

Keynote address
Herschel District – Eastern Cape
10h00 21 March 2001

Molweni, dumelang, good morning, goeie more, honourable guests, members of the community, young and old.

I am delighted to be able to be here with you in this beautiful corner of the country, not only to celebrate National Water Week, but also to honour Human Rights Day.

We are very privileged to be living in a country with a very high regard for human rights. Indeed, we are very privileged to have a Constitution that guarantees the human rights of all South Africans. One of the rights guaranteed in our Bill of Rights is the right of access to sufficient water. Those of our people who walk many miles each day to fetch water really understand how important this right is. Those families who have suffered from cholera understand how important this right is.

That is why we have chosen as our slogan for this year's National Water Week: Amanzi Ayimpilo – water is life. Viva water pure and clean!

Water is the giver of life. But it can also be the taker of life. Polluted or dirty water can make our children, our families, our friends sick. As too many people in South Africa have discovered, dirty water can kill.

It is for this reason that we, as government, are doing two things.

The first is to educate our people about health and water-borne diseases such as cholera, and the need for proper sanitation and hygiene.

The recent cholera outbreak has not only destroyed human life, it has also had significant socio-economic impacts in KwaZulu Natal, in particular.

We need to empower communities to combat outbreaks of water-borne diseases like this. So we have commissioned roadshows to be undertaken in a number of rural areas to spread information about the nature of cholera, how it is transmitted, how the chances of infection can be reduced, and how to treat the symptoms for those unfortunate people who do contract the disease.

The second important thing that we, as government, are doing, is to work towards being able to provide all our people with 6 kilolitres of water per household per month, free of charge. This will heighten our other achievement – the provision, by government, of water to around ten million people who did not have access to water before 1994.

We are also focusing much more strongly on the provision of sanitation to our people. The outbreak of cholera has brought home to us very strongly the fact that provision of clean water is important, but not enough. In order to protect health, we must have proper sanitation systems in place throughout the country. We must educate our people to understand the need to use proper sanitation facilities, in order to protect their own health, that of their families, and their communities.

In order to protect the health of our communities, but also of the natural environment, we must also keep our rivers clean. We should not allow our rivers to be used for dumping of rubbish; we should not allow industries to use our rivers as pipelines for their effluent to be carried to the sea.

The provision of water and sanitation, and the protection of our water resources, cannot be done by government alone. We need the commitment and involvement of all South Africans to assist in this major project. But we also need

to empower communities in order to participate in the protection of our water resources, and in the project to provide water and sanitation to all.

In particular, we need to empower women to take their rightful place in these projects. In the rural areas, it is usually the women and children who walk long distances to fetch water; it is usually the women who are responsible for nursing the sick family members. It is, thus, poor rural women who will benefit most from the provision of water and sanitation to all. It is women who will benefit most from clean rivers and dams.

This is part of the government's commitment to improving the living conditions of the poorest of the poor, and, in particular, to improve the conditions of poor women. It is, after all, poor rural women who carry the heaviest burdens.

It is always exciting to me to be able to visit the areas where we are providing water. It is important to me to be able to see, on the ground, what a difference our work is making to people's lives. It is important to me to see the communities that still need water, as well as the communities like this one, which is providing water to 16 villages.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to be here. I would like to thank you for coming to be here with me. And I would like you to all, with me, recognise that water is life, to have water is to have a right to life. Amanzi Ayimpilo. Viva water pure and clean!

[ends]