

Free State Provincial Water Indaba
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs
Delivered by Minister's Advisor Ms Cornelia September
Kopano Nokeng, Mangaung, Free State
7 December 2009

Honourable Premier
Honourable members of the Provincial Executive Committee
Honourable members of Parliament and the Provincial Legislature
Executive Mayors, Mayors and Councillors
Directors-General and Heads of Department
Leaders of Water Boards and Water Users Associations
Leaders of NGOs and CSOs
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Dumelang bahaeso!

I am sincerely honoured and grateful to be in your beautiful Province to have strategic engagements with all of you on the very important matter of one of our natural resources in our country, water. Free State Province is a water scarce province. It is a land locked province and borders the country of Lesotho. Provinces that border the Free State province are: Northern Cape, North West, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Kwa-Zulu Natal. It is bordered by the Orange and Vaal Rivers. The population in Free State province is predominantly rural. The Department of Water Affairs supports and regulates 20 Water Services Authorities in the Free State Province,

It is estimated that 19 million people in South Africa are rural survivalists with traditional agrarian lifestyles. Of these at least 15 million individuals are living below the poverty line. In some villages in the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces, levels of food security have increased by means of maize and vegetable production in homestead backyard gardens. In the last mentioned case, this has been achieved through the technology and practice of in-field rainwater harvesting (IRWH) and conservation. "Through technology exchange the application of IRWH expanded to more than 1 000 households in 42 rural villages around Thaba-Nchu" says Dr Gerhard Backeberg a Water Research Commission Director.

Today's Water Indaba should be seen as a follow up to the Water Summit held in the province in 2005. We are reminded by the National Water Act (1998) that central to our management of water is doing it in an integrated approach. We need an integrated approach that is lead by the Premier's office in this province too.

The Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF 2003a) defines IWRM as '*a philosophy, a process and a management strategy to achieve sustainable*

use of resources by all stakeholders at catchment, regional, national and international levels, while maintaining the characteristics and integrity of water resources at the catchment scale within agreed limits'. I hereby indicate that the absence of a dedicated portfolio on water in the provincial executive council presents a peculiar challenge to water governance and the relationship between the Department and provincial government broadly.

Our challenge remains on how we must inculcate awareness of the importance of water resource in a sustainable development manner; how we should balance protection and development; deal with mitigation of adverse impacts caused by water, and above all ensure water resource management in all our activities.

Premier, we have been tasked to make sure that for the next five years and beyond that we deal a blow on poverty and deprivation; we do all we can do to stimulate our economy through addressing the hurdles in our way of improvements in our education and health. As we do this we create decent work and bring about sustainable livelihoods in areas such as rural provinces.

Our Indaba here today should further give expression to these noble ideas in the Free State. Water is central to enhancing education by ensuring that we provide access and not subject our children to be deprived of education as they need to fetch water or do not have water for hygienic purposes. But equally so, we should have water in the curriculum so that we educate our young people about this precious resource too.

Programme Director I can go through all these areas and demonstrate to you why we need to ensure that we afford water the centrality that it has to occupy, but I am confident that the outcome of this indaba will give it the fullest attention.

The theme of the Indaba "Working Together for Water Security and Poverty Alleviation" itself illustrates the need for all of us to appreciate that water is a strategic resource that not only gives life, but is also a catalyst for development; therefore water has to and must be at the centre of all development plans. Water availability and management must feature very strongly in the development strategies of all sectors. We must also ensure that the past inequities in the allocation of water resources and access to services are redressed. I have established a task team to look at water allocation reform and would welcome input from this province in this regard.

Another area we should give attention too is urban population growth and the relationship it has with existing infrastructure in terms of quantity and quality of water. There has been an increase in the demand for water and also an increase in incidents of water pollution from industry and failing municipal infrastructure. By taking this resource for granted, we will be compromising the environmental, social and economic objectives that this generation and future generations can ever dream to achieve.

Talking about water conservation, I am encouraged by the Water Conservation and Demand Management programme that the DWA has initiated in partnership with the province to improve our actions in conserving water. I do wish to call on municipalities and the provincial leadership to prioritise this programme.

I am aware that some municipalities in the province are losing over 50% of clean water through leakages and lack of maintenance of the supply networks. This obviously is a situation that should not be tolerated. We should do everything we can to ensure that proper interventions are taken to address this challenge.

As a department, we are aware of the fact that some of the municipalities as Water Services Authorities in the province are faced with serious challenges with regards to discharging services to their consumers. It is absolutely critical that our resources and support programmes are integrated to ensure that these municipalities are able to perform their functions as Water Services Authorities. We are also aware that some municipalities in the province are experiencing problems with the management of sewage treatment works and water purification plants. Sufficient provision must be made for operation and maintenance of existing infrastructure to prevent service delivery failures.

As the Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs I have the responsibility of dealing with matters of the environment too, and as such appreciate Premier your pronouncements on a very unfortunate situation of dumping of waste in a very irresponsible manner in this province as widely reported by the media and now under investigation by officials and the law enforcement agencies. I associate myself with your resolve that those who are guilty of these practices should face the full might of the law.

This region has few water institutions such as Water Boards and Water Users Associations who are assisting the Department in managing and distributing water for the different intended purposes. Therefore, we need to understand their purpose and their contribution to the objectives of this government. I appeal to everyone to keep on giving me inputs on proper management of these institutions, so that we continue to improve the lives of the people where they live.

I need to indicate, Premier that I am very much aware of the critical drive and battle that the province has declared against poverty, lack of services and underdevelopment. "Operation Hlasela" is a critical and well-timed initiative that will not only improve access to services, but should also lead to improved intergovernmental coordination and programme integration. On that basis I would like to put it to all of us that water is a strategic resource, central and critical to the success of "Operation Hlasela".

I need to also acknowledge progress made in the province in addressing drinking water quality management. The water monitoring programme now forms the basis for our internationally acclaimed Blue Drop Certification Programme, which I must mention, has been receiving awards and acknowledgements in international conferences as a good benchmark of drinking water quality monitoring.

As a Department, we are involved in many other programmes in partnership with the provincial government. Some of these include small initiatives to ensure security of supply even in dire conditions of extreme drought. The Department of Water Affairs has already installed about 160 tanks for water harvesting that will benefit about 40 households in Maluti-a-Phofung. This programme is being rolled out to other municipalities like Letsemeng where about 12 tanks have already been installed to support War on Poverty.

Like all other parts of the country, climate change will affect water availability in this province. Adaptation and mitigation measures to climate change should therefore be considered when we develop infrastructure. At a national level, we will be developing measures to adapt and mitigate effects of climate change on our already scarce water resources. I was informed that the University of Free State has started to align itself with the priorities of the government and five strategic clusters, one of which is water.

In closing, Premier, ladies and gentlemen, it is my humble wish to see the Office of the Premier and the MECs of Agriculture and Cooperative Governance taking the lead in providing political and strategic leadership on water related matters. I also encourage the Honourable Premier to find suitable mechanisms for ensuring linkages between the Provincial Water Forum and the provincial planning and intergovernmental structures. This will surely improve political oversight of water issues and effective responses of the Department to provincial development priorities. I hope this partnership with Province and all other stakeholders will be strengthened as we seek solutions to water issues together. The intended outcome for this Water Indaba is a practical and implementable action plan with clear time frames.

Let us therefore join forces and work together to achieve a better life for all our people. Let this Free State Water Indaba be used to strengthen our national, provincial and local government links and ensure that we attain our common objective of alleviating poverty and hopelessness in the lives of our people.

Indeed let this Water Indaba be used to strengthen our cooperative governance and help us to attain our common objective of better lives of our people. This is what we stand for, this is what we all fought for and this should be our commitment to those we have a privilege to serve.

Ha re sebetseng re hlaseleng bohloki, khuma, lehuma, khumanehi. Mmoho, re ka kgona!

Pula! *Nala!*

Ha e ne! *Ka medup!*

I thank you!