



INTERNET ARTICLE

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Water poverty and the water poverty index.

Water poverty is a situation whereby a nation or region cannot afford the cost of sustainable clean water to all people at all times. This is about not having access to sufficient water, or water of an adequate quality, to meet one's basic needs.

The water poverty index, on the other hand, must be seen as an inter-disciplinary approach that can be followed to produce an integrated assessment of water stress and scarcity, linking physical estimates of water availability with socio-economic variables that reflect poverty. It is known that poor households often suffer from poor water provision, and this results in a significant loss of time and effort, especially for women.

By linking the physical and social sciences to address this issue, a more equitable solution for water allocation may be found.

To determine water poverty, sociologists look at an analysis of the financial circumstances of consumers to evaluate the proportion of income they spend on water. According to sociologists people and firms must be able to afford the water they need, and families should face neither hardship because of water bills nor disconnection.

They investigate if there is a serious problem of water poverty in South Africa, that is, people not having enough money to pay their water bills. For example, how many households could be experiencing water poverty? It could be due to the size of the water bills or to inadequate income; it remains a question of affordability: the proportion of our income we need to pay our water bills.

Sociologists also investigate the proportion of income spent on water by unemployed households, recipients of government grants or poor households, noting how the amount for water charges can erode the little income they have. They investigate the level above which it is unreasonable to expect a household to meet water charges.

The investigation also acknowledges an expenditure that cannot be afforded by consumers. This also implies water poverty, and provides estimates of the numbers of households affected. They utilise a test to determine whether water is or is not affordable by particular households.



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Since the introduction of pre-paid water meters by government households may limit their use if they have a metered supply; they may go short of other essentials or discretionary expenditure in order to pay their water bill. There is an overt health risk in the case of water poverty resulting from municipality disconnections and use of pre-payment meters. In particular poor or unemployed people, large families on low incomes and the families of people with designated medical conditions are then adversely affected.

A consumer is defined as being in debt if a bill is not paid by the end of the billing year in which it is issued. The question then becomes what water debt is there in South Africa?

It is important to highlight water poverty as an issue that requires public attention. This is helpful for government in reviewing the arrangements for assisting people who face difficulty meeting water bills, that is, low income consumers or the indigent. This will curb situations where communities protest against the installation of pre-paid water meters, for example. It will also assist the government's objective to achieve a better quality of life for its citizens and provide a strategy for sustainable development for South Africa.

According to sociologists, a development plan which ignores the essential needs of the poorest people is not sustainable at all. Households may limit their water use if they have a metered supply. Disconnection of supply to certain homes becomes the consequence of water debt, threatening a better quality of life.

The government needs to carefully determine what percentage of income is paid by a household towards water. The relationship between water debt and household income can be used to focus on the history and effectiveness of the measures introduced by government to assist particular households expected to have difficulty in meeting water charges, what measures can be adopted to assist consumers who may face difficulty in affording water. There is a firm view that help for poorer consumers should come from government, not better-off consumers. In this way government can play a positive and meaningful role towards poverty alleviation

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