

**ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF THE AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY
NETWORK ON WATER BY MR RONNIE KASRILS, MP,
MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY OF SOUTH AFRICA
ON 9 DECEMBER 2003, ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

**THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ADDRESSING AFRICA'S WATER
CRISIS, IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF THE WSSD AND
MDG GOALS**

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, fellow Africans, it is a pleasure to be here with you today, and a particular pleasure to be with you at the launching of this important initiative the African Civil Society Network on Water (ANEW). If we can work together, governments and civil society, to meet the water challenges facing Africa, I can see a great future ahead of this continent.

We have come a long way over the past decade: the African Union, NEPAD and the African Ministers Council on Water have brought hitherto unknown interaction between African countries on the subject of water. Nonetheless, the circle is not yet complete. The addition of active civil society will complete the circle and give us the resources we need to address this subject with the gravity that it deserves. We therefore heartily welcome the emergence of ANEW and your objective "to facilitate an effective voice for civil society organisations in Africa concerning water". If I may speak on

behalf of African governments and AMCOW I am sure all would wish to see you becoming more organised, accessible and accountable as valued partners in the joint continental endeavors aimed at the sustainable management of Africa's Water Resources and access by all to safe water and sanitation.

Water is a remarkable substance – central to life, it feeds our nations, drives our industry, washes away our troubles, quenches our thirst and brings beauty and pleasure into our lives. Yet it is an unfortunate aspect of the nature of water that it flows towards power. Thus it is always the powerless, the most vulnerable, who lack access to water, be it water for drinking, or for productive purposes. An equitable system of water governance is needed to correct this inequitable flow pattern – to make the river flow upstream. Effective management of water is also necessary to ensure that water is provided for economic and social development, as best as is possible considering the vagaries of the African climate and, indeed, the growing vagaries due to global climate change. At the same time, we must ensure that the aquatic ecosystems on which we depend are not destroyed and irreparably damaged. Thus the sustainable management of water resources has several facets to it: ecological, social and economic.

We all know the challenges facing us - the millions of Africans that don't have access to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation; the millions of Africans

held hostage to the vagaries of rainfall because of inadequate water storage to see us through the dry periods; the unnecessary deaths from water borne diseases. We all know the targets - indeed, they have become something of a mantra: to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. The challenge facing us is how to pool our precious human resources to find creative and effective ways of achieving them.

Partly I believe that this requires us to take a truly African approach to services delivery, an approach that sees our people as citizens that can interact with the delivery process to negotiate for their own interests, rather than as passive consumers. This raises some interesting questions:

- how does one build an active citizenry, particularly in the face of appalling poverty, weak communication channels, and a wide range of local languages;
- what is the role of the state and whose interests does the state serve, and what is the role of civil society. Sometimes one might be forgiven for thinking that the state was a thing of the past. There are those groups, particularly in developed countries, who would like to see the state play a truly minimal role, groups that see the private sector and the market as the nirvana of the modern world. Nonetheless I believe that the state has

a crucial role to play in developing countries. I firmly believe that the state is not a neutral entity, and should not pretend to be neutral. The state must drive the agenda for sustainable and equitable development. I also believe that the state will not achieve sustainable development, or the water and sanitation targets without a strong partnership with civil society. In fact such a partnership is essential if the MDG's are to be achieved!

A successful recipe for water governance brings together the governing capacity of the public sector, the private sector and civil society. This is not necessarily an approach that is welcomed by governments – there are many examples of governments ignoring or rejecting civil society based initiatives; in some cases, this is as a result of bureaucratic incompetence or exhaustion rather than a conspiracy; in some cases it is the response of a government threatened by challenge; in some cases, civil servants have not yet broken from technocratic hegemony into the modern world of participatory democracy.

Civil society is a necessary part of the checks and balances needed in a strong democracy to balance the immense power of the state and the tendency of the state to determine the “sanctioned discourse” in the water sector. Civil society also acts as a balance to the tension between the state and the profit motives of the private sector, lobbying, *inter alia*, for the

protection of the environment, human rights, protection of the poor. Let us not, however, fall into the easy assumption that all civil society groups act in the best interests of the people. Let us not forget that there are civil society groups that might have negative agendas and oppose governments for the wrong reasons. There can very well be a tension between C.S.O's and government for we won't see eye to eye on everything. My request is that the dialogue must be based on genuine facts and not distortions. The tension then will be creative and positive. The partnerships that we must build are between progressive government forces and progressive forces in civil society. That way we can build a better life for all in Africa.

In this process, we must ask ourselves how we involve people in decision making. Agenda 21 set the challenge for us of ensuring the involvement of people in decisions that affect them, with regard to the management of natural resources. However, participation in decision making is not an easy road to follow. We need to be clear about the difference between providing information, consulting or negotiating on decisions, and what mechanism is to be used in what situation.

We need to consider very seriously how one ensures that marginalised communities and groups are involved in the process and are enabled to make their voices heard. In South Africa we have powerful organisations

representing industry, commercial farmers, the forestry industry, and even middle class environmental groups. We also have large, poor rural communities, often semi-literate, and not fluent in English which is the language in which most communication takes place around public issues. How does one make their voices loud enough to be heard. And how does one enable the marginalised parts of marginalised groups, such as women in general, rural women in particular, the aged, those suffering from HIV and Aids, the disabled, to speak out. Civil society organisations, and in particular, community based organisations have a crucial role to play in this regard. ANEW is a most welcome development because of its regional representation and its potential to engage in water issues at a regional level. This is what makes ANEW unique, different and may I add very new in fact. AMCOW will aim to build a relationship of trust and open exchange with civil society organisations such as ANEW in order to strengthen the quality of development. ANEW should apply to make a presentation to AMCOW so that we may explore opportunities to establish a working protocol between ANEW and AMCOW.

Education and awareness is a crucial part of building effective water governance systems. An informed and active public is the best tool for balancing the excesses and mistakes of government and the private sector and to ensure that the needs of people and the environment are met.

I would like to stress that we need a partnership between civil society and government specific to the needs of developing countries. Developing countries are continually bombarded by northern concepts and ideas. This is true of both government and civil society. We have a challenge to work out for ourselves what serves our interests most effectively, rather than slavishly adopting northern dictats. For example, in the highly developed countries of the world, there is a strong position taken by various civil society organisations against the building of dams. This is not a position that makes sense, however, on a continent plagued by frequent droughts, where per capita storage is amongst the lowest in the world. We need more dams in Africa. In the United States of America and Australia, water storage is in the region of 6 000 cubic metres per person per annum. In South Africa it is one tenth of this, and in most of the rest of Africa, considerably less. Only 3% of Africa's renewable water is abstracted annually for domestic, agricultural and industrial use. Only 6% of Africa's cultivated land is irrigated – in a continent where millions of people go to bed hungry every day.

If we wish to build the economies of African countries we need to increase our capacity to store water. We need to work together, governments and civil society, to ensure that the new dams that we need to build are built in a manner that improves the lives of affected people. We need to work together

to ensure that impacts on the environment are mitigated to the best extent possible. We need to work together to enhance our ability to use water for economic development in Africa. This is part of the circle that is necessary to ensure that all Africans have access to sufficient water and adequate sanitation. One of the challenges that we have in providing safe drinking water and sanitation is the challenge of financing the infrastructure and the operation and maintenance of the infrastructure. Economic growth is an important part of meeting this challenge.

Let me briefly say something about synergistic collaboration. There is enormous potential for joint collaboration in our objectives whether integrated water resource management. The attainment of the MDG's, the Johannesburg Plan of implementation – we are looking not only for an upscaling of financial resources but an increase in the quality of ownership and sustainability. AMCOW will work to strengthen such synergy.

In conclusion, let me once again welcome this initiative. Let me stress that this initiative could not have come at a more opportune moment. We have, as a continent, put in place the New Partnership for African Development, a partnership between the peoples and states of Africa, and between the rest of the world and Africa. Nonetheless this partnership is in shadow as the war in Iraq draws the attention of the world, and much of its financial support,

away from Africa and aggravates uncertainty around the world. In these challenging conditions we must pool our resources, we must find ways of working together to meet the water challenges of the African continent. We owe it to our people to do so.

At the beginning of my address I stated that we needed to complete a circle. Today that circle is complete. It is my honour and pleasure to announce that ANEW is officially launched! May you grow to be strong, vibrant, dynamic and significant. Congratulations and good luck in your endeavors!