

Northern Cape Water Indaba

Speech by MS Buyelwa Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs

At AGS Diamond City Tabernacle in Kimberley

16-17 September 2010

Honourable Premier in absentia

Honourable Members of the Provincial Executive Committee

Honourable Members of Parliament and the Provincial Legislature

Mayors and Councillors

Distinguished Guests

Directors-General and Heads of Departments

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is gratifying and much appreciated that all of you have agreed to come together today to look at matters of water that have an impact on all of us. It is five years since I last attended a Water Indaba in the Northern Cape and I believe much has happened since then.

Our finite resources come under increasing pressure from our growing population, economic development and various forms of pollution. Of course, this is no secret to you in the Northern Cape as yours is the driest of South Africa's provinces. At the same time, we should recognise that poverty is still one of the South Africa's socio-economic challenges and we must look at ways whereby each and every sector can contribute towards reducing it. Poverty is often most severe in the rural and far flung areas. The above-mentioned challenges will certainly require a collective effort if we are to be successful and thus the theme of your Indaba; "Working Together for Water Security and Poverty Alleviation" really encapsulates these issues very well.

One of the major concepts that the Department of Water Affairs has been promoting in recent years is Water for Growth and Development. This concept speaks to the centrality of water in all development planning and people's lives.

We are seeking here to raise the profile of water in South Africa, not for any personal prestige, but because of the need to be more efficient and effective with the use of our precious water resources. In this regard, I am very pleased to see the diverse nature of the attendance at this Indaba, not only do we have excellent participation from the water sector, but also other key partner sectors including the private sector, civil society and international donors. There has to be a realisation of the many roles of water in society. Obviously the most fundamental are for basic human survival requirements and environmental preservation. Higher level needs come in the form of utilisation for agriculture, mining and industry and these of course create jobs and result in enhanced economic growth for the country, with all the positive spin offs that this implies.

One issue very close to my heart because it affects both of my portfolios in water and the environment is that of climate change. This is likely to have an effect on all South Africa's provinces but it is anticipated that the Western Cape and Northern Cape could be the most severely impacted. In particular, it is predicted that Northern Cape will get hotter and drier in the decades to come. Of course, there has been much emphasis internationally on mitigation strategies, but when it comes to the water sector the focus will be more on adaptation and this is something that this Indaba will certainly need to deliberate upon.

I would also like however to put a slightly different perspective on this issue and that is with regard to opportunities that may arise for the Northern Cape, in particular. For instance, I understand that there are a number of projects being considered with respect to solar power and clearly the Northern Cape is uniquely positioned to capitalise on this. At the same time however these installations will require water supply so integrated planning will be essential. Another important issue to emphasise is that as global warming is such a topical issue at the moment, there are certainly both local and international opportunities for funding of innovative projects with respect to power generation, carbon offsets and also more effective use of water.

In terms of adaptation strategies for the sector, increased emphasis on water conservation and demand management is virtually non-negotiable. Unfortunately non-revenue water is far too high in many municipalities in the Province and this aspect needs to be improved. Agriculture will need to continue to strive to use water more efficiently and the Working for

Water Programme must continue its work and, if possible, be expanded. On the supply side, desalination of sea water will certainly need to be considered in some areas and this option is currently actively being pursued at Port Nolloth. Another good technology, particularly for domestic and garden use, is rainwater harvesting and a project to address this has been undertaken in Kareeberg Municipality.

Programme Director, I want to place particular emphasis on the importance of cooperative governance in the water sector in the Northern Cape. In almost all instances, water issues are cross cutting with respect to many other sectors, creating many interdependencies. At the same time however, water resources are recognised as a national competence which means that there is no political representation at provincial level. One way of addressing this is via collaborative structures. There is a need for a political figurehead at the provincial level. If this is in place then it provides an ideal linkage and partnership arrangement not only with me but also with the Water Affairs' Regional Office. The "missing piece in the jigsaw" is what one could term a Member of Executive Council (MEC) that will take over the critical linkage and political leadership role for the water sector in the Province.

I would certainly therefore like to encourage the establishment of a water-specific Inter-governmental Relation (IGR) structure to support the MEC. I am made to believe that the Technical IGR Committee has done a lot of development work on such a structure already. The Regional Office will provide all the necessary resources to make this a reality. Ideally this should not be limited to government but should also include private sector and civil society representation.

We also need to recognise that water in itself is not really a driver in terms of economic opportunities. We see water more as a catalyst for development. Even in the case of irrigation, it depends on a number of other factors, for example, suitable available land. This emphasises the importance of the linkage of water sector planning into broader based initiatives such as the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy and at a local level, Integrated Development Plans. It is essential that the Provincial Water Sector Plan is integrally linked with the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy to the extent that it could almost be regarded as a chapter of the PGDS. This will be a very good way of fostering linkages and again becomes a cooperative governance tool.

One of the aspects which the Northern Cape should be given a lot of credit for, is delivery of services to the poor and marginalised. In this regard, I am very pleased to be informed that the backlogs for water services to schools and clinics have been eliminated, at least at a basic level. The same applies to bucket toilets in formal residential areas and the water supply backlog, with the exception of John Taolo Gaetsewe Municipality, is minimal.

As is common with other developing countries, we have found that the key challenges with respect to water services lie not necessarily with infrastructure delivery, but in sustainable operation thereafter. I am talking here, in particular, about aspects such as asset management, with particular reference to operation and maintenance, effective revenue management, customer management and water loss mitigation. This also applies to the issue of ring fencing of water services, which must certainly be regarded as a best practice business orientated approach and is a requirement of the Water Services Act. The DWA Regional Office informs me that there are many municipalities in the Northern Cape that are not doing well in these aspects. Without being too dramatic, I must emphasise that if these areas cannot be significantly improved, then the future of water services in those municipalities is bleak.

On the subject of institutions, I would like to highlight the fact that the Department is looking at institutional review and realignment. We needed to do this to respond to the challenges that we face throughout the sector. Indeed, I believe that our chances of success are greatly reduced if we do not have viable and competent institutions throughout the sector. Admittedly, it is a sensitive area but as they say in the classics “the first thing to do if you are in a hole is to stop digging!” In other words, if the current institutional design is not appropriate, one needs to look at redesign or you could also say “business unusual”.

One thing we also have to acknowledge is that the Northern Cape unfortunately does not have strong water boards. Although their role is sometimes confused with municipalities, the fact is that they have made very important contributions in other provinces. This is one of the aspects that need to be considered in the institutional reform work in future.

With respect to water resources institutions, in the absence of CMAs for the Orange and Vaal, the Department is continuing to play that role and doing as much as it can within limited resources. This is an important driver for establishing these institutions as it will allow for more resources, and more specialised resources, to be brought to bear. Good work has also been done in the Province with respect to Water User Associations in terms of rationalising these and combining them. This is necessary because at the moment effective oversight arrangements by the Department are not practically possible with such a large number of water user associations spread throughout the country.

I am very pleased to note the improvement in Blue Drop marks in the Northern Cape from 2009 to 2010 and the excellent participation (87%) in the Regulatory Performance Measurement System (RPMS). In spite of this, there is certainly a long way to go in terms of Blue Drop performance in the Province and this is even more pronounced with respect to Green Drop assessments. It must be acknowledged that Blue Drop and Green Drop awards are very difficult to achieve. However the Blue Drop award achieved by the Kgatelopele municipality in the Northern Cape shows that it can be done and this is in a relatively small municipality. We will be continuing to be extremely vigilant on the regulation front and, if anything, we see the scope increasing to include aspects such as water losses and economic issues in future.

Moving on to water resources issues, it is certainly a paradox of sorts that as well as being the driest province in the Country, the Northern Cape is home to long stretches of two of the biggest rivers in the country, namely the Orange and the Vaal. Many sections of these rivers could be described as very “hard working” from a water resources perspective with extensive storage dams in place, inter-basin transfers, pump storage schemes and of course receiving wastewater from various sources. In spite of this, there is still surplus water available in the Orange River system in the Northern Cape which has been earmarked primarily for the development of small scale farmers and I would like to see this initiative accelerated, in cooperation with our partners in the agricultural sector. The development of small scale farmers via irrigation is also an important component of Water Allocation Reform (WAR) which seeks to address the imbalances of water allocation which have occurred historically.

Of course, when one discusses water resources, you cannot talk about water quantity without talking about water quality. In this respect, one has to acknowledge that there are significant challenges in the water quality emanating particularly from the Vaal system. Unfortunately the Northern Cape, being at the bottom of the river system, it has been affected in terms of water quality. Much of this emanates from the Gauteng region and emphasises just how important an integrated catchment management approach is; if you only look at one part of the catchment then inevitably another part will be neglected or will be impacted upon by actions in other areas. The Northern Cape should also look to keep its own house in order with respect to aspects such as pollution from industry, mining, agriculture and also operation of municipal wastewater treatment works.

It would also be a big oversight in the context of water resources in the Northern Cape not to mention groundwater as this is the source upon which a large part of the province is dependent, particularly the rural areas. There is however evidence of over exploitation in some areas and enhanced regulation may be necessary in future to prevent this and ensure more sustainable use of the resource. Of course self-regulation is always a preferable alternative.

Another good example of a strong collaborative cooperative governance initiative is the Local Government Turn-around Strategy (LGTAS) being headed up by Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and its counterparts at provincial level. Local government continues to do excellent work in spite of many constraints and difficulties, however it is clear that many municipalities are struggling and in some cases will need drastic intervention to assist them.

In recent years, the DWA was instrumental in establishing a new grant for bulk water services infrastructure and a number of projects have already been implemented in the Province, in particular at Colesberg, Heuningvlei, Kenhardt, Petrusville and Van Wyksvlei. A number of major feasibility studies have been completed and more are currently underway including those for Emthanjeni, Namakwa, Kalahari East, Richtersveld, Moshaweng/Heuningvlei and Vaal Gamagara. This grant is making an important contribution; nevertheless it is clear that the needs greatly outstrip the availability of funds. The anticipated national budget for

Regional Bulk Infrastructure Grant (RBIG) is R164 million for 2011/12 financial year and R146 million for 2012/13 financial year.

The ideal tangible output for us is a Provincial Water Sector Plan for the province (PWSP). This should spell out what the sector plans to achieve over the next five to ten years and also how it proposes to do it. The PWSP should ideally be fully endorsed by the Provincial Government and developed via a truly cooperative governance effort in view of the key roles that so many other partners have to play. The recommendations and actions emanating from the Indaba can thus plug directly into the PWSP.

This should also be directly informed by the philosophy and approach in the Water for Growth and Development Framework and I know that the Regional Office has already done substantial work in terms of producing a Strategic Status Quo Assessment informed by Water for Growth and Development principles. The PWSP is thus, in effect, the strategic plan for the water sector in the Province and is the ideal tool whereby the “MEC for Water” can ensure that concrete action and initiatives are implemented. I would also like to see that monthly progress reports are produced, not only for the attention of the “MEC for Water” and the provincial Integrated Governmental Relations (IGR) Water Forum but also for the attention of the Premier and other members of the Provincial Executive.

In closing, I have referred to most, if not all, the key outputs of the Indaba held five years ago in my address and it is clear that whilst much has been achieved, much still needs to be done. I wish you well with your deliberations and I look forward to concrete discussions and outputs ultimately leading to a high quality Provincial Water Sector Plan for the Northern Cape within a short period after the Indaba has been held.

I thank you