

Water sector urged to prioritise professionalism over ego

South Africa's Minister of Water and Sanitation, Senzo Mchunu, has urged the sector to set aside its ego and focus on professionalism. This call was made during the two-day Water Services Authorities Summit, which took place at the Emperors Palace in Kempton Park, Gauteng, on 18 and 19 of January 2024.



The summit, attended by a host of dignitaries including the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Thembu Nkandimeng, and Water and Sanitation Deputy Ministers, David Mahlobo and Judith Tshabalala, aimed to review progress assessment reports, identify the root causes of both poor and good performance, and collectively devise a strategy to reverse the decline in performance.

The event saw the participation of representatives from various institutions, including water boards, the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agency (MISA), the National and Provincial Treasury, professional bodies, and training organisations.

Their collective support spans funding, capacity building, professionalisation, engineering, financial management, and governance, all of which are crucial in the development and implementation of improvement plans for the Water Services Authorities.



Minister Mchunu calls for prioritised maintenance of infrastructure

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The minister set the stage by providing an overview of the country's water situation based on the previous Blue, Green, and No Drop reports released in December 2023. He emphasised that the Drop certifications, introduced in 2008, have served as an effective regulatory mechanism, evaluating water and sanitation services, incentivising municipalities to improve their performance, and identifying areas for enhancement.

Water sector faced numerous challenges

In recent years, the water sector in South Africa has faced numerous challenges, with reports showing a decline in the

quality of drinking water and wastewater, as well as an increase in potable water losses. These issues have caused great concern among the public, particularly regarding the growing percentage of drinking water systems failing to meet both national and international compliance standards as revealed by these assessments.

“We have resuscitated the assessments and are committed to preventing similar mistakes in the future,” Mchunu said.

His call for the water sector to suspend its ego stems from the need to prioritise professionalism and service delivery to the public to address the decline in performance.

Mchunu emphasised that the non-provision of clean drinking water and a clean environment goes against people's basic human rights, as outlined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. It is therefore imperative that the water sector takes immediate action to address these challenges.

Following extensive discussions, several recommendations were put forward to improve the water sector and enhance water and sanitation services for the public. Notably, it was agreed that Water Service Authorities should make fundamental changes in the manner that they deliver water and sanitation services.

This by either considering establishing their own entities or creating special-purpose vehicles as water service providers. This would allow for greater accountability and efficiency in providing water and sanitation services.

“ *Municipalities have been categorised into four groups based on their Drop scores during discussions on how to improve.* ”

The first group comprised 67 municipalities with an average 'critical' score in their water supply and/or wastewater systems in the 2023 and 2022 full Green Drop. The second group consisted of 38 municipalities that had an average 'poor' score in their water supply and/or wastewater systems in the 2023 and 2022 full Green Drop.

While the third group includes 27 municipalities with an average 'average' score in their water supply and/or wastewater systems in the 2023 full Blue Drop and 2022 full Green Drop. Lastly, the fourth group comprised 12 municipalities with an average 'good' or 'excellent' score in their water supply and/or wastewater systems in the 2023 full Blue Drop and 2022 full Green Drop.

Address the current gaps

The 105 municipalities that are in the critical, poor, and average categories were urged to consider appointing reputable, credible, and competent water service providers for the next two to three years.

This move would help address the current gaps in service delivery and ensure that communities have access to clean and reliable water sources. This could be in a form of another municipality that performed well in their assessment scores in all

reports, a water board, or a competent private water services provider.



DWS withdraws controversial water regulations after public outcry

10 Oct 2023



Another critical area of focus is the review of implementing agents, with an emphasis on capacity building. The Directors-General of the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), COGTA, South African Local Government Association (SALGA), and the provincial and Local Government will collaborate to strengthen the capacity of implementing agents, the water sector will be better equipped to deliver on its mandate and meet the needs of the public.

Deputy minister Mahlobo, who was also speaking at the summit, announced recommendations and a way forward on finance, security, and corruption.

One of the major recommendations made was the strengthening of the budget for water and sanitation services. This will include relooking at the budget allocation to ensure that more funds are allocated towards the provision of these services to the public.

Infrastructure security

Mahlobo emphasised the importance of infrastructure security in ensuring uninterrupted water services. He urged all municipalities to develop and execute reliable infrastructure security plans, which should include the use of technology such as remote fencing and a rapid response system to combat theft and vandalism of infrastructure.

These measures will not only protect the vital water infrastructure but also ensure a reliable supply of water to the public.

There was also the formation of a multi-disciplinary security cluster consisting of ministers and mayors. This cluster will be responsible for leading intelligence operations and prosecutions against elements that hinder service delivery such as vandals, mafia as well as saboteurs of water infrastructure.

The team will also be tasked with screening technical division officials for lifestyle, integrity, morality, and community involvement, thereby ensuring that only the most qualified and dedicated individuals are entrusted with the responsibility of providing water services.

Provisioning reliable water supply is priority

In his closing remarks, Mchunu said the provision of reliable quality drinking water to citizens must be treated with priority and necessary urgency. The decline in water quality and increase in water losses were pressing issues that demanded immediate attention.

By implementing the recommendations put forward, such as the establishment of dedicated entities or special purpose vehicles, and the appointment of reputable service providers, the water sector can make significant strides towards meeting the needs and rights of the public.

Though the challenges are great, with a unified effort and a commitment to collaboration, a positive change is indeed possible.