

# High price of vandalism



## OPINION

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**T**he right to water and sanitation services is a fundamental human right that is provided for in the Bill of Rights.

The Constitution, which is regarded as one of the world's most progressive, contains a Bill of Rights which forms part of the cornerstone of our democracy. It enshrines the rights of all people in SA and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom.

Furthermore, the Constitution places a legal obligation on government to ensure that these rights become a reality for all people living in the country.

Successive governments have, over the past 27 years, prioritised the provision of water, especially to communities that were deliberately excluded by apartheid, and the current administration continues to upgrade water infrastructure. Today, South Africa faces critical challenges in respect of vandalism and the theft of water infrastructure, as well as the theft of copper cables used in electricity infrastructure. Electricity plays an integral part in ensuring the management of sustainable water supply.

Therefore, the result is that there is a heavy price to pay for achieving equity in terms of the distribution of water resources. As these challenges continue unabated, future water security for the country's economic prosperity and development priorities is uncertain.

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Besides trampling on people's rights, we are plunging the goals of our developmental state into disarray and these may take us decades to recover.

It is true that vandalism and theft happen throughout the country, in both rural and urban areas. The root cause of the problem includes the inability of politicians to deliver on promises, which results in a rise in protests.

The fact is that there is a market for goods like cables and valves, and relating to this are business opportunities, such as water carting, so vandalising infrastructure is good for some businesses.

Our water resources are under immense pressure; there is a need to deal decisively with the destruction of water infrastructure. Any strategies to plan, manage, protect and control the use of water resources will not yield any positive results if we do not work together to deal with the malicious destruction of infrastructure.

The vandalising of water infrastructure is a huge setback for service delivery. It not only disrupts water supply to communities but it also affects the financial wellbeing of the Department of Water

and Sanitation, as well as the relevant stakeholders in the water sector, particularly municipalities. Some of the forms of theft and vandalism include illegal connections in response to frustration over poor service delivery.

The reality that escapes the vandals who destroy and steal water infrastructure is the high cost of putting in place this infrastructure. It literally takes years and years of committing financial resources to restore the infrastructure to its original working state.

Additionally, these criminal activities generally result in reduced access to a suitable quantity and quality of water to users broadly. This in turn affects sanitation services, with associated impacts on public health and personal dignity.

To assist us to deal with this rising pandemic of theft and vandalism, municipalities should collaborate with law-enforcement agencies, and install CCTV cameras and concrete manholes that cannot be removed easily.

They could also delegate powers to municipal law-enforcement agencies, initiate robust community engagement, introduce the naming and shaming of those involved, work closely with scrap-metal buyers, and conduct research on the levels of theft and vandalism.

Hence, the Department of Water and Sanitation calls on communities to refrain from destroying water infrastructure, and to rather protect it. This would result in improved water and sanitation services for all.

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31 May 2022