

SPEECH BY MR R KASRILS, MP,
MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY,
AT THE OPENING OF THE ETHEMBENI WATER SUPPLY PROJECT, KEATE'S
DRIFT ON 3 JUNE 2000

His Royal Highness, King Goodwill Zwelithini, the Premier of the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, Mr Mtshali, the Chairperson of the Umzinyathi Regional Council, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to be present here today amongst you. It is always a pleasure to come to KwaZulu-Natal. This is a province close to my heart. It is also in this province where I have seen our people experiencing terrible hardships over the years. When I visit this beautiful province it still hurts me to see women and children carrying heavy containers of water from polluted rivers and springs walking long distances in the scorching sun.

As Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry it is my responsibility to ensure that our water resources are well managed to the benefit of all the citizens of our country. It is also my responsibility as Minister to do everything humanly possible to ensure that adequate water and sanitation services are being brought to within reasonable distance from each household. Our Constitution promises access to water supply and sanitation to all the people of our country, but more important, it promises the right to dignity to everyone, man, woman and child.

When our Government came to power in 1994, over 12 million people did not have water close to their homes. In the past five years, Government has been able to provide 9,2 million people with access to water.

This Government has promised that every citizen shall have access to good, clean drinking water and sanitation. This means that, instead of toiling up and down hills with buckets of water on their heads, women and children must have easy access to clean unpolluted drinking water close to home. It means our children must go to school and learn, rather than walking miles to fetch water. It means our people must be healthy and well. They must not be forced to drink polluted water which causes all kinds of diseases.

I am aware that many more communities in these areas have no clean water. My Department is addressing these issues despite severe budget constraints. We have started a process of restoring dignity to the people of KwaZulu-Natal. I promise you this Government will continue to find ways of ensuring that those who have no access to clean water will in time be given water. We shall bring water to our people.

We are together here today to celebrate the official opening of the Ethembeni Water Supply Scheme. Today's celebration represents an important milestone in a long walk to freedom and democracy for the communities living in Ethembeni in the Msinga District. This freedom has been achieved through hard work by the Local Water Committee, the Umzinyathi Regional Council, the Umgeni Water Board and my Department in making this project a success. This freedom is today symbolised by the clean drinking water that the community of Ethembeni now has. The availability of clean water in this community will restore their dignity and will improve their quality of life. All water borne diseases related to drinking polluted water will be a thing of the past to this community. My Department has invested an amount of R5,8 million in bringing clean water closer to the people of Ethembeni. The Ethembeni Water Supply Scheme is designed to supply treated water to some 7500 people living in this area.

I appeal to the people of this region to support your local government to ensure this scheme is protected and not vandalised or destroyed by those amongst us who do not like to see us succeed. I say this because in other parts of our country, there are people who want us to fail. They destroy water pipes, meters and have illegal connections. Some of them even refuse to pay for the services which our people have fought so hard for during the years of Apartheid. How can people destroy services and deny our people water, which they never had. These people rob others of their rightful share. Such people must be stopped. I appeal to you to stop those amongst us who do not want to see progress. Let us send them a message: We shall not tolerate such behaviour.

Which brings me to an important aspect: Payment. My people, all services cost money, and provision of water is no exception. Our Government cannot continue to install and maintain these schemes without support from its people. We need you to contribute to the process.

In 1994 when the Community Water Supply Programme was implemented approximately four and a half million of our people in this province, mostly living in rural areas, were without access to basic water supply and on site sanitation facilities. In order to catch up this huge backlog, it was estimated that an amount of between four to six billion Rand will be required over the next couple of years to develop water and sanitation services infrastructure. Over the past five years, as part of the Community Water Supply and Sanitation Investment Programme, an amount of more than 600 million Rand has been spent on almost 200 rural water and sanitation projects in KwaZulu-Natal alone. Once all these projects have been completed and fully operational, these projects will bring the basic levels of safe drinking water to within a comfortable walking distance from the houses of over a million people in this province for the first time. Although this will be a great achievement, we still have a heavy task ahead of us. If we as developers are committed to see the same level of services being provided to the remaining three million people out there, who are still being deprived of the service, within a reasonable time, we have to increase the pace at which new projects are being developed, and the time to do this is now. I therefore urge you all present here today and involved in the water services sector to assist government in its effort to address this backlog.

At the official opening of the Shemula project at Ingwavuma in October last year I announced the possibility of additional funds for water services provision in KwaZulu-Natal. I am now in the position to confirm that I am well down the line with reaching agreement with the European Union on a substantial amount to be made available to the province over the next three years.

I am therefore relying on your support for the programme to succeed. When I say this I mean true partnership in the sense of the word, partnership between different levels of government, partnerships between Government and the private sector, partnership between water services authorities, water boards and water services providers who are involved in water supply and sanitation infrastructure to be accelerated in the interest of millions of our people in the Province who have for too long been deprived of their basic right.

I want to commend all the parties that were involved in the planning, implementation and operation and maintenance of this project and these parties are Umgeni Water, the Umzinyathi Regional Council, the Project Steering Committee, the local leaders, the community of Ethembeni and my Department. My best wishes go to the Local Water Committee who have a huge task ahead of them of ensuring that the Project will be operated and maintained. I want to assure them that they have the support of the Umzinyathi Regional Council who are the Water Services Authority in this area as well as that of my Department which will leave no stone unturned to improve the living standards of the people of this beautiful province.

And now to the most important people here today the community living here and who will be served by this project. The building of this project and the official opening ceremony today is the first step towards a great future for all the people of this area. It is, however, important for me to remind the Ethembeni community of their most important responsibilities. Firstly it is important for the community to understand that this project must be operated and maintained and my Department will provide whatever support is required to ensure this. Secondly, the operation and maintenance of such a project comes at a cost and it is important for the community of Ethembeni to pay for the services that they are getting because that would be the only way to ensure that this project becomes sustainable. To the people of Ethembeni the success and failure of this project is in your hands.

Councillor Khumalo (Chairperson of Umzinyathi Regional Council), I congratulate you with this wonderful new project and wish you and your Council well in supporting its long-term maintenance and operation. To the community of Ethembeni, enjoy the safe drinking water from your project and take good care of it. To the Implementing Agent, consultants and trainers who help to build this project, thank you for assisting our people to make their dream come true and thank you for serving our nation.

I salute you.

VIVA WATER PURE AND CLEAN VIVA
VIVA FORESTS RICH AND GREEN VIVA

OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY

With this safe, clean water from the project – We congratulate the people of Ethembeni. Take good care of your project and it will serve you for many generations to come. I declare the Ethembeni Water Supply Project now officially open.