

March 2013

World Water Day: South Africa has most progressive water policies, but fails with implementation

African Utility Week to look at municipalities' key water challenges

On 22 March World Water Day will be celebrated globally. But South Africa has little to celebrate according to Harold Smook, founder of Urban Roots – Sustainable Communities Initiative and registered Professional Engineering Technologist. “We can celebrate our water policies - the most progressive policies in the world, but when it comes to implementation we have nothing to celebrate,” says Smook who will be speaking about water security aspirations at African Utility Week which is taking place in Cape Town from 14 – 15 May.

Poor performance due to environmental devastation

South Africa was recently 128th out of 132 countries on the Yale Centre for Environmental Law and Policy's 2012 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) which measures a country's performance in terms of water, air quality and overall environmental performance. “South Africa's poor performance is mostly because of the environmental devastation caused by the overexploitation of our limited water supply,” says Smook.

He explains: “acid mine drainage, water system losses and pollution, lack of holistic approach to water security, poor demand management, unchecked mining activity and our continuous hunger for coal fired power plants has resulted in 84% of South Africa's 112 unique river ecosystems being classified as threatened and a disturbing 54% critically endangered.”

Water – energy – food

Harold Smook says furthermore that most of South Africa's water resources have already been allocated and water licences have been expropriated from farmers to provide water for the mining and energy sectors – especially in the Vaal River system. He continues: “the interrelatedness of water, energy and food has to form part of any attempt to improve water security. Once water stressed conditions arise there are significant trade-offs resulting from the water-food-energy nexus. In South Africa the conditions of our natural ecosystems combined with the increase in coal fired power plants and increased mining activities, is an indication that government is focused on economic growth at all costs rather than the basic human needs of the people; water and food security.”

Agriculture biggest water consumer

Smook emphasises that while there are alternative sources of energy there is no replacement for water. “South Africa has an abundance of natural beauty, but if the rivers start dying, ecosystems are destroyed with devastating consequences.” Smook cites population growth, prosperity and pollution as the ultimate reasons for our escalating water crisis. Agriculture is the biggest national and global consumer of water and growing populations demand more food. Furthermore, a person rising out of poverty prefers protein based diets, which requires significantly more water to produce than carbohydrate foods.

Water budget deficit

According to Smook R670 billion is needed over the next ten years to: service previously unserved communities (17%), to grow and maintain the water infrastructure (34%), and to rehabilitate the existing infrastructure (49%).

However, the South African Government only has an available budget of R332 billion, which leaves a budget deficit of R342 billion rand.

A part of the solution lies in demand-side driven solutions says Smook. “Consumers need to realise how important it is to use only as much as we need and as efficiently as possible. Governments and business need to realise that economies cannot grow indefinitely with limited water resources. We need a paradigm shift and to start living within our planetary limits.”

Dedicated municipalities

Despite the water challenges, there is some reason for optimism - many of the country's municipalities have dedicated individuals working behind the scenes to ensure that the public has 24/7 access to potable water and safely managed waste water, according to Nicolette Pombo-Van Zyl, programme manager of the water track at **African Utility Week**.

"It is easy to forget that water management includes the collection, transportation and treatment of millions of litres of raw sewage that must undergo due diligence in ensuring that public health is protected and that our drinking water resources remain uncontaminated," says Pombo-Van Zyl.

There has been considerable progress in the water sector as indicated in the 2011 Census and the State of the Nation address earlier this year: nine out of ten households have access to water; the roll out of 315 000 solar water geysers to homes that never had running hot water before; and the construction of the bulk water distribution system for the De Hoop Dam that began in October 2012, to supply water to the Greater Sekhukhune, Waterberg and Capricorn district municipalities.

Pombo-Van Zyl: "At **African Utility Week** we will be addressing the key challenges of Integrated Water Resource Management including bridging the gap between water security aspirations and economic reality. With platforms such as these South Africans can celebrate the advancements made towards proactively managing this scarce resource now and in future."

BLUE DROP

Blue Drop is a project of the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs to encourage municipalities to improve the quality of drinking water. In 2012 the province of Gauteng received the accolade for having the highest quality water, followed by the Western Cape with average percentages of higher than 90%. The Department expressed serious concern about the Eastern Cape where some municipalities had percentages as low as 5,9 %. The positive results of the Blue Drop initiative are clearly visible in two municipalities in Mpumalanga. The Victor Kanye local municipality scored 18.26% in 2011 and improved tremendously in 2012 to an astonishing 80.07%. The Thembisile local municipality obtained a mere 27.77% in 2011 but through the use of Blue Drop processes managed to reach 78.30% in 2012. Says Nicolette Pombo-van Zyl: "Many people are unaware of the impact their behaviour has on water resource and water quality. The Blue Drop initiative provides tools that everyone can work with to make a difference at ground level, as shown in the two Mpumalanga municipalities above."

She adds: "Gaining Blue Drop certification is an indication that the authority has complied with a stringent set of procedural, chemical, biological and other requirements. Blue Drop certificates are an indication that the municipality is promoting a healthy environment and this encourages economic investment."

African Utility Week site visits

African Utility Week brings together the entire ecosystem for the African water and power sector, from high level government representatives, utilities and municipalities, regulators and power pools to consultants, vendors, service providers and energy intensive power users for the purpose of sharing and determining the future development of Africa's power industry.

The water site visit on 16 May takes delegates on a tour of the City of Cape Town's Water and Sanitation department's full range of facilities including the Athlone Wastewater Treatment Works, the Mandalay Pressure Management Project and the Faure Water Treatment Plant.

The dates for African Utility Week are:

Exhibition & Conference: 14-15 May 2013

Pre-conference Workshops: 13 May 2013

Site Visits: 16 May 2013

Location: CTICC, Cape Town

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