

# Decisive leadership is the key to saving water, avoiding crisis

By **Andile Tshona**

We have become habituated to fatalistic headlines from the mainstream media about SA's "water crisis". The other popular claim perpetuated by alarmists is that the next crisis to hit the country, after electricity, is water.

Apart from water problems in some parts of SA, do we really have a water crisis in the whole country? I think the opposite is true. However, if we are as slow as molasses in turning the tide, we risk reaching crisis proportions we can't afford – for ourselves and future generations.

Decisive leadership, accountability, consequence management and behaviour change are some of the things needed. People in positions of responsibility need to make decisive and responsible decisions, not for themselves, but for the benefit of communities they serve.

The Blue, Green and No Drop reports that assess the quality of drinking water and the management of wastewater and non-revenue water in the 144 water services authorities in SA, painted the picture of a festering wound.

The state of our water infrastructure, as we know it, poses a litmus test for the government and it needs to be sorted out as a matter of urgency. Talking about ageing infrastructure all the time when it does not seem much is done about it is no help. The water and sanitation department's director-general, Sean Phillips, likes emphasising that water business should be

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self-sustainable and that municipalities should use the revenue collected from water and reinvest in operations and water infrastructure maintenance. This needs forward-thinking people able to understand there is a need for investment in existing infrastructure to avoid its failure at critical times.

The dire consequences are there for everyone to see in the drop reports and the leaking of wastewater works,

with 64% of wastewater works in a critical state, discharging partially treated water into rivers and the environment. Loss of treated water is at 47%, up from 37% in 2014, resulting in a total waste and loss of revenue for municipalities. They spend money to get that water treated or buy it already treated from water boards, and get nothing in return.

The department can build as many dams as it wants and

it can pour with rain until the dams brim at the seams, but if the situation is not tackled, the problems will persist.

In a series of meetings, minister Senzo Mchunu has been engaging with senior officials of the department, entities and municipalities. He uses some candid words such as, this is a "cardinal sin, unconstitutional or breaking the law" in reference to inadequate water supply.

These may seem like they

are just words or tough talk but if this is not sending a strong message to those responsible for getting things done, then we are doomed.

As part of up-and-running Lesotho Highlands Water Project phase 2, SA will get plenty of water to benefit Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga, Free State and Northern Cape.

The Umkhomazi Water Project, with a large new dam, will supply water to eThekweni and surrounding municipalities in KZN.

Similarly, the R7,5bn Mandlakazi Regional Bulk Water Scheme, which is about 40% complete, involves a pipeline from Jozini Dam to supply areas of the Zululand and uMkhanyakude district municipalities.

Another project is Loskop Regional Bulk Water Project, from Loskop Dam in Mpumalanga to Thembisile Hani local municipality. It will also supply water to Sekhukhune in Limpopo.

Pilanesberg Water Supply Project is about 30% complete and will supply additional treated water to the Rustenburg local municipality.

In the Northern Cape, the Vaal Gamagara Project involves a bulk pipeline from the Vaal River to Hothazel, including reticulation to communities along it.

These are long-term water projects that will go a long way to ensure water security. However, the water cycle has a value chain that includes the end user who has a significant role to play, which is to reduce excessive water use. We need to start valuing water by realising that every drop of water counts. Water wastage will lead to the dreaded water crisis, and you and I would have contributed to it one way or the other.

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The end user of water has a significant role to play, which is to reduce excessive water use and water wastage will lead to a water crisis. / ANTONIO MUCHAVE

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