

**International Conference on Water for Food & Ecosystems**  
**Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**The Hague, Netherlands**  
**1 February 2005**

**THEME 1: IMPLEMENTATION "KNOW HOW FOR ACTION"**

Chairperson of the conference, Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands, Dr Cees Veerman,  
His Royal Highness, Prince Willem Alexander, Prince of Orange, Crown Prince of the Netherlands,  
Your Excellencies,  
Director-General of the FAO, Mr Jacques Diouf,  
Honoured guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I feel honoured in taking this platform to share with you.

Over the past decade many developing countries including South Africa have devoted their energies in policy formulation and review of their policies to promote science and arts of water management for agriculture, food production and ecosystems. This was in compliance with the objectives and the targets set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) as far back as 1992.

The International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID) during the Third World Water Forum in 2003 in Kyoto in Japan postulated that advancements in technology have made it easier to build mathematical models side by side with traditional and conventional models to enable rational approach for evolution of water policies.

Governments as custodians of natural resources have formulated policies, which are in line with international commitments on sustainable development. The global challenge now is how we going to successfully implement these policies in a manner that allows every stakeholder to be empowered to manage the natural resources. In so doing, the responsibility of our natural resource management would be transferred into the hands of the users. Without the support and the ownership of the implementation process by the multi-stakeholders, commitments made to sustainable development of our planet's available natural resources will mean nothing.

**The South African experience**

In 1994 a new democratic Government of South Africa faced the challenge of reforming water legislation as part of a much broader process of transformation.

The key challenge faced was to address the plight of the black majority, which had not just been politically oppressed, but also systematically excluded from participation in the economy, except at the most menial level in which a minority had access to the bulk of productive resources.

This had to be achieved against the backdrop of a difficult global environment, hostile to active government intervention and unforgiving of any deviation from the fiscal rectitude prescribed by the Washington consensus.

Given the challenges, we believe that South Africa has made tremendous progress in our first decade of freedom.

But another set of constraints was less remarked on: Those were the natural challenges posed by aridity (according to the World Water Assessment, we are the 30th driest country per capita in the world), very unevenly distributed rainfall and a variable climate.

These posed particular challenges for our rural communities and for the huge population of "displaced urban" dwellers that had been prevented from settling in the cities where the economy was centred. A huge population was dependent on a very small natural resource base. It was not, therefore, surprising to find that in those rural areas to which black South Africans had been restricted, the principal source of income for households was pension payments and remittances from urban-based family members.

Nor was it surprising to find that in many areas, the productive capacity of the land had been degraded and in many cases was no longer cultivated.

In this context there were a number of priorities:

- We had to address the imbalance in access to land;
- We had to address the low incomes of the rural poor;
- We had to ensure that the way we did this did not undermine the formal economy which was providing employment and government revenue to enable government to pursue its programmes; and
- We had to achieve these objectives sustainable, without doing further damage to the land and environment more generally.

### **Policy and legislative review**

This conjuncture provided my Government and the South African Department of Water Affairs and Forestry in particular with a unique challenge and opportunity to undertake a fundamental review of the nation's approach to water management and to put in place a legal and policy framework to achieve our goals.

This required us to draw on the principles enshrined in our Constitution governing the use of natural resources, which determined that Government was the custodian of the nation's water resources and "must ensure that water is protected, used, developed, conserved, managed and controlled in a sustainable and equitable manner for the benefit of all persons and in accordance with its national mandate".

According to Chapter 2 of South Africa's Bill of Rights, everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being, to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations, and to have access to sufficient food and water. These statements echo the precepts outlined in Agenda 21 and set the scene for the development of policies and legislation that are socially and economically enabling, while also ensuring sustainability.

The promulgation of South Africa's National Water Act in 1998 formalised my country's changed approach to the management and utilisation of its water resources. However, a change in law does not automatically change the attitudes of those who may continue to regard water as ever-present and ever-accessible. For this to happen, a marked change in attitude towards water resource management on the part of those tasked with the law's implementation is imperative.

The law was guided by a set of principles, among which are the following:

"The objective of managing the quantity, quality and reliability of the nation's water resources is to achieve optimum, long term, environmentally sustainable social and economic benefit for society from their use.

The quantity, quality and reliability of water required to maintain the ecological functions on which humans depend shall be reserved so that the human use of water does not individually or cumulatively compromise the long term sustainability of aquatic and associated ecosystems.

The water required meeting the basic human needs referred to in Principle 8 and the needs of the environment shall be identified as "the Reserve" and shall enjoy priority of use by right. The use of water for all other purposes shall be subject to authorisation. "

The establishment of the Ecological Reserve was arguably the most important development in environmental sustainability for decades. The challenge we are now facing is implementing the policy that is based on these noble ideals.

### **Implementation challenges**

As I have already indicated, one key element of our approach in South Africa is to ensure that we do not undermine the formal economy on which we depend.

In this context there was no attempt at radical redistribution of water. Our concern has rather been to ensure that we achieve optimum, long term, environmentally sustainable social and economic benefit for society from their use.

To this end, an early priority has been to promote greater efficiency in water use. One simple way to do this was to end the previous monopoly of riparian rights, in terms of which water was virtually owned by those through whose land it flowed.

This was not just inequitable, but was also inefficient since it was difficult for water rights to be passed from low value to higher value uses or to be distributed more equitably.

### **National Water Resources Strategy (NWRS)**

Legislation is implemented by means of strategies. Chapter 2 of South Africa's National Water Act of 1998 required the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry (my predecessor), after consultation with stakeholders at large, to develop a National Water Resource Strategy (NWRS) that would facilitate the proper management of water resources

The first edition of the National Water Resource Strategy has been approved and was widely circulated for stakeholder /public consideration and input. It was noted in Chapter 1 that the fundamental objectives for managing South Africa's water resources are to achieve equitable access to water resources and their sustainable and efficient use. In Chapter 2 it was concluded that, although they are limited and highly variable, the country's water resources would be sufficient to support social and economic development for the foreseeable future provided they are judiciously managed, and wisely allocated.

Implementation of South Africa's National Water Act of 1998 yielded some remarkable outputs. It helped my government to meet basic needs of clean potable water, food and energy while taking into account all three sectors namely, water for food, people and ecosystems.

The 10th anniversary of our democracy was also marked by the celebration of 10 millionth South African household that received potable water.

Equitable access has both a short-term and long-term dimension. It is important that the needs of current and future generations are considered in the management of water resources.

### **Examples of environmental water requirements and implementation**

The strategy to develop new dams is taking into consideration the requirements of the Reserve, allowing for specific release structures to be constructed giving effect to the requirements of the Ecological Reserve.

The Thukela River Study, in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, is an example of getting it right from the start, as the planning studies have taken all the important aspects of social, economic and ecological consideration into account in one of the most comprehensive studies ever undertaken to ensure that we are well prepared to ensure equity and sustainability.

The work that my Department is undertaking in the Mhlathuze River, also in KwaZulu-Natal, is a serious attempt not only to investigate, but also to implement, the provisions to ensure water allocation in such a way so as to address future needs and the imbalances of the past.

It is very important to emphasise that the National Water Act of 1998 highlights the link between integrated water management and socio-economic development. Water management, which steers the distribution of the multiple benefits from water within society, is intrinsically developmental. The assumption that water management is merely 'technical' or 'an end in itself' is a mistake. We, therefore, view new water management institutions by definition as developmental in nature. We need to see these institutions play a major role in poverty eradication and it is a serious challenge to the research and development community to find ways of contributing to this agenda. It is my concern that these institutions will find themselves "fighting fires" in a way and not being readily able to pick up new approaches and techniques.

We need to admit that the process to implement is technically challenging, as the successful management of water resources is critically dependent upon our ability to integrate various decision-making processes.

### **Water for Food and Rural Development**

#### **1. Lessons from the past**

As in many developing countries, South Africa has its share of dysfunctional irrigation schemes.

While serious mistakes were made by the apartheid government in following a top-down approach in the planning and implementation of most of these schemes, they also face huge challenges of viability in a liberalised agricultural market in which prices and markets are uncertain and limited farmer support is available.

In the revitalisation of the irrigation schemes, the economic, social and environmental aspects are now integrated in a highly participatory and bottom-up approach with the objective of ensuring ownership of the solutions and creating truly sustainable community development.

The South African Government is actively busy with the implementation of a process approach that was developed from the numerous and expensive lessons that were learned during the past.

#### **2. Meeting the growing and changing demands for food, alleviate poverty and maintain economic growth**

The policies and strategies for food security fall mainly under the auspices of the South African Department of Agriculture. However, there is great cooperation between the latter and DWAF. While at a national level, self-sufficiency is not a goal and food security is achieved as much through trade as through local production, at the household level the position is different.

In the household context, my Department has a potentially vital role to play in supporting poor rural families to improve their livelihoods by making water available not just for domestic use, but also for household production.

The National Water Act of 1998 makes provision, under Schedule 1, for water to be taken for the growing of food for reasonable domestic use and for food gardens not for commercial purposes. In those areas where there is still water available, general authorisations allow the taking of water for larger endeavours, up to certain volumes specified by my Department. In other areas, formal licenses are required for irrigation activities.

We also support irrigation activities by small-scale producers through the provision of a subsidy for water infrastructure, from treadle pumps to dams. One of the challenges that we face, that is peculiar to the racial history of South Africa, is that in the farming community, 95% of the water is used by white farmers. The black farming community, once vibrant and efficient, has been all but destroyed by the years of apartheid, and is only now slowly being rebuilt.

As part of rebuilding black agriculture, we will need to redistribute water from white farmers to black farmers. The National Water Act of 1998 allows that through a process of compulsory licensing, water can be reallocated to ensure ecological sustainability of water resources, to address the result of past racial and gender discrimination, and to stimulate economic growth. It will be a challenge to our considerable innovative abilities to do this in a way that enhances our economy.

We are also moving towards rainwater harvesting for targeted areas where the poorest are concentrated. As part of South Africa's contribution to the achievement of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and specifically to reduce by half the number of food insecure households, DWAF is financially supporting the construction of rainwater harvest tanks to rural households.

### 3. Actions and measures to improve efficiency and sustainability of agricultural water use taking account of social, economic and environmental uniqueness

South Africa is in the process of implementing the NWRS, which establishes the institutional framework for the protection, use, development, conservation, management and control of water resources for the country as a whole. It also provides the framework within which water will be managed at regional or catchment level, in defined water management areas. NWRS, which must be formally reviewed from time to time, is binding on all authorities and institutions exercising powers or performing duties under the National Water Act of 1998.

Furthermore the National Water Act of 1998 requires every catchment management agency to progressively develop a catchment management strategy for the water resources within its water management area. Catchment management strategies must be in harmony with the National Water Resource Strategy. In the process of developing this strategy, a catchment management agency must seek co-operation and agreement on water-related matters from the various stakeholders and interested persons. The catchment management strategy, which must be reviewed from time to time, will include a water allocation plan.

At this point, I must refer to the issue of the Johannesburg Programme of Action and the national water management plans that are due to be in place by the end of this year. I raise this topic because I am convinced that one of the major issues that need to be included in those management plans for most African countries is the issue of further development of big infrastructure – or, if I may use the words, the building of dams. I am glad to see that the World Bank has finally come around to the position that we have taken for a long time, those developing countries, and particularly countries in Africa, need more dams.

South Africa is currently battling the impacts of a drought. Recent rains in most parts of the country have saved us from devastation, but in some areas the impact has been severe. We have seen significant restrictions on water use by farmers – up to 100% reductions in water use in some areas. Despite the drought, however, we have managed to get through the drought so far, largely because of our well-developed storage facilities. The same cannot be said of many other countries in Africa where the per capita volume of water in storage is frighteningly low.

We need to build more dams in Africa. We need to build them in a way that takes into account the needs of the aquatic ecology, and takes into account the needs of affected people. But there can be no doubt that we need more dams. If we are to increase the agricultural productivity of the world, one element of the plan must be to build dams in Africa.

Conclusion

Even if it is a cliché, it is necessary to say that appropriate management of water is a priority, especially in light of global climate change and increasing pressures on limited water supplies. The manifestations of the challenges could reach global proportions, but it should be borne in mind that the answers would be found in the regional, national and local context.

South Africa had done much to address the challenge. The political changes, as well as the changes in water policy, have won worldwide esteem for South Africa. The slogan "Some, for all, forever" captures the essence of what is needed, and is a succinct political translation of what is needed. Internationally, South Africa is at the forefront of water resources management changes and we are willing to share our expertise with the rest of the developing world.

South Africa, like many other developing countries, has an excellent law and policy, but the capacity to implement these is still needed. My Department is undergoing major changes with regard to how to conduct its business in terms of collaborative management and it needs to be supported at the appropriate level with science, knowledge and capacity development.

I would like to end by saying that the South African slogan Batho Pele (People first) must be upheld, because if we put people first we will ensure sustainable utilisation and protection of our limited water resources to support social and economic activities.

There is a slogan used by my Department, which encapsulates the approach we are trying to implement. It is an approach that balances economic, social and environmental needs in the use of water. It is an approach that sees the protection of the aquatic ecosystem as integral to the sustainable production of food, the sustainable development of rural communities, the future of the country. The slogan is a simple one, but a powerful one, and one that carries a message for all of us. The slogan is "Ensuring some for all for ever, together".

I thank you.