

High level water panel meets in SA

A panel constituted of high level leaders from several countries around the world has met in South Africa to thrash out ways in which water use can be harnessed to aid efforts to save every valuable drop of the precious natural resource.



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As host country of the United Nation's Valuing Water Regional Consultation, South Africa called on world leaders to make meaningful inputs into the draft document on Valuing Water Principles. It is envisioned that the final document will contribute majorly to the work of governments to save water.

South Africa has been chosen as the first country to host the High Level Panel on Water (HLPW) Regional Consultation to solicit views from all segments of the water stakeholder community and beyond, including agriculture, energy and other sectors, on how water can be better valued.

The consultations, which are also expected to take part in other regions in the world, will culminate in the presentation of a report on valuing water, which will be presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations in September this year.

The members of the HLPW include heads of state from Australia, Bangladesh, Hungary, Jordan, Mauritius, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Senegal, South Africa and Tajikistan.

Speaking at the consultation on Tuesday, 30 May, in Boksburg in Gauteng's East Rand, South Africa's Public Service and

Administration Minister Faith Muthambi said the consultations were a platform for government representatives and organisations to share national perspectives and positions on the critical issue of water.

Water, Muthambi said, is a cross-cutting matter as it speaks to all aspects of development and is linked to different policy positions and legislative imperatives that must be considered in decision making.

“It is my submission that we engage honestly, while raising awareness on the harmful impacts of illegal usage of water and violation of laws, regulations and legislations to ensure that no one is left behind in the decisions that will come out of this process,” said Muthambi. She was speaking on behalf of Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokonyane at the consultation.

The minister said the HLPW members have the same vision agreed to by the Global Water Partnership (GWP), which is partly aimed at assessing the impact of water programmes in the region. GWP supports communities and countries to improve the way they manage water.

Muthambi said the HLPW is an opportunity for delegates to consider the different challenges that the countries face. These include the current levels of access to clean water in the region, monetary value attached to water as a critical resource, the policy perspective in the region, equity and user requirements, as well as legislative imperatives and government obligations.

“These challenges will be the contributing and determining factors in deciding on the ‘Principles of Valuing Water’ that we envisage at the end of the [consultation] process,” she said.

Muthambi said South Africa is one of the few countries that have embedded the right to water in its Constitution. She said the right to clean water is something that government must ensure is accessed at different levels of affordability across all communities, and industrial and commercial users.

Change the way you look at water

Water and Sanitation director-general Dan Mashitisho said the consultations will get countries to realise that they need to change the way they look at water, if the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on Water is to be achieved.

“South Africa takes this issue and consultation very seriously, hence our [Water and Sanitation] minister said last week, when she was delivering her Budget Vote emphasised the importance of collaboration with the Global Water Partnership, as well as the extent to which water contributes to industrialisation, job creation and poverty alleviation,” said Mashitisho.

The deputy minister of Energy, Thembisile Majola, highlighted the problem of acid mine drainage (AMD) in South Africa, which impacts the country’s scarce water resources.

The deputy minister said going forward, the bar must be set high for the mining industry to plough back into the environment to counter the effects of their operations.

Urgent action needed

World Bank special advisor Patrick Vincent Verkooijen warned that the pressure on water is raising and that urgent action is required.

The World Bank recently released a report titled *High and Dry*, which indicated that if left unchecked, water will become more scarce, polluted and much more unpredictable in the years to come.

Because of this, the report warned that some of the regions will see their growth rate decline to 6% by 2050 and the economic growth rate will decline by 60%.

“Water scarcity is a major threat to economic growth. However, the world has agreed on a different pathway. Led by South Africa in 2011 in Durban, the world agreed in 2015 and in 2017 to sustainable water development goals... That’s the vision and that’s the aspiration.

“...The world needs to transform the way it manages water. It requires political engagement at the level of heads of states and government, ministers of finance and planning, agriculture, energy, health and other parts of government, as well as key public-private and civil society stakeholders in order to galvanise action at the scale and speed required,” said Verkooijen.

Ambassador of the Netherlands Marisa Gerards said her country was happy to participate in the HLPW and thanked South Africa for hosting the consultations.

“It’s a unique and important platform and we have to push for [the SDG on Water], and we really need to be creative,” said Gerard.

She said the Netherlands has offered to champion the initiative within the high level because “we believe we have no other choice than to incorporate the value of water within our policy decisions”.

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