



OPINION PIECE

Rains go only so far, so heed clarion call to save the precious water

22 October 2017

The recent rains that resulted in devastating hailstorms in parts of South Africa have hardly resolved the water challenges that we are faced with as a country. Instead about 60% of the rain water was lost to the sea (through rivers) and 10% evaporated.

Worst still, Western Cape and parts the Eastern Cape are reeling from severe droughts that have forced municipalities to impose the most stringent restrictions in the history of water rationing. Cape is in the red as the precious resources is fast dissipating and dam levels are dangerously low.

It is for this reason that the government, through the Department of Water and Sanitation, is calling for intensified water conservation and the use of it wisely and sparingly. The notion that water comes from the skies and therefore it must be used negligently is as archaic and as naïve as a kindergarten fable. Fact is we are part of a dry continent which receives half the normal global rainfall. To compare ourselves with Europe where a one week absence of rain is akin to a national disaster, is suicidal to say the least.

Judging by the recent rains that brought with them destructive hailstorms in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and parts of Mpumalanga, there can be no doubting the fact that climate change is upon us. As such, we must brace ourselves for severe weather conditions that may plunge us in more floods as the festive season approaches. Climate change is ensuring that the world is swinging from one severe weather condition to another. The El Nino that brings with it dry conditions is playing games with the La Nina which engenders destructive floods. South Africa has hardly recovered from a two-year severe drought which caused the country billions, and seemingly we are now headed for wet conditions. It would seem that we must brace ourselves for a wet festive season that might result in sporadic flash floods.

What does all this mean? Does it mean that we have enough water to splurge? The answer is a definite no. Instead, we must heed the clarion call to save as much water as we can. Rains and floods do not cancel a warning ten years ago by the World Bank that we are among 30



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

driest countries in the world and that unless we start saving water now, 50 years on we may find ourselves without a drop.

To combat the scourge we must implement all the water-saving campaigns at our disposal if we hope to emerge unscathed by next winter. When using the toilet we must use the most minimal water we can and adhere to water saving tips such as staying in the shower for the shortest people possible and avoid filling our bath tubs with surfeits amount of water. Water saving is the responsibility of a domestic consumer and the industry. Despite appeals for water conservation, some industries continue with business as usual. Car washing enterprises continue to use hosepipes instead of a bucket and golf clubs irrigate their lawns as if they are exempted to water conservation rules. The laws of nature dictate that vegetation will always die in winter, yet most golf courses want to keep their lawns green and behave as if they are beyond reproach. Opulence and affordability aside, laws of the country must across the spectrum.

In terms of the National Water Act the Minister of Water and Sanitation is the sole custodian of water and all water users - domestic and industrial - are accountable to her. It is for this reason that the National Water Resources Strategy was introduced as a framework that governs issues of water audit to determine every five years the amount of water that the country has in its reserves.

The main focus of the NWRS is to ensure equitable and sustainable access and use of water by all South Africans while sustaining water resources. Equity and redistribution will be achieved through the authorisation process and other mechanisms and programmes, such as water allocation reform, financial support to emerging farmers and support to urban and rural local economic development initiatives. With our growing population, and focus on economic growth and development, we need to ensure water security and healthy water ecosystems that support our national imperatives. Apart from the water demands of the economic sectors – including energy, mining and agriculture - increasing urbanisation and industrialisation place enormous pressure on our scarce water resource. Over the last ten years water consumption of the domestic sector has increased from 22% to 27% of the total resource.

The strategy responds to priorities set by government within the National Development Plan (NDP) and National Water Act imperatives that support sustainable development. The NWRS acknowledges that South Africa is a water-stressed country and is facing a number of water challenges and concerns, which include among others, security of supply, environmental



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

degradation and resource pollution, and the inefficient use of water. In the context of the need for growth, equity and protection of water resources, the strategy identifies two broad objectives:

- water supports development and the elimination of poverty and inequality; water contributes to the economy and job creation
- water is protected, used, developed, conserved, managed and controlled in an equitable and sustainable manner

The response to the strategic context and the imperatives set out above is delivered through strategic themes, which discuss in detail the context and challenges, key principles to be sustained, objectives of that particular theme and then proposes strategic actions to achieve the stated objectives. The most important consideration in all themes discussed is that water is scarce and it requires careful management to enable provision of basic water services and equitable allocation, while meeting the needs of inclusive economic growth. Other water conservation campaigns that we must embrace without delay at the very beginning of this rainy season are water harvesting and its recycling. Various forms of water harvesting have been used traditionally throughout the centuries. Some of the very earliest agriculture, in the Middle East, was based on techniques such as diversion of flow from normally dry watercourses onto agricultural fields. In the Negev Desert of Israel water harvesting systems dating back 4000 years or more have been discovered. These schemes involved the clearing of hillsides from vegetation to increase runoff, which was then directed to fields on the plains.

Floodwater farming has been practised in the desert areas of Arizona and northwest New Mexico for at least the last 1000 years. The Hopi Indians on the Colorado Plateau, cultivate fields situated at the mouth of ephemeral streams.

A number of water harvesting projects have been set up in Sub-Saharan Africa during the past decade. Their objectives have been to combat the effects of drought by improving plant production and in certain areas rehabilitating abandoned and degraded land.

Some of the 14 000 South Africa's rural villages rely on water harvesting for survival. The practice, however, is confined among economically viable communities as the tank prices are prohibitively expensive. It is for this reason that we appeal to all citizens to spare a thought for those communities who still struggle to access clean drinking water

Themba Khumalo