

Water crisis in South Africa: Are we making progress?

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Under the global development goals agreed to in 2015, government has pledged to provide access to clean water and sanitation for all by 2030. Speaking on behalf of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica), Piet Nel, project director for Tax Professional Development at Saica, explains that in Saica's view, the biggest obstacle to achieving these goals is a lack of accountability and the enforcement of consequences for management, for which there seems to be very little political will.

In a submission made by Saica in response to the 2021 Budget speech, government was urged to:

- urgently prioritise funding for water and sanitation projects; and
- give urgent attention to fixing the collapsing sewage systems as the infrastructure is imploding and access to drinkable water is becoming more problematic.

According to Saica, it was doubtful that the additional budget allocation of R2.3bn over the next three years would be sufficient. Following the delivery of the 2021 Medium Term Budget Speech, Saica pointed out that government has been warned for many years of an impending water crisis, yet it seems such warnings have been ignored.

Auditor-general South Africa (AGSA) Tsakani Maluleke, in an audit of the country's water boards during the 2020/21 financial year published on September 14, 2022, called for improved financial and performance management controls that will enable reliable water service delivery to communities.



Piet Nel, project director for Tax Professional Development at Saica

The audit report outlined that six water boards complied with the minimum requirements for safe drinking water, as stipulated in South African National Standard 241, and three only partially complied with certain specifications. Ageing and improperly maintained infrastructure was mostly responsible for the water loss of about 74.70 million kilolitres, resulting in R794m in lost revenue in 2020/21.

According to the AGSA, the water boards' irregular expenditure decreased by 41%, from R3.22bn in 2019/20 to R1.90bn in 2020/21. Fruitless and wasteful expenditure increased by 12%, from R264m in 2019/20 to R296m in 2020/21. Seven of the nine water boards reported fruitless and wasteful expenditure.

In a Creamer Research Report, 'South Africa's Looming Crisis', (published in October 2023), the following is said: *"Water security is one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa, and this ongoing challenge is intensifying."*

South Africa's water custodian, the DWS, in its Annual Performance Plan for 2023/24 to 2025/26 published on 2 May, 2023, indicates that factors that have long hampered the water sector include poor maintenance in existing infrastructure; recurring droughts driven by climatic variation; inequities in access to water and sanitation; deteriorating water quality and a lack of skilled water engineers, amongst others, will in all probability lead to a water crisis in South Africa.

According to the research report, cities such as Johannesburg, water supply shortages are being experienced because of dilapidated infrastructure. The performance and reliability of water services are further being eroded due to power cuts in stages to mitigate the power load on the national electricity grid when there is insufficient electricity availability.

Water board Rand Water has attributed many reservoir infrastructures and pumping system failures to extended periods of load shedding, which has led to intermittent water outages for its 17 million customers across Gauteng and surrounding areas.

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), in 2021, found the Vaal River to be polluted beyond any acceptable measure owing to dysfunctional wastewater treatment plants releasing raw sewage into waterways.

Further, Hammanskraal, in Pretoria, and Parys in the Free State, are experiencing outbreaks of cholera, with many fatalities and hospitalisations.

Du Plessis, in an article by the *Daily Maverick* on 2 February, 2023, said that municipalities, which are responsible for clean water provision in their respective regions, do not have the ability to fix the system and, each year, budgets to safeguard water supplies go unspent.

With the growing economy and population, there is a need for more dams to meet the increasing water demand. Several challenges exist, the biggest constraint is funding.

Some experts have warned that the country faces a future of regular water shedding or rationing.

In an opinion piece published on the news platform *The Conversation* on 18 October 2022, University of South Africa associate professor and water resource management research specialist, Dr Anja du Plessis, noted that the biggest challenges are decaying infrastructure, including that of water storage, water supply and treatment, poorly managed water resources, poor planning, a lack of financing to maintain ageing infrastructure and failure to meet the growing demands of rapid urbanisation.

From a demand side, water conservation and demand management are critical, as South Africans continue to use above-average volumes of water, at 237 l/d per person, compared with the estimated international average of 173 l/d per person.

At least 5% of the 4.43 billion litres a day supplied by Rand Water to several municipal systems is lost within the water board's system, resulting in 3.97 billion litres a day reaching the municipalities, *Engineering News* reported on 14 March 2023.

Meanwhile, the Gauteng High Court in Johannesburg ruled that the unabated flow of raw sewage into the Vaal River contravenes various environmental acts and must be prevented.

The collapse of the Emfuleni local municipality's wastewater treatment system results in about 170 million litres of raw or partially treated wastewater entering the Vaal River daily, according to non-profit, Save the Vaal Environment (Save). Despite the deployment of, and repair attempts by, the Ekurhuleni Water Care Company, the South African National Defence Force and Cuban engineers, the plants were still not fixed and raw sewage continued to flow into the Integrated Vaal River System.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that South Africa is making the progress the country so desperately needs.

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