

Transformation and water

New ministerial initiative to transform water sector



Minister of Water Affairs, Nomvula Mokonyane.

The Minister of Water and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane, along with the Water Research Commission (WRC), has launched a Women in Water Empowerment Programme (W-WEP) to mentor and transform women entrepreneurs in the water sector.

The purpose of the programme, which was launched at a special event on 14 October, is to provide support to women-owned and led enterprises to be effective and efficient in delivering proper water and sanitation-related services to the public. The programme will run over three years.

"The historical position of a woman has for many centuries been the one of subservient. Women have always been viewed as homemakers who must pander to the whims of men whenever required to do so," said minister Mokonyane at the launch. "Their economic role has never been appreciated in the same manner as that of their counterpart. This situation is compounded by the fact that the economic levers of our society are by and large controlled by men. As a result, business opportunities are skewed in favour of men."

The W-WEP hopes to change this perception. The programme will provide a safe and supportive environment where new entrepreneurs, especially from previously disadvantaged groups are able to start-up and sustain their businesses and access available opportunities in the water and sanitation sector.

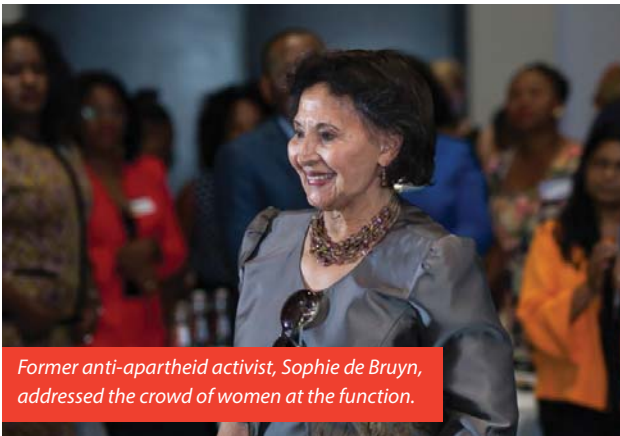
According to the minister, an investment in women was one of the most important investments the country could make to address the triple challenge of poverty, inequality and unemployment. "In turn, such an investment would bring

about the triple benefits of growth, prosperity and international competitiveness."

Among the speakers at the launch were anti-apartheid icon, Sophie de Bruyn, the last surviving leader of the 1956 Women's March. She highlighted the keywords for the morning as "standing together."

"The power of the 1956 march was that we knew exactly why we were standing together as women, what exactly we were standing up against and the future we wanted for our children and our families. We rose up against a system that victimised, oppressed and limited us, where our freedom of rights and economic opportunities was denied.

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"The conversation we are having today is knowing what your battle, your cause and your principles in life are."

The launch follows the Women in Water Consultative Conference held in Tshwane on 31 August, 2015, where the Minister made a commitment in regard to the launch of such a three-year national Women in Water Empowerment Programme. The scope of the programme covers all women-owned businesses that are competent and excellent in the provision of services to the department.

The programme comprises two legs, namely the W-WEP Mentorship Programme and the W-WEP Entrepreneurship Incubator.

The objectives of the programme are to:

- Identify and address the key gaps between the current scenario and expected future scenario for the participation of women-owned businesses in the water sector
- Accelerate the growth and success of women entrepreneurial companies through an array of business support resources and services. This includes, among others, capital, coaching, common services, and networking connections.
- Develop business talent to enhance performance of women professionals and women-owned businesses and create readiness for transition to the next level of operation
- Develop a succession and retention plan for professionals and women-owned businesses to sustain organisational excellence in terms of service delivery
- Measure business impact and effectiveness of the programme during and after implementation.

A total of 90 women-owned companies have been identified to be assisted in the programme.

The minister was under no illusions that the current economic environment will make implementation challenging. "We know that the transformation is under attack. There are active forces against the further development of an inclusive economy. Ironically, the lack of growth in our local economy, and indeed the global economy is often cited as the reason for holding the status quo. The second reality is that we know that the precise pathway out of the bondages of recession onto the pathway to prosperity is exactly the opposite. It is the path of inclusion. It is the path of expanding economic participation to realise our

full demographic dividend. It is the development of women as the investment in the future prosperity and sustainability of the South African economy."

The beneficiaries of the W-WEP will comprise three cohorts:

- Beginners (women-owned enterprises in business, however, with no sustainable growth)
- Intermediates (women enterprises in business, however, not as established as big enterprises)
- Established (women-owned enterprises at intermediate stages that function as fully-fledged businesses but that require additional support to take their businesses to the next level of operation and compete nationally and globally).

These three cohorts will be drawn from various sectors, namely research and development (including technological innovation), engineering, construction, local community initiatives and construction supply.

A mentorship programme will match women entrepreneurs active in the water sector with a mentor who will provide ongoing, individual support to the business owner. This support typically focuses on the more tacit and experience-based insight that new or emerging entrepreneurs may lack.

Mentorship is always based on agreement between mentor and mentee that is grounded in the experience the mentor can share and the needs that the mentee has.

Broadly, there will be a focus on four areas, namely building a network of partners (product development, refinement and distributions, clients, business services support); support on how to manage partners, networks and clients; refining the product/service offering; and critically reflecting on the business model the mentee adopts.

There will be a range of spaces for mentor and mentee to interact, such as introductory workshops, interactive sessions, and reflection sessions to explore how the mentorship process is assisting. Where needed, there will be specific training provided based on identified gaps or needs.

In turn, the Women in Water Entrepreneurship Incubator is aimed at creating a developmental platform for women-owned companies that are at various stages of establishment (emerging, intermediary and established) and requiring varying degrees of support.

The project will cover undertaking business and entrepreneurship readiness analysis; skills and development assessments and support; mentorship based on support gaps identified and links to and embedding in relevant and appropriate funded national, regional and local projects that will align with incubate business aspirations and business development goals.

It is envisaged that women entrepreneurs will be offered the opportunity to be part of numerous water-related projects, including full-scale dam construction and rehabilitation projects, sanitation projects, river rehabilitation projects, and the current DWS programme looking at the rehabilitation of irrigation canals.