

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY,
MR RONNIE KASRILS, MP
BUDGET VOTE NO. 34: WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY**

6 JUNE 2003

Embargo: 09:00

“CLIMBING THE WATER LADDER”

Introduction

Last year, South Africa hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development, called by world leaders to ensure a prosperous future for our people and our planet.

The World Summit gave us an opportunity to consider how we are progressing in the few short years of democracy in improving the quality of life of our people.

What was notable was the high regard in which South Africa is held internationally, echoed in New York last month when South Africa was invited to chair the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, which reviews progress and follows up the decisions on the summit.

Our environmental policies were praised, our efforts at poverty alleviation likewise, as well as our commitment to grow our economy and that of the African continent in a sustainable manner.

During the Summit, based on our reputation for sustainable use of forest resources, South Africa's assistance was sought to find ways to protect and preserve the wonderful tropical forests of Central Africa, a natural heritage that will help to sustain us all if it is properly managed.

But over and over again what was highlighted was the way we manage water, the revolution in water resources management, our tremendous success in making the right to water a reality for the many millions who in 1994 did not have it.

It was significant that one of the largest side events at the Summit, the WaterDome, was organised by my Department in collaboration with African and global partners. Many delegates commented that South Africa's tap water was not just safe but more pleasant to drink than in many of the world's other great cities.

And it is significant that the body responsible for turning the decisions of the World Summit into reality, the Commission for Sustainable Development, chaired by Minister Valli Moosa, has just decided that water should be the main focus over the next two years.

Our challenges

It is important to highlight these achievements, as a background for the challenges and tasks that lie ahead. Our achievements do not come easily for the constraints are great.

A United Nations report about world availability of water reveals that, out of 182 countries, only 30 have less water available per person than South Africa. Many countries that are seen as water stressed – including neighbours Namibia and Botswana as well as countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan have more water per person than we do.

So we should not be surprised that this budget is presented against a background of a drought that is hurting many rural communities in Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, a drought which has contributed to very unpleasant water quality problems across the country from Hartebeespoort Dam to Prieska. The drought is providing a check to see whether our water resources management and water services provision is really sustainable in the tough conditions that we face.

The water ladder: delivery of water services

In 1994, Government made a promise. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, one of the most widely consulted policy programmes in the world, committed us to the short term aim of providing every person with enough water for health “by establishing a national water and sanitation programme which aims to provide all households with a clean, safe water supply of 20 – 30 litres per capita per day and adequate sanitation facilities”. We did this and so took our first steps up the country’s water ladder.

This year, we will celebrate the delivery of water to the 9 millionth person served by this Department’s rural programme while government as a whole has supplied millions more, through housing and urban programmes, leaving between five and six million to be served - the exact figure will be determined when the 2001 census is released.

We have exceeded the RDP’s targets !

But we are not going to be content when everyone has got onto the first rung of that water ladder, with access to water at a tap in the street, and sanitation.

The RDP said:

“In the medium term, the RDP aims to provide an on-site supply of 50 – 60 litres per person per day of clean water ... water supply to nearly 100% of rural households should be achieved over the medium term and adequate sanitation facilities should be provided to at least 75% of rural households.”

The promise for the next ten years is to move up the ladder, from communal tap to the convenience and dignity of having water in peoples’ own yards with each household having its own toilet and even, in time, hot and cold running water inside the house enjoyed by many more of our people. That’s what I mean by climbing the water ladder. As we climb the ladder, so our people will experience better and better standards of supply and services.

The water services policy review, now drawing to a close, has considered how to move up to the next step. So we reject the allegations of the coterie of self - proclaimed “real revolutionaries” that government has failed on its RDP promises. On the contrary, we have delivered them and more. And the way forward will be outlined in the Water Services White Paper, to be published shortly.

Service sustainability

But many people have asked whether the systems we have built are working as we intended.

Water supply does not end when pipes are put in the ground. What happens when a pipe bursts ? When diesel must be bought for the pump ? When the operator fails to open the valves to a community ? When some people take more than their fair share of water at the expense of others further down the pipeline ?

These issues are confronted every day in communities across the country.

For an objective view, I asked Dr. David Hemson of the University of Durban Westville who had highlighted these challenges, to investigate a representative sample of DWAF-funded water projects in KwaZulu-Natal.

His report did not give us 100% - I would have been surprised if it did. His team visited 23 schemes across the province. 17 (74%) were supplying water as intended. Only one had a technical problem – needing a new pump. In three, there was no water because neither community nor local government had paid for diesel or electricity. In the last two, there was community conflict over how the scheme should be run and who should benefit.

These findings are encouraging because, once those problems are solved, it will be possible to get the schemes back in operation and providing water to the communities in a sustainable way. My appreciation to Dr Hemson for his work, which will continue. He draws attention to many issues from the role of NGOs to compliance with RDP standards which are most helpful.

We have also surveyed 1544 departmental schemes valued at R9.95 billion as we prepare to transfer them to local government. While the vast majority of the schemes are working some rehabilitation is needed, 40% because of normal ageing, 19% due to vandalism (including theft of diesel engines, illegal connections which caused leaks and reduced pressure, depriving whole communities of their supplies), 18% because normal maintenance had not been done.

The next phase of our work will therefore focus on strengthening local management and local government. This year's budget therefore provides not just R1.2 billion for new water supply and sanitation infrastructure but also R116 million for refurbishment (with another R210 million in the next two years of the MTEF), R93 million for capacity building and R25 million for strengthening our oversight role.

Last year, when we started our policy review, I asked the people of South Africa "what problems do you have with your water services?" The responses confirmed that the challenge goes beyond infrastructure with many complaints about poor service and people not benefiting from Free Basic Water also pinpointed by Dr Hemson. Most people had tried to engage their local municipality, without success and were extremely frustrated. I greatly sympathise with them and have confronted these municipalities.

Many municipalities need to improve the efficiency of their water and sanitation services. They receive substantial grants and municipal officials are well paid. It is therefore time to ensure that our people get the service to which they are entitled. The Department will therefore increasingly concentrate on its long-term job:

supporting, monitoring and regulating the way municipalities provide water and sanitation services.

Cut-offs

It has been claimed in certain quarters that water supplies to 10 million South Africans have been cut off – one zealous Wits Professor even suggested to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee that the figure might be as high as 13 million. But like statements that Government is privatising all water services, this is simply not true. The Human Sciences Research Council, which published the book in which the claims were made has now stated that the figure was “a misplaced extrapolation by a researcher of an HSRC survey, and considerably over-estimated the phenomenon”.

There are lies, damn lies and statistics and there are people who deliberately lie with statistics. “John Pape”, co-author of the book who was recently extradited to the USA to face charges related to the so-called “Symbionese Liberation Army”, glorified the use of incorrect information. In a paper entitled “Down With Missionaries and Objective Academics”, he encouraged colleagues not to present facts to help workers make their own decisions but rather simply to lead them to support the desired positions and courses of action advocated no doubt by the real revolutionaries. I have nothing personal against the man and trust he is coping with his incarceration but misleading working people by withholding concrete facts or providing incorrect information is no basis for morality nor long term political success. I trust that David McDonald his co-author, of Queens University in Canada and the University of Cape Town, will now retract and, like Dr Hemson, provide some honest information that reflect what is really happening on the ground today in a way that helps us to solve the problems.

Messrs McDonald, Cottle, Bond and company, listen up: The HSRC used surveys and information from local government and concluded that “a plausible estimate of the number disconnected at any point during that period would be less than about 2% of all connected households” but that “the extent and consequences of disconnections by local authorities remain a serious matter of concern”. I agree wholeheartedly.

In the three largest Metros, in the first three months of this year, 53 400 households had been cut off, typically for a short time. This is 17 800 per month. If this is typical of all households with metered water connections, about 250 000 people would be cut off at any one time, including many who can pay but “forgot”. I am not happy with this number but it is far from the crisis that the phoney revolutionaries have tried to portray.

Our policy is clear: we cannot deprive people of basic water supplies. Where there are problems, the municipalities may restrict flow to the free basic water level rather than cutting it off completely. But people who use more than their free basic allowance have to pay and if they don't, they will face restrictions. The White Paper will clarify this and propose any amendments needed to existing laws to ensure that everyone – from mayor to Mamas in informal settlements - knows that water cannot be cut off completely, save where public health is at risk.

Free Basic Water

The Free Basic Water policy announced by our President in his 2002 State of the Nation address actually goes further than the RDP, which promised only a lifeline tariff to cover operating and maintenance costs. 26 million people live in

municipalities that have already implemented the policy. Once again allegations by the self-proclaimed revolutionaries that government has gone back on its promises are as empty as a leaky bucket. Many more people will enjoy free basic water from the July 1 start of local government's financial year. Given the generous increase in the Equitable Share, I will name and shame municipalities that fail to implement Free Basic Water.

These and other matters will be dealt with in the Water Services White Paper, compiled by a core group including National Departments, SALGA and the South African Association of Water Utilities (SAAWU). It will clarify the arrangements for transfers of schemes to local government, and for funding water investments through the Municipal Infrastructure Grant (which I explained in the NCOP on Tuesday).

It will also outline the future of that important family of public service providers, the water boards, ably represented by SAAWU. And I must congratulate Rand Water, for its hundred years as a world-class public organisation, which continues to deliver excellent service to the people of South Africa.

Sanitation delivery

Sanitation is now our critical challenge and delivery by the national sanitation programme (which includes the Housing and Municipal Infrastructure Programmes) continues to accelerate with improved sanitation provided to an estimated 2 260 000 people last year by Government as a whole. R221 446 000 has been spent by my Department providing toilets for 65 105 households.

R321 million is allocated this year to provide sanitation in 120 000 households as part of the national target of 300 000 households for the combined Programme. This will keep us on track to eradicate the backlog by 2010. We will promote community based labour intensive approaches that could generate over 6000 jobs annually and put R50 million into rural economies.

The Department is also helping to eradicate the despised bucket system. The target date for its eradication in 430 000 households is 2006. Communities and municipalities must agree about the system used to replace buckets, Ventilated Improved Pit Toilets (VIP's) in rural areas or low flush water-borne systems in dense Peri-Urban settlements. Properly built VIPs are a first class design and the full flush systems that everyone wants will not work where not enough water is available or the community cannot afford expanded water supplies and waste water treatment which national government cannot yet fund.

The Department will continue to collaborate with the Departments of Health and Education to improve sanitation in schools and clinics. R40 million has been allocated to my Department for clinic sanitation programmes with R150 million allocated to the Department of Provincial and Local Government for School Sanitation, all using labour based approaches. The National Sanitation Task Team chaired by my Department is helping to prioritise and identify needy schools through the local government's planning processes.

Water Resources

Water resources management makes our water services and forestry work possible. The National Water Resource Strategy will be finalised for publication in the course of this year after last year's mammoth round of consultation.

The current drought highlights the importance of managing efficiently the water we have, both above and below the ground, and storing it in wet years to use in dry times. Groundwater, that hidden treasure, can be much more reliable. The Berg River project, which will assure Cape Town's water supplies, is now underway and, as announced in the President's State of the Nation speech, we are also preparing to build a major dam on the Olifants River in Limpopo to supply the rapidly expanding mining sector and meet domestic needs. Construction to raise the Flag Boshielo dam will increase the water available in the region in the short term.

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project is going well with Mohale Dam nearly a quarter full. Its water will flow to the Vaal when the tunnel is completed adding to the contribution that Katse Dam is already making - 618 million cubic metres per year, more than half the volume supplied by Rand Water to Gauteng.

Dams are vital to our survival but the way they are built must not prejudice local communities as happened with the construction of the Gariep and Inanda dams. I was shocked to learn of the arbitrary treatment of the communities concerned by the apartheid government of the time and told them that, while I cannot compensate them directly for what happened, my provincial colleagues will ensure that the shameful past is recognised when farming and housing opportunities are allocated. And I am grateful to NGOs such as Earthlife-Africa for working with us to support the communities concerned.

WUA challenges

We also need to check our progress in the transformation of the Department and of our country and indeed whether we are doing our job as Parliamentarians. I believe we are, and the evidence for this is the growing cooperation we are seeing between Minister and Department and the people we serve.

As an example, the drought has highlighted the need for discipline in the use of water and I have already reported to the NCOP on progress we have made using the "eye in the sky" technology to curb illegal water use. But we will never be able to be everywhere at once. We depend on information from the ground as well.

So I am encouraged by the many people who tell us about things happening in their areas. Often, this is not because they are affected directly but because – like the Gauteng resident who told me about farmers illegally building dams to take water from the Crocodile river – they recognise that damage is being done to our environment and to the country we are trying to build.

The role of MPs is well illustrated by the example of Hon. Dr. Jean Benjamin who brought to my attention the disgraceful attitudes that still prevail in some of our rural communities, reflected in the way that workers of colour were treated by white supervisors in a recently established water user association.

Government officials know that they have to respect the basic value of human dignity and there have been dismissals in cases of gross racism. But workers of Water User Associations must be treated with the same dignity and respect that they would enjoy in government and could expect from any other employer. I cannot go into more detail here because some of the incidents concerned are the subject of disciplinary proceedings but I want to assure members that I greatly value your reports, act on them and will report back to you. I wish to acknowledge the role of the Unions in this respect.

My Director General will establish systematic oversight of Water User Associations similar to that for the Water Boards, which has enabled me to keep a close eye on developments and to intervene in cases such as that of Umgeni Water. Problems there have been dealt with through contract cancellations, dismissal of managers and serious criminal charges. I have been greatly helped by information provided to me although carefully documented, factual information is always more useful than emotive, anonymous unsubstantiated allegations distributed to all and sundry which has not helped the Umgeni issue.

Forestry

The restructuring of the Department's plantation forests has continued. All the large, Category A, plantations have either been transferred to new operators or incorporated in SAFCOL for further disposal. As a result, the Department's forestry trading account has been closed.

As I told the NCOP, the Eastern Cape is an important province for forestry. We believe that 60 000 hectares of new commercial forestry could be added over the next 20 years, creating 3 000 direct jobs and producing an additional R150 million turnover per annum. The Department, working with the relevant provincial departments, will be giving a high priority this year to turning this potential into a reality. My appreciation to my Advisor, Dr Dennis Goldberg, for his creative energy in this regard.

I want to thank those MP's and Forestry South Africa – who pointed out that payments are outstanding to the communities involved in the Singisi forest project. Indeed, more than R25 million is in the bank, awaiting the registration of the community property associations. As a result of that information I have raised the matter with the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs whose officials are working with mine to expedite the process..

Our flagship conservation programme, Working for Water which has now cleared a million hectares of invasive aliens plants. National Treasury is currently reviewing how such poverty relief programmes should be funded in future and I am hopeful that Working for Water will continue, with a permanent budget. And I congratulate our Ukuvuka: Operation Firestop project which has just won a Green Trust award.

Corporate services: Audit of the department

I must mention that the Auditor-General qualified his audit of the financial affairs of my Department last year. I have reviewed this fully with my DG and his team. While no fraudulent or fruitless activities were reported, some supporting documents were only submitted after the audit, and accounting systems did not yet meet the requirements of the PFMA. Treasury has now switched the Department to the new BAS accounting system (although the 2002/3 accounts may still be qualified) and planning for this year's audit allows enough time to provide the necessary records.

Africa and NEPAD

I started in New York, with the impact we have made internationally and end in Africa where we are promoting the same water and sanitation goals that we are achieving at home. During WSSD we hosted the second meeting of the African Ministers Conference on Water (AMCOW) and agreed on ways to make progress on water and sanitation for poverty alleviation.

With our colleagues we developed an African Water Facility proposal, a fast track fund to help other countries match the progress that South Africa has made in water and sanitation and welcome the positive response from the G8 meeting in Evian.

We are not seeking funds for South Africa but, in the same spirit of solidarity that sees the better off helping the poor water user through their tariffs; commercial farmers helping emerging farmers to establish themselves; forestry companies investing in our rural communities; we are fighting for equity and justice beyond our borders as well as inside.

Conclusion

We recently laid Tata Sisulu to rest and the country reflected deeply on the lessons we learnt from his life. Perhaps the most important is that value of putting others before ourselves, of service to others. This is the contract, which this government, through in this instance, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, and today's budget, has with the people of South Africa and the Continent.

In this spirit of cooperation I recognise the private sector's response to my challenge to forge partnerships with Roundabout Playpump and can report a contribution of R21 million to date for 442 playpumps in rural schools.

I conclude by expressing my appreciation for the dedication of my adviser, Dennis Goldberg, my DG Mike Muller, the Department's hardworking officials, SAAWU, the Water Boards, the TCTA, Water Research Commission, the National Advisory Councils for Water and Forests, Forestry South Africa and all in the wonderful water and forestry sectors.

June 6th, 1943, sixty years ago, saw the first opening of the second front against Nazi Germany in the Normandy Landings.

I dedicate this speech – “the water ladder” – isitebhisi samanzi to our assault on poverty.