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“The most important resource on earth”, I read somewhere recently, is not oil but water”. This is a sentiment that I am sure all of you here will identify with.

Such insignificant stuff! Virtually without colour or taste, no substitute for Coca-Cola or beer, water is often simply taken for granted and wasted. Yet it is, of course, the very essence of life. This has been brought home to us very forcibly recently as we watch the helplessness of the people of drought-stricken Ethiopia.

I don’t have to tell anyone today how seriously we need to treat the question of our water supplies, both now and for the future. Serious drought, punctuated by the sudden and uncontrollable violence of storms and flooding, are features of our climate in the region. As the farmers say, “If the drought doesn’t get you, the floods will”.

As professionals in the water field, you are, of course, aware of the consequences of water shortages, and of the need to maintain a reliable and regular supply. As human beings, we are all aware of the desperate need of those who have no ready access to water; whose vulnerability to the vagaries of flood and drought is sometimes life threatening.

This is why I welcome the opportunity to talk to you all today. Because, as water professionals, you are a very large part of the solution. All of you, at some level or another, play a role in the vast network that supplies the region with the water it needs. And our expertise in this area is beyond question, meeting the highest international standards. We are, indisputably, equipped with the expertise to do what so urgently needs to be done ... to ensure access to water by every man, woman and child in our region.

The South African RDP promises 25 litres per person a day within 200 metres of every household. Despite considerable progress, we have a long way to go before we can meet this undertaking. Many people, particularly in our rural areas, still walk miles to collect the water they need for their daily requirements. Others, by building their shacks on the banks of rivers, put themselves at desperate risk when, as recently, flood waters claim homes and lives. The devastation caused by the floods has affected the entire region and, as neighbours, we have tried to help each other to mitigate their worst effects.

My Department is engaged in two core areas in respect of water.

The first of these aims at meeting the minimum requirement set by the RDP. We have committed ourselves to finding ways to ensure that every household has access to the clean, unpolluted water they need for their basic needs.

However, as we have learnt, simply providing toilets and taps is not enough. Once the water supply is installed, we need to make sure it is managed and maintained so that it becomes a sustainable resource for that community.

This means we need to look carefully at the reasons why so many water schemes have failed and what can be done to empower communities at the local level with the necessary expertise and commitment.

It has also been brought home to me very forcibly that, while we abide by the principle that people should pay for the water they consume, some are not even able to pay the most basic prices for their water supply.

When I spoke to the NCOP last week, I told them about a woman I encountered in the Eastern Cape, scooping water from a hole she had dug in the ground. Although the nearby village had an organised and well-functioning water scheme, she could not afford the required R10 a month and had resorted to collecting her own.

Obviously, this is unacceptable. Those who have no means of subsistence cannot simply be excluded from the loop.

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 core area that my Department is engaged in is the protection of our water resources. Whatever schemes we put in today; whatever our progress in terms of meeting the water needs of the South African population, we need to do so within the framework of proper planning and sound conservation principles.

In the past, many of us saw the construction of dams as the very foundation and pinnacle of water conservation strategy. Dams have been built all over the world and heralded as the solution to the needs of the populace. And yet, as the World Dam Commission has pointed out, dams often have very damaging environmental consequences. This is not to say that we should never build dams; simply that we need to be extremely careful to assess the feasibility and consequences of all dam building projects.

We also need to look very carefully at our alternatives. This means we need to examine our existing water resources and catchment areas and to maximise their potential. They must be protected from pollutants and other forms of damage. They must be conserved and encouraged in a way that will ensure their long-term viability. Environmental legislation and monitoring is one important way of achieving this. Public education is another.

I am sure some of you will have watched at least one of two American films that focus on the consequences of industrial pollution: *A Civil Action* and *Erin Brockowich*. These are not just Hollywood money-spinners, they tell

true stories about communities that suffered from the serious consequences of industrial pollution.

As governments, both here and throughout the region, we have a responsibility to ensure that people are protected contaminated water supplies. As an industry, with special knowledge and understanding, we have a moral responsibility to remain critically aware of the dangers of contamination.

As key players in the provision and maintenance of water supply, we share many common goals. The South African government is committed to working with the private sector in meeting them. Together, I believe, there is nothing that we cannot achieve.

In the region, we are committed to working with our neighbours on issues of common interest. Rivers do not respect borders. Aquifers straddle national boundaries. Dams can supply millions of people on our sub-Continent. And pollution flows uninvited from one country to the next.

In any country, the government – and specifically the mandated Department – is the custodian of the country’s water resources. As such, we must ensure equity of access within a framework of sustainable utilisation and development. We must protect and safeguard our water resources, while making sure that the needs of the people for a safe water supply are met.

This duality of water rights – for basic human needs on the one hand and to environmental needs on the other – has been termed the “reserve”. In determining the “reserve”, issues of sustainability in water use allocations will be ensured. The “reserve” will ensure that we fulfil our obligations as

custodians of water resources, and our commitment to both present and future generations.

As water professionals, you have particular expertise and capacity to bring to the party. You have ability to explore and develop technological improvements in the areas of treatment methods, use of process water, recycling and closed circuit systems, the minimisation of waste and cleaner technology.

Even though some of these innovations may be more costly in the short-term, in the long-term they make good economic sense. With better practices, we can derive more mileage can be derived from the same unit volume of water – from the same stretch of river, the same dam or spring.

In this respect, I am greatly encouraged by the new innovative procedures that are constantly evolving in our local water industry. We are, I am told, world leaders in the development of small scale, low cost and low technology systems. For this, we have you to thank.

You also have a critical role to play in the building of economic sustainability In South Africa, for example, the Integrated Rural Development Strategy is an attempt to provide a common framework for development in underdeveloped rural areas. Here again, we seek partnerships with the private sector in the achievement of our goals. We urge you to continue to research and develop low cost equipment that is easy to install and operate and we urge you too to share your considerable knowledge in areas where you implement your projects.

I would like to commend the work of many of your members in the area of training and the transfer of knowledge. By spreading knowledge, by making it available to learning institutions throughout the country, WISA can help build the professional capacity of the entire industry. You can play an important role in encouraging young people, from all communities, to pursue careers in your area of expertise. It would be a welcome step forward, for example, if we were to see more women civil and environmental engineers in our region.

WISA is a strong and healthy organisation, destined I believe to play a key role in the future of our water strategy. Here, in this room, are the brains that will drive our endeavours forward in the new century. This is our combined strength. I am greatly encouraged the presence and involvement of so many members of my Department, some sixty of whom are here today. This confirms that the partnership we seek with the professionals in WISA is already alive and well.

Finally, I would like to say that, in the very near future, I will be publishing draft regulations to govern private/public sector partnerships in the water sector. I will be looking for broad public comment on these regulations and hope that, as an association, South African members of WISA will submit views on them. They have been drawn up by an extremely high-powered team, with both local and international input, and I consider them to represent some of the most advanced thinking on the subject.

Having said that, you will be the judge. I look forward to hearing your comments.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to join you here today. I wish you well in your deliberations and hope our partnership will be a long and mutually beneficial one.