

DEPUTY MINISTER-REJOICE MABUDAFHASI'S (DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS) ADDRESS AT ENVIROCON 2009 HELD AT GALLAGHER ESTATE ON 11TH NOVEMBER 2009

Conference organizers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen it is my pleasure to be afforded this opportunity, to address this gathering of great minds which are comprehensively unpacking the issues pertaining to environmental sustainability and their ramifications, both adverse and positive. It is at occasions of this nature that endeavours to find solutions to problems currently facing humankind should be explored to the fullest. We dare not miss such an opportunity.

It is without question that the state of South Africa's environment, a resource upon which the well being of our people depends, is generally in a state of decline. While the human footprint in our country is growing consistently, it faces overwhelming development challenges. At the same time, sustained provision of some ecosystem services is threatened, biodiversity is being lost, land is being degraded and left unproductive, the quality and availability of inland water resources is compromised, marine and coastal resources in some instances have collapsed, and indoor and ambient air pollution is worsening in many settlements. Furthermore, significant threats to environmentally sustainable development are being fuelled by persistently high levels of poverty and the deep socio-economic divide.

Nevertheless, SA has a deliberate development plan to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and more specifically, to halve unemployment and poverty by 2014. We have prioritized investment into skills development, infrastructure, agriculture and tourism sectors. While many developed countries have already made such investments that were energy inefficient and that unnecessarily depleted natural resources, the opportunity exists for our country to incorporate sustainability thinking into the roll-out of its planned investment.

These challenges are not peculiar to our country. Since the advent of the industrial revolution, the big and lingering question that the global community should ask itself is: "Now that there is hard evidence that human activity is systematically destroying the environment as we know it, what can we do to change our economic activities in order to maintain the universe in a sound and good state?" Ignoring this question means we are not keen to achieve a sustainable balance between the environment and economic, technological and social developments.

Peter Senge, one of the prominent management guru of our times points out the business rationale of prioritizing environment sustainability. In his latest book entitled *The Necessary Revolution- How Individuals and Organisations are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World*, Senge argues:

“ Up till now, we have been looking at sustainability through an extremely broad lens: What are our actions doing to the planet as a whole? And how does that affect all of us? The human community has done a lot of harm to the planet, and things need to change. Doing nothing is no longer an option. But true innovation requires thinking differently. Many businesses and organizations of all sorts have already come to this realization...

“Many others are working hard to catch up. And though plenty of organizations are still huddled in the throes of inaction and paralysis, more and more businesses in every industry sector are incorporating sustainability and social responsibility issues into their goals for the future. They have accepted that they must do so if they wish to survive and thrive in the tumultuous times ahead.”

The world can no longer idly sit with the mistaken belief that it is business as usual. Moreover, we can no longer afford to treat landmark global fora such as the forthcoming United Nations Summit in Copenhagen next month as mere talk shops where egos reign supreme without regard for the pressing issues facing our planet. As Senge asserts ***“most people accept the overwhelming evidence that the world has changed and that business-as-usual global expansion cannot continue. They are looking for answers and leaders with solutions and the ability to get moving. Savvy executives have embraced the challenge amid clear and growing evidence that companies that do little or nothing to address sustainability issues risk losing market share, cutting off their access to the best and brightest employees, and causing severe damage to corporate reputations and market capitalizations.”***

It is in this context that I highlight the adverse impact of global warming on the availability of water. Many of Africa's major rivers such as Limpopo, Nile, Niger, Zambezi, to mention but a few, are shared between a number of countries. These rivers are critical in providing water for cities, irrigated agriculture, hydroelectric power and fisheries. In the event of a decline in rainfall, this would mean greater competition for the resources and conflict may arise. In addition, some of Africa's big cities including Lagos, Durban, Accra and Alexandria, are vulnerable to a rise in sea level.

We are also faced with the painful reality that our country is water stressed and among the top thirty such countries on the continent. Water is life. Water is a necessary input for many productive activities including agriculture, forestry, industry, mining, commercial and livestock development, energy production, tourism and wildlife conservation. The effective and sustainable utilization and management of water resources is an essential pre-requisite for sustaining all forms of life, improving livelihoods of the people and fostering overall socio-economic development in our country, on the continent and in the whole world. This is why environmentally sustainable management of water resources plays a critical role in the reduction of poverty.

The menace of climate change continues to threaten the basic elements of life for people the world over such as access to water, food production, health and the use of land and the environment. Disconcertingly, the damages from climate change will accelerate as the world gets warmer. Moreover, the impacts are not evenly distributed because the poorest countries and people will suffer earliest and the most. The grave threat of this menace is faced by the developing countries. Firstly, developing regions are at a geographic disadvantage because they are already warmer than developed countries and suffer from high rainfall variability. Further warming will bring developing countries high costs and few benefits. Secondly, most developing countries, particularly the poorest, are heavily dependent on agriculture, which is among the most climate-sensitive economic sectors and also suffer from inadequate health provision and low-quality public services. Thirdly, their low income and vulnerabilities make adaptation to climate change very challenging and particularly difficult.

Climate change is not just a mere environmental crisis, it is also an economic and humanitarian crisis. We are faced with a moral and ethical responsibility that will guarantee the survival of future nations. It is a matter of urgency that we reduce dependence on fossil fuels through a focused drive to develop cost-effective alternative sources of energy including solar, wind, wave, hydrogen, nuclear and biomass. We must also expand, extend and implement the use of solar energy as well as introduce adequate funding for adaptation, mitigation, capacity for research on climate change and its adverse impact on our society. As a developing country, we are vulnerable and need to establish appropriate adaptation strategies for the socio-economic and biophysical environments and link these to our national economic policy. Introducing and implementing a communication strategy to inform the general public about the potential outcome of climate change is of critical significance.

But then much as we face these problems, we must also be innovative and creative by formulating solutions and identifying opportunities presented by the challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to devise and implement a range of actions that target the improvement of planning and decision making processes that are effective in dealing with the current and emerging issues and problems. These actions should be in line with the objectives of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development and address the institutional, economic, legal, social, behavioural and technological challenges.

The progress we have made in developing a sound environmental governance framework has not been moving at a pace we would have wanted due to the fact that environmental issues have to a limited extent been integrated into national, provincial and local economic development and planning strategies. SA has in the past decade put in place a largely adequate and progressive framework of environmental policies and laws. Since 1999, we have focused on improving the governance framework for specific areas such as air quality, biodiversity and protected areas. However, intentions become a reality when they are implemented and enforced effectively. As part of our interventions, we have passed the Air Quality Act and established a Directorate for enforcement and monitoring. We have also trained the members of the judiciary in principles of environmental management and sustainable development and built legal capacity within the national and provincial environmental departments.

It is also critical to embrace a mainstreaming approach that will focus on the integration of environmental sustainability goals and objectives into the economic sectors, into development models, policies and programmes and thereby, into all human behaviour. This approach is crucial because the condition of the environment is often determined by macroeconomic, trade and other policies rather than by policies within the environmental sector itself. Some of the drivers of environmental change and users of ecosystem services operate outside the environmental sector. Therefore, mainstreaming activities should involve forming partnerships with a broad range of actors including conservation agencies, non-governmental organizations, government, business and communities.

Mainstreaming should apply to both the public and private sectors. It should be implemented in areas of spatial and integrated planning. These include blueprints such as the National Spatial Development Perspective, Provincial Growth and Development Strategies, Integrated Development Plans and budget allocation processes and mechanisms such as the Municipal Infrastructure Grant and Medium

Term Expenditure Framework and state-owned funders and private sector funders such as banks.

At a more practical level, we have to involve our communities in order to integrate their indigenous knowledge. This is why we have introduced programmes such as Rain Water Harvesting and Clean Fires Campaign. The latter is called Basa Nje Ngo Magogo and is based on an indigenous knowledge fire making methodology while the former is about the storage and preservation of water resources in the face of declining rainfall. We also have the Working for Water programme that deals with the clearing of invasive vegetation in our rivers and the Working for Wetlands that rehabilitates the diminishing wetlands. In addition, we have initiated cross border Clean Up Campaigns with countries bordering SA. Recently we successfully launched the initiative with Zimbabwe at Beit Bridge in Musina.

The challenges we face in the arena of environmental sustainability have informed our embracing a sustainable development paradigm that prioritizes meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We will live up to this commitment. And together we can do more.

I thank you.