

**Media release**  
**For immediate release**

**Thousands have lived without love, not one without water**

Against this backdrop, Nomvula Masehla, SAICA's Lead for Tax Thought Leadership, reflects on South Africa's escalating water crisis; a threat now rivalling the nation's long-standing struggle with loadshedding.

A country that spent years wrestling with loadshedding and persistent power cuts now finds itself in the boxing ring grappling with the fundamental threat of the collapse of water security. While going head-to-head with this threat is nothing new, unlike the 2018 drought experienced in Cape Town, the current water crisis is not only a national one, but also largely man-made – caused mainly by persistently failing water infrastructure.

***When dams are full, but taps run dry***

While one can easily make peace with not having water because there is simply none in supply, watching taps run dry while major dams remain at healthy levels is something altogether difficult to come to terms with. Yet this is something South African households have had to come to terms with as the 2024 – 2026 water crisis has played out.

In Gauteng, the nation's industrial heartland, "water-shedding" has become a household term. Residents often find their taps dry not because of a lack of rain, but because aging pumping stations have failed, or because the 47.4% of treated water lost to leaks and theft has drained reservoirs faster than they can be refilled.

***A small leak will sink a great ship***

The current crisis is driven by three primary factors:

Firstly, maintenance backlogs: Decades of under-funding have left the country with a maintenance backlog estimated at over R400 billion.

Secondly, municipal mismanagement: Many local municipalities lack the technical expertise and funds to maintain treatment plants, leading to the discharge of untreated sewage into rivers — a disaster highlighted by the recent Green Drop reports.

Thirdly, rapid urbanisation: Cities like Johannesburg and Centurion are growing faster than their water infrastructure can support, leading to a permanent state of "demand exceeding supply."

***The human and economic cost***

The impact is felt most acutely by the vulnerable. In rural areas, the lack of clean water has led to periodic outbreaks of waterborne diseases. Economically, the crisis threatens food security and industrial productivity. Without reliable water, the manufacturing and mining sectors (the backbone of the South African economy) face operational shutdowns that could further stifle GDP growth.

***The path forward***

There are glimmers of hope. The South African government has begun treating water security as a national priority, establishing the National Water Resource Infrastructure Agency to attract private investment. Projects like the Lesotho Highlands Water Project Phase 2 are finally gaining momentum to bolster supply to the Vaal River system.



However, experts agree that engineering alone won't solve the problem. South Africa must foster a "water-wise" culture, drastically reduce per-capita consumption (which is higher than the global average), and hold local officials accountable for the billions lost to non-revenue water. The question on many lips that face the threat of dehydration being: Can planning, implementation and accountability foster strong relationships with each other?

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