

Living with water scarcity and Ma Vilakazi's cabbages

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WATER is a lens through which to view society and an important focus is on how society shares and uses this scarce natural resource. Is it going to be used for the benefit of all? Or will it be captured for the benefit of a few? And what should be equitably shared — the resource or the benefits from its use?

The National Water Resource Strategy, just published for consultation by Water and Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa, largely ignores the practical operational issues it is supposed to address. But it opens a policy debate that is fundamental to the achievement of water security in SA by making the startling suggestion that we should make our water supplies less rather than more reliable.

The threat of a national water crisis has been raised repeatedly over the past few years, with good reason. Our water reserves, the amount of water stored in the country's dams, are down more than 10% from the last year's levels. A drought-associated El Nino weather pattern is developing and historical evidence points to the likelihood of drought in the next few years. So are we ready for it?

The strategy, published three years late, does not provide any answers. It does not tell us how much water we have nor how it is being used. It provides no explanation of how much water the main centres of our country are going to need and how they are to be provided, nor whether water pollution is getting worse.

It mentions that saving water, in part by reducing water losses, is important, but not how that is being done nor what progress has been made in meeting President Jacob Zuma's 2010 state of the nation commitment to reduce water lost through leaks by 50%. So it is not possible to confirm the reports that the proportion of "nonrevenue water" in municipalities is rising rather than falling.

It does not do what the National Water Act stipulates, to "set out the strategies, objectives, plans, guidelines and procedures of the minister and institutional arrangements relating to the protection, use, development, conservation, management and control of water resources within the framework of existing relevant government policy".

At best, it simply states that strategies will be developed. Indeed, part of the problem is that, rather than explaining how SA's water goals are to be achieved within the framework of existing policy, it seeks to change that policy. So, among its few specific proposals, the draft strategy suggests that, in the face of drought threats, SA should reduce the reliability of water to key users such as large cities, Eskom and major industries.

The headlines could be dramatic: "Electricity blacked out so Ma Vilakazi can grow cabbages" would be an accurate reflection of the proposals. That could be the consequence if, in decisions on water allocation, "water for poverty eradication, the improvement of livelihoods of the poor and the marginalised, and uses that will contribute to greater racial and gender equity" were given higher priority than "water for uses that are strategically important to the national economy".

That proposal has not been made without thought. The implications are clearly understood because the report goes on to say that "the reduction of assurance of supply for existing water users as well as reduction of water losses will be critical components of making more water available to historically disadvantaged, small-scale users."

At this point, the absence of the information that the strategy should contain becomes problematic. That information would show that many parts of the country still have enough water for small-scale farmers to expand. It would focus us on the policy failures that leave available land and water resources so dramatically underused. But in other areas, notably Limpopo and Mpumalanga, SA is already confronting its water-scarce future and the available water is almost all being used.

Here, water required for a new use will have to be taken from another. So farmers, miners and domestic users have to agree on priorities and recognise that other needs must also be met.

This is where the strategy fails. Rather than face the tough decisions that have to be made and spell out an approach to addressing them, the issue is fudged. The National Water Act provides for mechanisms to review water allocations, but they are complex, contested and hardly used.

This reluctance to confront water-scarcity is confirmed by proposals to deal with backlogs in issuing water licences by speeding up the process. But if there is not enough water to allocate, the process cannot be sped up — unless the intention is to issue "dry rights", licences to take water that does not exist. In areas with absolute

water shortages, water licensing will require a review of all water use in the area, to identify whose use can be reduced. That will take more time, not less.

There will be difficult trade-offs. If competition is between urban supplies and farming, whether it is a village community of Ma Vilakazi's growing cabbages or the ZZZ tomato estates, which criteria should be used? The number of jobs that are created through the water use? The number of black beneficiaries? The contribution of the water use to the national fiscus, incidentally, to help pay the social grants that many poor communities depend on? And who should take those decisions? Water affairs officials? Or more broadly constituted groups that represent the diverse interests of the area concerned as well as the country more generally?

This is the debate that the draft strategy opens up. It is helpful because it can force South Africans to confront difficult choices rather than run away from them. And this debate is essential if we are to ensure that water supply failures and pollution do not cause a water crisis. But for the debate to be well grounded, Molewa will have to provide the detailed information.

More generally, we need to know what infrastructure development is planned to maintain secure supplies, for our cities, towns and industries. Institutional responsibility, financial arrangements and key project milestones should be given, so that progress can be monitored.

Institutions that develop and operate the national water resource infrastructure are crucial for national survival. The strategy proposes to maintain current arrangements, with functions split between competing institutions, perpetuating their failure to sustain existing infrastructure.

Effective water conservation is as important as new infrastructure to maintain SA's water security and sustain the society and the economy that underpins it. Water-use targets have been established for all major use areas, but where are the dedicated programmes to reduce leaks and manage water use?

A similar, structured approach is needed for water quality, starting by outlining the current situation and implementing a prioritised and sequenced programme of action that is within the capabilities of the institutions concerned.

With such building blocks in place, we can build a water-secure nation. It will take leadership to reject the easy fudges, to step off the slippery path of failing supplies and declining quality back onto the high ground. But we need to get there if we are to avoid the crises that await failure to act decisively.

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