



**Briefing Paper 475**

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## 2019 World Water Day

### 1. Introduction

Since 1993 the UN has recognised 22<sup>nd</sup> March as World Water Day. Every year the reflections for World Water Day focus on a particular theme, and for 2019 the theme is *'Leave No-one Behind.'* The theme is wholly appropriate: one of the most glaring inequalities in our world, and an obvious sign of the times, is the unjust and unequal access of millions and millions of people to fresh, hygienic water.

### 2. Pope Francis's Approach

Pope Francis has referred to access to safe water as being "essential for survival and as such a condition for exercising other human rights."<sup>1</sup> Many commentators – including Pope Francis – have tied this imperative to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #6 deals with the issue of water. The official wording of this goal is to "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all."<sup>2</sup> The three key targets that are meant to guide government policies in this area are:

1. By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.
2. By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.
3. By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping, and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, thereby

4. Halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.<sup>3</sup>

The Pope stresses that the right to water is a basic human right and that all must have access to it as both a necessity for survival and a matter of being able to live lives with dignity. Lack of access to water translates into deepening cycles of poverty and missed opportunities especially for women and children; it adds to burdens on the poor; and it undermines the dignity of those who bear such burdens. The Pope has also often stressed that water is a public good.<sup>4</sup>

Francis is also on record as condemning the privatisation of the goods of the earth at the expense of the poor. In traditional Catholic Social Teaching this is understood as the 'universal destination of goods.' There is a strong echo of this in his message to Prof da Silva of the Food and Agriculture Organisation. He points out that annually more and more regions are plagued by water scarcity, that the just management of water is critical, and that there needs to be ongoing education as to the conservation and use of water.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. South Africa's Situation

World Water Day is important for SA as the country is rated the 39<sup>th</sup> driest in the world. Thus, clear policies on managing water, especially in its availability for the marginalised, are critical.<sup>6</sup> South Africa is a signatory to the SDGs and it is

therefore incumbent on it to direct its policies to meet those goals.

The South African Government in its 2019 World Water Day statement pointed to the need to see this Day as linked to “the lack of clean water around the world, alongside the damaging effects of global warming, water pollution and damaged water tables” and as “more important to understand than ever.”<sup>7</sup>

Last year at the 2018 UN observance of World Water Day, SA stated that “South Africa shares 60% of its fresh water resources with its neighbours in Southern Africa. We are committed to multi-lateral, trans-boundary collaboration to ensure that water is a catalyst for socio-economic development and transformation.”<sup>8</sup>

South Africa uses about 10 200 million m<sup>3</sup> of water a year from its major dams. The majority of water consumption can be attributed to domestic use, irrigation, electricity generation, mining processes and industrial processes.<sup>9</sup> In the 2016 statistical survey it was estimated that each South African used 233 litres of water per day, with the highest usage being in Gauteng at 305 litres per person per day, and Limpopo the lowest at 182 litres per person per day.<sup>10</sup>

The SA government has pointed to improvements in the ability of the poor to access water, even though the situation is less than perfect. “26.8% accessed water on site while 13.3% relied on communal taps and 2.4% relied on neighbours’ taps. Although generally households’ access to water is improving, 3.7% of households still had to fetch water from rivers, streams, stagnant water pools and dams, wells and springs in 2017. This is, however, much lower than the 9.5% of households that had to access water from these sources in 2002.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Statistics SA’s General Household Survey for 2017, “although 88.6% of South African households had access to piped water in 2017, only 74.2% of households in Eastern Cape, and 74.7% of households in Limpopo enjoyed such access. While South Africa has progressed in the supply of water to most urban and rural areas, water supply remains challenging in many communities in the country.”<sup>12</sup>

The SA government believes that it will take up till 2030 to establish the possibility of fair access to water for all people.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. The Regional and International Situations**

In terms of this year’s theme it is abundantly clear that the numbers of those ‘left behind’ is enormous. Indeed, it is obvious that in our times access to fresh water is mostly linked to geographical position, military power, economic superiority, hydraulic expertise and socially mediated forms of privilege. The old adage says that ‘water follows power.’<sup>14</sup> The statistics tell the story of those ‘left behind’.

It is noted internationally that water shortages are particularly acute for vulnerable groups such as the 68.5m people who have been forced for one reason or the other to flee their homes and countries.<sup>15</sup> Globally, 80% of the people who have to use unsafe and unprotected water sources live in rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Women and girls are responsible for water collection in eight out of ten households with water off-premises.<sup>17</sup> One in four school children do not have access to clean drinking water and 2.1 billion people have no access to safe drinking water at home, while in an associated statistic one in three people have no access to proper sanitation. If the present trend in water scarcity continues, 700m people across the world will have to leave their homes due to lack of access to water.<sup>18</sup>

In 2018, 319 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa did not have access to a water point that was hygienic.<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis had already observed the water poverty in Africa. He wrote: “Water poverty especially affects Africa, where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production. Some countries have areas rich in water while others endure drastic scarcity.”<sup>20</sup>

#### **5. Appropriate Policies**

It thus goes without saying that the statistics call for sound, value based policies if those now left behind are going to be included and benefit from just water management. Pope Francis offers clear direction in this area, in line with the SDGs. He says: “Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. This debt can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor.”

Christiana Zenner develops this policy principle and, applying Catholic Social Teaching, provides a few guidelines for just policies in this domain. These are important insights as governments shape appropriate policies, and they also provide key points for ongoing advocacy. She writes:

- The principles of water justice and water sustainability for current and future generations should shape the management and provision of fresh water. Here the preferential option for the poor
- obtains in a special way, and women and children deserve focused attention, since they bear the multiple burdens associated with fresh water.
- Access to fresh water is a fundamental human right, yet other moral concepts are needed too, including the language of non-negotiable duties to future generations and the continued development of the insight that water is a public good.
- The life-sustaining qualities of fresh water forestall a reductive equivalence between fresh water's value and its price. Economic valuation must be subordinated to equity in distribution for individuals, future generations and ecosystems. Privatisation of water supply may be considered only insofar as equity of access for current and future generations is always sought and ensured before corporate profit. Public regulation of the water sector is necessary to ensure that negative externalities are absorbed by the corporations and shareholders and not downstream stakeholders.
- Because of the vital significance of groundwater, there must be full disclosure of any toxic compounds

involved in technologies that may have negative downstream consequences, whether in agriculture or industry (especially but not exclusively in fossil fuel extraction.)

- With regard to agriculture: in most places worldwide consumptive water uses are unsustainable. At a bare minimum, irrigation systems must be made maximally efficient. Government subsidies to industrial agriculture should be examined and revised if they encourage profligate water extraction, excessive application of toxic chemicals and the planting of soil exhausting monocultures.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Water has become the barometer for measuring the health of the planet and a touchstone for our commitment to creating a just and humane order in our world. The final word belongs to Pope Francis.

"We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels. The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty."<sup>22</sup> That is indeed one of our century's greatest challenges.

**Peter-John Pearson**  
**Director**

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- 1 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)
  - 2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_Development\\_Goal\\_6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Development_Goal_6)
  - 3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_Development\\_Goal\\_6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Development_Goal_6)
  - 4 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)
  - 5 <https://zenit.org/articles/holy-father-on-world-water-day-stresses-theme-leaving-no-one-behind/>
  - 6 <http://polity.org.za/article/world-water-day-10-facts-some-surprising-about-africas-water-2019-03-22>
  - 7 <https://www.gov.za/WorldWaterDay2019>
  - 8 <http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/18558701/south-africa.pdf>
  - 9 <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/water-affairs>
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  - 14 Zenner, Christiana. Just Water. Orbis Publications, New York. 2018 p 210
  - 15 [https://www.worldwaterday.org/app/uploads/2018/02/fact\\_sheet\\_WWD2017\\_EN\\_2.pdf](https://www.worldwaterday.org/app/uploads/2018/02/fact_sheet_WWD2017_EN_2.pdf)
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  - 21 Zenner, Christiana. Just Water. Orbis Publications, New York. 2018 pp 211-212 (all the bullet points are taken from this book.)
  - 22 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

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