

UNESCO-HELP Southern Symposium 2007
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Emperors Palace, Kempton Park, Gauteng
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Professor Kader Asmal, MP
Professor Emmanuel Naah, Representative of UNESCO
Members of the Global Steering Committee for UNESCO-HELP
Distinguished guests
Programme Director, and
Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to welcome you to this important international event: the HELP Southern Symposium 2007, which is hosted by my Department in partnership with UNESCO and a number of our country's water sector institutions. I am particularly pleased to hear that the significance of this Symposium is that it brings together academics, researchers and experts from across all disciplines including scientists, political scientists, policy makers, lawyers, engineers and general stakeholders to engage in a dialogue to bring meaning to the concept of integrated catchment management. It is about 5 years since the August 2002 HELP Symposium that took place in the City of Kalmar in Sweden which looked at increasing the dialogue between scientists, policy makers and stakeholders.

Five years later today we must be particularly excited about seeing all these sharply (though misleadingly) separated disciplines converging under one roof. This rarely happens, and when it does happen it shows that at last we are beginning to find one another, and that we shall have a holistic understanding of the true meaning of integrated catchment management approach.

South Africa's Policy and the IWRM approach

As you might be aware, our country's water legislation has been globally hailed as one of the most astute pieces of legislation, thanks to Prof Kader Asmal (the first DWAF Minister of the democratic South Africa) who has lead a comprehensive institutional and legislative water reforms in the formative years of our democracy.

For instance, our National Water Act (NWA) of 1998 was promulgated to regulate the management of the country's water resources using the integrated water resources management (IWRM) approach. The regulation of the country's water resources takes place across several dimensions that include the different components of the hydrological system (surface water, groundwater, wetlands, estuaries, etc.), the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, and the integration of environmental sustainability with statutory, economic, and social objectives.

Policy Implementation Successes and Challenges in HELP Context

One of the main objectives of the National Water Act is progressively to decentralize responsibility and authority for water resources management to appropriate regional and local institutions, partly in order to assist water users and other stakeholders to participate more effectively in the management of these resources.

However, the slow pace in implementing our water legislation and policies reflects the complexity and difficulties that flow from the lingering legacy of apartheid. Such complexities are made worse by a miscommunication between policy makers, scientists and the reality on the ground.

Policy makers are trained to make human judgements whereas scientists are trained to make scientific judgements. Naturally, both cultures are bound to provide a one-sided view and narrow solutions.

Despite all that, I can share with you that we have made some successes in implementation of policy. Our success in providing clean water to over 12 million people and access to sanitation to more than 9 million people is partly due to our policy makers working in concert with researchers.

Additionally, since the promulgation of the National Water Act in 1998 we have introduced mandatory reserve determination measures, established stakeholder forums and bodies, and established some Catchment Management Agencies such as Crocodile-Marico, Inkomati, Mvoti and Breede. In all of these we have been working in collaboration with the researchers and the broader stakeholder community. While our linkages have been harmonious, we can still improve.

The HELP Symposium, SADC and the African Continent

Your deliberations and debates during the course of this week will provide an opportunity not only to showcase some of the work that has been done locally across the globe but also reflect on how we have been doing over the past five years. Being a country with limited water resources and more than 60% of rivers categorised as shared watercourses we know too well how significant a holistic approach to water management is. I hope that the field tour to the Olifants basin which is a HELP demonstration basin will give you a good idea of the successes and challenges. The Olifants basin is one of the pilot projects for our water allocation reform programme. With this programme our aim is to reallocate water in order to deal with imbalances of the past. This water allocation reform programme does not necessarily mean taking from the haves and giving to have-nots. As will be demonstrated during the tour of the Olifants Basin, the aims and objectives of our water allocation reform programme can be achieved through cooperation between those who already have access to water and those who were denied access due to apartheid policies.

One of the major challenges on the Olifants is the issue of pollution of water as result of mining activities, power generation, and other land use activities. These challenges are made worse by limited capacity to monitor and intervene.

As for the Thukela Basin, which is scheduled for the post-symposium tour, we are looking forward to the positive impact that the results of the integrated catchment management studies currently underway under the auspices of the HELP programme, will bring about.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I must point out that we warmly embrace new innovative international best practices such as demonstrated by the UNESCO-International Hydrological Programme's HELP approach.

It is encouraging to see that the HELP Programme cuts across many disciplines and that it is meant to bridge the gap between scientists, policy makers, lawyers and political scientists in an attempt to enhance the knowledge base on which decisions are made. We certainly need to foster interdisciplinary approaches in order to achieve our broad-based sustainable development and Millennium Development Goals. Accelerated development in Africa and the rest of the developing world can only be enhanced through these kinds of exchanges and interactions.

Programme Director, I have to commend the strong partnership and collaboration between UNESCO and South Africa especially in the area of water resources management, which has blossomed quite dramatically over the last few years.

My Department is hosting the South African National Committee for UNESCO-International Hydrological Programme which was established in 2005 and formally inaugurated in September 2006. Its membership spans a wide spectrum of academia, research institutions, professional bodies, NGOs and government representatives. One of the chief responsibilities of the National Committee is to act as a coordinating body working with other related bodies in the region and the world to achieve shared objectives concerning freshwater, within the framework of the IHP.

To that end, the country has assisted in the implementation of a number of key regional IHP Programmes which were of significance to the national interest, and these programmes include HELP, FRIEND (Flow Regimes from International Experimental and Network Data), and others.

Conclusion

Securing the bid to host this international HELP Symposium is further evidence of the efforts that my Department in partnership with the broader South African water sector community has jointly put to show the international community that we view issues of water seriously.

Additionally, Programme Director, I am pleased to announce that from 10-12 March 2008 our IHP-National Committee will be hosting another UNESCO event, the 2nd Africa Regional meeting of the National Committees for UNESCO-IHP and the IWRM Conference in this country.

To conclude, South Africa and the developing world, mainly in the South, generally have much to teach the developed countries (i.e. North), and on the other hand the developing countries (i.e. South) have much to learn from the developed countries in a two-way process. For example in the South generally policies are in place and are aligned with the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management. Such learning and shared experiences could greatly benefit our attempts as a global community to improve the sustainable management of our water resources in a truly integrated manner.

I wish you a very successful conference, and I shall be keenly waiting the outcomes at the conclusion of the conference.

I thank you.