

SERVICE DELIVERY

'Getting hands dirty' key to solving water crisis

A PRIMAEBVAL chronicle tells us about a desperate scorpion incapable of swimming to get to the other side of the river for the proverbial greener pastures.

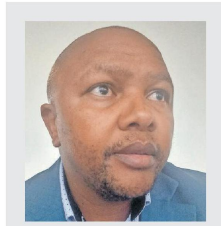
It needs to negotiate with an excellent swimmer, in the form of a frog. The frog does not hide its scepticism and tells the scorpion, "I know your true colours, you want to sting me".

The scorpion assures the frog it will not do such a thing because it will die if it doesn't cross to the other side. The frog is swayed by this argument and agrees to transport the scorpion.

Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog, and as it is about to kick the bucket, the frog asks, "But why, after you assured me that you will not sting?" And the scorpion replies, "I am sorry, but I couldn't resist the urge. It's my character."

Water and Sanitation Minister Senzo Mchunu narrated this story to the members of the South African National Committee on Large Dams during their annual conference, and at the beginning of the narration, one wondered, why was he telling a contingent of technocrats such a story.

He brought it home by saying people in government have often behaved



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like scorpions, as if certain unacceptable things are in the chromosomes of government officials.

"Government tends to do things like it is in our nature to allow the decline of infrastructure everywhere, and I go against that, I don't agree with it, I strongly don't agree with it," he emphasised at the time.

To use another analogy, since he

assumed this portfolio, Mchunu has demonstrated that there needs to be a quick transition from caterpillar to butterfly to ameliorate the living standards of the people, particularly in the provision of water and sanitation services.

At the time of the conference, there had been a myriad challenges in the sector, particularly, the stagnation and instability in the department that he was tasked to steer.

This affected the effective implementation of infrastructure projects intended to realise water security in the country. Top of his priority was to stabilise the department and unlock stagnant water projects that were not moving at the required speed because of this reason and others.

Some of the challenges that have made government akin to a sloth are the separation of powers as outlined in the Constitution, with national government (Department of Water and Sanitation, in this case) and local government (water service authorities) having constitutional roles to fulfil.

The national government is responsible for bulk water infrastructure, while the local government is responsible for ensuring that water is

provided to communities. Sometimes there is no parallel planning, resulting in bulk water projects being completed by the department, while the municipality responsible for reticulation would turtle, resulting in delays in the provision of water to communities.

However, Section 154 of the Constitution places the ball in national and provincial governments' court, to support and strengthen municipalities with the capacity to manage their own affairs and perform their functions.

"Getting hands dirty" has become a new mantra in the department, in support of the foibles of municipalities, not just with grants in monetary terms but with technical support and using skilled personnel in the department as well as from various water entities. This is to ensure there is no pointing of fingers or any "us and them" when there are water challenges.

In executing its mandate, the department has intervened in water services authorities besieged with a myriad challenges that hinder the consistent provision of basic services to the people.

While at it, the department risks burning its fingers and encroaching on the local government space because of

its drive to ensure access to water and sanitation services for all.

Minister Mchunu's first bold move was the re-introduction of drop reports that look into the quality of water, waste management and non-revenue water in the water services authority.

This is to ensure that municipalities account for their areas of operations and get their houses in order because there has been a general decline all around.

Mistakes have been made in the infamous Giyani Water Project, which is subject to investigation by the Special Investigating Unit, but Minister Mchunu nipped it in the bud. The project is moving, amid challenges, but hope has been restored to some communities.

Other projects, such as the Mzimvubu Water Project, Lesotho Water Project Phase 2, Clanwilliam Dam and Tzaneen Dam Wall Raising, had stalled but have since been kick-started.

Like a scorpion, the department, as a leader and regulator of the sector, needs to sting to get things done the right way to ensure efficiency that will lead to water security, that will in turn improve the socio-economic conditions of the country.

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