

COMMENT



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Does South Africa have a water crisis?

"SOUTH Africa's Water Crisis!" This is among fatalistic headlines we have become habituated to in recent years from the mainstream media. The other popular claim perpetuated out there by alarmists is that the next crisis to hit the country, after electricity challenges, is water.

Notwithstanding water challenges in some parts of the country, do we really have a water crisis in the whole country? I think the opposite is true. However, should we be slow in turning the tide, we risk reaching crisis proportions which we can't afford for ourselves and for future generations.

Decisive leadership, accountability, consequence management and behaviour change are a few recipes needed in moving from fragmentation into wholeness. For us to witness the phoenix rising from the ashes, people in positions of responsibility need to rise to the occasion and make decisive and responsible decisions, not for themselves but for communities they serve.

The Blue, Green and No Drop reports that assess the quality of drinking water, the management of wastewater and non-revenue water in the 144 Water Services Authorities in the country depicted a festering wound.

The state of our water infrastructure poses a litmus test for government and 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 throwing water on the duck's back.

Director-general of Water and Sanitation, Dr Sean Phillips, likes emphasising the point that water business should be self-sustainable, that municipalities must be able to use their revenue collected from water and reinvest in operations and maintenance of water infrastructure. This needs forward-thinking people to be able to understand that 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, leaking of wastewater works, with 64% of wastewater works at a critical state, discharging partially treated water into the rivers and 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 spent an arm and leg to get that water treated or buy it ready-treated from water boards, and get nothing in return.

The Department of Water and Sanitation can build as many dams as it can, and it can rain as much as it can, and the dams brim at the seams, but if the situation is not taken by the scruff of its neck, the problems will persist.

In series of meetings Minister Senzo Mchunu has been engaging on these matters with senior officials of the department, entities, and municipalities using tough talk. But if this not sending a strong message to those responsible for getting things done, we are doomed.

As part of the up and running Lesotho Highlands Water Project Phase 2, the country will get plenty of water from Lesotho to augment the Integrated Vaal River System to benefit Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga, Free State and Northern Cape.

The department is seized with the uMkhomazi Water Project, to supply additional water to eThekweni and surrounding municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal. Similarly, the R7.5 billion Mandlakazi Regional Bulk Water Scheme. But these are long-term water projects. We all need to start valuing water by realising that every drop counts.

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30/03/2024