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Speech by Minister Kasrils
Workshop on Managing Urban Catchments
29 January 2000
Cape Town

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be here today, and to see how many of you are interested in the question of managing the urban catchment – despite being in one of the most beautiful and tempting cities in the world.

Ingrid de Kok, a well-known South African poet, once wrote: “To return home, you have to drink its water.” There are few things as powerful as the clean, pure water of home. It is not for nothing that water is, throughout the world, a symbol of cleanliness, of life, of purity.

Unfortunately, as you know only too well, the reality is rather different. Much of our water is polluted by industrial effluent, by mining leachate, by contaminated run-off from unserviced settlements and from farms, and by polluted stormwater from urban environments. Many of our rivers are stretched to the limit, or even beyond sustainable limits, by the amount of water abstracted for agricultural, industrial and municipal use, and by the level of pollution that finds its way back into the water. Many of our rivers have been changed forever by canalisation, by the encroachment of roads, by invasion by alien vegetation.

The picture on the human level is as gloomy. Around 10 million people still do not have access to safe drinking water, and at least 20 million do not have access to adequate sanitation. For the majority of our people, the sweet taste of fresh mountain water is only a dream.

But it cannot be allowed to remain only a dream. Because we can build a society in which all people have access to safe drinking water. We can build a society in which our rivers and wetlands are protected. We can build a society in which our plants, our animals, continue to thrive in balanced, protected ecosystems. We can build a society in which water is a force for development and peace. And we can build cities in which we have healthy, thriving rivers.

It will not be easy, but we can achieve this vision. And proper catchment management is a crucial building block in this process.

Proper catchment management comprises a number of different factors, human, hydrological, institutional, ecological, and others.

Firstly, however, it requires us to understand what the Constitution describes as “socially and ecologically justifiable economic development.” This must be the basis from which we address the problems of our country – the unemployed, the poor and the hungry.

The eradication of poverty is the most profound challenge facing South Africa today. Our high levels of poverty are made worse by high levels of inequality, and by lack of access to natural, political and financial resources in certain sectors. While some members of our society are extremely wealthy, too many of our women, our women-headed households, our young people, our old people and our rural people suffer from poverty, hunger and lack of services. While some of our people have two or three university degrees, too many of our people cannot read, cannot fill in a simple form to send money home to hungry children in the rural areas and cannot understand the warning messages on medicines and household items.

Just under half of our population are poor. A high percentage of our children are sufficiently undernourished to find difficulties concentrating in school, and suffer from stunted growth, ill health and other problems arising from lack of nutrition. The national stunting rate among young children ranges between 23% and 27%, and among the poorest 20% of households the rate is 38%.

Women, and women-headed households, are amongst the poorest of the poor. Apartheid policies, which encouraged able-bodied black men to move temporarily into cities and towns in order to provide a ready and cheap labour pool, resulted in a disproportionate number of women and women headed households in under-developed rural areas. These women take the full brunt both of poverty and of degradation of catchment areas.

In the 1998 Speak Out on Poverty Hearings organised by the South African National Coalition of Non-governmental Organisations, access to water, land healthcare, housing and education were, once again, raised as crucial issues by the poor themselves. They also, however, raised the need for development, not hand-outs. Violet Nevhri from the Northern Province told the hearings: “We want to be taught and resourced to fish. We don’t just want fish to eat.”

If our people are to learn to fish, proper catchment management is necessary. If they are going to teach their children to fish, we must make sure there are still fish for them to catch.

It is up to us. If we manage our water resources effectively, we can build a thriving, health country. If we manage our water resources effectively, we

can build a society in which there is no poverty, in which all have enough to eat, in which all can live in dignity.

Proper catchment management is one of the necessary underpinnings of that “socially and ecologically justifiable economic development.” This is the goal our water resource management must aim for.

We meet here today in a city with a number of smallish catchments within its boundaries. This city is one element of the complex mix that makes up the larger water management area. It is a place of great human initiative, of great human intervention – a place of cement, of brick, of tar, of tin. But it is also a place where people live. And it is a place where rain falls and rivers flow. The management of such an urban catchment presents its own particular challenges.

For most of us here today, the city is a part of our daily experience. We live in cities. We work in cities. We travel from one city to another, across land, sea and international boundaries. Our ways of living are defined by cities, by the urban experience.

Our cities, on the whole, take care of our physical needs. If we are lucky, they provide the infrastructure, the roads, the buildings, hospitals, schools, offices and homes that support our lives as urban dwellers. For the less fortunate, they provide a place to erect a tin shack, or a cardboard box to sleep. They provide a place to beg, to wash cars or to sell vegetables on the pavement.

But cities also profoundly alter the natural environment. Rain here no longer falls on the fynbos and seeps through to reappear in a tranquil, mineral-stained stream. Instead, it rushes across concrete pavements to gather in dirty gutters. It pours down stormwater drains, carrying with it litter, organic matter and a range of pollutants washed off the urban streets.

The vast area of hardened surfaces that characterises the urban environment provides not only the source of pollution, but results in an increased rate of run-off, channelled into ever more constrained areas. Many of our urban rivers, including those in Cape Town, have been canalised in an attempt to control them, to manage them, to make them obey our rules.

But the forces of nature are not so easily constrained. Rivers burst their banks. Small streams turn all too fast into raging torrents. When coupled with a heritage of poor planning and lack of regulation, such events have the makings of disasters. Buildings are erected in the wrong place because of a desire to be close to the banks of a river or because there is nowhere better to put up a shack. These increase the risks not only to the inhabitants of such buildings, but to others downstream as the natural course of floodwaters is interrupted.

The managers of cities face a different set of challenges to those managing water at the macro level. There is, of course, one challenge that they have in common – the protection and, in many cases, the restoration of a valuable environmental asset. A healthy river is a precious asset, one that we owe to our children, and our children's children to protect and preserve.

In the urban context, a healthy river is particularly precious for a number of reasons. It extends the network of ecologically sustainable water resources. It provides a source of spiritual and mental relief in the high-speed concrete of the city. But also, and very importantly, it provides a place of learning for city children from all walks of life. It provides a place where children can see for themselves how a river lives, changes and carries life within it. It provides a place where children can learn to value our natural resources. As such, it provides a core of hope for the future.

I would like, just for a moment, to talk about the terrible fires that ravaged this region last week. The fires that have burnt over 9 000 hectares of land along the Table Mountain chain have caused considerable damage. And it could have been worse. Given the fire potential posed by invading alien plants, had there been a slight shift in the direction of the wind, the fire would have turned into an unprecedented catastrophe. It is no exaggeration to say that significant proportions of Hout Bay, Noordhoek, Ocean View, Kommetjie, Scarborough, Simon's Town, amongst other areas, could have been burned down, had we been less fortunate with the wind. As it is, we still face the threats of flooding, erosion, mud slides, scouring of rivers, siltation of dams and estuaries and all the damage to property and commercial activities that these will bring.

The fires have brought home to a wide variety of stakeholders, the need for us to develop an integrated management plan for the control of invading alien plants along the mountain chain. They present us with an exceptional opportunity to develop a campaign aimed at securing full control over invading alien plants along the Table Mountain chain. A secondary goal could be to assist in the rehabilitation of the Table Mountain chain in terms of the problems that have been exacerbated by invading alien plants - erosion, mud-slides and the like. Finally the opportunity could be used to promote social cohesion, training and employment creation, and accountability by land-owners.

Today's workshop will examine several of the challenges facing the urban water manager – flood and risk management, ecological issues, planning issues. It will also focus on the institutional arrangements for catchment management.

I hope it is by now a matter of common knowledge that, under the National Water Act, South Africa has been divided into 19 water management areas. In due course, each of these water management areas will be managed by a catchment management agency.

Each catchment management agency will be shaped by the particular water management challenges of its water management area. It will be shaped by the different stakeholders, their commitment, their involvement, and the skills and knowledge they bring to the table. The establishment of catchment management agencies is part of a worldwide trend – a move away from the centralised management of water to a more decentralised, directly accountable form of governance.

Yet, we must be careful not to imagine that the establishment of catchment management agencies will provide some magic potion to solve the water ills of the country. The Constitution commits us to co-operative governance, not because of some ideological position, but because it makes good sense. As water managers, we must implement the constitutional imperative of co-operative governance, not because it is in the Constitution, but because it is the only way we will be able to manage our water resources successfully and in a sustainable manner.

At the moment we are in a period of flux. The CMC is going through its own restructuring processes, moving towards a vision of one unicity. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is in the process of establishing catchment management agencies. This is an ideal time for us to come together from national government and from local government, in order to explore ways of ensuring that our resources are used to optimum effect.

The correct institutional structures will enable us to give full effect to the National Water Act and to the equitable, sustainable management, protection and use of our water resources. The correct institutional structures will enable us, as a team, to investigate how to harness the untapped water resources of this area, including currently unutilised aquifers.

This team is already working together on a number of aspects. I believe that the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and the CMC are already exploring what co-operative governance means. We are working together in the field of water conservation and demand management, finding ways to use the limited water resources of the area more efficiently and more effectively. We are also working together to carry the message of National Water Week to the people of this area and of South Africa.

We have set for Water Week 2000 the theme: "Water – the key to development, both present and future."

The slogan that will carry this theme to our people is: “Everything works with water; let’s all work for water.”

And the sub-text to the slogan is celebratory: “Viva water, pure and clean!”

The objectives of the Water Week campaign are to:

- Highlight the economic, social and environmental value of water;
- Reinforce the importance of saving water and protecting our water resources, be they rivers, streams, dams or wetlands;
- Inform the public about their rights and responsibilities regarding water use and sanitation;
- Inform the public about health and hygiene issues relating to water availability, access and use
- Highlight the dangers of wastefulness and ignorance
- Highlight the social and economic implications of wasting water and the social and economic benefits of conservation
- Make apparent the importance of paying for water in terms of its value as a limited resource
- Highlight, ultimately, the vital role water plays in terms of its contribution to the economy and to the social well being of our people, now and in the future.

There is an old saying that goes something along the lines of:

I hear something, I forget it;
I do something, I remember it.

This is why we want Water Week to be about doing. We want to mobilise the people of South Africa by calling on everyone, from the President to the school student to the unemployed mother in the township, to act to protect our water resources. For Water Week 2000 we will send out a call-to-action for people across the country to:

- clean up our rivers, wetlands, and water resources;
- stops leaks and cut down on water wastage, and

- ensure the implementation and use of appropriate sanitation to maintain the integrity of our precious groundwater and to improve the health of nature.

We have already begun gathering the support of leaders from across a wide spectrum: politicians, industrialists, leaders of organised labour, community leaders, women, youth, to participate in the campaign. Together with our partners, we will organise events across the country for these people to take part in, to be seen cleaning up our waterways, stopping leaks, chopping down alien invasive species and working with the people for the protection of our water.

A number of extremely influential people have already agreed to be Patrons of National Water Week, to be our champions in this campaign. They include: Former President Nelson Mandela, His Grace, Archbishop Njongukulu Ndungane, His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelithini, Her Majesty, the Rain Queen, Modjadji and Nobel Prize Winner, Nadine Gordimer.

We hope to bring in a number of other well-known personalities to take the message to the people of South Africa, young and old.

The launch of National Water Week will be taking place within the CMC boundaries on the 15th March, and we are very much hoping that the President himself will be leading the call to action by helping to clean up one of your rivers.

One of the essential elements of catchment management – whether an urban catchment or a predominantly rural catchment – is education. We must build an informed and educated population. We must build an awareness of the importance of our scarce water resources. We must build a cadre of people, young and old, who through their individual and collective actions, will come to understand and support our efforts to protect our scarce resources.

This workshop is part of that process of building greater understanding. National Water Week is another building block in that process. Together, in this way, we can build a better and more sustainable future.

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