

Opening Address by Ronnie Kasrils, MP
Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
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Introduction

A most productive relationship exists between WISA and my department. It consequently gives me great pleasure to be present here today to open the biennial WISA conference, in the year when South Africa hosts one of the most significant events in its post-1994 history – I refer of course to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. As a highly professional organisation WISA is working hard to ensure that all efforts within the water sector must focus on sustainable development.

Indeed let me immediately start off by commending WISA for its role in arranging an extremely important workshop with my department which involved the water sectors inputs and resolutions to the WSSD.

WSSD and poverty eradication

One of the key focus issues of the coming WSSD in Johannesburg is Water and Sanitation. At the dawn of the 21st century, some 1.1 billion people on Earth are still without access to a safe water supply and over 2.4 billion are without adequate sanitation. Despite laudable achievements to meet these basic needs, since the Rio Summit ten years ago, there remains a tremendous backlog, mostly the poor and marginalised citizens living in unhealthy environments in the developing world.

It is the view of the SA government that Development is the priority of the WSSD – development that grows our economies and societies in a way that will enable our children and their children to enjoy adequate benefits and a better not worse quality of life than we do. This is why South Africa, together with the rest of Africa, has put poverty eradication at the forefront of the sustainable development agenda for the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Together with my fellow Ministers we have been working hard to ensure that this is made a reality for the Summit. Again, let me emphasise my indebtedness to WISA for the input you have made.

In order for development to occur and to be meaningful, we must attack poverty and as we all know access to safe water and adequate sanitation is a basic requirement for eradicating poverty. Here in South Africa we have one of the most advanced

constitutions in the world in terms of the protection of human rights and the promotion of human dignity. We have made tremendous advances in delivery of safe water to our people. As I pointed out in my budget speech last week, we have now reached 7.2 million rural people with potable water at a cost of R5.5 billion since 1994, which is over half of those without clean water. The Millennium Target agreed by the World's Heads of States at the U.N. in 2000, was to achieve this target internationally by the year 2015, a figure we are well ahead of. In fact by 2008 every South African will have been provided with access to clean water.

Sanitation is a particular priority. Yet the will and commitment to address it invariably lags behind the provision of clean water. It was not addressed in the Millennium targets of the UN nor initially on the agenda for the WSSD. I have been working with Ministers in a number of other African countries together with the UN-mandated Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council to get sanitation firmly onto the agenda for the Summit and we have succeeded.

Sanitation

Access to sanitation facilities is a basic human right that safeguards health and human dignity. Every individual deserves to be protected from disease and other health hazards posed by the poor disposal of human waste. Our children, who are among the most vulnerable to such hazards, deserve a better environment and the highest standard of living possible. And may I stress that sanitation is as much about the protection of water quality and the environment as it is about the recognition of human dignity and good health.

Last year's cholera outbreak in KwaZulu-Natal and other parts of the country was a wake-up call for us in terms of accelerating the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene awareness. It brought to our attention the unavoidable fact that we had not done enough in terms of delivering sanitation systems and promoting simple but critical health and hygiene.

The recent White Paper on Household Sanitation committed government to clearing the sanitation backlog by the year 2010 at an investment of R360 million per year over this period. This budget will fund a roll out programme to address the sanitation backlog which last year in our country stood at 18 million people without adequate sanitation and also to address health and hygiene issues. Our delivery figures last year are impressive and show that we have at last started to really make headway. My department spent

R125million on sanitation and built almost 50,000 toilets in the rural areas, improving sanitation for up to 500,000 people. This was five times greater than we had achieved in the previous seven years and has created a springboard for considerable advance in the coming years. It is important to note that last year government improved sanitation facilities for 2.5 million South Africans, urban and rural, when one takes into account the housing and municipal infrastructure programmes of local government. Internationally South Africa is seen to be a trailblazer. My Department has received the prestigious Water Globe Award for 2002 for our Community Water and Sanitation Services achievements.

WASH AND AFRICASAN

Such success has led to the UN mandated Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council to look to us to take the lead both in Africa and internationally with what they call a WASH Programme which stresses the powerful trio of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) to combat water-borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, etc. We launched our South African WASH campaign in Ladysmith during Water Week this year. In launching the WASH programme we have joined hands with the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council in a global alliance for making safe water, sanitation and hygiene a reality for all people in the world. This campaign focuses on the simple act of washing hands after going to the toilet – before eating or handling food. Studies in other countries have indicated that this action alone can reduce illness and death from waterborne diseases by 33%.

The WASH campaign has commenced already with popularising these messages across the country and will continue with a number of activities and a national roadshow which encourages good hygiene practices and the distribution of educational materials. Internationally, the WASH campaign is a concerted global advocacy effort by members and partners of the Collaborative Council to place sanitation, health and hygiene firmly on the political agenda and in particular the agenda of the WSSD.

As a further sign of our commitment to sanitation, health and hygiene South Africa will host the African Sanitation and Hygiene Conference in Gauteng in July this year. This event will bring together the foremost decision makers and sanitation and hygiene policy and practice experts from the continent for a working conference. The overall goal of this conference is to accelerate sanitation and hygiene work in Africa and prepare for the Johannesburg World Summit.

What is happening with Free Basic Water?

Now I want to stress that although we believe in cost recovery for water service, we have found that the poorest and most vulnerable of our people often have not been able to pay for the minimum basic needs. Since the introduction of the Free Basic Water policy in 2000, there has been a significant realisation of our vision to ensure that the basic water needs of our poor are being met. It is a long road- Yes- with obstacles Yes! However, it is pleasing to note that presently 66 % of the total population in the country who have access to water infrastructure are already receiving Free Basic Water and a further three million people will gain access in July when local government's new financial year begins. I make a special appeal through WISA to all water sector specialists and administrators in our country to make this policy a success.

My colleague Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel has also announced significant increases in the allocation of the equitable share of revenue to the provinces and local governments over the next 3 fiscal years. It is expected that this subsidy will in part be used to subsidise the costs of basic water to the poor.

The question is often asked how will small municipalities, that may have a larger portion of poorer people, and therefore lesser scope for cross-subsidisation be able to provide for Free Basic Water. The answer is that equitable share allocations are calculated in such a way as to be proportionally substantially greater in those municipalities than in the bigger cities. The other side of the coin is that inefficiencies in bigger towns and cities can often be hidden by cross subsidies. The margin of error in smaller towns are far less and we have therefore discovered that Free Basic Water now brings all those other management issues to the front, so that the implementation of FBW acts as a catalyst for sound management practices.

My department in its aim to provide support to local government, has in place 9 Provincial Support Units, to proactively engage local authorities to provide financial planning assistance and technical guidance for the implementation of the policy.

One of the important lessons we are learning from implementation is that cost recovery from higher volume water users must be achieved. A communication campaign focusing on the policy, will aim in part to promote cost recovery and will receive critical coverage.

A further reality is that we cannot provide Free Basic Water until people are served with infrastructure. As my department's Water Service programme reaches the 7 million who

at present are “unserved”, so will they benefit from the 6 kilolitres per month free basic allocation.

Local government support

Our programmes will only be successful if local government is able to manage the services in the future. The Department sees its efforts as a local government support programme. We know that there is limited capacity and in response have established numerous, local government capacity building initiatives. It is now time for local government to engage and indicate what is working and not working – where can things be made easier – what is the nature of the support that they need? Through our partnerships such as Masibambane with DPLG and SALGA, local government must engage and ensure that our programmes meet their needs. I have just initiated a water service policy review to address these issues and hope that all WISA members will contribute actively to it.

The future role of water boards

My department has embarked on a process to review the Water Services White Paper and as part of this will also review the role of water boards as well as provides more clarity on the regulatory role of DWAF. Please participate in this process.

Water Boards are seen as an important family of public water service providers that can operate across municipal boundaries. Water boards can therefore be appointed by Water Service Authorities as service providers to assist such municipalities to provide a service that is effective, efficient and affordable. This may be bulk, or bulk and retail or even sewerage. The future responsibility will now be on water boards to change their mindset and not impose themselves on municipalities but become even more customer focussed and so efficient and effective that they will be an attractive choice as a public service provider. Discussions with SAAWU (Association of SA Water Utilities) have revealed that most water boards see it in the same way.

Regulatory role

As I emphasised earlier, the right of access to basic water supply and sanitation is a constitutional right for all South Africans. Whilst the constitution and certain pieces of legislation set out a framework for progressively realising these rights, the task of monitoring and regulating progress and performance is a major challenge. Much work is

going on to support local government and other institutions, however, the role of monitoring and regulating these institutions has to be developed simultaneously.

One of the major challenges in the water services sector is the large number of different institutions involved. All three spheres of government have a role, as well as water boards, community based organisations, municipalities acting as water services authorities and water services providers, and the private sector. To develop a regulatory framework and regulations to cover all these institutions and yet, be simple and transparent is a particular challenge.

The Department has published regulations in terms of the Water Services Act, 1997. All water services institutions are required to comply with these regulations. As its role changes DWAF will become increasingly focussed towards ensuring this compliance through regulatory monitoring and evaluation.

While taking on this new role the Department is also letting go of its old role as a manager of the delivery of community water supply and sanitation. The first step in this process involves the devolution of finances directly to municipalities for projects and this last financial year a substantial proportion of funds went directly to local government for the first time - around 10 per cent of R1.17 billion. It is anticipated that this proportion will increase in the next financial year. Within the next 3 years the role of the Department in the water sector will have undergone a significant transformation. At the same time, budget and management for the 334 major schemes currently run by DWAF will be transferred to local government.

Women in Water

Having highlighted some of the key issues facing the water sector I would now like to take a moment to congratulate the women who were recognised in the Women in Water Awards during Water Week this year. For a long time the work of many women in the sector has gone unnoticed and these Awards provide a long overdue platform for women who have made outstanding contributions to the water sector in a variety of different ways to be recognised. I am delighted that the Department has joined hands with WISA and the WRC in jointly establishing these Awards. This initiative will honour and celebrate the hard work of women in the water sector and the key role they play in poverty eradication, education and sustainable development in both urban and rural settings.

Water conservation and water demand management

One of the key elements of the National Water Resource Strategy is the chapter on Water Conservation. The purpose of the Water Conservation and Water Demand Management Strategy (WC/WDM) is to enhance the management of water in order to achieve sustainable, efficient and affordable water supply to all consumers. The role of WC/WDM in the context of this strategy is not limited to water resource considerations and acknowledges that economic and financial factors are perhaps of equal significance. The approach adopted in the strategy is to derive a “win – win” situation for the various water institutions, for consumers and the environment. I take this opportunity to invite the Conference delegates to attend the plenary paper and a series of workshops on Water Conservation tomorrow. Your comments and inputs will be appreciated, especially in our moves towards sustainable services delivery. I look forward to you being as practical and productive as you were in your contributions to the WSSD workshop.

I must mention one more challenge, which I would like WISA members to take up this year. Apart from the Water Services Policy Review, the Department will also be publishing the draft National Water Resources Strategy for public comment. WISA members must play a leading role in ensuring that the whole South African community understands and engages in finalising this strategy, our country’s “Blueprint for Survival”.

Finally, let me commend you on your progress since your Sun City conference two years ago. You have continued to play a vital role in transforming our country’s water sector and implementing our Water Acts. I am greatly encouraged by the positive way you maintain your relationships with the Water Research Commission, the Water Boards, the universities, provincial and local authorities and in particular the community level authorities you are so keen to provide assistance. Together with government and country you are soon going to be called to put the resolutions of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development into practise.

On these challenging and positive notes I would like to wish the participants of this WISA biennial event a very fruitful and productive conference. I hope that you achieve all that you set out to do in this very important year for water supply, sanitation and sustainable development in Southern Africa, our continent and the world.

I have no doubt whatsoever that you the sector professionals are capable of dealing with the challenges.

