



04 September 2024

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The State of Water and Water Infrastructure in South Africa: Insights from SAPOA Annual Convention 2024

The state of water and water infrastructure is one of the most important issues facing South Africa today. The South African Property Owners Association (SAPOA) Annual Convention 2024 addressed this issue in-depth, with contributions from important industry experts. The convention emphasised the property sector's critical role in addressing South Africa's water crisis and the urgent need for collaboration between the public and private sectors.

In her opening remarks, Lizanne Evangelou, Manager of Urban-Econ's Property Development Unit, emphasised the importance of public-private sector cooperation in addressing South Africa's water-related issues. She posed the question to the group, highlighting the property industry's critical role in averting the catastrophe: "Are you part of the problem or the solution?" Evangelou pointed out that the majority of water infrastructure failures have been attributed to developers, especially in large metro areas where the current state of affairs is becoming unsustainable.

Considering that the average annual rainfall in South Africa is only 450 mm, whereas the average worldwide is 860 mm, the country is categorised as having limited water resources. The nation is now listed as the 30th driest country in the world, and by 2030, it is predicted that water demand would surpass supply by 17%.

Evangelou drew attention to the nation's failing water infrastructure, which results in the loss of 41% of municipal water owing to theft, leaks, and bad management. She gave a sobering assessment of the nation's water governance and management, emphasising the vital role that municipalities play in controlling water use as well as the government's responsibility as steward of water resources.

Unfortunately, poor upkeep, corruption, and financial mismanagement have put many towns in danger of failing, which has a big effect on the price and marketability of real

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South Africa – WeWork Offices • The Link • 173 Oxford Road • Rosebank • Johannesburg

PO Box 78544 • Sandton • 2146 • Tel: +27 11 883 0679 • Email: reception@sapoa.org.za • Website: www.sapoa.org.za



estate development. Evangelou cited Cape Town as a model city for aggressive water management strategies, as the city effectively cut water use by more than 50% during the harsh drought that occurred between 2015 and 2018.

The CEO of Nexus Water Alchemy, Fred Platt, explained that the water shortage is more of a governance problem than a technical one. Speaking to non-revenue water, which makes up about 41% of South Africa's total water supply, he remarked, "There's no point in adding more water to the system if it's just going to leak out." According to Platt, cutting water loss would be the single biggest opportunity since it would spur development, save expenses, and double the amount of resources accessible.

He emphasised the necessity for a change in perspective on water management, emphasising the need of financial engineering, stakeholder involvement, and governance. In order to tackle criminal activities related to water theft and mismanagement, Platt called for more involvement from the police and justice sectors. She also highlighted the formation of water mafias as a symptom of governance failure.

The South African Water Research Commission's Executive Manager of Water Use and Waste Management, Jay Bhagwan, urged the sector to see the water crisis as a chance for innovation and transformation. Bhagwan argued, "We should be part of the solution, not the problem," and he supported the use of cutting-edge technologies and a move towards on-site water management.

Bhagwan emphasised that more than 60% of South Africa's dams are more over 50 years old, indicating the ageing of the country's current water infrastructure. Additionally, he underlined the significance of altering societal norms regarding water consumption, pointing out that South Africans frequently take water for granted. Speaking out in favour of stricter regulations and a more methodical approach to water conservation, he declared, "We need to be bold in our approach and start thinking differently about how we manage water."

The founder and group MD of BT Industrial, Kgomotso Lekola, emphasised the need for companies to conserve water by acting proactively. He offered doable alternatives that might result in large cost savings and infrastructure improvements, like purifying water on-site and recycling it from shopping centres. Lekola urged companies to consider innovative



approaches to resolving the water situation, stressing that although there are obstacles, there are also chances for creativity and investment.

WaterSolve's head, Walter Wales, spoke about the value of decentralisation and environmentally friendly water management techniques. He made the argument that prudent water management may stop major water loss and lower usage, protecting the nation's water supplies. Wales also underlined how digital technology, like remote metering, may improve waste reduction and water management.

The government's viewpoint on the water situation was given by a representative of Dr. Sean Phillips, Director-General of the Department of Water and Sanitation. She recognised the difficulties caused by ageing infrastructure, fast urbanisation, and climate change, all of which have put pressure on the nation's water supply. Since 2000, South Africa's population has increased by almost 20%, significantly taxing the country's water supplies. She gave an overview of the government's initiatives to strengthen water governance, stressing the need for affordable water services and the implementation of a licensing system for municipalities.

She also underlined how important it is for local governments to invest in water infrastructure first and to put in place efficient programs for recycling and reusing water. Water is the biggest risk for business, according to Dr. Phillips, who emphasised how urgently the situation needs to be resolved in order to guarantee the long-term viability of the South African economy.

The SAPOA Annual Convention 2024 made clear that everyone involved—the government, private companies, and real estate industry—must work together to solve South Africa's water crisis. In order to assure a successful future for all, South Africa needs to tackle its water difficulties via collaboration, innovation, and a focus on sustainable solutions.

For media inquiries or further information, please contact:

ISSUED BY THABANG MOKOPANELE on behalf of SAPOA

Contact Information

Name: Thabang Mokopanele

Job Title: Director



Mobile: 083 715 9137

Email: thabang@leanomedia.co.za

Company name: Leano Media

OR

Contact Information

Name: Neil Gopal

Job title: Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Email address: ngopal@sapoa.org.za

Company name: SAPOA