

Press Release

For immediate release

11 November 2015



Media Contact: Chelsea-Summer Lodewyk

Tel: 011-482-7221 ext. 2018

Email: chelsea@sairr.org.za

Water wastage and contamination from an ‘induced’ deficit of engineering skills

Average water consumption in South Africa, at 235 litres per person per day (l/p/d), is a staggering 26% higher than the global average of 173 l/p/d, writes water expert Dr Anthony Turton in an analysis recently published in *@Liberty*, the policy bulletin of the IRR (Institute of Race Relations).

This massive wastage is adding to the water shortages highlighted by the current drought. Were it not for the water being squandered in this way, South Africa would be better placed to cope with the strong El Nino now apparent and the much reduced rainfall it is likely to herald.

Says Turton: “A key part of the problem is that 37% of the water supplied by municipalities is ‘non-revenue’ water, which is either lost to leakages or is never billed or paid for. In some of the worst performing municipalities, distribution losses are estimated to be close on 50%. These losses cost municipalities around R11 billion a year, but cannot easily be overcome with existing state capacity.”

Much of the reason for the malaise lies in a crippling loss of engineering skills at municipal level. This shortage was highlighted as far back as 2008 in a comprehensive study carried out by the South African Institute of Civil Engineers (SAICE). Seven years later, notes Turton, the skills deficit has yet to be overcome.

Adds Turton: “The shortage of engineering skills at third-tier level is an ‘induced’ deficit directly related to the ruling party’s insistence on a rigid form of racial transformation. Were it not for this factor, the engineering skills available would suffice to meet present needs. Hence, if the Government were willing to deracialise the appointment of technical skills, the current shortage would be overcome.”

The skills shortage also helps explain why many poorly functioning municipal wastewater plants currently spew close on 4 billion litres of untreated or partially treated sewage into the country’s rivers every day.

Adds Turton: “The relatively small elite which benefits from present transformation policies is likely to object vociferously, but their narrow self-interest cannot continue to be put before the needs of the country as a whole.

“If current transformation policies continue to take precedence, we can anticipate a further deterioration in the operation of wastewater treatment plants. This in turn is likely to generate a growing burden of disease, especially in poor communities, and an escalating cost for the treatment of potable water from sources contaminated by sewage flows. The possibility of major public health crises in the short to medium term is also growing and can no longer be discounted.”

Find Anthony Turton’s article in *@Liberty* by clicking [here](#). This article has been published with support from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Ends.