

Address at the Opening of National Water Week

Cape Town 15 March 2000

Premier Gerald Morkel
Minister Ronnie Kasrils, Ministers and MECs
Mayor of Cape Town, Nomaindia Mfeketo
People of Bridgetown
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured to be here today in Bridgetown, Athlone, with the people of the Cape Flats, as we launch National Water Week.

We are all aware of how places like Bridgetown came into existence, of how through apartheid policy and its extension of separate areas, those people who had been born and bred in the city centre, grandfathers and grandmothers, were removed to the periphery of the city, to Langa and Mannenberg, to Bokmakierie and Hanover Park and to Bridgetown.

But despite all these difficulties and obstacles deliberately put in their path, armed with a will to survive and a determination to succeed, the people of the Cape Flats stood together and were victorious in the struggle to overcome apartheid.

It is this unity first forged in struggle and now deepened in our collective efforts to consolidate our democracy that still motivates the people of the Cape Flats and our entire nation as we gather here today to promise to protect and conserve our water. It is this commitment to making a better life for all that brings us here today.

A Cape Town poet, Donald Parenze, in a poem called "Making Things" tells us that:

My simple need is that we breathe
And eat and live by the things we make ...

I ask you to dream of houses
without rain; without sharp edges;
to make stories that have no murderous endings;
to place high, clear photographs
on the walls of the city...

I ask you to listen precisely
to the songs which measure our history
and to broadcast the news as poetry
and turn work into a dance."

Indeed today we must start making this better life by breathing and eating and living by the things we make, by building houses to withstand rain and by imbuing our hard work with both the discipline and also the creative energy of a dance.

For today it is our task to demonstrate our responsibilities and obligations as South Africans towards our water resources. We are bound by a common vision and collective action to manage and protect our water and to share with others the best ways in which we can conserve our water together. Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed how people living in the north of our country and in neighbouring Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe have been battered by heavy storms and flooding and their homes devastated.

Here in the Western Cape, we have also seen powerful winds fanning fires that brought about extensive damage.

Over the years, we have also been vulnerable to long periods of equally devastating drought in our country and on our continent. Over the years, people in our rural areas, especially the women, have had to walk miles to access water.

These tragic events and the long term effects on the lives of our people remind us of the importance of preparing for the unexpected, of managing our environment with care, so that when the rains come we can minimise the damage they cause and when drought comes we have enough water to sustain us.

The biggest challenge for all of us still remains the need for purified water, for we must acknowledge that despite the abundance of water we have seen in recent weeks, the majority of our people do not have clean water.

Those in our region who drink contaminated water are exposing themselves to all kinds of diseases such as cholera.

Of course there are also those in other parts of this land for whom access to clean water is as simple as turning on a tap.

It is in this context of extending essential services to all our people, of sharing our precious resources, that we must value our water, its uses and its dangers, and be acutely aware of how precious it is in our daily lives and for our future.

Here in Cape Town, which is blessed with good water supply, we must not allow the fresh clean water to become undrinkable.

For too often are our rivers polluted by effluent, rubbish and chemicals when instead they should be conserved as a source of life and well-being.

For too often do we allow our dreams of a clean, healthy environment to be poisoned.

Our conservation and management of water must be seen as a necessary contribution towards our collective efforts for the sustained social and economic progress of our country.

Thus, as we gather here to clean the Vygeskraal River, all of us, men, women and children, government, business and NGOs, must join hands in water conservation and come up with innovative ways in which more water, clean water, can reach all our people in the remotest corners of our land.

For as we guard and conserve our water, as we protect it from pollution, as we work hard together to safeguard this most essential of all our national resources, we are indeed creating a better life for all.

This is life in which we can breathe and eat and live by the things we make; a life in which the dream of houses without rain becomes a living reality, a life in which stories have no murderous endings and people live together in peace, proud of themselves and their environment.

This is the life we must build together.

I thank you.