

NEVA MAKGETLA: The crisis in Jozi's water supply

Situation reflects tough decisions needed to serve fast-growing but deeply unequal population

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Residents of Dube and Meadowlands seek alternative means of getting water in Soweto, Johannesburg, in this March 18 2024 file photo. Picture: FANI MAHUNTSI/GALLO IMAGES

It's easy for policymakers and pundits to talk about hard choices in the abstract. Too often though, they neither describe those choices nor act on them.

Consider the water crisis in Johannesburg, where households face daily interruptions and often erratic billing. It's easy to speculate about corruption. Ultimately though, the situation reflects the tough decisions required to serve a rapidly growing but deeply unequal population. The hard decisions centre on water and land use, investment and tariffs.

The population of Johannesburg doubled from 1996 to 2022, though the rate of growth slowed sharply in the past decade. But water services had to grow even faster to overcome apartheid backlogs. Before 1994 Johannesburg provided world-class services to the rich suburbs by avoiding investment in black neighbourhoods.

In 1996, when Johannesburg had almost 500,000 African households, just half had running water inside the home. For non-African households the figure was nearly 100%. In 2022 Johannesburg held 1.4-million African households and 70% had running water at home, an increase of over 700,000 customers.

The continued expansion in townships far from the city centre after 1994 added to the burdens on the water system. That strategy held down the cost of land and new housing, and avoided disrupting township construction practices entrenched under apartheid.

At the same time, new flats are being built across the richer suburbs, putting aged infrastructure under stress. Both these developments fostered smaller households. As a result, the number of households in Johannesburg climbed 50% faster than the population from 1996 to 2022.

In the early 2020s Johannesburg Water was still adding more than 1,000 households a year to its networks. It had 12,500km of pipe, up from 11,000km a decade earlier. The city's water deliveries climbed under 30% in the past decade though, about the same as the population, mostly because growth centred on low-income households that used relatively little water. Residents use less than a quarter as much water per person in Soweto as in Sandton, where families maintain gardens and pools.

In short, fixing the water network requires big upfront investments. But SA's notoriously deep income inequalities mean many new residents cannot afford to pay for them. The median household income in Gauteng's townships runs around a 10th of that in the leafy suburbs, at about R2,500 a month in 2022.

Raising tariffs for high-end users would help slow demand as well as paying for maintenance. However, it would annoy people who have resources to

pressure the government. In such an unequal society taxpayer revolts are always a risk.

The easier response, as in most of postcolonial Africa, has been to cut maintenance, because the results only emerge over decades, as we are now experiencing. In constant rand, Johannesburg Water's annual investments have been flat at about R1.1bn a year since 2015.

The value of its physical assets climbed 20% over the past decade, far slower than its water purchases. The company says it should replace about 180km of pipes a year. In 2022/3 it targeted 28km and actually managed 19km – a tenth of the norm.

It's not surprising, then, that 45% of the city's bulk water purchases in 2022 were lost to leaks and other losses. In 2010 the figure was 36%. Investments to reduce the leaks would ultimately pay for themselves, but in the short run would need higher tariffs or reprioritised budgets.

In electricity, a surge in off-grid renewable generation has alleviated similar challenges. Water is a finite resource though, so that option is not available. Ultimately, the only solution is to deter wasteful and unnecessary water use, including through higher tariffs in high-income areas, and to upgrade investment in maintenance and reduced leakages.

In the longer run, to build an efficient city Johannesburg needs to understand changing settlement patterns and manage them far more effectively.

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