

Baswa le Meetse (Youth in Water) Awards Ceremony
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Gallagher Estate, Midrand, Gauteng
30 March 2007

Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Water Affairs & Forestry, Ms Connie September,
and members of the Portfolio Committee
Councillors
Members of the Diplomatic Corp
Representative from Irish Aid, Mr Malcolm White
CEOs of Water Boards

1. INTRODUCTION

I would like to welcome you to the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry annual Baswa le Meetse Awards. These awards have become an inspirational and symbolic feature in our departmental calendar. They are one of the highlights of our year, as they encapsulate the links between water, sanitation, health and hygiene as well as arts and culture, and the youth. This year, we are celebrating the fifth year of the Baswa le Meetse Awards – hence the theme “5th Element”.

We are honoured that a number of important people; Ministers, Members of Parliament, Ambassadors and senior private sector representatives have joined us today to witness the brilliance, energy and enthusiasm of our youth. All of these people in important positions realise that we need to support the youth and the necessity for our young people to acquire the skills needed to grow and develop our country.

2. BACKGROUND OF BASWA LE MEETSE

In the audience today we have gathered from all corners of our country the scientists, engineers and artists of tomorrow. We will be honouring their achievements and will announce the national winners of the Baswa le Meetse Awards 2007. These are the students who have done the best and are our national champions, the *crème de la crème* and they should be extremely proud of their achievements.

It is a pleasure for me to see these brilliant young children taking advantage of the opportunities for further development that have been created for them as a result of initiatives like Baswa le Meetse. They are an example to the youth of this country. Sadly there are many young people who do not value the importance of education and further developing their skills.

Baswa le Meetse encourages youth to participate in education and awareness programmes on water, sanitation, health and hygiene. The Grade 6 learners convey health and hygiene messages through drama, music, poetry, praise singing and poster development. Their projects are guided by the theme “Washing of Hands, Use and Care of Sanitation Facilities for a Healthy Life”.

The awards we are handing out later are preceded by competitions at district, provincial and national levels. All learners who are here today are provincial winners, and the national winners have been selected from amongst them. Through the generosity of our sponsors we have wonderful prizes, and the provincial winners are eligible for cash prizes of which 50% will be shared amongst the learners who will spend it on education-related items. The balance will be spent on school resources, based on the priorities identified by the school and the community. In addition to cash prizes, the national winners are also eligible for water pumps and media classrooms. The success of these learners will therefore contribute to improving their school environment.

Through Baswa le Meetse, we showcase our cultural heritage while respecting our diversity, and recognising the youth as the future. This project is important for my Department because

not only does it encourage our youth academically but it also raises the profile of sanitation and health and hygiene - issues that are a priority for my department and government as a whole.

In addition to these awards we are also here today to be educated on water resource management and sanitation by these hardworking future leaders. Their message will be communicated very creatively through spectacular performances with captivating and educating messages. Definitely, this is an opportunity not to be missed! As a minister and a mother, I would like to say 'Halala Youth, Halala'.

3. Water Week and Sanitation Week

Ladies and Gentlemen, learners, many of you would be aware that this event takes place during our national Sanitation Week. Last week we held National Water Week and we have been very busy over the last two weeks promoting the importance of our water resources, access to sanitation, and the need for health and hygiene.

On Monday, 19 March we had the sod turning ceremony for the building of a dam in Limpopo, the following day we visited a school in KwaMaphumulo, KwaZulu-Natal where we launched a programme highlighting water safety, and then on Thursday and Friday we held a conference on water conservation, where local and international speakers shared with us their views and experiences on the importance of water conservation and water demand management, as well as how to tackle these challenges. We also launched a book on the relationship between government policy, scientific research, and society.

Launch of sanitation week was held in Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal where we launched a health and hygiene strategy with the Department of Health. We also visited Mount Fletcher in Eastern Cape where we handed over toilets to communities that have long had to do without these basics facilities.

Last week, during our Water Conservation Conference, Prof. Biswas, who is one of the world's leading thinkers in the water sector met with us and made a presentation at the conference. Of concern to all of us, is that with increasing demand for water there is the potential that there will not be sufficient water for these needs. Already in South Africa we are facing huge challenges in the amount of water we have, as we receive on average only half of the world average rainfall and face the additional problem of periodic droughts. The view of Professor Biswas, which is shared by many of us, is that the critical issue to dealing with water scarcity is governance by our water institutions and in how we manage our water resources. He is also strongly of the opinion that we cannot solve our present and future water challenges by looking at how things have been done in the past. The solutions, he argues, do not lie with traditional approaches and thinking, and we require innovation and new ideas to solve the water challenges of the future.

I believe that by focussing on the youth of our country and inspiring them to enter the water and sanitation fields, we are creating the potential for such solutions to be found.

The key focus and message of this year's Water Week was conservation and protection of our scarce water resources, and the need for South Africans to change their behaviour so that we do not waste water. We must also stop polluting our rivers, dams and wetlands as these are precious resources. With increasing demand for water and the need to achieve 6% economic growth, there will be greater demands on our water resources, and we need creative responses. We are tackling these challenges by building new infrastructure and conserving water and we need to 'plug the water leaks'. As President Mbeki pointed out in his weekly newsletter in *ANC Today*, "we have to use our limited water supplies more efficiently and effectively. We must also put into the larger equation serious consideration of the longer-term impact of global warming and climate change. Our celebration of water as a source of life must translate into practical actions".

The President also pointed to the need for creative solutions and questioned why we are not looking to desalinating and treating sea water for possible use. A challenge from the

President that we will need to take on board; along with better utilisation of waste water, removing alien invasive species, improved infrastructure, and better management of existing water resources. Minister Xingwana, solutions may also exist in improved efficiencies in the agricultural sector which is our largest single user of water - and the sector that suffers the most during droughts.

There is a great deal that needs to be done, and amongst us today may one of the future scientists or engineers who will come up with the much needed solution to our challenges.

4. Youth Development

Ladies and Gentlemen, my Department has been mandated to ensure sustainable water and forestry resources for future generations. Our vision will be realised only if our society is empowered with knowledge and skills. Our Water Week and Sanitation Week are key components of our awareness programmes as are our initiatives to support and develop the youth.

As government, we are committed to the democratisation of the management of water resources, and it is for this reason that we encourage the participation of our communities and our children as stakeholders. It is in this context that my Department is passionately driving education and awareness programmes such as the *2020 Vision for Water and Sanitation Education Programme*. The Baswa le Meetse Awards is a project of the 2020 Vision Programme.

Through this programme, we hope that learners would be able to participate effectively in water resource management and the promotion of health and hygiene. Over the past few years particularly on World Water Monitoring day (which takes place on 18th September this year) we have been getting learners to identify problems related to water and sanitation in their schools and communities. Last year we ran a programme in 40 schools whereby learners were given water quality test kits, trained in how to use them and conduct tests on water quality in their own local environment. These learners were asked to give feedback to their local municipality and DWAF on their findings. This year we look forward to greater numbers of schools participating in this exciting initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen, through the 2020 vision programme we have reached 20 000 learners from both rural and urban areas and instilled the culture of water conservation, health and hygiene, awareness about alien invasive species, and general natural resource conservation. We hope that this initiative is stimulating their interest in water resource management careers.

We are aware that at present the challenge of scarce skills in the sector requires urgent attention. There is clearly a shortage of skills – especially in the science and technical fields – professions that are key to our economic growth and development. These skills gaps however present an opportunity for our youth to go into highly sought after professions. In particular we would like to see an increase the number of woman engineers and scientists in the country. Because these professions require our children to study science and mathematics, my Department plans to provide identified schools with resources such as laboratories and computers so that the learners have proper facilities. We are currently engaging with potential sponsors to install laboratories in five schools.

We are also committing ourselves to supporting learners who wish to pursue careers in Water, Sanitation and Forestry. We will track successful learners from Grade 6, so that by the time they enter high school or a tertiary institution they can be awarded bursaries, if they qualify. I am proud to announce that we have already offered bursaries to ten learners, of whom two are studying civil engineering and one is studying micro-biology. We have also provided 60 computers to 6 schools (in KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State and North West).

We have also established a Learning Academy in the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, which is a graduate training programme; and will contribute to addressing the skills level in the sector.

The Water sector is one of the most exciting sectors you can ever be involved in! We will await your participation.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Programme Director; Prof. Biswas in his address to us last week was inspired by the excellence that already exists in South Africa and he feels that we have the potential to be a 'knowledge hub' of the water sector in Africa. With the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) programme and good collaboration that already exists between South Africa and other countries in the continent, I believe this is possible; and it would give us an opportunity to share success stories and pockets of excellence that exists across the continent in how communities are responding to our water and sanitation challenges.

To the learners I have two last messages; firstly not all of you can be the national prize winners but to me you are all winners for what you have achieved and for being here today. Winning is also about learning, participating and making a difference to your communities. Secondly, during this week we have given many important messages about practising good hygiene to limit the spread of diseases like diarrhoea and skin infections. There is another important message that all our youth must be aware of and that is the very real dangers of HIV and AIDS. The youth are most vulnerable to contracting this disease through risky sexual behaviour and because they believe it won't happen to them. We do not want to lose our promising scientists and engineers of tomorrow, the people who will provide the solutions to our water challenges. So remember your ABC – Abstain, Be faithful, or Condomize.

Finally, there are a number of people to thank for their involvement in Baswa le Meetse and in today's programme:

1. I would like to thank all the sponsors: MTN, ABSA, Play-pumps International and Rand Water. I have noted your commitments. Our children will have access to information through media classrooms provided by MTN; prize money from ABSA and access to water through water pumps from Roundabout. Rand Water will ensure that the water pumps are installed. On behalf of Government, I wish to thank you for responding to the call made to the private sector by our President. I have no words but to say "Nangamso! Ukwanda kwaliwa ngumthakathi! Ningadinwa!"
2. Thank you to the SABC who play an important role in taking these critical messages to the broader community.
3. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the principals, teachers, parents and community members who supported these learners and encouraged them to come this far. They will need your ongoing support if they are to become our future scientists.
4. Special thanks must go to the judges. Choosing winners from amongst these intelligent learners was not child's play, but you did an excellent job.
5. I would like to thank the officials of my Department and MTN as well as all other people involved in organising this event. I appreciate the hard work you have put in to make this event a success. Keep up the good work.

Let me ask you to give a round of applause to all those who have made this programme and today the great success it has become! This programme is an excellent example of the spirit of partnership that is needed to address the huge challenges that face our country.

Educate the child, educate the nation

Let us take good care of our Water Resources – not only for our sake, but for the sake of the environment, our health, our nation's growth and prosperity, and for the sake of those who will come after us.

I thank you