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Security of our water infrastructure falls on all of us

BY LEOGANG MASEKO -31 March 2022 - 09:52

The Water Month campaign, spearheaded by the department of water and sanitation is coming to an end this week, but the spotlight on water-related issues will linger on every day after March.

The Human Rights month has put under the spotlight a number of issues in the water sector, groundwater, infrastructure maintenance and investment, water reticulation, consistent water supply to communities (or the lack thereof) and matters relating to dams being full but dry taps in homes.

Then there is water pollution, infrastructure malfunctioning and vandalism, the effects of which are felt by you and I. Ask anyone who is from the Vaal or Sebokeng area to tell you about their experience of bearing the brunt of living with wage in their backyards, you will be reduced to tears if you are a softie like I am, or you will explode in anger.

On Wednesday, March 23, water and sanitation deputy minister David Mahlobo went to visit residents of Sebokeng Zone 10, to assess the progress made by Rand Water in stopping sewage spillages in the area. A colleague and I were also on the field. We spoke to several residents who shared heart-wrenching stories of how difficult it has been for them to raise children or create loving and warm homes for their families, as a result of the stench they have had to live with for more than a decade.

As a villager from a place named Stinkwater in Hammaskraal, I related to what we were told but as a public servant, I wanted to hang my head in shame. See, I was born and lived in Stinkwater for most of my life. I was informed the place got its name because too often the local water had a stinky smell.

And now that I think about it, how ironic is it that residents of Emfuleni (loosely translated, at the river) local municipality are subjected to such humiliating living standards.

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However, not all is doom and gloom, seeing the vast difference made after Rand Water took over as the implementing agent to stop the long-standing issues of sewage spillages in households, streets and leading into Vaal River.

Rand Water took over the functions of operations and maintenance for water and sanitation services in Emfuleni in June last year. This follows recommendations made by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), stating the implementation of Section 63 of the Water Services Act 108 of 1997, which resulted in the challenges related to water and sanitation in Emfuleni to be classified into three categories: operations and maintenance, refurbishment of the infrastructure and upgrade of the Wastewater Treatment Works in the Emfuleni area.

Adding to the recommendation by the SAHRC, and exactly a month later, the department of water and sanitation reinstated the Blue and Green Drop Certification Programmes, which call for excellent drinking water and wastewater quality management in the country. This was done to also ensure the upkeep of infrastructure by municipalities. The first Green Drop Report, which looks at the state of wastewater treatment infrastructure will be released in the Western Cape on Friday.

It is without a doubt, the department is pulling its weight and, I admit, there is still a long way to go to address sewage spills, not only in the Vaal area but across the country, especially noting that SA is a water scarce country with water demand exceeding supply.

You and I also have a major role to play to safeguard the infrastructure, which is of service to us. The truth is, we know who the vandals are in our communities, and we know where they live. Reporting infrastructure vandalism begins with us.

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