

SA needs another solution for its water huge problems

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It's no secret that South Africa's water sector faces big problems. Old infrastructure is falling apart. New infrastructure is not being maintained. Drinking water isn't clean, and sewage isn't treated. Numbers running into the hundreds of billions of rand are mentioned when talking about the cost to solve this crisis.

The danger is of money being spent without it fixing anything.

The plan drawn up by the Financial and Fiscal Commission tears mercilessly into all levels of government, detailing the failures. One section notes: "Current spending [on water infrastructure] is associated with decline [in giving people clean water] and not progress."

Government is found to be at fault for giving money to municipalities that cannot spend it properly, and municipalities are at fault for not operating as they should. "Municipalities do not have the required skills to plan, manage and operate their water services," the report notes.

Critically, the report suggests how things can be turned around, in a sustainable way.

The commission is an independent body within government. It was set up to work out how money should be divided between and used by South Africa's three levels of government: local, provincial and national. Its recommendations go to the treasury.

At the heart of the water, sewage and sanitation problem is money and how it is spent. When things go wrong, each branch of government blames the other. This is what happened in Sedibeng and southern Gauteng, where sewage flows into the Vaal River. Sedibeng complained about a shortage of funding from national government, which in turn complained that the municipality wasn't maintaining its infrastructure.

Both are correct. The Constitution guarantees that everyone has a right to clean water, and it is up to government to provide that water. The water and sanitation department gets it to municipalities, which then pipe it to people's homes, and treat what comes out.

By law, each home gets 600 litres of water free each month. Municipalities get money from treasury — called the equitable share — to pay for this water but they don't get enough. Yet in cities there are enough people using more water — and paying for it — to subsidise those who aren't. But that system doesn't work in most municipalities.

Too little income, bad management, corruption and an inadequate budget results in sewerage and water plants, and all the pipes connecting them, falling apart.

The fiscal commission's report says: "Sanitation provision is often unsatisfactory and wastewater treatment failures result in serious water pollution."

It also notes that: "The safety of water can no longer be assured in many municipalities."

The Financial and Fiscal Commission's report on water says: "It is irresponsible to continue to provide funding in such circumstances." The money will end up in new projects, not in maintaining existing ones.

To solve this, the commission re-commends tough love.

Municipalities should only get funding when they know how much water everyone is using (through meters), and when they show they can pay to operate and maintain new water and sewerage plants. That will force them to fix things such as leaks, and collect money from people who can afford to pay for water. It will also require less corruption, and trained people employed to work at water and sewerage plants.

Different parts of government need to work together. The commission said municipalities spend too much time reporting to different parts of government on what they're doing with their funding. Getting departments to talk to each other would make life easier for everyone, and close corruption loopholes.

The commission said budgets can be created for government departments to give ongoing help to local municipalities if they meet set goals. That could mean setting aside a percentage of their budgets for maintenance, or getting more people to pay for water.

Put together, these options would get municipalities and national government to work together better. That would ensure new water and sewerage plants are built, and then maintained and upgraded to keep pace with population growth.

Saamwerk or sink

Numbers from Statistics South Africa show that 20% of people in the country don't have an acceptable level of sanitation, and 35% of households don't have access to clean drinking water. That's 5.3-million homes.

Only 44% of homes pay for water, down from 62% in 2015. Municipalities also owe water boards —which sell them water —R6.5-billion, and the water and sanitation department R11-billion.

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