

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAf) is developing a framework to guide actions and decisions that will ensure water security in terms of quantity and of quality to support South Africa's requirements for economic growth and social development. Sufficient supply of water is a requirement for the country to achieve its economic growth targets. The provision of potable water to every person in South Africa is also a fundamental developmental goal that needs to be facilitated by the department's framework. These two goals must be achieved without compromising the ecological sustainability of water resources.

The Department has also embarked upon rigorous water assessment studies referred to as Reconciliation Strategies in order to reconcile the supply and demand for water, particularly in water scarce areas and areas experiencing relatively high levels of demand. These strategies aim to ensure the supply of water at adequate levels of assurance within the constraints of affordability, appropriate levels of service to users, and the protection of current and possible future water resources. Thus far, six studies have been undertaken in the major urban centres and in July 2008, the Department commissioned reconciliation strategies for every town in the country, due to be completed by 2011.

Water scarcity has been identified in the major urban centres. These major urban areas anchor the country's economy, and the Department has to invest heavily in the diversification of its water mix in order to prevent serious water shortages from adversely impacting on our economy. In addition to the traditional augmentation schemes, two major ways that water supplies can be augmented are the treatment of effluent and the desalination of sea water for productive use. A key principle behind assuring local water supplies is to limit the expense of transporting water by keeping supplies as close to the end-user as possible.

The Department also appreciates that whilst investments have been made in water schemes to assure water supply, there is a need to strengthen its focus on water conservation and water demand management, especially since a very basic cost analysis shows a better return on investment from water loss control and water use efficiency measures than from additional supply-side interventions. A major source of water loss is ageing infrastructure exacerbated by poor operations and maintenance at a municipal level. Analysis shows that this state of affairs is a multi-faceted problem including a lack of managerial and technical skills, and a lack of funding. The Department will strengthen its regulatory efforts to support this sector in a bid to reverse this dire situation; it becomes an even more crucial intervention when the pollution of water resources is due to faulty wastewater treatment works.

The phrase "water for development" refers to the critical role of water in poverty alleviation and people's constitutional right to have reliable access to safe drinking water. The Department is deeply concerned about the persistent backlogs in certain parts of the country. By 2005, it had already achieved the Millennium Development Goal of halving, "by the year 2015 the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water".

The Department is also very aware of anomalies in water distribution, such as communities that reside next to water sources but do not access to these. The Department remains committed to ensuring that every person has access to a safe and reliable supply of drinking water hence the framework for growth and development.

In terms of service backlogs, it is the Department's recommendation that resolving these backlogs is prioritised and addressed through a combination of short- and long-term interventions. Such interventions would include rainwater harvesting, the development and treatment of groundwater sources, and exploring the possibility of extending the reach of existing water supplies to additional communities.

A balance is needed between bulk and small-scale infrastructure projects. Where a community can be serviced by existing large-scale infrastructure, this should happen with immediate effect.

Where a community cannot be serviced by bulk infrastructure projects due to the cost of such an intervention (for example, pumping water to mountain-top communities at higher altitudes), then localised schemes must be planned and implemented. Where large-scale infrastructure could solve local water scarcity, such as the De Hoop Dam, the necessary planning and resourcing must be undertaken and interim measures introduced to compensate for the long lead-times. The Department will also prioritise schemes in areas with resource development potential but with high service backlogs. It will also support sector plans where water use for economic growth purposes can also support social development needs. The Department will particularly seek for and support interventions in the water sector that explicitly provide for the dual goals of growth and development, since one goal should not be realised at the expense of the other.

The Water for Growth and Development Framework points to the relationship between water availability and the many forms of economic activity that depend on available water supply of specific levels of quality. The Department's position is that the country's economic growth target cannot be achieved at the expense of the ecological sustainability of water resources or meeting people's human needs. It wishes to respond to the needs of the different economic sectors and this is best achieved when water supply and the impact of use are factored in during planning. Rather than being an add-on or afterthought, the Department sees the need for water to be mainstreamed and placed at the nucleus of all planning decisions both in the public and private sector. For water to support economic growth without compromising primary needs or ecological sustainability requires adequate planning at a strategic level and in an integrated manner.

The Department is very mindful of water use behaviour that impacts negatively on water resource quantity and quality. It is currently exploring a potential mix of mechanisms to change this behaviour that includes regulatory instruments, market-based instruments, self-regulation, and awareness and education. The Department plans to match mechanisms to offending behaviour in ways that appropriately mitigate its effects.

The Department is taking action to ensure it has reliable information to better support cross sectoral planning and development initiatives in its decisions and trade-offs. The rolling out of the Reconciliation Strategies to various parts of the country will ensure that the Department is able to anticipate and address future demand without any one aspect of water need (social, economic, or ecological) being compromised.