

Water and sanitation must be prioritised

Ensuring that citizens have access to clean water and good sanitation is critical, but without political will there can be no progress in this regard, writes **Liesl Venter**.

Reading the statistics of Africa's water and sanitation situation, one could very well mistake it for the script of a horror movie.

In Africa, 115 people die every hour from diseases linked to poor sanitation, poor hygiene and contaminated water. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 40% of the more than 700 million people live without access to an improved source of drinking water, while further figures show that at least 70% of people in the region don't have access to adequate sanitation. Over a quarter of the subregion's inhabitants – 230 million people – practise open defecation.

Some 40 billion hours are spent every year, mostly by women, just hauling water.

That is the equivalent to a year's labour for the entire workforce of France.

The Water Project (TWP) estimates that around half of the young girls in sub-Saharan Africa drop out of primary school because of poor water and sanitation. Lack of water deprives children of an education, which subsequently keeps people in the poverty cycle, says TWP.

This organisation, which works to establish wells in rural communities, says the payoff for water provision is big. Every US\$1 invested in water and sanitation generates an average of US\$8 return in the form of saved time, increased productivity and reduced health costs.

But bringing water and sanitation to



Dr Akissa Bahri

Africa's people is neither easy nor quick.

Experts agree that the situation is dire and while efforts to bring about change have increased dramatically, the rising population



compounds the situation by driving demand for water and accelerating the degradation of water resources.

According to the United Nations, Africa's population (excluding the northern-most states) was about 838 million in 2011 and increasing by 2.6% per year, compared to the world average of 1.2%. By one estimate, its population will grow to 1.245 billion by 2025 and to more than two billion by 2050.

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"Currently, Africa has the lowest rate of access to improved sanitation. Access to water is not much higher, but the situation is progressing faster than for sanitation," says Dr Akissa Bahri, a coordinator with the African Water Facility (AWF), which is hosted and managed by the African Development Bank. The AWF is a multilateral fund that provides grants and technical assistance to enable governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public-private partnerships to secure investments and implement sustainable water projects throughout Africa.

"Yet, the rate for access to water remains fairly low and practically unchanged over the last decade. From our standpoint, the situation is extremely serious as lives are at stake," says Bahri. "We cannot say that a crisis has grown or even emerged per se, because the situation has been dire for the longest time. The continent as a whole has, however, made important progress and, though it is still lagging behind compared to the rest of the world, it has come a long way."

Kichime Bawa Gotau, sanitation officer for the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), agrees, saying major efforts are under way across the continent – not only in the form of physical projects that ensure the erection of taps and toilets in communities, but in the increase in policy and commitment from governments, for water and sanitation crises are often the inevitable corollary of economic and political crises.

Bahri adds: "In Zimbabwe, for example, the government had successfully increased coverage of water and sanitation after gaining independence, reaching 85% for water and 68% for sanitation services by 2000. The subsequent economic collapse and rampant hyperinflation meant municipalities ceased to pay for water or sewerage services, and the coverage levels are now estimated around 25% for sanitation and 40% for water."

Both she and Gotau say economic and political stability are the first keys in unlocking any form of progress in the water and sanitation subsector. "Infrastructure and services suffer from lack of it," says Gotau.

"And you need political will," adds Bahri. "Without it, there is little hope of seeing any progress. Even if the international community, development partners and civil society agree that the water and sanitation sector needs more attention, you simply cannot impose a water and sanitation agenda on any government. This must come from within, from a conviction that this is the right thing to do and the right time to do it."

Much has been gained in Africa in this regard, with awareness campaigns providing governments with the knowledge and necessary information to make different decisions.

It has seen the launch of the African Water Vision and Framework for Action 2025, a shared vision that provides the overarching strategic orientation on water resource management in Africa.

This vision is tremendously important, say role players, as it is the single point of reference and the trigger for a number of water campaigns, thematic conferences and initiatives.

"The launch of the vision immediately triggered the adoption of the

African Development Bank's Integrated Water Resources Management Policy and the establishment of the bank's multidonor Water Partnership Programme," says Gotau.

It might all sound like talk, but without these policies and visions, the continent will get nowhere.

"If we don't get this part of it right and create a platform from where all role players – be they investors, donors, project coordinators, governments, NGOs – can work, it will just be fragmented and undoubtedly fail. One sometimes loses sight of how big the continent is and how varied the cultures and people are," says Gotau.

"The underlying factor is the need for water and sanitation, but how you deliver that changes from community to community. In Nigeria alone, we have 774 local governments. Our outlook and approach is very different to that of South Africa, for example," says Gotau.

And that is before money is even brought into the equation. The investments required to keep pace with the demand and urbanisation of the continent are estimated at around US\$50 billion per year for the next 20 years.

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The forecast on annual spending for the water sector reveals there is a sizeable financing gap. Current spending is around US\$14.3 billion – about 2% of Africa's total gross domestic product – compared to the required US\$21.9 billion.

"We have to create more bankable projects to attract investment and boost the water sector," says Bahri. "We have been able to mobilise €935 million and hope to reach the €1 billion mark in the next few months. It might seem like a drop in the ocean, but it is making a difference, slowly but surely." 🌱

