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The Critical Drought Period in South Africa: Lessons and Reflections, Different Responses for Different Provinces

Since 2015, South Africa has been experiencing successive years of severe drought conditions, which have led to critical water stress levels and have ultimately contributed to some of the socio-economic challenges we currently face, including job losses in agriculture and related sectors. Different provinces and areas within provinces experienced the drought variably in terms of periods and intensity. For some provinces, such as Kwa-Zulu Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape, 2019 brought relief, with sufficient rain to keep the taps running. On the other hand, provinces such as the Eastern and Northern Cape are still grappling with the effects of the disaster in 2020. Limpopo, Mpumalanga, the Free State and parts of the North West have experienced the driest conditions since beginning of this drought period, resulting in great livestock loss and crop planting inconsistencies. In addition, most of these provinces have for three consecutive years experienced a drastic shift in rainfall patterns where the rainfall is delayed, the rate of rainfall declines, and temperatures continue to rise in most parts. Most recently, rainfall is increasingly becoming associated with extreme weather patterns such as hail and thunderstorms; and the risk of frequent localised flooding increases with each rainy season in areas where there were previously few records of such events.

The drought seems to be persisting into 2020, and figures for the summer rainfall in the northern parts of the country indicate a deficiency in rainfall received in comparison with what was expected; and as has now become the norm, the rain was late in the season. These are all critical conditions in different ways and in different areas.

When Cape Town experienced its worst conditions during 2017-2018, a great popular effort was mobilised to meet the challenge; and this motivated a wide variety of organisations and citizens to work together in admirable co-operation with the municipality to ensure that Cape Town avoided day zero. The drought situation in Cape Town was quickly and loudly elevated to a state of emergency, to the extent that the entire country was abuzz about the critical conditions the city faced. The drought got widespread media coverage on different platforms; there were campaigns to raise awareness about water-use management and conservation; and citizens' behaviour changes were a significant part of the Cape Town drought strategy. Interventions in terms of resources and ideas from different players across sectors, combined with a willingness from government to impose consumption limits, enabled the city to get through a very difficult period with very minimal impact. Finally, the City of Cape Town enforced strict regulations and tariffs to prompt responsible and conscious use of the scarce resource, a message that is still deeply embedded in most households and facilities, where it has become a habit to use water wisely and sparingly

This was, arguably, a perfect showcase for a project that could potentially be adjusted to different local contexts in other provinces across the country, as the struggle for sufficient water continues. Learning from our own experiences can provide a basis for an approach towards mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change, and for fitting and adaptable solutions. It is also important that this kind of natural disaster is approached from a national perspective, to ensure that interventions and resources are equally and timeously allocated for different provinces, and areas in provinces, in order to address the drought across the spectrum.

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