

Business Day

Three things government can do to address sanitation backlogs and save lives

For a variety of reasons, rural municipalities are not getting this right — and national government can help to change that, writes Sabelo Mtantato

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Backlogs in providing adequate sanitation infrastructure and services are a problem across the country, but more so in rural areas than in cities.

The national sanitation infrastructure backlog has declined — 47% of people lacked access to adequate sanitation in 1996, and this fell to 31% in 2014 — but most rural municipalities still have high levels of sanitation backlogs.

Adequate sanitation infrastructure and services are important for people's health and dignity. Improving sanitation infrastructure and services, and educating households on the importance of good sanitation practices, reduces the risk of infection from excreta-related diseases, especially for children under the age of five. This age group is the most vulnerable to excreta-related diseases including diarrhoea.

Globally, access to adequate sanitation infrastructure has improved, from 54% in 1990 to 77% in 2015. But rural access in 2015 was stuck at 51% compared with urban access of 82%.

SA follows the international trend. Between 1996 and 2013, the proportion of rural dwellers with access to adequate sanitation infrastructure rose from 40% to 68%. This represents an improvement of only 28 percentage points over 17 years.

Funding for the provision of sanitation infrastructure in SA comes from the revenue municipalities earn themselves; from municipal infrastructure grants; from the local government equitable share — the money municipalities receive from national government; and from conditional grants.

In practice, however, not all these funding instruments are available or usable by rural municipalities, for a variety of reasons.

Rural municipalities have a low revenue base and rely heavily on the equitable share to fund their operational needs, leaving very limited or no resources to fund basic sanitation infrastructure.

The proportion of the municipal infrastructure grant that goes towards sanitation infrastructure and services is negligible and is determined on ad hoc basis, making it inadequate to properly address sanitation needs. The grant also prioritises other basic infrastructure and services needs, such as water.

Rural household infrastructure grants, introduced and implemented since 2010-11 to provide sanitation infrastructure for rural households have not been effective and have performed poorly in terms of spending.

Research that tracked backlogs in 2013 where the grant was implemented in 2012, showed only a marginal reduction in sanitation backlogs of about 1% in some municipalities, while in others the backlogs remained the same or even grew.

The reasons for the poor performance include the grant's design (as an indirect grant) and the late transfer of funding, because of the poor quality and late submission of business plans by municipalities that are water services authorities.

Findings also revealed that some municipalities did not include sanitation in their Integrated Development Plans and so sanitation was not prioritised. A lack of operation and maintenance plans was another of the problems seen in a number of rural municipalities.

Furthermore, the research revealed that in SA, ventilated improved pits (VIPs) technology is commonly used to improve sanitation, while other countries have moved towards ecological sanitation (EcoSan) or waterless toilet technologies that are environmental friendly.

How to fix it

- To reduce backlogs in sanitation infrastructure and maintenance, the national government should ensure that rural municipalities prioritise the delivery and maintenance of sanitation infrastructure by monitoring that all municipalities include sanitation infrastructure delivery and maintenance plans in their Integrated Development Plans.
- Sanitation infrastructure and its maintenance should not be funded on ad hoc basis, as it is now.
- To reduce sanitation backlogs in an environmentally friendly and in a sustainable manner, the government should ensure that rural municipalities prioritise EcoSan waterless technologies or else municipalities will continue implementing VIPs, which can contaminate underground water. This is particularly problematic during the current drought.
- *Mtantato is a senior researcher at the Financial and Fiscal Commission*

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