



Briefing Paper 340

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## South Africa's Water - Counting the Drops

*Since the late 19th century, South Africa has exploited its mineral wealth with little or no regard for the environment. Changes are needed to protect the natural environment while allowing the country to benefit from its mineral deposits. In addition to significant non-renewable mineral wealth, the country's natural resources include its adjacent oceans, soil, water, biodiversity, sunshine and a long coastline.*

*National Development Plan 2030*

### 1. Introduction

There is no denying the crucial role that water plays in our country's well-being and prosperity. This paper will take a look at policy that was recently introduced in the form of the National Water Resources Strategy; consider South Africa's progress in achieving its Millennium Development Goals with regard to water; briefly examine the country's water status; and share some insights gathered from attending conferences that focused on water issues from the faith community's perspective.

### 2. Recent Policy on Water

One of the main pieces of policy that came out in 2013 was the Second National Water Resources Strategy (NWRS2), which was published on 3<sup>rd</sup> July by Water and Environmental Affairs Minister, Edna Molewa. This legislation aims to address the new challenges, including security of supply, environmental degradation, resource pollution and the inefficient use of water, which have emerged since the first edition of the strategy was published in 2004. The various changes which have occurred in the country's water landscape, and which call for a new approach, also had to be considered in the new strategy.

Minister Molewa said the main focus of the NWRS2 is equitable and sustainable access to and use of water by all South Africans, through improved authorisation processes and mechanisms, as well as via programmes such as water allocation reform, financial support to emerging farmers and support to urban and rural economic development initiatives. The NWRS2 is also geared towards three key objectives: to ensure that water supports development and the elimination of poverty and inequality; that water contributes to the economy and job creation; and that our water resources are protected, used, developed, conserved, managed and controlled in a sustainable and equitable manner.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Millennium Development Goal Progress

Among many other objectives, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 1990, aim to reduce the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by half (Target 7c). In the 2012 UNICEF report entitled Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation, it is contended that between the years 1990 and 2010, over two billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources, such as piped supplies and protected wells. This means that, globally, we have managed to halve the proportion of people

without access to safe drinking water well in advance of the MDG 2015 deadline. According to the report, at the end of 2010 89% of the world's population (6.1 billion people), used improved drinking water sources (this is 1% more than the 88% MDG target). This puts us above target for the 2015 deadline; however, an approximate 783 million people are still without access to safe drinking water. As for the MDG target for sanitation, it is still far from being met by the 2015 deadline, with shortfall numbers pronounced in billions.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Current Water Status

With Southern Africa being a water vulnerable region, our country is fortunate to be one of the few on the African continent that has generally potable water, at least in built-up areas. But access is patchy: for example, although 90.8% of South African households were served by piped water in 2012, only 79% of Eastern Cape households enjoyed such access. This situation does, however, represent a substantial improvement over 2002, when only 56.3% of households in this province had access to piped water. Nationally, 60.1% of households rated the quality of water-related services favourably. Satisfaction has, however, been eroding steadily since 2005, when 76.4% of users rated the services as good. Residents of the Free State, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape have consistently been least satisfied with the quality of water provided. In 2012, 15.1% of households in the Free State felt that their water smelled bad, compared to 11.7% of Mpumalanga households and only 2.4% of Gauteng households. Free State households were most likely to feel that their water was unsafe to drink (15.1%), not clear (16.5%) and not tasting good (15.2%).<sup>3</sup>

#### 5. Conferences

The SACBC Justice and Peace Commission organised a 'Just Water' consultation on 11 July 2013. The first speaker was Dr Anthony Turton, who spoke about *Understanding past and present water cycles and the impact of human activity and climate change on our water resources*. Dr Turton unpacked the notion of a global water scarcity, and zoomed in to look at the South African context. Secondly, we heard from Mr December Ndlhovu, who shared his experiences of *Commercial agriculture, deforestation, and commercial forestation in the Mpumalanga* BP 340: SA Water: Counting the Drops

region. This was followed by a presentation on *Mining and acid mine drainage* by Ms Marriette Liefnerlink. An *Introduction to fracking* was then given by Liane Greeff, and we were finally treated to a presentation by Matthew Rosmarin entitled *What do we do? Solutions from biomimicry*. The day ended off with a discussion on the role of faith communities in addressing water issues.

Franciscans International held a 'Water and Sanitation' workshop during the week of 19 to 24 October, with participants from all over the African continent. The topics of discussion ranged from South Africa's Green and Blue Drop Programme to the involvement of civil society and communities in the development and implementation of policies.

Some of the themes that emerged at these conferences included the following: That as custodians of the earth and all that is in it, we, especially the faith communities, have a responsibility to preserve its integrity for present and future generations. Responsible citizenship and ethical decision-making in respect of water conservation and water usage must therefore be promoted. Faith communities need to ensure that all the stakeholders and decision-makers appreciate the interconnectedness of the social, economic and ecological spheres, and that all decisions regarding water must promote sustainability as the main goal – the Earth Charter contains a set of principles that could guide this process. It was also stated that the faith sector needs to lead by example. The things we learn from the different educational sessions we attend need to lead to us to behave differently and to become models of the changes we want. We need to show our respect for nature and, in that way, embody the notion of stewardship. It was also suggested that a social movement that incorporates all faith-based communities and any other groups that are committed to the same goals be created to take these issues forward.

#### 6. Conclusion

It has to be acknowledged that there has been progress in making safe drinking water accessible to as many South Africa as possible. The different spheres of government are urged to do their part in ensuring that they put in place a policy framework that will promote equitable access to water for all our people, and the sustainable use of this critical resource. There are grave concerns about the looming plans regarding fracking, and

the amount of water used during fracking procedures. This calls attention to the need for robust legislation in this area. Minister Molewa's declaration that water licences will have to be

issued for fracking is a hopeful sign; however time will tell whether proper implementation takes place.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa at the release of the Second National Water Resources Strategy – June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> 2012 Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation - <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/JMPreport2012.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 2012 General Household Survey - <http://www.statssa.gov.za/Publications2/P0318/P0318August2012.pdf>