

## **Decent sanitation down the drain Voices from AfriSan, February 2008**

By Baruti Amisi, Patrick Bond, Dudu Khumalo and Simphiwe Nojiyeza

*If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down.* That sensible old adage, initiated in New York City's 1970s water conservation campaign, reminds us of government's focus on individual energy behaviour change ("go to bed early!"), when in reality industrial policy – hyper-subsidies for electricity-guzzling smelters - is to blame for our economy's carbon over consumption, world-leading contribution to climate change and now crippling Eskom load-sheds.

Conservation is all well and good when there are explicit water shortages. But that's not generally the case when it comes to South African sanitation. After all, human consumption of raw water amounts to less than 12% of the total, of which the majority is used for swimming pools, non-indigenous gardens, and rich/middle-income folks' hedonistic consumption.

The same superficially "common sense" yet profoundly unfair philosophy – i.e., poor people must be given water-free pit latrines - permeates the African Sanitation (AfriSan) conference now underway at the Luthuli International Conference Centre.

Several hundred experts have come to Durban to talk toilets this week. Our own attempts to enter the ICC along with civil society colleagues were barred by the R2000 entrance fee; there were only a few passes given to community groups.

If allowed in, civil society critics would raise the essential problem across the continent, including South Africa: under funding. Toilets and bulk wastewater pipes dug down out of sight and mind aren't sexy for donors to show off to politicians and constituents.

Moreover, for the last quarter century, the pressures of World Bank structural adjustment programmes broke African governments' ability to meet citizens' needs, even basic water/sanitation infrastructure.

And today, most African states are run by venal elites who don't care where their poorest residents defecate; witness Durban's provision of a handful of public toilets to literally thousands in the city's burgeoning shack settlements.

Hence a dangerous – and health-threatening - conventional wisdom has emerged: poor and working people should learn to consume far less water than rich and middle-class people do. Self-help for "total sanitation" (including hygiene education) replaces state responsibility. The market rules: if you can't pay, you can't pee or poo.

UN Water Task Force on Sanitation coordinator Clarissa Brocklehurst explains: “Simple subsidisation is not enough to lure the poor to build toilets. We need to create supporting policies, develop low cost options, mobilise communities and even involve the private sector.”

Jon Lane of the Geneva-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council is even blunter: “The need is to take sanitation technology from being subsidy-driven, which it so far is, and make it market-driven.”

This is the new “neo liberal” strategy for toilets. In reality, the problem is not the subsidy per se, but its small amount. Typically, only a tiny capital grant allows poor people to build a rudimentary toilet. Operating and maintenance subsidies are practically never supplied. Hence when systems break down for lack of borehole diesel or broken piping, they stay broken.

South Africa was, unfortunately, not immune from the pressure of neo liberalism, well before the country adopted a home-grown structural adjustment policy in 1996. From the early 1990s, key officials at the Development Bank of Southern Africa, Mvula Trust and Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAFF) adopted the World Bank strategy, refining it especially here in Durban.

That strategy hinges on persuading poor people not to use water for flushing. When persuasion doesn't work, officials simply impose dry toilets like Ventilated Improved Pit latrines (“VIPs”) on very impoverished people, who are invariably black.

The worst case of this philosophy was the apartheid regime's filthy “bucket system” for South Africa's “temporary sojourners”: i.e. all black people living in cities. Water was a weapon in the white government's arsenal of oppression and control.

But what goes around sometimes comes around. Mike Muller, former DWAFF director general, points out that “the buckets, especially when not emptied by inefficient municipalities, provide community activists with an effective and ready-made weapon of protest, which has been used with substantial effect in protests about poor service delivery.”

Today, 14 years after apartheid ended, hundreds of thousands of people still suffer buckets, in spite of Mbeki's promise that by 2007 we'd be rid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century system.

Shockingly, there are still 9,270 bucket latrines in Durban, along with 148,688 unventilated pit latrines and 41,880 chemical toilets. Lack of adequate sewage disposal, combined with heavy rains, hot temperatures and accidental spilling of these buckets, together create a perfect storm of infectious diarrhoea, other gastrointestinal disorders, and worm infestations – fatal threats to so many HIV+ people.

Worse, the alleged sanitation “improvements” since 1994 include mass installation of VIPs. But as veteran sanitation practitioner Kathy Eales notes, “Many VIPs are now full and unusable. In many areas, VIPs are now called ‘full-ups’. Some pits were too small, or were fully sealed.”

According to Eales, “South Africa's household sanitation policy is grossly inadequate. It speaks primarily to dry systems, and does not clarify roles and responsibilities around what to do when pits are full. National government under-estimated the scale of technical support required.”

But given the state's white elephant priorities – think Coega, Gautrain, nuclear reactors, once-off sports stadiums, Shaka statues and mega dams - who believes the ruling party will rid the society of the dreaded buckets and pit latrines?

And with the rate of community protest doubling to 30 per day from 2005-07, according to the SA Police Service, who believes we'll have peace - without sanitation justice?

Activists in Kareenberg in the Northern Cape and Mamafubedu and Rouxville in the Free State, amongst other sites, have demonstrated against the replacement of buckets with VIPs, and instead demand waterborne sanitation.

Two innovations may make matters worse. Sowetans are protesting against new “condominal shallow sewage” systems introduced by the French water privatiser Suez, which ran Joburg Water from 2001 until they were expelled, in part by protests, in 2006. Victims of this experiment have no water cisterns above the loo, much thinner pipes, and lower gravity to get excrement down and out to the mains.

Hence they clog not by accident but by design. Then, according to 12-step instructions provided by Suez, women are meant to stick their hands (with gloves, to be sure) into the pipes to remove the shit by hand.

Second, in Durban, a post-apartheid bucket system – the Urinary Diversion (UD) toilet – is being foisted involuntarily on 60 000 households. With their double-pits, separating urine and faeces so as to speed decomposition, the UD's are theoretically useful in water-scarce rural areas. But Durban?

Earlier this month, *Science* magazine praised municipal water manager Neil Macleod's promise that within two years, “everyone will have access to a proper toilet.”

But that includes the replacement of apartheid-era pit toilets with “the best solution”, UD's, which are credited with “a 30% reduction in diarrhoeal diseases compared with similar households using pit toilets”, as our UKZN colleague Stephen Knight told *Science*. (Of course the comparison should instead be to decent indoor waterborne sanitation, but when serving poor black people, chief Macleod seems to have removed

that item from the menu.)

Yet experience in the communities we know best - Umzinyathi and KwaNgqolosi in peri-urban Inanda – is unsatisfactory. UDs have internal buckets that require emptying. No training was given on how to deal with faeces, except to dump it in the garden “for fertilising your veggies”. Many people are repelled by use of human excrement (compared to cow-dung) as fertiliser, because of the many diseases surrounding them. The burden of cleaning is left to women. Other creative opportunities for bio-gas are also foreclosed by UDs. Many UDs have become mere storerooms or are permanently locked because of the smell. Councillors are useless when the UDs cease functioning.

Indeed, municipal neglect of sewage is apparently widespread. The Umbilo River is badly polluted because Macleod didn't manage industrial wastewater pipes properly, as Tony Carnie's *Mercury* scoop last month showed.

Thousands of dead fish in the harbour at Christmas were victims of a sewage pipe rupture. City manager Mike Sutcliffe withheld the study for weeks, perhaps because it confirms the corporate culture of rampant eco-vandalism in South Durban, which he has nurtured in his repeated attacks on environmentalists there. Belatedly, the city will sue for damages, but the two key officials have been extremely evasive.

Sutcliffe and Macleod are not the only ones to blame. Faizal Bux of Durban University of Technology's Centre for Water and Wastewater Technology remarks, “The council needs to be held accountable for the current status of the Umbilo River” because of consistent under funding of maintenance.

To solve the sanitation crisis is not a matter of rocket science. No one at the ICC can disagree with these aspirations:

- we need appropriate health and hygiene awareness and behaviour (especially for policy-makers and municipal officials prone to disconnect poor people from water supplies, hence threatening all of us, as the 2000 cholera pandemic tragically proved);
- we need systems for disposing of human excreta, household waste water and refuse, acceptable and affordable to the users, safe, hygienic and easily accessible and which does not have an unacceptable impact on the environment;
- and
- we need a toilet facility for each household.

Even though it draws on the richest economy on the continent, the South African government cannot claim to be a leader. As Muller confessed in a 2007 article for *Progress in Development Studies*, “the expansion of sanitation services to the unserved is slowing.” He specifically cited Trevor Manuel's 2006 Division of Revenue Act because of its “clear incentives for municipalities not to extend services to the unserved.”

To change this we need new genuinely pro-poor policies, and more state funding and policies that get poor people appropriate supplies of waterborne sanitation, including septic tanks for off-grid rural areas. And in turn we need much more political pressure, *not more technocratic solutions from AfriSan, the World Bank, UN, Pretoria or Durban officials who want poor people to cut their water consumption.*

If we don't get it, government's reversion to VIP latrines, chemical toilets, UDs and condominal sewers means that apartheid's sanitation indignities will be reconstituted not along ethnic lines alone, but according to the placement of sewage lines. And not only will the suffering continue. One day, a government with decent values will have to put in proper sanitation at much greater cost because it will mean undoing the damage being done today by those men tucked away behind R2000 entrance gates at the ICC.

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