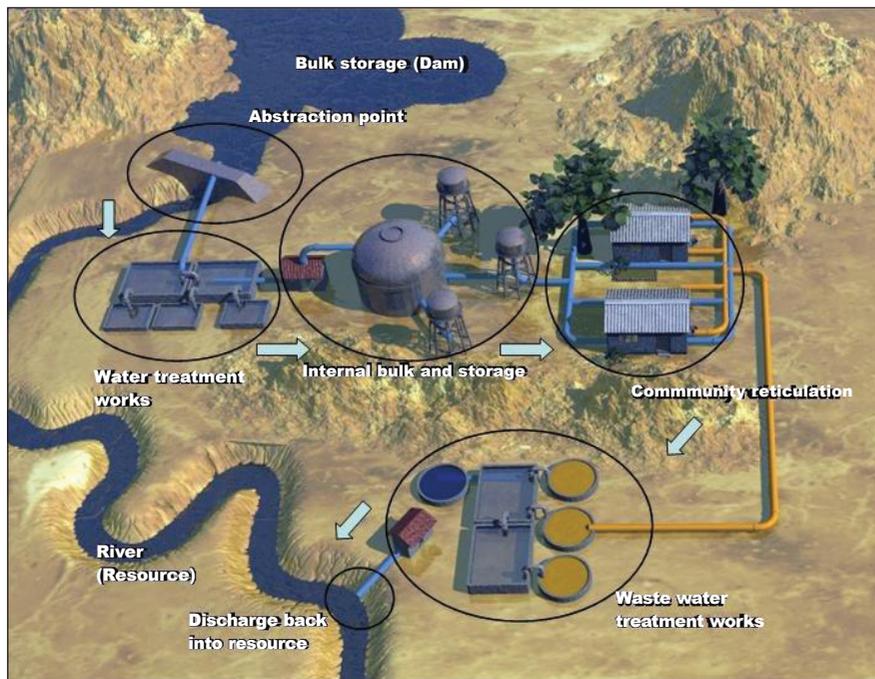


Second report slams crippling neglect of water/sanitation system



Water abstraction and recycling process.

A second government-commissioned report has concluded that most of South Africa's waste water treatment plants are either dysfunctional or non-functional, with millions of litres of sewage illegally discharged daily into rivers by small-town municipalities.

The implications of the long-delayed Green Drop Report, read with the earlier Aurecon Report (risk assessment), for the fatal spread of water-borne diarrhoeal diseases, especially among rural children, are now undeniable.

Just under half of the municipal sewage treatment plants (403 out of 852) had the capacity to even assess their facilities.

The Green Drop Report was commissioned by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWA) to give municipalities a chance to apply for Green Drop status, an international measure of broadly acceptable minimum standards.

Just under half of the municipal sewage treatment plants (403 out of 852) had the capacity to even assess their facilities. The report's authors found that municipal officials at these plants were either 'not sufficiently confident in their levels of competence to be subjected to assessments' or simply 'failed to adhere' to the call to be assessed. Of the remaining 449 plants, only 203 scored better than 50% against the set criteria with just 3.8% (32 plants), situated mainly in or around Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria, actually receiving Green Drop status.

R56 billion repairs? Try R100 billion, says minister

The DWA Minister Buyelwa Sonjica upped the estimate for the required up-skilling, additional staff hiring and infrastructural water and sanitation repairs from the R56 billion cited in the Aurecon Report to 'ideally more than R100 billion over the next 3 years'. The Aurecon Report was commissioned by the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in February last year and

was reported in *Izindaba* last August as showing the country to be 'sitting on a health time bomb'.¹

Public health experts approached for comment agreed that failure to act quickly could lead to an epidemiological nightmare. The Aurecon Report found a full 85% of the country's sewage system infrastructure to be 'dilapidated' owing to outright neglect and/or incompetent management.

Mpumalanga was the most sickening province with all 31 of the 50 municipalities for which data were obtained exceeding a maximum cumulative risk rating score of 7 or more, the bulk of them double or more this figure. The risk score was a combination of ratings on infrastructure design capacity and its adequacy, an effluent failure rating and technical skills of staff (where they exist). All 72 of the Northern Cape's and all of North West province's dozen municipalities scored on average double or more the maximum cumulative risk score.

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80 children known to have died ... how many others?

To give some idea of the health hazard the data represent (and almost certainly significant hidden mortality), the Ukhahlamba district municipality in Barkly East (Eastern Cape) scored 14 on the cumulative risk rating (twice acceptable risk levels).

From January to April 2008, more than 80 Ukhahlamba children died of diarrhoeal diseases amid initial official denial, avoidance and obfuscation about a malfunctioning and decaying water reticulation and purification system.²

COGTA Minister, Sicelo Shiceka, last year instructed his Director General, Mr Elroy Africa, to urgently facilitate meetings with the DWAF, the four main banks, NGOs and the private sector to develop a crisis strategy. Africa could not be reached in spite of repeated attempts.

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Shiceko ordered the audit after the Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut (AHI) approached him in December last year, offering to help address problems profoundly impacting their members in several towns.

His spokesperson, Ms Vuyelwa Vika, admitted at the time that 'Government can't address these deficiencies on its own', and said last month that the AHI was helping with the rescue plan in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. The National Treasury would be deploying people to the worst affected municipalities to oversee proper financial management.

Incompetence and neglect rife

Reasons identified by Aurecon for the crisis included a lack of planning and budgeting by councillors, awarding of contracts to inexperienced contractors, lack of skilled officials to operate facilities, inability of officials to budget for and operate infrastructure, vacant managerial and operational posts, lack of technical ability to plan and manage capital-intensive water services projects, mostly unqualified controllers, lack of financial skills, and poor money management.

The more recent Green Drop report implies that hundreds of millions of litres of untreated or inadequately treated sewage is also being illegally discharged into rivers and streams daily, mainly by small town municipalities. The lowest scoring province here was the Free State, where only 8 out of 20 water service authorities took part in the Green Drop assessment, scoring an average of 15% against the minimum set criteria, followed by Limpopo (average 18%) with 4 of its 13 water service authorities able to be assessed. The latest report released follows opposition party accusations of deliberate delay and obfuscation by government.

Sonjica initially denied there was a sanitation crisis but admitted to being 'worried'. 'I wouldn't say there was a crisis in a way that would make people run, really, but there are serious concerns ... we have very serious concerns as the regulator,' he said prior to releasing the findings.

Dr Danie Wium, head of Aurecon's water division, told *Izindaba* that 'a confluence of situations' led to the existing situation.

'Every municipality' had also been 'supported' to develop a comprehensive infrastructure plan plus conduct a skills audit.

Nobody taking responsibility

'Old equipment should have been replaced and there needs to be urgent consolidation and realignment of responsibilities for this thing going from national to local government.'

An *Izindaba* follow-up to the Aurecon report last month shows that an inter-departmental task team consisting of DWA, COGTA and National Treasury has been put together and 'all affected municipalities [have been] visited'.

A service provider was appointed to compile a technical document which would be taken first to a MinMEC (relevant national ministers and their provincial counterparts) meeting, and then to Cabinet. COGTA's Ms Vika added that a document was being compiled for National Treasury to consider funding the waste water treatment works and the water treatment works. She said that 'every municipality' had also been 'supported' to develop a comprehensive infrastructure plan plus conduct a skills audit.

Chris Bateman

1. Bateman C. Up to its eyeballs in sewage – government pleads for help. *SAMJ* 2009; 99: 556-560.
2. Bateman C. Incompetent maintenance/inept response – eighty more Eastern Cape babies die. *SAMJ* 2008; 98: 429-430.

David Hepburn Study Award – 2010

The KwaZulu-Natal Kidney Association invites applications for this R30 000 award, from suitably qualified medical, nursing and paramedical personnel who are registered in South Africa. The aim is to sponsor a suitable person for a study or research project in the field of kidney disease.

Application forms are obtainable from: The Secretary, KwaZulu-Natal Kidney Association, by e-mailing nortonamor@worldonline.co.za or A J F Ross on adiealan@mweb.co.za.