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Poor Governance Deepens South Africa's Water Crisis: It's Time for Municipal Action

South Africa's water crisis is no longer a distant threat it's here, and it's worsening. From crumbling pipes to polluted rivers, the evidence is everywhere: poor water governance is choking one of the country's most vital resources.

The infrastructure burden

Many of South Africa's municipalities are sitting on aging infrastructure-built decades ago for smaller populations and milder climates. Today, this system is buckling under pressure. Leaking pipes and faulty pumps waste up to 40% of treated water, while water treatment plants operate below standard due to maintenance backlogs and limited technical skills. The result? Entire communities, especially in rural areas and small towns, face unreliable supply and unsafe drinking water. The Hammanskraal cholera outbreak was a tragic reminder of how governance failures can become public health disasters.

Governance gaps and accountability

At the heart of the crisis lies poor governance not just a lack of funds, but weak oversight, poor planning, and fragmented accountability. Municipalities often lack the technical capacity and data to monitor water losses or maintain infrastructure effectively.

Corruption and tender irregularities further erode public trust and delay critical projects like the Giyani Water Project or the Lesotho Highlands Phase II. In many cases, water management plans exist only on paper, with little coordination between local and national agencies.



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The ripple effects

The water crisis hits more than households. Industries, agriculture, and hospitals rely on consistent water supply. As water systems collapse, so do local economies. Drought and water contamination drive migration, unemployment, and rising social unrest especially in provinces already struggling with service delivery.

What municipalities can do

- Despite the challenges, municipalities hold the key to change. A few critical steps can make a real difference:
- Prioritize maintenance — fix leaks before expanding new networks.
- Invest in skilled personnel and retain technical expertise.
- Improve data management to track non-revenue water and treatment performance.
- Enforce transparency in water procurement and tendering.
- Collaborate with communities and private partners to co-manage local systems.

The bottom line

Water security begins at the municipal level. Without strong governance, even the best national policies will fail. By focusing on accountability, maintenance, and skills, municipalities can turn the tide, ensuring every drop counts in building a more resilient and equitable South Africa.