

SOUTH AFRICA WILL MISS UN'S CLEAN WATER TARGETS



Liquid asset:

South Africa has made considerable progress in providing water and sanitation to people since 1994, but over the years the infrastructure and water quality has declined. (Delwyn Verasamy/M&G)

With just nine years left to reach the United Nations' sustainable development goal targets for water, South Africa will miss achieving these "by a long way".

[Poor economic growth](#), a water deficit, poor monitoring and data collection, [increasing pollution](#) and [water stress](#) worsened by climate change mean the country is unlikely to achieve the water development goals by 2030, said Kevin Winter, of the University of Cape Town's Future Water Institute.

In 2015, member states adopted the 17 integrated development goals as a [universal call to action](#) to end poverty, protect the planet and to ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

"These development goals are much more than a kind of 'nice-to-have'. These are very definite targets that have quite definite indicators to them ... We can't lose sight of what those targets are and we are pretty poor at implementation," said Winter.

The government's final report to the UN is more likely to take the form of a rain check, claiming that the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted the agenda for addressing the development goals, he said, adding that South Africa won't be the only country making such a plea.

Access to and availability of water is crucial for the country to forge ahead with its developmental agenda, using the goals to complement the national development plan.

In 2019, South Africa confirmed its commitment to meeting the development goals in its first [Voluntary National Review](#), which Winter said, highlights numerous policies and programmes and identifies "copious" developmental challenges.

Poor GDP will impede investments in large-scale water infrastructure.

"There are signs of the collapse of water services in many municipalities countrywide, in declining infrastructure, non-payment for water services, mismanagement, [corruption](#) and bloated civil service wage bills that compromise the ability to operate and maintain water systems."

South Africa is running out of water. The 2018 [National Water and Sanitation Master Plan](#) identified a water supply deficit of 17% by 2030.

Access to improved water facilities in households fell from 87.5% in 2015 to 86.4% in 2017, with the master plan acknowledging that only 64% of households had safe, reliable access to water.

The review proposed reducing water demand by 15%, Winter said, rather than dealing with the looming deficit. “What is required is a substantial investment in new [water supply](#) infrastructure; a concerted effort to reduce water loss — currently an average of 37%; and an investment in innovations that aim to reduce, recycle and reuse water without harming the receiving waters, including the oceans.”

Statistics South Africa manages an online goal tracker data portal that shows South [Africa’s progress](#) for all 17 development targets.

“The water sector appears to be doing better than most. In total, seven out of eight targets are ‘covered’ within sustainable developmental goal 6 (water and sanitation), but the data is old and highly aggregated, making it difficult to understand, particularly when it is based on only one data point,” said Winter.

This is confirmed by [Mariette Loefflerink](#), of the Federation for a Sustainable Environment, which is a member of the water and sanitation sector leadership group on the developmental goal 6 task team.

“It is doubtful that South Africa will achieve the eight targets,” she said.

The department of water and sanitation did not respond to the *Mail & Guardian’s* questions about the country’s progress in meeting the goals or experts’ opinions of how far along we are.

Since 1994, South Africa has made substantial progress in the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation services, said Winter, “but it’s not enough”. Pollution is an enormous problem and the decline in water quality is alarming.

“The collapse of freshwater ecosystems and ecosystem services is compromising the ability of wetlands and rivers to regulate hydraulic flows, avert flooding and purify water,” he said.

About 40% of all water bodies have poor water quality from pollution and the destruction of river catchments; only 58% of water bodies are compliant. Only 52% of [wastewater](#) is being safely treated and lawfully discharged. “I think that figure is probably a whole lot higher.”

Overall, Winter said, South Africa’s water stress level is 41%, with extremely high levels in parts of the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and North West.

“The observed rate of warming of 2°C per century is even higher over these parts of the country,” he said.

Water specialist [Anthony Turton](#) said the country’s “fast approaching fiscal cliff” means it is unlikely to meet the sustainable development goal targets.

“In effect, the government has run out of revenues and will be unable to meet many of its core commitments. The R1-trillion needed to recapitalise the water sector, which has largely collapsed because of mismanagement over two decades, will not be available,” said Turton.

But Winter remains optimistic.

“It’s never too late to turn things around,” he said. “We need to ensure that ecological services and the integrity of those services are maintained because that’s where some of our answers lie.”

[Sheree Bega](#)

Sheree Bega is an environment reporter at the Mail & Guardian.