

A decade of delivery: The Water Sector in South Africa
Minister Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Solidarity Conference, London, October 2003.

Ladies and Gentlemen, honoured guests, friends and comrades. It is a great pleasure to be able to address you here today and to celebrate with you the triumphs of the first decade of freedom in South Africa.

Ten years ago we shared, in many corners of the world, the joy of liberation in South Africa. Those were heady moments, when the ANC, after many years of bitter struggle, finally took the reins of government in South Africa. On the 27th April, 1994, the people of South Africa, black and white, women and men, stood patiently in queues to cast their votes for the future of the country. That day, and all that followed it, would not have been possible without the support of passionate and committed people throughout the world. What has transpired in South Africa in the last ten years is as much an achievement of the anti-apartheid movement that fought so dedicatedly for our liberation, as it is the achievement of the ANC and of the people of South Africa.

Ten years in the lifetime of a country is like a few months in the lifetime of an individual. Our democracy is still in its infancy - and yet, what a mature democracy it is, and how well it has delivered to our people. Perhaps you will allow me, on

this auspicious occasion, to boast a little about our achievements in bringing water to the people of South Africa.

When the ANC took office in 1994, we estimated (the apartheid government's figures weren't very good when it came to black South Africans) that there were around 12 million people who did not have access to safe drinking water. These were people, mainly in the rural areas, who had to fetch their water from springs, from distant rivers, or, if they were lucky, from distant wells and boreholes. Our rural women were condemned to spend many hours of their precious days, walking to fetch water. Some faced the daily terror of fetching water from crocodile infested rivers. On the other side of the fence, of course, white South Africans had services equal to the best in Europe, full flush toilets, baths and taps and showers aplenty, and even a plethora of swimming pools. We were two worlds in one country.

The ANC government recognised the primacy of water in the struggle for dignity and wellbeing. Indeed, our Constitution recognises this in the guarantee of the right of access to sufficient water. Water is, after all, a basic human right, fundamental to life. It was on this basis that the government began a major programme to bring water to the people. Ten years later, I can say with pride, that our government has brought safe drinking water to more than 9 million people. This is a remarkable achievement, testimony to the commitment and creativity of

hundreds of people in government, the private sector and NGOs who have worked tirelessly to make this dream a reality.

I am particularly proud that, in this process, we have been able to assist in the gender struggle in our country. Frances Baard, a wonderful and powerful woman who was a leader in the trade union movement and in the ANC, once said: "we know that there is no freedom which can be for the men without the women".

Black women in South Africa faced, under apartheid, the triple burden of race, gender and class discrimination. It is our challenge to change this, to ensure that women are enabled to take their rightful place alongside our men, as equal partners in the drama of life. In providing water to rural households, we have liberated innumerable women from the drudgery and labour of fetching water over long distances; we have liberated innumerable women from the agony of nursing family members made ill by poor water and lack of hygiene; we have enabled these women to carry themselves with pride as members of water committees, as labourers on water projects, as citizens of South Africa.

None-the-less, the latest census figures show that we still have a long way to go. At least 5 million people are still getting water from unacceptable sources like rivers and springs. We intend to change this picture, and to change it fast. The Millennium Development Goals have set the target of reducing the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water by half by 2015. We are already well

on the way to ensuring that everyone has access to safe drinking water. We have set ourselves much more ambitious targets. By 2008 we will have delivered water to these last 5 million people. But we have also recognised that this is not enough. We have brought a basic amount of clean drinking water within reach of 9 million people. Now we need to begin to upgrade that service, to increase the amount of water available to households, to bring it closer to individual households. We need to move our people up the water ladder, to improve the services that we can provide. This, believe me, is a major challenge that will keep us occupied for many years to come.

However, we are the first to recognise that it was not all plain sailing. Several times we had to stop and reassess what we were doing. The first real challenge came in the form of a severe cholera outbreak. Although the interventions by government managed to keep deaths from the disease to a minimum, it forced us to reconsider our strategy. The provision of clean water clearly wasn't enough to prevent cholera from breaking out. Clearly we needed to do more.

Buoyed up by international support and local expertise, we moved more strongly into the field of sanitation provision. But alongside the provision of basic sanitation, we began a major health and hygiene campaign. Water, sanitation and hygiene became our watchword - WASH! A programme that we have championed not only in South Africa, but in international forums as well. With the cry: sanitation

is dignity, we launched a campaign to bring basic sanitation to the 20 million South Africans without access to adequate sanitation. Part of this campaign, which is gathering momentum daily, is the campaign to eradicate the dreaded bucket system, a filthy remnant of apartheid abuse from which some of our people still suffer. We have set ourselves the target of eradicating the bucket system throughout the country by 2007.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg last year, the world finally agree to a target of reducing the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation by half by 2015. Once again, we have set ourselves far more ambitious targets. We intend to eradicate the backlog in basic sanitation by 2010. An ambitious target indeed - and we will need support to get there.

A second challenge stared me in the face on day when I was visiting a water scheme that we had put into a rural village. To my distress, I saw a woman, a baby tied to her back, digging a hole near the bank of the river to fetch water. When I asked why she wasn't using water from the tap, the answer came back to me that she couldn't afford to pay for the water. Our Constitution guarantees people the right of access to sufficient water. It is an insult to our people and a mockery of our Constitution to put in water schemes and prevent people from using the water by charging an unaffordable price. It was on that day that our free

basic water policy was conceived: a policy which allows for 6000 litres per household per day free of charge. To date, in the region of 75% of households that have access to safe drinking water are receiving free basic water, and this percentage is going up all the time.

It is worth noting that we have recently come under fire from a number of people, parading under the banner of anti-privatisation radicals, both in South Africa and internationally. They have attacked us for our stance on privatisation, for putting in pre-paid water meters, for allegedly cutting off the water supply of the poor when they can't pay. Their arguments are laced with hyperbole and incorrect statistics. I would like to set the record straight. The reality is that only five out of 284 municipalities have contract agreements with private sector partners to assist in the delivery of services. I stress that where the private sector is engaged, they are carefully regulated so that the interests of the consumers are protected, and that they are contracted to provide a service. Neither the assets nor the resource are for sale. Our policy is to ensure the supply of 6000 litres of water free of charge to the poor, not to remove their access to water. The ANC government chose, in the face of considerable opposition from the international water sector, to provide free basic water to our people. We did this because we believe it is necessary to protect the right of access to water. We will continue to provide free basic water to our people. We will use water meters where necessary to help people and municipalities to manage water use; we will take action against people

who abuse the system and steal water through illegal connections and tampering with meters. This is necessary to ensure that our systems continue to function, to preserve law and order, and to make sure that we are able to continue

to provide free basic water to those whose need is so terribly great. But through all this, we will continue to provide water services to the 5 million still unserved and we will continue, proudly, to provide free basic water to our people.

The greatest challenge in the provision of water services in South Africa is not, as these self-proclaimed guardians of the revolution would have us believe, a massive take over by the private sector. The greatest challenge facing us is ensuring that government, at all levels, has the capacity to deliver on its Constitutional mandate to ensure that all South Africans have access to safe and affordable water services.

It is the Constitutional responsibility of local government to deliver water services and sanitation. Since 1994 we have re-drawn the historically racial boundaries of local government to establish the 284 municipalities I have referred to. The challenges facing these municipalities are immense. In many areas, particularly the rural areas, the financial and human capacity to deliver services, is limited. We must in parallel with delivering services build the capacity of local government

to perform effectively. Strong local government is also crucial to ensure the effective intervention of the private sector in the delivery of services.

We must not forget, either, that these challenges are being faced in a country where water is a scarce commodity. Those of you who know South Africa well may remember the beauty of the sun rising over the ancient koppies of the Karoo, the bite of the winter chill hanging between the sparse scrub, the vast expanse of cloudless sky hanging above the endless landscape. It is a land of inestimable beauty, but little water. Most of our land is arid, dry. Most of our water falls on the eastern part of the country, in the foothills and majestic mountains of the Drakensberg, over the humid hills of Kwa-Zulu Natal and Mpumalanga.

The challenges of providing safe drinking water to our people are immense. Just as immense is the challenge of providing water security in a water scarce country. In 1994, at least in white South Africa, we inherited a remarkable and complex system of water infrastructure, that moved water from one catchment to another in attempt to meet the water needs of the economy. South Africa has one of the highest levels of water storage per capita in Africa, allowing us to weather, with some comfort, the frequent droughts that strike. At the moment some parts of South Africa are still in the grip of drought, and it is only our dams and our ability to move water from one catchment to another that is enabling us to keep going.

We also inherited significant water pollution problems arising from the industrial and mining heritage of South Africa. Abandoned mines continue to release polluted water into our rivers; lack of sanitation results in high bacterial pollution in some areas; industrial pollution is a continual challenge.

It was clear that the old ways of doing things were no longer effective. We needed to bring in a new way of managing our water, and we developed a piece of legislation that is, I am told, one the most progressive pieces of water legislation in the world. Certainly, we have had delegations from as far afield as China and Tanzania coming to study our legislation and to learn from it.

This year, I had the pleasure of publishing, under this piece of legislation, our blue print for water security - the first ever National Water Resources Strategy. It is a remarkable piece of work, made more so by the fact that we consulted widely with the people of South Africa on the document, and nearly two thousand people responded with detailed comments. The tradition, started with the Freedom Charter, of asking South Africans to contribute to designing their own future, lives on in participatory democracy today.

One element of that blue print relates to the issue of shared rivers. Unlike Britain, South Africa shares most of its major rivers with neighbouring states, in some cases with three other countries. These are not big rivers by international

standards, with more than enough water to spare. These are rivers already under stress, which must be managed with care and sensitivity to meet the needs of all parties. Our legislation, in a clean break with the winner takes all approach of apartheid South Africa, binds us to meeting our international obligations with regard to sharing water. We know that it is in the interests of long term security of the region to ensure the fair distribution of benefits from shared water. We know that our commitment to equity must extend not only to the people of South Africa, but also to the people of our neighbouring states. The spirit of internationalism lives on in our water legislation.

We are proud of the fact that, in SADC, we have a ratified and effective Protocol on Shared River Basins. I am proud too, that I recently signed the Incomaputo agreement with Mozambique. I am proud that during the current drought in the Inkomati basin, we are able to release downstream the amount of water agreed to with Mozambique. It is testimony not only to our commitment to our neighbours, and to the officials in my department, but to the organisation and restraint of the South African farmers upstream from Mozambique. Despite their need they are respecting the need of Mozambique. It is a remarkable symbol of our co-operation.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, we have come a long way in the water sector since 1994. When I look at the achievements we have made in these ten years, I am proud to be a South African. I am proud of my fellow South Africans who have made these achievements possible.

I am also proud of the international support we have received, from international donors in particular, such as the European Union and DFID who have made it possible for us to deliver water services to our people at such a pace.

There are, however, still major challenges facing us. We still have to deliver water to 5 million people. We need to deliver sanitation to 20 million people. We need to continually improve the quality of the basic services that we are providing to people. We need to upgrade, maintain and refurbish aging infrastructure, and we need to invest in new infrastructure - dams, water treatment works, major pipelines, pump stations. We have taken a clear position in South Africa that the private sector has a key role to play in the delivery of services to our people.

Government cannot and will not abdicate from its function to ensure that services are delivered, but we recognise that we cannot do it alone. We need the investment and the capacity that the private sector can offer. We are ready and willing to make use of this capacity.

Already the international private sector have been active in South Africa. In Bombela municipality, Bi-Water have assisted in bringing water to 240 000 people in an area where the historically white municipality only served 24 000 white ratepayers. Similarly, Vivendi have been involved with a R150 million water purification plant at Matsule in Mpumalanga. Johannesburg Water, a public utility, has engaged Suez, France on a five year contract to help consolidate fifteen previous municipalities that now comprise the Greater Johannesburg Metro. Partnerships, be they public-public or public-private, are an important element of the delivery of water services in developing countries.

We have come a long way, but the struggle is not yet over. We need your support in mobilising funds, be they from individuals or from institutions, for the delivery of services not only in South Africa, but in Africa as well. We need your support in making NEPAD work and in helping to realise this vision that we all share of a strong and prosperous Africa. We have a saying in South Africa: Izandla ziyangezana; one hand washes the other one. Let us continue forward in partnership, one hand washing the other.

Thank you