The politics of drought

Christopher Vandome assesses the causes of South Africa’s water shortage

The 2017/18 drought in Cape Town, and the city’s countdown to Day Zero, when taps run dry, grabbed attention around the world. A city with a population approaching four million, and regularly ranked as a top holiday destination, faced the very real prospect that it might run out of water. Now the first decent rains for four years are replenishing the dams, the city is confident that it will avoid Day Zero until beyond 2019.

In the last issue of The World Today a team of water experts from the engineering consultancy Arup wrote: ‘It is hoped that the memory of the crisis will create the social and political environment for continuing reductions in water use and encourage increased spending on infrastructure.’

But has the political climate in South Africa changed sufficiently to prevent such policy failures being repeated?

Successive administrations have faced the challenge of expanding the supply of water to people who don’t have it, while also pursuing industrialization and development objectives. The number of households with access to piped water has increased from 7.2 million in 1996, to 14.8 million in 2016.

At the same time, however, the government has faced criticism for prioritizing commercial over domestic water allocation. Water-intensive industries such as agriculture and mining are potential growth sectors in an economy that needs to generate jobs.

The measures to reduce water consumption that allowed Cape Town to avoid Day Zero have raised social tensions that could put at risk their long-term effectiveness.

Only 5 per cent of the city’s available water is allocated to the poorest 20 per cent of the population, many of whom live on the expansive Cape Flats, a low-lying area away from the city centre and tourist attractions. Regular protests have been staged there against poor access to sanitation, as well as electricity and land.

The division of responsibility between tiers of government to ensure water keeps flowing is unclear. National government is responsible for water infrastructure. Supply and oversight are the responsibility of local and provincial governments respectively.

It is estimated that over the next ten years more than $70 billion in investment will be needed to fund new projects as well as upgrading existing ones. Attracting this level of investment will be challenging in an uncertain political environment.

President Cyril Ramaphosa came to office in February 2018 after a campaign of rooting out corruption and rejuvenating South Africa’s sluggish economy. Improving the management of government departments and attracting investment are central to his strategy.

A ministerial change at the Department of Water and Sanitation is a start, but parliament has urged the National Treasury to intervene more strongly to improve the department’s financial management. The department has faced allegations of corruption relating to tenders for the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, an infrastructure project to serve the economic hub of the city of Johannesburg and Gauteng Province.

Tackling corruption can be sensitive, especially when it involves those abusing empowerment legislation that is key to the post-apartheid economic transformation. Ramaphosa will need to provide clarity on any proposed changes to legislation if he is to attract investment. A new Water and Sanitation Infrastructure Investment Strategy, informed by a collaborative summit in December 2017, will also need to show that a more co-ordinated national response is being adopted.

The multi-layered governance structure of South Africa’s water collection and distribution system continues to present a political risk.

Crisis can rapidly become politicized. Cape Town and Western Province, in which the city lies, are run by South Africa’s opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). As the water shortages in the city became worse, the alliance accused the national government, run by the dominant African National Congress (ANC), of not declaring a disaster early enough to release emergency funds that are sanctioned at national government level. At the same time, political tensions exacerbated political tensions within the DA creating a rift between local, provincial and national party structures.

The divisions in who is responsible for the water supply may be replicated in other municipalities as the South African political landscape changes. The DA has been successful in targeting urban areas in its bid to dislodge the ANC from power. In municipal elections in 2016 the party had mayors elected in Nelson Mandela Bay, Tswane (Pretoria) and Johannesburg.

Across Southern Africa, water stress will become an increasing problem as climate change, population growth, urbanization and development driven by water-intensive industries continues a pace. Citizens will keep pressing the government to improve water delivery, in an increasingly competitive political environment.

South Africa’s experience highlights that government initiatives need the backing of investors and the public. This is dependent on trust. The memory of the crisis will bolster social demands for change, which will increase political will, but the uncertain political environment means that there are still significant risks. The way in which investors mitigate these, through partnerships and the structuring of project finance, can be an example to the region and the world.

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