

Draft final

**Address by L N Sisulu, MP, Minister for Human Settlements, Water and
Sanitation during the debate on the President's State of the Nation Address
17 February 2021, Parliament**

Madam Speaker

Chairperson of the NCOP

Mr President

Honourable Members

Nothing has confirmed the centrality of water in our lives more than the Covid-19 scourge. The pandemic has highlighted the challenges of access to water and sanitation in South Africa, and the stark divide between the rich and poor. The first thing we were all required to do was to wash our hands for 20 seconds regularly.

In a country still trapped in huge and unjust disparities, this seemed an impossible task. We were driven to think beyond the normal and created a water distribution network that would allow all around the country to be able to respond appropriately to the pandemic. In partnership with the water boards and municipalities, we embarked on a roll-out of emergency water provision to the most disadvantaged areas, still trapped in poverty. We managed to get beyond the pandemic at its height and I am extremely proud of the team we established for this effort. We were able to affirm the fact that water is a public good in the most practical way. The challenge still facing the country, however, is that of providing sustainable water to everyone.

However, that was a temporary intervention. The huge disparities still remain. More unjust with every day. Our most urgent responsibility is to ensure that this right reaches every citizen of our country.

On assumption of responsibility, one of the first things we did was to conclude a very comprehensive Water and Sanitation Master Plan for the country, which was launched in November 2019. It has been on our website allowing for all to read and understand. We urge all those who have not read it to do so and provide us with their comments.

We have since had good inputs from various sectors, including a very successful recent meeting with representatives of the various agricultural unions. To my amazement, we all agreed on the concept of “water for all”, which will henceforth be the title and clarion call of the Master Plan. This is our attempt at redressing the disparities of our past, giving direction to where we are going and ensuring that the disadvantaged are given priority. I am grateful to all who have contributed to our Master Plan in various meetings. This was done in the shortest possible time, very conscious that large sections of our people in the rural areas go without water for weeks, further entrenching the divide between those who have had, those who have and those who continue to wait. We regard our Master Plan as a transformation charter.

As part of the Master Plan, now called “water for all” we adopted a section of the National Development Plan, which indicates the need for the creation of the National Water Resources Infrastructure Agency. This is the Agency which the President referred to in his State of the National Address last week. The primary objective of the Agency will be to sustain and improve the performance of all

strategically important water supply systems in regions where water security is at increasing risk.

The Agency will be responsible for, amongst other things:

1. The provision of water for all in the country in the most equitable manner;
2. Making sure that the ordinary South African has access to sufficient clean water;
3. The economy should have sufficient water to ensure that it is functional and continue to expand;
4. Further, support to the vision of universal dignified sanitation.

The primary responsibility of the Agency is to ensure that quality water and sanitation is available to all South Africans and there is a guarantee of water sustainability for the economy. In this regard the Agency will work with municipalities, water boards, financial institutions, the agricultural community and other sector institutions such as mining. This process will bring together some of the sector's strongest capabilities in a single Government owned entity.

The legislation to establish the National Water Resources Infrastructure Agency has, the President will be glad to hear, been completed and will be ready for tabling during the second half of this year, after all the public consultations have been finalised.

The Agency will strengthen the ability of the water sector to fund, build and operate the large water resource projects on which South Africa depends for its water security. This forms part of the President's infrastructure investment pipeline worth R340 billion. It will function very much along the lines of the national road network entity, SANRAL, but without toll booths. This is a much needed entity to ensure that

our ageing infrastructure is properly maintained and that the most far flung places of our country enjoy the benefits of clean water that you and I enjoy on a daily basis.

After 26 years of democracy it is completely unacceptable to still have the class and race divide in access to water. Access to water is a right. Our people in far flung villages wait for the day when they can turn the tap and receive clean drinking water, that we take for granted every day.

The President has also indicated government's concern about the delay in issuing water licenses. We have taken note and have put a programme in place to improve our systems, and while it might have taken three years to issue a water license to the President, it now takes 70-90 days to finalise any new, duly completed and compliant application, irrespective of whether the applicant is Honourable Buthelezi, Honourable Holomisa or Honourable Meshoe. They can put us to the test and we will prove our worth.

Eleven of the infrastructure projects already promulgated through the government gazette are water projects, ranging from new dams to irrigation systems. We have successfully turned around most of the water boards with the result that 80% of the boards have received unqualified audit outcomes. This is a welcome break that should revive public confidence in our water boards.

Our Department is turning around slowly. We now have a fully-fledged Disciplinary Committee, working hard on all our problem areas. The Committee, chaired by a former Member of the Executive, encompassing esteemed legal minds, including retired members of the judiciary, focuses on:

- a) Investigations into maladministration, fraud and corruption, audit findings and any other misconduct related matters;
- b) Outstanding investigations and disciplinary cases;
- c) Attend to the backlog of cases as identified by the Auditor-General and the Public Service Commission.

We are winning our legal cases one at a time. As a result, our zero tolerance for corruption is becoming part of our culture and the Minister of Finance will no longer refer to us as a bankrupt Department.

The Covid-19 pandemic helped us find innovative ways of distributing water to the most far reached areas. This project, which was successfully run from Rand Water, will now focus on ensuring that the tanks we installed in public spaces are distributed to all vulnerable communities and in time these will be substituted by more sustainable water sources. We aim to achieve maximum water security. Despite the recent heavy rains and overflowing dams, we remain a very dry country. We will investigate innovative ways of using ground water, desalination and cloud harvesting to create a secure water mix reserve. We are working with the farming community to ensure that the water we have is indeed water for all.

In all we do, we seek to ensure that we have a 30% set aside for women contractors within our communities, for all our community projects. We are very optimistic that we will make this a top class service delivery department.

We have engaged with those people who regularly disrupt our infrastructure in KwaZulu-Natal and we hope their sabotaging of our projects is something of the past.

We understand their grievances and they in turn promised to no longer be a disruptive element. I trust they will stick to our agreement.

Chairperson, I frequently receive letters of desperation from members of the public, complaining about the lack of water or sanitation services. I ask Honourable Members to take up their responsibility as Members of Parliament to assist our people. These services are a municipal responsibility. Please help the municipalities in your constituency so that our people receive these services. We, for our part, will ensure that municipalities have access to enough water. Over and above that, help our people understand that apart from the indigent, citizens are required to pay for their water usage to enable municipalities to settle their bills from the water boards.

Each one of us belongs to a community, serviced by a municipality and we need to teach our people to look after our infrastructure. Vandalism is a major cause for the dysfunctionality of our waste water treatment plants. This must stop and Honourable Members must ensure that this message is communicated to our communities. We regularly find that sewerage is running down our streets because someone has stolen or damaged an essential part of the waste water treatment plants. Responsible citizenship means looking after the assets that government installs to provide essential services.

Today, despite the recent heavy rains, which we are grateful for, our country remains a very dry country and we take every opportunity to remind all to do everything to save water – it's the patriotic thing to do.

I thank you