



# High time to tackle SA's water woes

WHILE much of the focus of late has been on South Africa's electricity crisis, another key resource also came under the spotlight recently when President Cyril Ramaphosa painted a grim picture of the country's threatening water woes in an open letter published in the media.

"Unless we take drastic measures to conserve water sources and promote efficient use, water insecurity will become the biggest developmental and economic challenge facing this country. Our current energy challenges will seem small by comparison. Unless we act now, we may not have water anywhere," the President warned.

Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation Minister Lindwe Sisulu said South Africa intends spending R900 million over the next decade to improve its water-supply and storage infrastructure and tackle a growing shortage of the resource.

Commenting on these developments, the Southern African Plastic Pipe Manufacturers Association (Sappma) said they were relieved

that the government is finally recognising the seriousness of the problem.

"There is no doubt that the impact of this current crisis could have been reduced – if not completely avoided," Sappma CEO Jan Venter said. He conceded that whilst drought and climate change might have aggravated the problem, a major cause is the country's failure to upgrade and maintain its water pipes and infrastructure over the last decade.

Sappma is a non-profit industry body that represents close to 80% of the plastic pipe manufacturers in South Africa.

Venter said much of the country's water infrastructure consists of old steel and asbestos cement water pipes that were installed in the early 1960s or earlier. These pipes have a limited lifespan of no more than 50 years before they start to corrode, start to spring leaks and need to be replaced.

"In South Africa and the rest of the world, plastic pipes are the material



Photo by Joseph Chirume

from their members' dwindling sales figures over the last few years that no orders were being placed for new pipes, despite the fact that municipal budgets were allocated for upgrades and maintenance.

"Irregular expenditure of R13 billion wasn't accounted for in 2016 and 2017 in the Eastern Cape alone – making up almost half of the country's wasteful expenditure of the same year. As a result, plastic pipe manufacturers were forced to close, and a significant number of jobs were lost."

## Culprits

He said the biggest culprits of wasting water are municipalities who do not repair leaks or fail to maintain their water pipelines. The Water Research Council recently conducted a survey of 132 municipalities in South Africa, which revealed that close to 40% of the country's potable water was being lost as a result of leaks, incorrect metering and unauthorised consumption.

By comparison, Australia (also classified as a water-scarce country) loses less than 10% per year.

"The two main causes of water loss are corrosion and the poor joining of pipes. Not only does South Africa suffer financial losses of more than R7.2-billion per year, but we have lost a significant supply of water that we might never be able to replace again.

"Despite the good rains that have fallen in large parts of our country this past week, we can still run out of water if we do not protect and look after what we have now as a matter of urgency. People can still live without electricity and as South Africans we have almost started to get used to regular power cuts. But nobody can live without water. Government must realise the seriousness of the situation and plan for the generations to come through installing the correct plastic pipes that will be capable of meeting the infrastructure needs of a growing South African population," Venter said.