary to re-allocate water between users, where some water may be taken from existing users to give to those who have none.

This is a complex process, and will require extensive consultation with stakeholders in that particular catchment if it is to achieve the goal of equity, sustainable and efficient use in the public interest. We will not serve the public interest if water is wasted or used unproductively – there will be less food produced and less jobs created.

Professor Kader Asmal as the first Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in our democracy, made it very clear and I quote from our National Water Policy “that in changing the discriminatory laws of the past that governed the way water was managed, our National Water Act and the way water is managed in future, will not protect existing vested interests nor will there be a water grab” within our reform process. The draft position paper we are talking about today gives effect to this statement.

In turn, Minister Ronnie Kasrils became known for his water services “water ladder”. Through our water allocation reform process we are going to take this approach in the use of water for productive purposes.

The National Water Act already provides for the small amounts of water required for basic human needs as part of the “Reserve”. Larger amounts are listed as Schedule 1 uses which can be used without licenses. Finally, amounts greater than this must be authorised for use through general authorizations and licences.

We will continue to strive to help our people along the journey from being small subsistence water users to, if they so wish, large commercial, productive and competitive users not just in South Africa but internationally. This we hope will contribute to the government imperatives of poverty eradication and socio-economic development.

To be able to achieve this goal, we must know how much water we have, how it is currently being used and how much we can take without damaging the environment.

Work on this is already well underway. Water use has been registered right across the country. The next step is to verify the claims that have been made and work in this regard has been initiated in several Catchments (like Umhlathuze, Inkomati & Olifants) that will enable us to apply the proposed WAR framework.

In the Mhlathuze catchment, the extent of water use is being examined through the verification and validation process that will be finished by end of April. This will help us in determining the lawfulness of water use, inefficient use as well as the unlawful uses. This information will soon be presented to our stakeholders in the Catchment inviting them to join us in crafting a vision and a way forward on how to best use their water while ensuring that benefits are realized by all.

Likewise, work in both the Inkomati and Olifants has begun whilst the establishment of the Inkomati CMA Board will be announced in the near future. The Catchment Management Agencies are important because they will bring together the stakeholders to undertake the detailed work of considering water requirements and proposing the allocation of available water to meet them.

This process will be supported by programme of support to resource poor farmers. All these initiatives are part of an integrated package of measures through which we will achieve the goals of our water resource policy, pro-poor integrated water resources management and water allocation reform.

There are short-term and longer-term interventions that will be made to develop towards a more equitable society. We can move more quickly on water for food security to assist rural people who want to harvest the rain. We are moving on allocating water to new irrigation farmers, we need to ensure that illegal users stop abstracting water that could be used by emerging farmers in the interests of equity, and we shall encourage and guide with the help of our sister Department of Agriculture the more efficient use of water in agriculture.

We are making war on inequity, on poverty and a war for peace and prosperity. The longer-term reallocations of water at present taken by existing users will be carefully studied and with the achievement of consensus on the process some of that water will be allocated to emergent users. Land redistribution in the name of equity must be accompanied by water redistribution to ensure equity in land use.

We are also working on our National Water Resource Strategy (NWRS) to expand the amount of available water to the utmost. We know that this will be a long and costly process but water is clearly a strategic input to our national efforts to enlarge our economy and we need to “bake a bigger cake” rather than rely only on subdividing what we already have.

The water allocation reform programme, which we are launching today, in essence is a step towards giving effect to the equity aspects of the NWRS.

Water Access Reallocation is going to be a protracted process but we shall not permit it to be dragged out by intransigent refusal to cooperate in the achievement of the righting of historic wrongs.

Ladies and gentlemen, the challenge before us is huge. I would like to invite each of you to consider how we build a nation based on equitable, sustainable and efficient use of our water resources. I call on each and every one of you, as patriots, as the ambassadors of a better life for all, to work with us in the reallocation of our scarce water resources.

I urge you to help us in “ensuring some for all, forever, together”, by engaging constructively both during these two days and into the future to help us craft a solid and speedy way towards Water Allocation Reform in South Africa.

On behalf of government and the people of South Africa, I would like to thank the UK Department for International Development for their far-sighted support in this process. This framework does not only belong to DWAF, nor just to the people of South Africa. It reflects our efforts to ensure that in managing our water in Africa and beyond, we adopt approaches that aim to achieve broader global goals of fairness and equity, poverty eradication and sustainability.

The world is watching and I hope that I can call on the support of all those gathered here to collectively work in the interests and for the future of our country. Through the processes we are starting here today, I believe that we are taking a huge step that will see our precious water

serving the interests of all of our people, black and white, men and women, poor and not-poor, building one sustainable and powerful nation, a South Africa that truly belongs to all.

Enkosi.