

Inaugural Speech by Dr Heidi Snyman, as Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA) President on the 20th May 2008

“Keep on keeping on - We have work to doWISA and the Water Sector in 2008/9”

By

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Members of Council and the Board, WISA Members, Distinguished Guests, and Friends. It is an honour to deliver this address to you. I am humbled to be elected as President of the Water Institute of Southern Africa for the 2008/9 term.

Acknowledgements

I want to start with some very important acknowledgements as this is a voluntary organisation dependent on the generous contributions of individuals and institutions:

I would like to give credit to Prof Fred Otieno, the now Immediate Past President of WISA. I am sure I speak on behalf of the Board and Council when we thank you for your dedication and leadership. Few people are aware of the fact that you suffered ill health during your presidential term. Despite this, you kept this large ship's bow steady in the face of the storms we experienced this year. Personally, I have learned so much from you. We urge that you remain actively involved in the WISA management team as this organisation need wise men.

Continuing with the analogy of a large ship, we need to formally acknowledge the efforts of our financial management team, Mr Koos Wilken (WISA Treasurer), Mrs Alison Chapman (Immediate Past Treasurer), Ms Dierdre Pakeman (Bookkeeper), Ms Gisela Muller (Previous bookkeeper) and Wallace Mayne our Chief Executive. These individuals worked furiously to keep the ship's engine in working order. The quantum business growth put significant strain on WISA as an organisation and it has only been the hard work of the WISA office, the board, council and members that kept us well away from the rocks.

Thirdly, I take this opportunity to thank all the individuals and organisations involved in the WISA. We salute the WISA office staff (Dot, Evelyn, Merle, Melissa, Manoko), division and branch chairs and members, the support staff, our service providers and the many organisations that open their doors for WISA meetings and seminars,.....THANK YOU

Lastly, thank you to all the individuals for making the WISA 2008 a success. A special vote of thanks to Dr Ralph Heath and his team for the tireless efforts. The volume of work required to make an event like this happen is always underestimated.

The second part of my address is dedicated to the main theme of this presentation: “We have work to do....”

We Have Work To Do : Internally – WISA in 2008/9

WISA has experienced tremendous positive growth in the last two years. We have gained Implementation Agent status from DWAF and are engaging more closely with the sector to address the pressing sector needs. We are fulfilling our mandate more effectively:

- To encourage communication and better understanding in the sector
- To facilitate the exchange of information and liaise with all elements of the sector
- Promote participation and research for the benefit of communities, industry and the environment
- Arrange forums and establish a database to facility the sharing of information
- Support individual development and capacity building.

I mentioned that WISA went through a difficult year in 2007/8. We grew to such an extent that our resources barely-barely coped. The Board and Council are currently in a process to reflect critically on how to better serve the sector. In the next year, WISA will specifically focus on:

Restructuring of WISA

A process has already started under the leadership of Prof Otieno to critically examine the current structure of the WISA to improve the manner in which we address aspects such as:

- Improved alignment between Divisions, Branches and the different Portfolio Committees
- Addressing the needs of Young Professionals, Process Controllers and Operation & Maintenance staff
- Increase our efforts to address the needs of the broader membership of WISA – including industry, the mining sector, agricultural sector, local government and other water services institutions

Improve governance

This will include the development of Manuals for Office, Finance and Procurement Procedures and Improved Ringfencing of Special Projects and Conferences.

Understanding the needs of all WISA members

The individual paying WISA members (now standing at 1484) grew steadily at about 6 % per annum during the last two years. The student membership (free subscriptions) grew from 316 to 509 members in the last two years. These 2000 individual members need to be served to ensure that we grow our

membership and more importantly – retain the members. I had to hang my head in shame in the Young Professional session yesterday when a post graduate student asked me: Where have you been? How many other WISA members are asking: Where have you been..... We need to increase our efforts to address the needs of all our members. Similarly, we need to take more care of the needs of our 32 very special patron members and 261 institutions that are members of WISA (Companies, Educational institutions, Media, Local authorities, Other Professional Member Associations and Water Boards).

We have work to do: The sector in 2008/9

The Minister, Senior DWAF Officials, Water Services Institutions, Researchers, Scientists and Consultants have reminded the sector at this conference that although we are on the right track, we still have a huge task ahead of us. Let me remind you of the results of the 2007 State of Environment report published by the DEAT.

The report states that:

Inland water

“...a significant proportion of our useable water resources, including our river ecosystems, have been degraded, and that most of our exploitable water resources are being utilized at present. In many cases, current levels of water-use make no allowance for the need to sustain the ecological viability of the resource. Furthermore, climate change is expected to alter hydrological systems and water supplies in southern Africa and reduce the availability of water.”

Water quality variable

“The restriction on the fitness for use imposed by the physico-chemical water quality standards of the different WMAs regarding domestic, irrigation, and recreational use” are significant due to the increased pressures.

“Overall, the services provided by inland waters will be limited by the quality of the water in the system under consideration.”

If we as a sector take the concept of Water for Growth and Development and Integrated Water Resource Management seriously, we need to remind ourselves from time to time what the consequences are when we fail to meet our objectives:

Let us remind ourselves of the direct and indirect impacts on humans and on the aquatic ecosystems:

- Increased salinity which can lead to salinization of irrigated soils, diminished crop yields, increased scale formation and corrosion in domestic and industrial water pipes, and changes in the biotic communities.
- Water borne diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, skin infections, intestinal worms, cholera, trachoma, and schistosomiasis (bilharzia) arise from bacteria or parasites attributable to poor sanitation practices.

- Low oxygen levels and elevated concentrations of organic matter in water, arising from animals, humans, or plants can occur naturally as well as from poor waste-disposal practices.
- Eutrophication due to an accumulation of nutrients (mostly nitrogen and phosphorus compounds) in water.
- Suspended solids arising from excessive erosion, destruction of riparian vegetation, construction activities, over-grazing, and industrial or domestic discharges.
- Contaminants such as hydrocarbons and recently endocrine disrupting compounds which could have toxic effects on the environment and humans.
- Acidification as a result of mining, industry, acid rain, waste disposal, or certain natural biological processes which can mobilize metals such as cadmium and lead.
- Solid litter, both non-biogenic (plastics, cans) and biogenic (vegetation, cellulose-based paper). Besides being unsightly, they can degrade to release hazardous substances, deplete oxygen, and obstruct watercourses, causing flooding upstream and draining downstream.

WE, the Water Sector of South Africa have work to do.....

I want to quote another report that gives advice on the way forward:

“The focus on our water resources is often on the volume of water available for particular purposes. However, water quality determines the suitability of water for a particular purpose.

[We] we are currently facing critical water supply and water quality problems. These problems are expected to become worse over the coming decades due to drought, pollution, over-extraction and climate change.

Managing water quality requires a catchment-based approach as land uses have a major effect on the quality of water resources.

A concerted effort by land managers, industry, catchment groups, the community, environmental groups and government is required to protect the quality of our water resources.”

Guess which organisation made these statements: This quote is directly from the website of the Australian Government: Department of Environment, Water Heritage and the Arts.

I am sure many thought it is our Department of Water Affairs and Forestry Although it is relevant and we need “to keep on keeping on” – we should not feel alone in the global context. The challenges we face are not unique to South Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen, in closing, it is important that we remain calm and focussed in our task ahead....

I would like to share a poem that was written by a Norwegian poetess Halldis Moren Vesaas (1907-1995) that was translated into English and called "The woman is planting" which is associated with Wangari Maathai, the Nobel peace Prize winner:

*The woman is planting a tree in the world.
On her knees, like someone in prayer,
Among the remains of the many trees that the storm has broken down.
She must try again, perhaps one at last will be left to grow in peace.
She sees the hands outspread on the earth as if trying to impose her calm on its threatening tremors.
Oh earth, be still, be still, so my tree can grow.*

Keep on keeping on – we have work to do

I wish to thank my mentors, family, friends and colleagues for shaping my career. Thank you for your their understanding and support over the years. Thank you to my employer the Water Research Commission for donating my time to the sector in this manner.

I thank you all and may God bless the water sector and our beautiful Africa.

Dr Heidi G. Snyman

President of the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA) 2008/2009

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