

Speech by the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, at the Opening of Kwa-Ndebele Water Supply Project

Kwa-Mhlanga, 16 January 1999

Former Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Hashimoto
Ambassador of Japan Mr. Hatekenaka
Minister Asmal and Premier Phosa
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be here with His Excellency, the former Prime Minister of Japan, Mr Hashimoto, and Ambassador Hatekenaka as well as other representatives of the diplomatic corps. It was only a few short months ago that I was in Tokyo for the TICAD II meeting discussing Japan's commitment of long term support for Africa. As I said there, this is a crucial initiative for us.

We are keenly aware that our plans and desires for growth and development of our continent, for its revitalisation, cannot be achieved without such partnerships.

It is for this reason that I am particularly pleased to join you here because the project, which we are opening today, is a concrete example of such partnerships. Too often, our desires remain just that, they are translated into plans and concrete projects. Here for once, we can see the product.

It is a project built by South Africans with money loaned on favourable terms by the Japanese Overseas Economic Co-operation Fund. The organisation and institutional development work for the project has been supported by the UK Department of International Development's technical assistance grants.

Contrary to what is often believed, this assistance is not tied . OECF did not insist that Japanese firms should get business. Indeed, I understand that they allowed the project to be divided up for tendering.

Because of this, new African contractors were able to participate in its construction; the kind of practical capacity building which is essential if growth and reconstruction are going to take root. Similarly the British grant was not limited to British personnel.

They certainly sent their best experts when requested, but the bulk of the work they funded was done by South Africans. This is the kind of co-operation and partnership that we need.

But there are other reasons, which make it important for me to participate here today. First, this is further evidence of the commitment of the Government to improve the quality of life of all South Africans, to alleviate and eventually to end poverty.

Many people talk great about poverty; indeed, those who are furthest from it often talk the most. So, standing here in this community which was forced by apartheid to be poor, there are some points I need to make.

Some people say we should not spend money in places like this, where people have to wake up at three and four o' clock in the morning to go to work many kilometres away in Pretoria and Johannesburg. Why do we not invest where the jobs are, they ask?

These people forget that apartheid built unemployment in our society. Should we just walk away from those who have no jobs? Should we leave them to walk for hours to find water in muddy streams and irrigation canals?

No. Our policy is to ensure that all South Africans have access to a basic package of social services. This includes, amongst others, basic pensions, health care, education, housing as well as water supply.

I know Minister Asmal that your Department is also trying to ensure that firewood is available for the majority of rural South Africans who depend on it for their very daily bread. We have to recognise that the bulk of South Africa's poor are poor precisely because they do not have jobs and because there are no easy, immediate opportunities to create jobs for them.

This is not to say that we do not have programmes to promote investment. Our Spatial Development Initiatives and corridor projects, our municipal infrastructure programme are all designed to ensure that the growth of our economy and the cities from where most of our wealth comes, is not stunted by lack of investment.

But that does not mean we should ignore the basic needs of our people. Besides, a key element of the reconstruction and development programme is to use public investment to build our society, to build the capacity of our factories but, more important, to build the capacity of our people.

You learnt here, even as you debated and argued amongst yourselves, the TLCs and the District Councils, the Department and the unions, the Moutse people and those from Kwa-Mhlanga, inside and outside your project steering committee. You learnt that if a plan is to become a finished project, there comes a time to stop arguing and get down to work. It is an important lesson.

This leads to the second thing I want to refer to, the sustainability of the projects. Sustainability is a big word for a very simple concern. I want to know, when I come back in a year's time, whether water will still be flowing from the taps.

In one project I know, in the Eastern Cape, the water stopped flowing not long after the work finished. But what was the problem? The people (in fact it was the men) decided that they were not going to pay for the diesel to run the pump - although they were happy to buy diesel for their bakkies when it was time to fetch beer. In the Eastern Cape, as here in Mpumalanga, the answer to the question "will the water keep flowing?" depends on you.

So I should ask you, how are you going to organise yourselves to keep the project running? It is not the job of the national department to run your water supplies. I know that the Minister has insisted on this.

The Constitution describes that the job of providing water is the local government's responsibility. They must either run it themselves or find organisations that can help them to do so, for an example, Water Boards.

As the time goes on national departments that are performing certain functions that were originally for local government must put a process in place to transfer those functions. In this case this department will have to hand over Water Schemes to the local government.

To help local government, we are introducing what we call the equitable share of revenue for local government. Very simply, this is a small subsidy to help local governments to do their jobs.

It will not be enough, and it is not intended, to pay for big car allowances for councillors, for air conditioners for council officials. It is meant to ensure that local government can run the basic services it must provide for the poorest members of its community.

Our policy is not a stony hearted one that says the poorest must pay for everything they get. It is a realistic one that says those who can afford to pay their services must pay. Otherwise, the pumps will stop and the tanks will run dry.

The equitable share will help to pay the operating costs of services for the poorest people. It will do this if we are vigilant and ensure that the equitable share is used properly.

National government will continue to support with funds for new infrastructure. Unless we put the pumps and pipes in the ground, there will be no water supplies to the poor for which the equitable share can be used. But apart from that, local government will have to mobilise its community to pay for its services.

This is just some of the building work that has to be done, in water, as in health, in education and in all the other fields of life. We will build better and faster if we work in partnership with national and provincial government as well as the private sector.

We will be greatly assisted by partnerships with our foreign friends such as the Japanese and the British and I thank them once again not just for their financial contributions but for their moral commitment to our challenges.

But, in the end, we will only be successful if we work together in partnership with our neighbours, within our communities and through our local governments. And it is to this that we should be committing ourselves today, as we celebrate this significant milestone in water delivery to our people.

I thank you!