



Kathy Eales

Much more needs to be done in South Africa to ensure communities have access to improved sanitation facilities.

Can SA Lay Claim to a 'Sanitary Revolution'?

The South African government has committed itself to wiping out the country's water and sanitation backlogs. Much progress has been made since 1994, but can South Africa lay claim to a 'sanitary revolution'?, asks Prof Geoffrey Setswe of the Human Sciences Research Council and Dr Lindiwe Zungu of the School of Public Health at the University of Limpopo.

Access to safe sanitation remains one of the most fundamental challenges in the world. A staggering 2.6 billion people are still without safe toilets, leading to millions of deaths of mostly children from diarrhoeal diseases every year. To highlight their plight and place the issue in the spotlight, the United Nations (UN) has declared 2008 the International Year of Sanitation.

To underscore its importance sanitation has been hailed as the most important medical advance in the past 150 years, according to a poll conducted by the prestigious *British Medical Journal*. Dr Lee Jong-woo, Director-General of the World Health Organisation, names water and sanitation the primary drivers of public health. "Once we can secure access to clean water and to adequate sanitation facilities for all people, irrespective of their living

conditions, a huge battle against all kinds of diseases will be won."

WATER, SANITATION AND HEALTH

Water provision cannot be separated from two other inter-related factors – sanitation and health. This is because one of the primary causes of water contamination is the inadequate or improper disposal of human (and animal) excreta. This often leads to a cycle of infection (resulting primarily in diarrhoeal diseases) and contamination which remains one of the leading causes of illness and death in the developing world.

In South Africa, poor communities in rural areas are most especially affected by a lack of clean water and safe sanitation. This leads to thousands of cases of water-related diseases being reported in the country each year. Diarrhoea

remains one of the leading causes of death among children under five. People living with HIV/AIDS are particularly vulnerable to diseases related to poor sanitation. Seemingly less serious sanitation-related ailments like scabies and intestinal worms are also severely debilitating – the latter can stunt mental and physical growth in children and even result in death.

Apart from improved health, the benefits of access to safe water and sanitation are numerous. For example, women and girls can use their time in more productive ways, such as going to school, rather than carrying water. Water can be used for productive purposes, such as expanding small enterprises and growing household food gardens, thus increasing disposable household income. Sanitation facilities closer to home also improves the safety of especially women and girls.

PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING A SANITARY REVOLUTION

According to the United National Development Programme (UNDP), South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that spends less on its military budget than on water and sanitation. In his latest State of the Nation address, South African President Thabo Mbeki reiterated government's commitment towards eliminating remaining backlogs of basic services. "We will...speed up the development of sustainable human settlements, with intensified efforts, as a matter of urgent priority, to accelerate universal access to water, sanitation and electricity, so that by 2014, we should have decent human settlements and access by all households to these services."

As custodian of South Africa's water resources, the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAf) leads, supports and regulates the water and sanitation services sector. However, the main responsibility for implementing and managing water and sanitation services lies with local and provincial municipalities.

Good progress has been made in the provision of water services, and by 2005, the country had already achieved the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of those without access to water. Between June 1994 and June 2006, approximately 12 million people were served with clean water. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of peri-urban and rural households with access to an improved water source. Still, the difference between urban and non-urban households remains significant – 98,2% of urban households have access to an improved water source, while only 59,6% of the non-urban households have the same access.

Since 1994 the European Union (EU), through its European Programme for

Reconstruction and Development, has donated more than R1,6-billion to water and sanitation projects in South Africa. A further R1-billion has been committed between 2007 and 2013. Most of these funds are funnelled through DWAf's Masibambane programme. The first phase of this water and sanitation programme was implemented between 1994 and 2004, with the second phase nearing completion.

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At a recent media briefing, Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry Lindiwe Hendricks told journalists that, this year, the delivery programme would focus mainly on accelerating access to water. "About 90% of the total population will have access to basic water supply services by the end of this year." The Minister also reported that at least 73% of indigent households and 77% of all households in the country were currently benefiting from government's Free Basic Water Policy, which provides households 6 000 l of free water every month.

But what of water's historically neglected cousin, sanitation? In comparison to water services, only 9 million people received access to safe sanitation between June 1994 and June 2006. According to DWAf, 15,3 million people still need to be reached. Access to the rural poor is especially challenging.

In 2007, Limpopo had the highest backlog, with more than 810 000 households lacking adequate sanitation. KwaZulu-Natal had the second-highest number at 714 000, and the Eastern Cape the

third-highest (450 000). "To meet our 2010 target for sanitation, delivery in KwaZulu-Natal alone has to increase from the current delivery rate of around 50 000 structures per year to at least 180 000 structures per year," Hendricks said at the launch of National Sanitation Week last year.

DWAf has placed specific emphasis on the replacement of the bucket system. Within one year the country has been able to eliminate the bucket system with an improved form of sanitation by almost half. By the target date of December 2007, municipalities managed to replace 81% of bucket toilets. At the time of writing, the remaining 19% (49 010) were under construction. If only the same effort could be put into accelerating access to safe sanitation as a whole.

CONCLUSION

We cannot lay claim to a sanitary revolution in South Africa. Despite the President's State of the Nation targets on water and sanitation, white and green papers, policies and strategic frameworks and funding provided, there is no sudden, momentous or sweeping change with regard to the provision of especially adequate sanitation, and it seems that it is business as usual for many municipalities.

Sanitation has always been treated as a 'cinderella' subject. This statement rings true for millions of South Africans whose daily lives and dignity are still being impeded by the lack of this essential service. Many communities have run out of patience and demonstrations have been held across the country to demand better services. If the local authorities in whose areas of jurisdiction these marches had taken place had prioritised the provision of water and sanitation with urgency, their and other efforts might indeed have provided South Africans with the sanitary revolution needed and the rioting for the provision of basic services would have been averted. 