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OPINION

Vandalism and theft threaten our water security

AS the pendulum of freedom continues to swing in favour of levelling the playing field, the democratic rights that many South Africans strived to achieve against all odds are now being reversed and cancelled out by counter-productive acts that lay waste to the country's foremost infrastructure. One after the other, the water infrastructure is targeted and damaged. The result is that there is a heavy price to be paid for achieving equity and redistribution of water resources. As this continues unabated, water security for the future and the country's economic prosperity and development priorities hang in the balance. Besides trampling on other people's rights, celebrated throughout the month of April, we are plunging the goals of our developmental state into disarray that may take us decades to recover from.

Our water resources are under immense pressure; there is a need to deal decisively with the destruction of water infrastructure. Any strategies to plan, manage, protect and control the use of water resources will not yield any positive results if the malicious destruction of infrastructure is left to continue. Amid exponential population growth, we must ensure water security to provide impetus to economic growth and development, especially for those still on the periphery of the economy. The reality that escapes the vandals that destroy and steal from water infrastructure is the cost of putting in place this infrastructure – it comes with a hefty price tag. It literally takes years and years of committing financial resources to successfully restore them to their orig-

inal state. For instance, the operations at 25 of Cape Town's sewage pump stations recently affected by theft and vandalism is estimated at R30 million for operating costs, including repairs and hiring of mobile equipment to reduce sewer overflows. The municipality also has to deal with damage at Site B, estimated to cost R6 million to reconstruct the pump stations. The damaged infrastructure serves about 8 000 households in Site C and a part of Site B in Khayelitsha. It does not only take away funding meant for other priorities but impacts negatively on residents to lead healthy lives. More importantly, it robs communities of much-needed work opportunities – businesses are reluctant to invest in areas overrun by sewer spillages. Another factor that compounds our water situation is the persisting drought in some parts of the country.

Presently, in Nelson Mandela Bay there are fears of a looming Day Zero as dams continue to float at dangerously low levels. Add vandalism of water infrastructure to the picture, and the situation is too dire to contemplate. The seriousness of vandalism and stripping of parts from water infrastructure is such that when communities' rights are negatively affected they angrily take to the streets with horrible consequences. As we have often seen, other infrastructure becomes collateral damage as community members demand access to clean water and proper sanitation and other services. Conspicuous by its absence when such protests take place is the extent to which communities value and appreciate the existence of the infrastructure that keeps their taps running. Protesting and demanding one thing but destroying another only

leads to a new protest for what has been destroyed after resolving what got them to protest in the first place. Our water infrastructure profoundly impacts on the transformation of society and to extract the poor from the morass of poverty. So, any action aimed at destroying it undermines their freedom to have running taps, and to eke out a living. Thus, celebrating April as Freedom Month provides an opportunity to ensure that the impoverished in our society do not continue to experience lack of water and are not robbed of a resource that should sustain them. Persisting to maliciously damage not only the water infrastructure but all of our infrastructure is to trample on people's freedom for a better life.

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