

Another man-made emergency brought to you by Athol Trollip

The current dire situation in Cape Town around its water supply features in the press on a daily basis. This is a serious situation caused by a "not so major" drought. It clearly shows what happens if the planning duties of the responsible authority are neglected for a decade or two. It also highlights the near criminal situation of vast quantities of clean fresh water being wasted daily. Imagine what will happen if this turns out to be a major drought? The consequences are too ghastly to contemplate. I was surprised to read on News24 last week that the Nelson Mandela Metro is also suddenly finding itself in a water crisis ([Mandela Bay on brink of disaster as water crisis deepens](#)). While there are similarities between the situations in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth there are also significant differences. There is no crisis in Port Elizabeth that is remotely on the same scale as that facing Cape Town. This is just an opportunistic move by mayor of Nelson Mandela Metro to score some easy bucks from National Treasury.

Let us compare the water supply situations in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Cape Town derives the majority of its water supply from three dams: Theewaterskloof - , Voëlvlei - and the Berg River Dams. These dams are located between 40 km and a 100 km from Cape Town. The average water levels in these three dams reported by the website of the Department of Water and Sanitation is around 35%. PE on the other hand is supplied by a number of smaller local dams located in or near the coastal belt. These dams include Mpofu Dam, Churchill Dam, Loerie Dam and Kouga Dam. But a significant contribution to PE's potable water supply comes from South Africa's largest dam, the Gariep Dam, via the Nooitgedacht scheme. Water from Gariep Dam is transported nearly 500 km to reach PE and even that does not tell the full story as most of the water in the Gariep Dam originates in Lesotho. Gariep Dam is currently sitting at 98%. A water supply crisis in PE? Rubbish!

So the details above highlight a key difference between Cape Town's situation and that of PE. But there is another major difference. Of all the metros in South Africa, none has done more or better than Cape Town to ensure its reticulation networks are well maintained and leakages and (so called) unaccounted for water is managed to

within acceptable limits. Thanks to this Cape Town is the only city in the country, as far as I am aware, that operates within internationally acceptable limits (15% overall losses). Good for them! The difference between Cape Town and PE in this regard could not be starker. The last estimates I have seen for PE puts its overall losses around 50% - and even that may be conservative. (The figures of 20% to 25% quoted in the article above are an absolute joke!). Just think about it. This means that of every two litres of water that comes nearly a 1000 km from Lesotho, one litre simply goes missing. The result of this is that the metro cannot produce enough potable water to supply its consumers. This is not a drought problem, this is a simple operations and maintenance problem. Thus man-made!

Finally, there is a key similarity between the two metros. Both of them discharge their purified sewage effluent either directly or indirectly into the sea. I have written enough about this madness ([When do you know we are in deep trouble?](#)) in the past and will not expand on it further here.

So why is Athol Trollip so keen to make everyone believe his metro is facing a crisis? It is all about funding and obtaining money. Easy money in this case. You see, Athol Trollip knows that he is sitting on a ticking time bomb given the state of disrepair of his metro's reticulation networks – a legacy of the ANC governing the metro for close on 20 years. He needs money, and lots of it, to fix things. There are generally two mechanisms through which he can access funding for this purpose. Firstly, he can try to borrow money in the market. In this instance the Development Bank of Southern Africa would be his prime financier. But any debt financing facility would come with strict controls, contracted discipline and ongoing performance covenants. Not a very appetising prospect for the management team of a large metro.

So onto his second option. This would be to secure an additional allocation of funding from National Treasury. How do you qualify for such an additional allocation? Easy, you get declared a disaster area due to some natural disaster, such as a drought. Is there a drought in the Eastern Cape? Yes, like certain areas in the Western Cape, areas in the Eastern Cape are also experiencing a moderate drought. The low state of fill of some of the dams in the area does however not spell a crisis for PE on any scale

remotely similar to that of Cape Town as PE is shielded by the Gariep Dam as discussed above.

Why is this an issue? I believe municipalities in this country are generally hiding years and years (even decades!) of poor planning and poor operations and maintenance practise through the country's disaster management programmes. Take potable water supply for example. It is the obligation of the Water Services Authority of every municipal area in this country to plan and implement its resources and infrastructure on such a basis that a 98% assurance of supply is ensured. This means that the water supply system/scheme must be able to withstand a one-in-fifty-year drought. But that is simply not happening. The result is that with the first dry season or dry spell, the water supply systems come under severe pressure. That is what is happening in Nelson Mandela Bay at the moment. It is simply highly unlikely for a town, city or region to have 50% leaks and/or unaccounted for water in its system and to maintain a 98% assurance of supply.

Time and again we see municipalities that are grossly negligent and derelict in their duties, simply being bailed out by central government when the first signs of a drought appear. This is just another form of wastage of taxpayers' money and I as a taxpayer object. So, I guess this article is aimed at Pravin Gordhan rather than Athol Trollip. The message to Pravin Gordhan is this: stop dishing out "easy money" to municipalities and metros just on the semblance of a natural disaster when in actual fact we are dealing with a self-made crisis. You as Treasury must enforce the same discipline, control and performance covenants that any lender would do!