

# Access to safe water must top agenda before next pandemic

The polymaths of yesteryear were somehow able to foresee the future in a way that, even now, their pronouncements resonate with our daily realities.

One of the walking encyclopedias of the 1700s, Benjamin Franklin, is quoted extensively as having said either "we never know the true value of water until the well is dry" or "when the well is dry, we learn the worth of water".

Regardless of which quote is historically correct, the meaning is the same and Franklin hit the nail on the head.

While the SA government has made some progress in the provision of water, and seeks to ensure its universal access as envisaged in the constitution, it has fallen short of radically turning the tide and fully liberating those who were systematically excluded by the erstwhile government.

Twenty-six years into democracy, it is inexcusable that there are still millions of people in SA without water.

Every finger is rightfully pointing towards the government, which must fulfil its mandate to the public and restore the dignity lost by the majority of South Africans due to the obnoxious and exclusive policies of the past.

Rural folks continue to suffer the unmeasured indignity of traversing long distances in search of water, with a possibility of finding a pig cooling off in the same water they are supposed to consume for drinking and cooking.

The best chance of finding clean and sufficient water for the day often depends on getting up in the wee hours.

Unfortunately, those who bear the brunt of this preventable exercise are women and young girls, who are more likely to be preyed on then by callous predoctors — men.

Government has been at pains to accept this harsh reality and plans are afoot to address it.

One often wonders if those with immediate access to water value this resource all that much and acknowledge the reality that they could one day open the tap and not re-



MAJOR SUPPLY DAM: Kougou Dam, one of Nelson Mandela Bay metro's main water supply dams, pictured at a level of 22% in January

ceive a single drop. Scary thought, isn't it?

Water security is central to government's agenda but it can never make this a reality by itself without your, my, business and civic society organisations' helping hand.

Water security can be realised if we all play an active role in the water value chain.

Water security is defined by the UN University Institute of Water, Environment & Health as "the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human wellbeing, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against waterborne

pollution and water related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability".

The central idea is that security, sustainability, economic development and human wellbeing all depend on a reliable and safe supply of water.

The minister of human settlements, water and sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, has consistently called for sustainable public-private partnerships to adequately address the challenges facing the water and sanitation sector.

The holding of hands will help us overcome the disproportionate nature of water resources that has seen race and gender imbalance perpetuating

the old system our forebears had laid their lives to fight.

The World Bank has been one of the global institutions that has been leading the charge, advocating for public-private partnerships and arguing that, in developing countries, the water sector is chronically underfunded.

"Public-private partnerships can be a mechanism (among others) to help governments fund much-needed investment and bring technology and efficiency that can improve the performance and financial sustainability of the water sector."

There is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has crippled many economies around the world, therefore a

lot cannot be expected. However, the water sector should not be relegated when key decisions are being made — it needs to top the priority list.

We should not be caught napping; we should not wait for another global pandemic to befall us before we ensure water access for all.

We have the National Development Plan, National Water and Sanitation Master Plan and Sustainable Development Goals, and 2030 is the target.

If we do not act now, the words uttered in the 1700s by Franklin could become a reality — the well could run dry.

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