



23 March 2021

Valuing Water: Reflections on Why Water Has No Substitute

The month of March is an important opportunity to commemorate the universal importance of water with World Water Day (22 March) and National Water Week (15-22 March) in South Africa.

Since 1993, the United Nations has designated 22 March as World Water Day, with a specific focus on the necessity of freshwater, to raise awareness around the billions of people living without access to clean water. While access to water is a basic human right enshrined in the South African Constitution, reliable water access is placed at just 64% nationally.^[1]

The theme for World Water Day 2021 is “Valuing Water” and while water is essential for livelihoods and development, it means different things to different people. This year’s theme aims to explore the various economic, social and cultural ways in which water is valued and how it plays a role in people’s lives.

Every year, the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) focuses on World Water Day as an opportunity to embark on a month-long campaign around the importance of water. National Water Week is specifically aimed at raising awareness around the need to protect and conserve the country’s water resources, bearing in mind South Africa’s status as a water scarce country. This year the focus is on taking action to tackle the global water crisis and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6: water and sanitation for all by 2030.

In celebration of these key moments in the national water calendar, the NBI is reflecting on the importance of valuing water and how we embody the above values through our various water initiatives.

Valuing water for development and ecosystem services

NBI’s water work aims to address the compounding issues of drought, ageing infrastructure, degraded landscapes and a lack of financial sustainability in the sector. Combined, these multiple stress factors place the country’s water security at severe risk. **The NBI’s water programme** works to combat these risks by focusing on 3 main areas:

Strengthening company best practice on water
Enhancing the resilience of key targeted catchments
Unlocking water investment through collective action

As we reflect on the NBI's achievements over the past year, it would be remiss not to note that this year marks the 5th anniversary of the **uMhlathuze Water Stewardship Partnership (UWASP)**. UWASP is a recognised example of global best practice in public and private sector water collaboration.

The NBI's focus over the next year will be in applying the lessons learnt under UWASP to the Vaal System, which supports 45% of South Africa's economy. In addition, we will be ramping up our partnership with the **South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)** and the **Water Research Commission (WRC)** in mobilising finance and private sector expertise to rehabilitate South Africa's high-value mountain catchments.

Valuing water in the time of the Coronavirus

While we recognise the importance of water for economic development and continued ecosystem services, we have also turned our focus to water as an emergency response, especially given that handwashing serves as the first line of defence against viral infection. Our COVID-19 response has included rolling out thousands of handwash units for vulnerable communities and developing a foot-operated communal standpipe and handwashing unit, using the engineering skills of our **Technical Assistance, Mentorship and Development (TAMDEV)** programme.

Over the past year, with funding and support from **AECI, Astron Energy, the Grundfos Foundation, the Netherlands Embassy in South Africa** and the **PepsiCo Foundation**, our COVID-19 emergency response efforts in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Gauteng have seen over 11,000 handwashing units installed.

In 2021 our work on supporting safe water access and handwashing continues. Our collaboration with PepsiCo in the Eastern Cape is ramping up and, together with the Grundfos Foundation, we will be rolling out foot-operated handwashing units in the Western Cape in partnership with Save Our Schools (SOS).

Understanding how water is used and valued is the first step in effectively conserving it and ensuring access to clean water for all. The March month of water celebrations serve as a key opportunity to demonstrate the real value of water. Whether it is in a time of drought, normal life or a global pandemic, water really has no substitute.

For more information on this collaboration and the National Business Initiative's (NBI) water related work, please contact Alex McNamara (NBI: Water Lead): AlexM@nbi.org.za

^[1] National Business Initiative (2019): Kopano Ya Metsi: *Unlocking Water Investment in South Africa*, Available online: https://www.nbi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/NBI_KYM-Report-1_Unlocking-Water-Investment.pdf



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The National Business Initiative (NBI) is an independent and voluntary coalition of South African and multinational businesses launched in 1995 by the then President, Nelson Mandela.

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Dear Jo-Anne

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4. Strengthening company best practice on water
5. Enhancing the resilience of key targeted catchments
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