

Stewardship approach needed to sustainably address the water crisis

By [Karen King](#)

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Today we celebrate World Water Day, with this year's theme focused on accelerating change to solve the global water and sanitation crisis. As countries struggle to reach water and sanitation for all by 2030, the reality is that no meaningful change will occur without integrating stewardship with practical problem-solving. People must first understand the problems before they can hope to overcome them.



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At a basic level, stewardship entails taking care of something that we do not own. So, water stewardship will centre on identifying relevant responses to the complex challenges facing the water resources all of us rely on. In fact, water stewardship can be defined as the use of water that is socially and culturally equitable, environmentally sustainable, and economically beneficial.

In South Africa, like many other developing nations in Africa, challenges around water, its supply, and hygiene are most keenly felt. Even if dams are full, which is happening more seldom given the rise in global warming, water boards are struggling to get water out of the dams into treatment plants, and then through to the reticulation system to provide services to communities. Added to that is the ongoing scourge of load shedding that is also impacting on the infrastructure's ability to pump water.

The quality of drinking water is another major cause for concern. Research has found that the country's rivers and dams have a severe problem of microbial contamination from faecal pollutants. What is concerning is that 53% of the sampled sites are a risk to people's health if crops eaten raw are irrigated using this water.

On top of that, it is expected that the upcoming El Niño weather cycle could pose a significant risk to South Africa's food security in the near future. The four-year cycle of La Niña, with its heavy rains, is coming to an end. With the country's agriculture predominantly rain-fed, the potential for drought must be cause for grave concern.

Prepare for the worst

South Africa, like many countries, must consider the drastic effects of climate change and extreme weather changes and conditions. This requires countries to become more proactive and forward-thinking around how the management of available water resources is prioritised. This is where the concept of water stewardship can be most keenly felt.

Water resilience planning is one of the key components behind this stewardship as it enables countries and the citizens to become better prepared and able to cope with drought (or even flooding) conditions. Much of this comes down to using water sustainably without compromising the natural environment. Understanding the resources available, as well as the potential future impact current usage patterns will have, will allow us to prepare water plans that do not negatively impact the generations to follow.

#WorldWaterDay: Water shedding in SA must be avoided at all costs

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Managing infrastructure

Infrastructure maintenance is a challenge not only affecting South Africa but many countries around the world. Funding and capacity remain concerning, resulting in what was once a world-class system now falling into disrepair. There are many communities in South Africa outside the urban nodes who simply do not have access to water services. Statistics show that 28% of South Africa's 905 towns have inadequate water resources.

Fortunately, government is continually committing to prioritising water projects and is shifting additional budget to address this concern. Of course, this is a long-term problem that will not be fixed overnight but requires concerted effort from all stakeholders and the communities themselves to affect change. Renewed investments to increase capacity in water supply and treatment infrastructure and management have fallen under the spotlight as government focuses on short-term water availability while still taking care of sustainability in the future.



#WorldWaterDay: Tiger Brands invests R35m in water infrastructure to mitigate load shedding impact

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Looking to the future

In keeping with the stewardship message, we all must adopt more sustainable approaches to managing available water. Smarter governance, management, and an understanding of how recycling and reuse initiatives can be leveraged to bring home the sustainability message must be foremost on people's minds.

We have to embrace a strong sense of shared accountability to eliminate wasteful water usage and use our stewardship to preserve water resources for the future.

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