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Water is a human right that comes with responsibility

On March 21, South Africa observed Human Rights Day which is linked to March 21, 1960, and the events of Sharpeville. On that day 69 people died and 180 were wounded when police fired on an unarmed crowd protesting against the Pass Laws.

Human Rights Day always takes place on the eve of the UN World Water Day, celebrated under the theme “Valuing Water” for 2021 .

Section 17 of the Constitution provides that “everyone has the right to have sufficient water”. This was affirmed by the UN in 2010 when it adopted a resolution affirming clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right. The countries that supported the resolution argued that water was essential for life and noted that there is still a large of proportion of the population that lacks access to clean drinking water.

The next question is how far has

South Africa gone in the provision of water and what are the rights and responsibilities that come with water? South Africa has made strides – the General Household Survey of 2018 shows that households’ access to drinking water is at 89%.

The government is acutely aware that despite the improvements in the provision of the quantity and quality of drinking water, there are still pockets of the population without adequate access or have to travel far to fetch water. Women, in particular, are still bearing the brunt of not having adequate water in their homes. Through the National Water Act 36 of 1998, we are committed to the sustainable provision of water to all households.

The Covid-19 pandemic has once again reminded us how valuable our water resources are. While access to clean drinking water is enshrined

in our Constitution, as government we remind citizens that there are responsibilities that come with the provision of water. They include:

- As South Africa is a water-stressed country, all citizens have a responsibility to safeguard this resource by using it sparingly.
- Every municipality has a legal obligation to provide basic services to residents in an equitable manner.
- Water users, in particular those with means, must inculcate a culture of paying for water services to enable sustainable service delivery improvement.

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, government has been working to ensure the equitable distribution of water. This can only be fully realised if we use this precious resource sparingly and wisely.

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