

COMMENT

Water is not a political tool, but a human right

Communities experiencing outages are not concerned with political arguments

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OVER the past few weeks, the water outages affecting communities in the City of Johannesburg have not just been distant reports discussed only in meetings and briefing rooms; they have, at times, unfolded in the very area where I reside, in the City of Tshwane. The moments that stay with me most are not the technical briefings or operational updates, but the visible doubt, disappointment and worry on the faces of people in my neighbourhood when the taps run dry. These experiences have reinforced, in a deeply personal way, the daily reality that millions of South Africans are facing, and they have strengthened our resolve as a Ministry to approach water challenges differently – with urgency, humility and a clear commitment to doing more and doing better, to support the communities who continue to carry the heaviest burden of unreliable water supply.

What disheartens me deeply is how water, a basic human necessity, is now being politicised. Access to water should never become a tool for political point-scoring. Communities experiencing outages are not concerned with which party wins the argument of the day; they want reliable supply, functioning infrastructure and clear communication. Pointing fingers may generate headlines, but it does not repair pump stations, replace ageing pipes or replenish reservoirs. In the context of South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU), cooperation is not optional but essential. The credibility of this new political chapter depends on our ability to demonstrate that shared governance produces shared solutions.

Within the Ministry of Water and Sanitation, this cooperation is not theoretical. As leaders from different political formations, we are working together daily to stabilise systems, coordinate emergency responses and accelerate long-term reforms. Engi-

neers, financial experts and policy teams operate as one system because water infrastructure does not recognise party-political boundaries. This collaborative approach is particularly crucial in the City of Johannesburg, where infrastructure backlogs, rapid urbanisation and rising demand have converged into a complex and fragile supply environment. Residents do not experience governance through party labels; they experience it through whether water flows when they open the tap.

We must be honest about how we arrived here. Much of our infrastructure has aged faster than it has been maintained. Urban growth has outpaced upgrades. Maintenance has too often been reactive instead of preventative. Financial and governance weaknesses at municipal level have compounded the strain. Climate unpredictability continues to test systems that were never designed for such extremes. Acknowledging these realities must not become an excuse for paralysis; it must drive reform.

In the short term, stabilisation remains critical. Soft water restrictions, reservoir load shifting, intensified tanker deployment and daily coordination between municipalities and provincial authorities are technical interventions designed to protect system pressure and prevent wider collapse. These measures are not punitive; they are necessary to safeguard the integrity of the network while deeper reforms take effect.

At the same time, we are undertaking structural reform to secure long-term water resilience. South Africa requires sustained, large-scale investment in national water resource infrastructure while ensuring that existing assets are properly operated and maintained. Given fiscal constraints, this investment must be supported by a capable institution able to raise finance responsibly and manage assets efficiently.

The establishment of the South African National Water Resource Infrastructure Agency (NWRRIA) is central to this vision. By merging the Trans Caledon Tunnel Authority (TCTA), the Water Trading Entity of the Department of Water and Sanitation, and the Department's infrastructure branch into a single entity, the NWRRIA will own national water resource infrastructure, operate and maintain major dams, collect revenue from raw water sales and raise finance for new projects. This integrated structure will create an entity with a substantial balance sheet and predictable revenue streams, placing it in a far stronger position to attract long-term capital for infrastructure expansion than the current fragmented model.

Alongside institutional reform, major augmentation projects are progressing to strengthen supply to Gauteng, the economic heartbeat of our country. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project Phase Two (LHWP-2) is one of the most significant of these interventions. Advanced infrastructure has been completed and the construction of the Polihali Dam is now 41% complete, while the Polihali-Katse Transfer Tunnel stands at 47% completion. When completed, LHWP-2 will substantially increase the volume of water transferred from Lesotho to South Africa's Integrated Vaal River System, bolstering long-term supply to Gauteng and surrounding provinces. For Johannesburg in particular, this augmentation is foundational to economic stability, industrial productivity and urban resilience. The project will strengthen supply security, reduce the risk of severe future shortages and support the water demands of households, businesses and strategic industries, while reinforcing regional cooperation under the Lesotho Highlands Treaty.

However, even the most ambitious infrastructure projects cannot succeed in isolation. Municipal maintenance discipline, transparent governance,

partnership with major water users and responsible consumption by households remain indispensable. Water security is both a social and economic imperative; every investment in reliable supply protects jobs, supports growth and strengthens investor confidence in cities like Johannesburg.

The choice before us is clear. We can continue a cycle of accusation and counter-accusation while infrastructure deteriorates, or we can demonstrate, through the GNU and through practical cooperation across institutions, that South Africa is capable of acting in the national interest. Communities affected by water outages are not asking which political party is to blame; they are asking whether those entrusted with leadership can work together to deliver results.

Water is life, and securing it requires less finger-pointing and far more partnership, technical competence and disciplined execution. Now is the moment for collective responsibility. Municipalities must prioritise maintenance, protect water budgets and strengthen technical capacity. Industry and large water users should consider partnerships with government in co-investing in infrastructure that sustains both operations and surrounding communities. Residents should use water responsibly, report leaks and demand accountability, but also participate in solutions. And to all of us in public office, across party lines, we need to prove that the GNU can rise above politics when the well-being of our people is at stake.

If we act decisively, collaboratively and transparently, we can restore confidence, rebuild infrastructure and secure a resilient water future for Johannesburg, for Gauteng and for South Africa. The taps must flow, not for political victory, but for the dignity and prosperity of our nation.

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