



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OPINION PIECE

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We need to preserve our water resources

Water is critical for the country's socio-economic development. So when a drought occurs, it impacts on all levels of society from food production to the provision of water to households. This is currently the reality in a number of provinces, especially KwaZulu-Natal.

Droughts are a natural phenomenon normally caused by prolonged lower-than-normal rainfall. South Africa, as one of the 30 driest countries in the world, is particularly susceptible to droughts. Another phenomenon that adds to the country's future water challenge is that the western part of South Africa is in a state of progressive desertification, which means that our water resources are slowly decreasing.

KwaZulu-Natal normally receives high rainfall and has sufficient availability of water resources, but the current drought has had a devastating effect with dams in the province being at an all-time low. This is of great concern to the Department of Water and Sanitation which is responsible to secure water supply for all sectors of our society.

As a Department we cannot prevent the occurrence of droughts, but can manage and mitigate the impact. To this end, government has implemented a number of initiatives to avert a water crisis in KwaZulu-Natal. Among these is supplying communities whose water sources have dried up with water through tankers.

Systems-level drought disaster committees have also been established with stakeholders which include municipalities, water boards and irrigators. These committees meet regularly to monitor compliance to water restrictions and the performance of implemented mitigation measures.

The drought in KwaZulu-Natal should serve as a reminder to South Africans that water in the country is precious and every drop should be used sensibly. We should also play our part in the protection of all water sources which include rivers, streams,



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dams and all other related infrastructure. Destroyed and damaged infrastructure deprives communities of critical services as funds which could have been better spent on improving services are then used for repairs.

Annually the demand for water keeps on growing as the economy develops and more South Africans get access to water services. To meet future demand the Department has done a number of hydrological and catchment assessment studies to understand the water resource and its availability.

Informed by these studies the Department is currently building additional dams to harvest more rainfall during the wet season for use during dry periods. However, looking at the current state and levels of storage in most of our dams, it should be noted that last season's rainfall failed to significantly increase dam storage levels.

Another supplementary measure government is rolling out is Rain Water Harvesting tanks. This method addresses one of our biggest problems namely, that rainwater is often immediately absorbed, or evaporates due to the hot and unsaturated soil leaving little room for rainfall runoff to reach or replenish dams and aquifers. By using rainwater-harvesting tanks, rain can be harvested and stored for later usage.

The Department is also exploring groundwater as a viable option, especially in areas where few or no alternative water resources exist. This is a particularly attractive alternative as this resource is fairly drought resistant.

Needless to say, as with all water taken directly from the source such as rivers, ponds and impoundments, groundwater must be managed responsibly. This includes avoiding having pit latrines or any other longer-term waste-disposal sites near boreholes to prevent contamination.

Droughts are natural disasters which South Africa will continue to face from time to time. As a Department we will continue to put measures in place to mitigate its effects. However, all of us need to become involved in water preservation and the protection of our water resources. Let us work together to ensure this vital resource is available not just for now but in posterity

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