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Water Scarcity and Municipal Infrastructure Breakdown

Water is our most essential environmental resource. Water does not belong to private landowners; instead, it is a public resource managed by the state for the benefit of all people. South Africa has faced significant challenges regarding both the supply and quality of its water. The National Water Act 36 of 1998 provides the primary legal framework for managing the country's water resources, and aims to ensure that every person has access to a basic, ecologically sustainable water supply. Local municipalities (acting as Water Services Authorities) are legally responsible for direct water delivery and basic sanitation in both urban and rural areas. Municipalities are legally obligated to maintain water infrastructure, minimise losses, comply with quality standards, and report malfunctions or risks immediately.

As early as 2018, the National Water and Sanitation Master Plan (NWSMP) acknowledged that South Africa was facing a water crisis caused by insufficient water infrastructure maintenance and investment, recurrent droughts driven by climatic variation, inequalities in access to water and sanitation, environmental degradation, resource pollution, and a lack of skilled water engineers. https://tinyurl.com/hu8h5nh2

Poorly maintained sewage systems often lead to leakages, allowing untreated sewage to seep directly into the environment https://tinyurl.com/yvwmc7kd. Such untreated sewage causes widespread ecological collapse, toxic algal blooms, severe health hazards, and agricultural contamination. Water contamination, treatment failures and infrastructure collapse have caused major service outages and public health risks https://www.polity.org.za/topic/national-water-crisis-committee. South Africa's escalating water outages are being driven primarily by failing infrastructure, not water scarcity. The country now finds itself facing a critical turning point requiring urgent intervention to prevent further service delivery collapse https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.10520/ejc-civeng_v34_n3_a15. The Deputy Minister of Water and Sanitation, Jack Bloom, told Talk Radio 702 that around 30 to 40 per cent of the country's clean drinking water is wasted on the streets. Bloom said that much of this water wastage stems from municipal mismanagement, infrastructure failure, corruption and leadership issues https://tinyurl.com/4y9n6txa.

The Department of Water and Sanitation Green Drop Report 2025, released by Minister Pemmy Majodina in March 2026, assesses South Africa's municipal wastewater management systems. Approximately 47 per cent (396 out of 848) of municipal wastewater treatment systems assessed in the report were found to be in a critical state of performance. The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) has pursued over 100 criminal cases and issued over 164 directives against non-compliant water services authorities and municipalities for raw sewerage spillages https://tinyurl.com/3jy7e3s9.

Government estimates show that the cost of rehabilitating national water and sanitation infrastructure would be more than R400 billion, far exceeding current municipal budgets and maintenance spending https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/879880/r26-billion-a-year-down-the-drain-in-south-africa/.

Pollution enters water from many sources – leaking sewage pipes, overloaded wastewater plants, run-off from farms and factories, and litter dumped in rural and urban areas. "This has serious consequences for biodiversity, health and economic development. Decreasing water quality can also cause algal blooms [and] low oxygen as well as killing fish and encouraging the spread of invasive water plants.

This disrupts the natural balance of rivers, wetlands and coastal systems. As a result, there is less clean water available for households, food production and other economic activities" https://www.sanbi.org/news/pollution-impacts-aquatic-ecosystems-species-and-economic-activity/. Water quality issues are particularly pronounced in rural areas. River water used in these communities is frequently contaminated by agricultural run-off, mining pollution, and unmanaged sewage, exposing people to waterborne diseases. Many use communal taps, walking long distances to collect water. Some are reliant on irregular municipal water delivery trucks and waiting in long queues, while the elderly pay others to fetch and carry water for them. In certain instances, limited water availability in these areas has resulted in criminal activities and irregular practices, such as the theft of water and its sale to impoverished communities https://journals.co.za/doi/10.53973/jopa.2025.60.3.a9.

The consequences of untreated and polluted water from rivers being pumped into the municipal water systems is well illustrated by the recent cases of Bronkhorstspruit https://tinyurl.com/2wet4nhx and Makhanda Rhodes students hit by gastro, thrusting Makhanda water system into spotlight (again). The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) released a scathing 48-page investigation report in June 2026, finding systemic human rights violations and governance failures in the Makana Local Municipality, which includes Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) https://tinyurl.com/3av3yhcj. The SAHRC concluded that Makana Municipality had infringed core constitutional rights, including the right of access to sufficient water (section 27), human dignity (section 10), an environment not harmful to health or well-being (section 24), and children's rights (section 28).

Through the newly-created National Water Crisis Committee and National Water Action Plan (NWAP) the government aims to stabilise the water sector through centralised crisis management, major infrastructure investments, and stricter governance reforms at the local level https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/president-ramaphosa-releases-national-water-action-plan. The government also aims to enforce accountability and address the governance failures that significantly contribute to the current water crisis https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/president-ramaphosa-chair-national-water-crisis-committee.

The Helen Suzman Foundation points out that "managing water services is a complex process that involves different institutions working together in a co-ordinated way. If one institution is not functioning optimally it adversely affects the chain of service delivery, implicating constitutional rights in the process" https://hsf.org.za/publications/hsf-briefs/the-institutional-structure-for-delivering-water-services.

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