

# WATER AND SOCIETY

## 10-year anniversary to right to water offers chance for reflection

*The Water Research Commission hosted a webinar in July in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Resolution on the human right to water and sanitation.  
Article by Sue Matthews.*

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It's been 10 years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted UN Resolution 64/292 on the human right to water and sanitation. More specifically, it recognised "the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights." The resolution called upon states and international organisations to help developing countries scale up their efforts to deliver such water and sanitation services, by providing financial resources, capacity building and technology transfer.

So how well is the world doing in upholding this human right, and what more can be done to provide international assistance and cooperation? And how far has South Africa come, in its efforts to reverse historical inequities and achieve universal access to water and sanitation services?

These were some of the topics addressed by panellists during a celebratory webinar hosted by the WRC on 28 July 2020, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Resolution's adoption. Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, pointed out in her opening address – delivered in her absence by her Special Envoy, Jürgen Kögl – that South Africa had enshrined a rights-based approach into all facets of the Constitution drawn up by the new democratic government 25 years ago. This, together with the pioneering leadership of the then Water Affairs Minister, Prof Kader Asmal, had prompted a total rewrite of water legislation, and the introduction of safeguards to individuals' human right to basic water, which were given effect through the Free Basic Water and Sanitation policies.

"To date, we have been able to increase water supply to 88%

of households, while 79% of households now have access to safe sanitation,” noted the Minister. “Still, the number of people without access to reliable water supply and decent sanitation remains unacceptably high.”

She added that the Department of Water and Sanitation had put a Water Master Plan in place towards the end of last year, which sets out the framework for managing water resources and provision of water and sanitation services in the short, medium and long term. But the COVID-19 pandemic had necessitated immediate action, so water is being made available to thousands of households via water tankers dispatched to vulnerable communities in some of the most inaccessible parts of the country.

During the panel discussion, facilitated by WRC CEO Dhesigen Naidoo, UN Water’s Vice-Chair, Dr Olcay Ünver, remarked that – at a global level – a lot has happened in 10 years.

“While we should celebrate our achievements, it is important to remember that, for many of us, things haven’t changed that much,” he added.

Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report 2020 shows that 2.2 billion people around the world still lacked safely managed drinking water in 2017 (the most recent available data). And while the population using safely managed sanitation services had increased to 45%, the remaining 55% represented 4.2 billion people worldwide.

The relevant SDG 6 targets are to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030, as well as access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, while paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. But these targets won’t be met at the current rates of progress.

“We are off-track to achieve SDG 6 on water and sanitation,” said Ünver. “Why is this? There are two main reasons – the lack of political will, and the fragmentation in the water-related sectors. This means that water does not get prioritised, and that we end up with sub-optimal solutions in sectoral silos, missing the opportunity to use synergies and manage trade-offs.”

In an effort to speed up progress, on 9 July the UN launched the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, which forms part of the UN Secretary-General’s Decade of Action to reach the SDGs by 2030. The Framework encourages the international community to improve support to countries through four action pillars:

- Engage – ensuring swift responses to country requests through leveraged expertise and mobilisation,
- Align – coordinating approaches across sectors and actors through unified strategies and initiatives,
- Accelerate – unlocking bottlenecks through five accelerators, and
- Account – strengthening accountability through joint review and learning.

The five accelerators deal with financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance.

But panellist Dr Amanda Loeffen, the CEO of Human Right 2 Water, does not believe the solution lies in international financing.

“We’re not going to achieve SDGs by throwing money at it – there isn’t enough money available,” she said. “The World Bank estimates that achieving these targets will cost approximately \$14 billion per year between now and 2030, and that’s only the cost of constructing the infrastructure, not including operation and maintenance.”

Loeffen believes the human rights approach gives the option to be more innovative and creative about solutions. She feels the focus should be on local solutions provided by local enterprises and local government, combining in public-private partnerships and blended finance options.

However, Dr Sunita Narain, Director-General of the Centre for Science and Environment in India, expressed concerns about whether the human rights approach was most conducive to bringing about action in the coming years, given the current global leadership.

“The fact is there can be no bigger human right than the right to clean water and sanitation – there is absolutely no doubt about that,” she said. “But with the terminology of human rights having been so politicised, we should consider whether that would mean countries would balk at the idea of discussing the human rights of water resources, because they see it as another stick that would be used against them.”



John Hogg/World Bank



*The webinar organised by the WRC in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the United Nations resolution on the human right to water and sanitation included (from top left) Dr Sunita Narain, Dr Amanda Loeffen, Mr Ashton Busani, Mr Dhesigen Naidoo, Dr Olcay Ünver, Cllr Thembi Nkadimeng and Ms Khosi Jonas (facilitator).*

Instead, she noted, it had become abundantly clear in this age of the COVID-19 crisis that without clean and safe water, we cannot have health. “It’s in this context that we need to put water on top of the agenda, and reframe the agenda of health from the point of view of prevention, and the role of water and sanitation,” she said. “Because the other thing that has become very clear, as never before, is how interdependent we are – the rich and the poor are interdependent, and the countries of the world are interdependent. It is the poor of the world who have suffered the most as a result of the pandemic, both because their livelihoods have been affected by lockdowns, and because they live in congested environments, and in places where there is no safe water and sanitation. But because of this interconnectedness, if the poor live in densely populated areas without access to clean water, the rich are also vulnerable.”

The UN certainly recognises that the pandemic offers an opportunity to accelerate delivery. Ünver explained that apart from emergency investments, there’s also significant stimulus and economic recovery investment coming up in the post-COVID era.

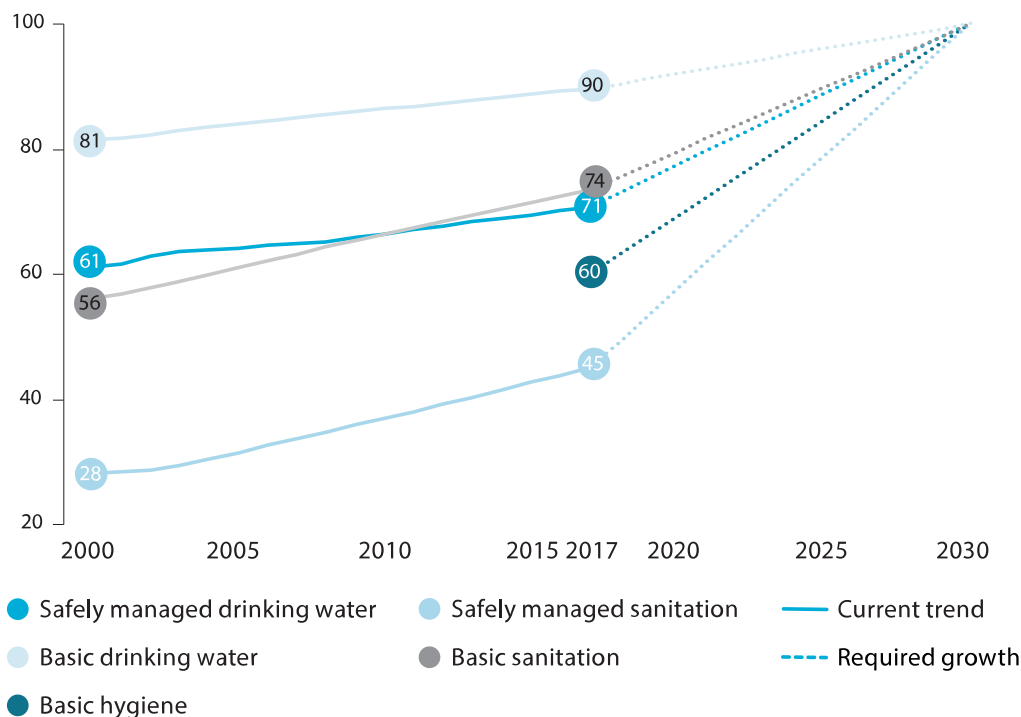
“The main message is to ensure that governments think about the longer-term future when they are making these investments, and use them as building blocks towards water and sanitation for all, and – in a broader sense – a sustainable future for all,” he said.

Issues around poverty and inequality were also highlighted by the fourth member of the panel, Ashton Busani, who is the National Lead for South African Young Water Professionals and a



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In July the United Nations launched the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework to drive progress on water and sanitation issues, in support of the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.



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**Reference:** Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. 2020. The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19. Sustainable Development Report 2020. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

water sector analyst at GreenCape. He began by quoting Nelson Mandela, who said: *“Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times – times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry, and wealth accumulation – that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils.”*

“This is the reality that the young people are facing today – the issues of poverty and inequality, particularly referring to the inequalities around access to water and sanitation,” said Busani. He noted that while the youth are cognisant of the advances that have been made since 1994, this is simply not enough.

“To the young people of today, without these basic services, there is no freedom,” he stressed. “So the youth are beginning a new revolution, and that revolution is taking education as the way forward.” He pointed out that putting education at the forefront of the revolution would encourage the innovation needed to come up with solutions.

Just a few days after the webinar, the WRC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) issued an open call for innovations addressing South Africa’s water challenges, specifically for water access and provision. The call requested applications from local innovators developing technologies or solutions for water challenges that have been exacerbated

or introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It noted, for example, that many rural schools had been unable to reopen following lockdown due to their inability to meet the basic safety requirements, including the provision of water and sanitation facilities.

The webinar’s closing remarks were made by Cllr Thembi Nkadimeng, President the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and Executive Mayor of Polokwane. She reported that SALGA had been doing an assessment into the ability of municipalities to respond to the water challenges associated with COVID-19, and this had highlighted the critical skills shortages in municipalities in rural areas. It had also become clear that the lack of access to water undermines women’s rights, forcing women to live under difficult conditions, and exposing them to the risk of rape and murder if they need to go deep into rural areas to fetch water.

“So we need to listen to what our young people are saying – provide space for them to participate so they can bring knowledge, innovation and technological skills,” she said. “That way, the financial partnerships we have will be able to invest money into what can be speedily turned into access to water in our communities.”