

Celebration of Women's Month 2009
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs
Machibini Village at Chris Hani District Municipality, Eastern Cape
31 August 2009

Programme Director
Honourable Mayors and Councillors
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Malibongwe! I salute you all in tribute to the heroines of 1956 who came from all walks of life and bravely marched to Pretoria in protest against the injustices of apartheid. The theme for this year's Women's Month is: "Together, Empowering Women for Development and Gender Equality". We are compelled by the Constitution of the land to highlight the plight and reforms that relate to women. This relates to the fact that our Constitution speaks to equality and non-sexism as well as non-racialism.

As government, we would like to use the Women's Month to showcase government programmes aimed at improving the plight of women as well stress the importance of upholding values that enhance our ultimate quest for a non-discriminatory, non-racial and non-sexist society.

I am thrilled and quite excited to know that the Lukanji Local Municipality launched this initiative, amongst others;

- To ensure constant provision of water to the community
- To encourage ownership of schemes by local communities
- To provide affordable and quality services
- To alleviate poverty
- To develop skills and sustainable utilization of resources

During my briefing about this project, I was moved by the zeal of the Municipality and the community to form a Water Community Service Provider composed of 40 members, 23 of whom are female. It is very pleasing to note that women are now taking their rightful place in society and occupying roles that were traditionally thought to be the preserve of men. We must look at how we can speed up the implementation of programmes that will improve the lives of multitudes of women who still languish live in abject poverty.

As government, we have made big strides in advancing the course of developing women in our country. To highlight a few:

- The establishment of the Ministry of Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities consolidates our programme to continue the development of women. Whilst addressing the fifty-third anniversary of National Women's Day, President Jacob Zuma said the new Ministry will monitor other government departments to ensure the mainstreaming of

gender, children's rights, and disability considerations into all programmes of government and other sectors. This will help government to respond to issues of these targeted groups in an integrated and coherent manner.

- The Women's Empowerment Fund and the Employment Equity Act continue to ensure the appointment and support for women in leadership positions in government and the private sector.
- Through interventions such as the rural and local economic development programmes and social safety systems, we continue to reduce the burden of women-headed households who bear the brunt of poverty.
- The Kha ri Gude literacy campaign will build functional literacy amongst the marginalised adults including women.
- A new co-ordinating and management structure for the criminal justice system is set to heighten interventions that protect the women and children from abuse.
- The re-establishment of Sexual Offences and Child Protection units of the SAPS will reinforce efforts to prevent and respond to crimes against women and children.

In the pre-1994 era, access to water was not regarded as a fundamental right, and water policies were mainly geared to meet the needs of the minority. The lack of access to water made it increasingly difficult for our people to escape poverty. With the initiatives such as the Community Service Providers, we are confident of a better life for all.

In a water scarce/arid country like ours, it is necessary that we understand the importance of all the issues, particularly water conservation, the quality and quantity of water, the distribution of water and how it impacts on our daily lives. This initiative has created a lot of awareness for members of the public and has gone a long way in empowering them about water conservation and demand management.

Water is central for the achievement of our economic and social development objectives, as well as the nurturing of our ecosystems. Given the scarcity of water in our country, it is critical that we do all in our power to ensure that we use water wisely for the current and future generations.

At the opening of the first democratically elected parliament, the then President, Dr Nelson Mandela set the agenda for addressing the rights of women in a post apartheid South Africa, and I wish to quote him. "Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realized unless we see, in practical and visible terms, that the conditions of women in our country has been changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society"

Through initiatives such as this one, our government continues to impart technical and professional skills through ongoing training. It is noteworthy to observe that the women who have

benefitted from this programme, obtained skills that would be put to use where they are needed the most.

I am also aware of the challenges that continue to confront you, including the high staff turnover that hinders your progress. We are also mindful of the challenge of people who continue to do unauthorised connections because they need a higher level of service. We will continue to discourage this practice and with the good work that you are doing, we are certain that we will win the fight,

I have been reliably informed that an estimated 680 000 people are served with Free Basic Water, including 250 000 of the poor population who receive same in the Chris Hani District Municipality. However, it is worrisome that none of the local municipalities have an official policy for Free Basic Water.

It is however pleasing to note that the “ring-fenced” administrative units in Lukhanji, Tsolwana and Sakhisizwe Local Municipalities have started to address the issue by not charging a metered rate for the first 6kl of the monthly consumption. This is a step in the right direction in combating poverty and underdevelopment as water is a catalyst for development.

In conclusion, I am very pleased to tell you that my department is making a generous offer of protective clothing to members of the Community Service Providers to assist them during their operations. I congratulate all of you and wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

Malibongwe!

I thank you.