

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND
FORESTRY, RONNIE KASRILS,
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES
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Madam Chair, members of the NCOP

As members of the NCOP, you have a special window onto the second sphere of government. This means that you have a first hand understanding of some of the problems we face in our provinces in respect of the obligations of my Department. You know how great are the disparities between those who can access clean drinking water at the twist of a tap, and those who must fetch water every day, sometimes from miles away. You know the consequences and indignities of living without proper sanitation. You know the health risks of collecting water from sources that are sometimes polluted or unclean.

Your provinces are also at the rock face when it comes to dealing with natural disasters. Some of you will have experienced at first hand the terrible flooding in the Northern Province and Mpumalanga. And, of course, the effects of our heavy rains spread beyond those two provinces and were felt in KwaZulu Natal, the Free State, the NorthWest province and Gauteng, where flooding caused devastation in Diepsloot and Alexandra. In the Western and Eastern Cape, we witnessed the havoc and destruction caused by fires. Tornadoes have devastated parts of Langa and Gugulethu, Mount Ayliff and Umtata.

The costs of these disasters have been high. Lives had been lost. Homes have been destroyed and the infrastructure upon which hundreds of thousands people depend for their very existence is having to be rebuilt.

At a time when our first obligation is to gird our resources and do all we can to improve the lives of the poorest of the poor, these have been severe blows. Yet, we need to accept that they are part of the dramatic pattern of drought and flood that characterizes our climate, and must be tempered by well-planned and co-ordinated disaster management strategies. We cannot allow ourselves to be deterred or discouraged. Come what may, we have a deep obligation to bring basic services to all the people in this country ... with all the speed that we can muster.

I will not be covering all aspects of our work in Water Affairs and Forestry today, but have selected just a few items that I felt would be of particular interest and importance to the NCOP.

I would like to start by telling you the story of an encounter in the Eastern Cape that made a great impression on me. It also, as you will see, led to my changing my mind about some aspects of our water delivery.

Last winter, on a grey and chilly day, I paid a visit to a very poor village near Mount Ayliff. I was there to visit a water project and, as I arrived, the whole village came out to greet me. This is a well-organised community with a water scheme that seemed to be functioning well. In exchange for R10 a month, villagers receive the basic 25 litres of water per person per day promised by the RDP. It looked like – and is – a good and successful project.

After the welcome, we went down to the river. Well, it is a riverbed really; no more than a trickle. The water is drawn from a borehole and piped into the village.

Next to the river crouched a young woman, with a tiny three-week old baby strapped into a blanket on her back. She was young, but she had that exhausted prematurely-aged look of those for whom life is a constant struggle. As we approached, we saw that she had dug herself a hole on the river bank and was scooping water out of it into a bucket.

I was surprised and asked her why she didn't make use of the village scheme. She couldn't, she said, afford to pay R10 for her water so she had come to dig for her own.

That encounter brought home to me two very important lessons that I would like to talk to you about today.

The first is that many of our people are so desperately poor that they cannot even afford what may seem to us a very small price for their water.

The second is that, if we cannot provide for the women who are the spine of so many of our poor rural communities, we cannot truly say that we are genuinely empowering the poorest of the poor.

In respect of the first point, this meeting with a poor young mother on the banks of a dried out river showed me that we cannot simply assume that everyone can afford to pay for water, however low we ourselves consider the price. This means we have to find alternative ways of bringing everybody into the loop.

This is why I decided that we have to look at ways of providing a minimum amount of water free to those who cannot afford to buy into local water schemes. It is a fine principle to say everybody must pay for their services, but there are those who

cannot yet afford to do so. In the meantime, like the rest of us, they depend on water for life.

The Durban metropolitan council has come up with a staggered water tariff that I consider to be an excellent working model. The first six kilolitres of water per month is absolutely free. This amount is considered essential water consumption for an average sized family. Any water consumed over and above that rises in price in a series of steps. In other words, at the upper levels, you pay for the luxury of filling your swimming pool, watering an exotic and thirsty garden or simply, as so many people do, wasting the water that flows from their taps.

The staggered tariff not only ensures that those who cannot afford to pay receive a basic minimum. It also seeks to change the attitudes of those who take water for granted and waste it because it is too cheap, too freely available. Like any scarce resource, we must put a value on water.

The second lesson relates to our obligation to the poorest of the poor and, as we all know, the very poorest *of the poorest* of the poor are all too often women living in remote rural areas. We often reflect on this in our speeches and documents. Yet how often do we consider the vital role women play in communities our services do not reach?

Women provide the glue that cements the community together, demonstrating the most remarkable levels of endurance in the face of extreme poverty and suffering.

Often they enjoy little or no status, yet it is they who find the food to feed the children, provide the care that keeps the family together and walk miles to fetch the basic requirements for daily living.

Often they are abused, yet they continue to rise bravely each morning and, disregarding their physical and emotional injuries, engage the daily battle of survival.

Sometimes, as in Mangondi village near Thohoyandou, where a group of women have cleared the land and planted a market garden with their bare hands, the enterprise of women transforms the entire community.

The point I am trying to make is that, in poor communities, women are often the backbone and sinew and, as such, we have a special obligation to relieve them of the burden under which they exist. It is they, after all, who carry the firewood and water home to their families. They have inherited the apartheid burden of being the hewers of wood and the drawers of water.

This is why my Department has committed itself to the provision of employment for women. Water Affairs employs large numbers of women to lay pipes in areas where we put in water schemes. In the Working for Water programme, 60 percent of the tens of thousands we employ to eradicate alien vegetation are women. Forestry, too, targets women for jobs in the rural areas.

We do this not only because we pity or admire women. We do it because it is good common sense. When we provide work for women, we put food on the table for the whole family. When we provide work for women, we invest in the community.

It is important to establish exactly where we need to install and implement our water and sanitation schemes and how well those we have already installed are working. This is why I recently conducted an audit of the work of my Department.

Where our work intersects with that of other Departments we included their achievements as well.

The audit shows that, since 1994, government has served an estimated 9.2 million people with basic water supplies. In rural areas, the proportion served by the infrastructure is up from 33 percent to 50 percent. Around four million people received new supplies (2.6 million to RDP standards) and over six million benefited through improvements to the reliability and quality of supplies. In urban areas, the proportion served rose from 84 percent to 92 percent.

About half of these improvements were achieved through the rural programmes of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry; the balance through housing programmes, local government and other organizations.

Our achievements in the field of sanitation have been dramatic in urban areas, with about 5 million people benefiting from improved sanitation through Department of Housing programmes. In the rural areas, we have scarcely scratched the surface but, as housing support focuses more and more on rural areas, we are hopeful that the situation here will improve rapidly.

This is not, of course, nearly good enough. There are still 8 million people in our rural areas who do not have access to clean water. Over 20 million rural people have no acceptable sanitation. This, as the President of the Constitutional Court pointed out recently, has serious consequences for our constitutional obligations.

“Millions of people”, he said last Thursday night, “are still without houses, education and jobs and there can be little dignity in living under such conditions. Dignity, equality and freedom will be achieved only when the socio-economic conditions are transformed to make this possible”.

Socio-economic rights, he continued, “are rooted in respect for human dignity, for how can there be dignity in a life lived without access to housing, food ... or in the case of persons unable to support themselves...”

He correctly points out that it is incumbent on the state to take action to achieve the progressive realization of housing, health care, food, water and social security.

I quote Judge Chaskalson because, like him, I want to stress the fact that I consider the war against poverty to be the most critical issue facing us today. We have to win this war. This means we need to do a great deal more than simply manage our scarce natural resources and provide reliable and efficient services. We need to do these things in a way that ensures a better quality of life and dignity for all.

Our audit shows that the bulk of the water supply backlog lies in the three provinces in which the largest number of our poor live: the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal and the Northern Province. More than 80 percent of the people still to be served live in these provinces.

Obviously the matter is urgent. It seems, however, that the original date projected for the fulfilment of our obligations – the year 2007 – may be unrealistic. I have accordingly taken the matter to Cabinet, which has asked me to meet with Ministers Manuel and Mufamadi to investigate how we can speed up our water delivery.

We need to look too at the issue of sustainability of our projects. As we have learnt, putting in the initial infrastructure is often not enough. Systems have run dry owing to lack of management and maintenance and funds at the local level. We need to ensure that the local structure responsible for keeping the system working is

properly trained, motivated and empowered. People on the ground must be educated on how to look after their water systems and to counter vandalism.

I would like to say how grateful we are for the assistance we have received from our donors. Last Saturday, for example, the European Union ambassador and I opened an extremely important water project at Zingquthu village in the Glen Grey district. The European Union has set aside R83,7 million for the installation of basic water supply and sanitation, targeting the former “homeland” areas of the Transkei and Ciskei. Together with government’s contribution, the total investment amounts to R104 million.

We are seeing real results from this generous donor investment, with water being supplied to 154 villages, serving a total population of 215 000 people.

The EU has also contributed a significant R200 million to water service projects in the Northern Province and, after a recent meeting I had with the Ambassador, they have promised to consider making a significant grant for water services in KwaZulu-Natal.

These and other similar projects are critical because they bring real, practical changes to the lives of people. They transform the environment and bring hope and dignity to the poorest of the poor.

I would like to use this opportunity to talk briefly about something the European Ambassador said to me on Saturday. He told me that the EU like working with my Department for two reasons. First, our accounting and reporting systems are transparent and above reproach and, secondly, the money they give us goes directly into projects where they can see it making a difference. We have succeeded in

costing these projects so accurately that not a rand or a cent is wasted – no overspending and no rollovers. My Director-General and Department deserve a great deal of credit for this.

This made me realize, once again, how enormously important this aspect of our work is. We need to be honest. We need to be accountable. And we need to ensure that the money we are given to improve the lives of the poor *goes to the poor*.

It is very distressing and embarrassing to read of money that goes astray; of corrupt officials who line their pockets with money that is intended to relieve the plight of others. This obviously also applies to the leadership, no matter how great or small, and whatever contribution we might have made to the struggle in the past. This is an aspect of our society that we need to wipe out in no uncertain terms. Corruption and fraud are unacceptable anywhere. They are nothing short of disgraceful in a country that has committed itself to the elimination of poverty. We must take our lead from President Thabo Mbeki who has declared war on corruption.

Water provision is, as we know, the responsibility of local government. This does not mean, however, that we can simply turn our backs on the fact that many people are still without the basic services they need. We cannot simply demand that municipalities deliver services if they lack the funds, the skills or the capacity to do so.

As national and provincial government, we have a constitutional responsibility to make sure that services are delivered. This means that we must remain fully informed about where and why services have failed. We must consider ways of ensuring that the equitable share allocated to local government for the delivery of basic services is better utilised. Funds should be allocated to speeding up the

provision of water services and sustaining the projects my Department has put in place. It is not sufficient to lay the pipes and put in the taps. The projects must operate in a sustainable way, with the necessary funds for management and maintenance of operations at the local government level.

This is something we all need to take very seriously. I will be discussing these issues next week at a round of meetings with MECs and we will, in consultation with the Ministers of Provincial and Local Government and Finance, consider what is to be done.

Since I became Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, we have developed a chant to celebrate the two national resources for which we are responsible.

“Viva water pure and clean. Viva forests rich and green”.

We have talked about water. Now I am going to talk to you about our forests, the other half of my portfolio.

The restructuring of our commercial forests has recently attracted considerable interest.

Here we touch on that contentious issue of what we, as government, should be doing with some of our assets. Government must do what government does best. We are not tree farmers or commercial operators. Our job is to make sure the economy grows for the benefit of our people, not to run every aspect of that economy.

I am working with my colleague, the Minister of Public Enterprises, to implement the Cabinet decision that government should not be in the business of farming trees. Our commercial forestry industry generates exports and earns the foreign currency we need to keep our economy running and creates tens of thousands of jobs in rural areas. This means we need to make sure that its management is in good hands.

We have made important progress with restructuring. Offers to take over the running of forests in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal in the final stages of negotiation.

We must attract foreign investment and technology but, local communities, workers and genuine black owned businesses who are prepared to put their own money on the table and take risks are being special priority.

Arrangements with workers have been negotiated in great detail with their organizations, and I am grateful to organised labour for its positive contribution to the process.

The interests of communities with legitimate land claims have also been protected and they will get the benefit of commercial returns for the use of their land. Revenue from the leasing agreements with the successful bidders will be kept in a trust fund for the relevant communities, pending the outcome of land claims.

Empowerment interests have also been addressed. Minimum standards have been met and, in some cases, substantially exceeded.

There are also firm commitments of investment in new sawmills and related infrastructure which will help to replace the unsustainable jobs in the government forests with sustainable, more productive, opportunities.

In Mpumalanga and Northern Province, however, most of the offers we have received do not reflect the real value of the forests. The few proposals worth considering were unable to bring the necessary financial resources to the table. Obviously, we are not going to give away valuable assets simply to get rid of the responsibility of managing our forests. We will, therefore, be going back to the interested parties shortly to ask for new bids in what we hope will be an accelerated process.

Once the current transactions are completed, we will be turning our attention to restructuring of the medium size forests, the so-called Category Bs. Many of these offer tremendous opportunities for local business development to serve regional needs and local business will accordingly be prioritised.

Finally, we are also initiating the process of the transfer of the small local “woodlots” to community management. This will be an important contribution to enabling rural communities, which depend on firewood for most of their energy and building needs, to improve their self-sufficiency. I believe that as much as 80 percent of rural people’s energy needs are met by firewood, much of it, as I mentioned earlier, carried daily on the heads of women.

The management of our precious indigenous forests is also receiving more focused attention. My Department is making the first inventory of all indigenous forests, which cover less than 1 percent of our total land area, so that appropriate management standards can be applied to each one.

We are also working with the provincial authorities on a detailed audit of the forests they manage. In line with our national and international obligations, we plan to publish the first ever State of the Forests Report. This will help us track the progress we are making in implementing sustainable management of all South Africa's forests.

There is no doubt that forests are being lost through over-exploitation and unscrupulous practices. We need to prevent this happening and ensure that every last remaining hectare is conserved for the benefit of local people and the nation as a whole.

I would like to report to you on the progress we are making in one particularly difficult area, Dukuduku in KwaZulu Natal. As many of you know, this small coastal forest is next to the St Lucia World Heritage site and should rightly be part of that National Park.

Together with the national Department of Land Affairs and the provincial Department of Housing, my Department has taken steps to acquire productive land on which to settle those who have taken refuge in the forest because they have nowhere else to go. This will be one of the biggest land redistribution projects yet undertaken.

Many of you will have read of the problems we are experiencing in Dukuduku. I would like to assure you that these have nothing to do with the central issue of protecting natural forests or acquiring land for resettlement. They relate to the activities of criminals who are pursuing illegal activities in the area and will be dealt with as such. Criminal activity and intimidation has been obstructing the

completion of a registration process that is necessary if people are to be relocated to new land my Department has acquired for them. We will not allow the criminals to stand in the way of a process that is for the good of the people and will save the forest.

I would like to emphasise the enormous importance we, as government, place on working in a co-operative and integrated way. As you know, our President has stressed the importance of clustering our efforts in order to achieve co-ordinated and systematic development. The integrated rural strategy is a crucial component of this approach. As we all know, our Constitution also requires that government work in a co-operative way.

My Department is engaged in co-operative work with all three spheres of government, particularly on key rural projects. I have already mentioned the necessary intersection with the work of the Department of Housing in respect of sanitation. I have also told you about our work in Dukuduku with the national Department of Land Affairs and the provincial Department of Housing.

The bonds that link national, provincial and local government are being cemented daily.

For example, I am working closely with the Minister of Environmental Affairs to Tourism at ways to consolidate national parks and heritage sites, such as St Lucia and the Cape Peninsula National Park. In other matters relating to the protection of the environment, we work with all the provincial departments of Environment and Nature Conservation.

We are working with the Department of Trade and Industry to develop opportunities along the Orange River in the Northern Cape in line with its SDI strategy. We are engaged in other SDI projects in the Lebombo Corridor and on the Wild Coast.

We work with the national Department of Agriculture on the development of policy and new approaches for the support of emerging farmers from previously disadvantaged communities. In addition, in the Eastern Cape, we are working with the provincial Department of Agriculture on the rehabilitation of the Tyefu, Ncora and Qamata irrigation schemes along the Great Fish River. From Ceres in the Western Cape to Orabie in Northern Province and Schemula and Mbazwana in northern KwaZulu-Natal, collaboration on development programmes is underway. On the Blyde River in the northern part of the country, an irrigation scheme that will benefit emergent farmers is also under consideration. These are very good examples of the kind of integrated rural development we have been talking about.

We are also engaged in vital partnership ventures with the private sector. A recent example of this is the Ukuvuka Firestop Campaign in this province, which is being well supported by local business. The campaign aims to eradicate the alien vegetation that contributed to the spread of the fires earlier this year and is setting up a voluntary fire fighting association to fight fires along the mountain chain and in some of our more vulnerable settlements. We see this campaign as an important model for similar partnerships elsewhere.

This kind of public-private sector co-operation will, we hope, play an increasingly important role in our efforts to build a better life for all. In order to ensure that such partnerships are efficiently and effectively run, my Department is drawing up a set

of regulations. These will be ready very soon and I hope to make an announcement in this regard during my speech to the National Assembly on 9 June.

I would like to say that I was enormously gratified by the support we received during Arbour Week and Water Week recently. The private sector played a very supportive role, as did national government, including the President and Cabinet. But I was particularly impressed by the way the provinces responded to the national call and organized activities throughout the country.

I thank you all for that and look forward to the continued involvement of your provinces in our future projects.

Madam Chair, members of the NCOP, it is only fitting that I should conclude by expressing my appreciation for the hard work done by my Department and all staff, led by the Director-General Mike Muller. My appreciation goes also to my advisors, Dr Eugene Mokeyane and Janet Love, as well as the Ministry staff, who have helped to ease this old soldier into a fascinating new billet.