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COUNTING EACH DROP . . .

Is it not ironic how some people can take things for granted and simply believe that the current presence of natural resources, such as water for example, is in itself a guarantee of a future supply? Let us take another example such as the famous Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, New York City, United States of America (US). The years of planning and the building of the Twin Towers in the 1960's was obliterated within 56 minutes on the morning of September 2001. Interestingly, whilst it took the US around eight months of an intensive clean-up campaign, it was a mere five years later that the first building of the new World Trade Center was opened, in May 2006. Whilst this is a stark reminder that devastation will endure in the hearts and minds of millions of people across the world, what is important to note is the *speed* and *action* people of the US took to re-build not only their buildings, but also their national pride which was -- and continues to be -- symbolised within their democratic values, as well as within iconic features such as the Statue of Liberty, big brands such as McDonalds, and their world famous rivers such as the Colorado of some 2,333 km long. Going by the example of the World Trade Center, one need not wonder what the people of the US would do if any of these features -- that sustain their sense of nationhood -- were to be threatened, lost or even destroyed.

Of all those things that 'define' and sustain human beings (whether in America or Africa), without doubt our most precious resource in the world is under threat. *Water* - fresh water is increasingly being brought under the spotlight by international communities; such where the shortage of fresh water and sanitation issues have been the focus of intense debate. It is ironic that a natural resource such as water -- which we take for granted -- may be the cause of future wars as countries fight for a depleting resource. For this reason, water has been described as the 'new oil' and the potential for "water wars" has been flagged as a future risk¹. Given the fact that the world considers problems with the quality (and access) to fresh water as a massive threat to the future sustainability of civil society, the question arises regarding *why* there is no haste (by governments and civil movements) to act severely against those who threaten our water quality and supply, and why a response is not executed with the same sense of urgency, such as was the case with the 9/11 disaster? The stern warning from the UK Minister of State for International Development, Gareth Thomas, states that, "*if we do not act, the reality is that water supplies may become the subject of international conflict in the years ahead*" and this undoubtedly has a bearing on us all.

South Africa should take greater heed of this warning due to the fact that our country may be more susceptible to the lack of water assurance than other developed countries, which may be the result of -- among other reasons -- a harsh semi-arid climate, spatial variability of water resources, mismanaged water supplies, poorly managed regulation and certain errant corporate behaviour. The scarcity of water is likely to worsen as the demand for water outstrips the supply.

"There is no doubt that climate change is going to be potentially the biggest source of water stress," he said. "If average global temperatures go more than two degrees above pre-industrial levels you are looking at 2 to 3 billion people potentially suffering water shortages. It's a pretty serious business."

Charlie Kronick: Greenpeace - Senior Climate Adviser

Of course, the call to action to provide all South African citizens access to fresh water is not only underpinned in our Constitution. South Africa -- as signatory of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) -- commits itself to fulfilling the targets of at least seven of the eight goals. By not assuring the supply and quality of water for all the people of South Africa, and where its security is compromised, both the Constitution and the MDGs remain nothing more than a long forgotten, unfulfilled promise.

Indeed we have heard the call for action by President Zuma, reciting the critical importance for South Africa to meet its MDG commitments to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015². The question of course is how far along are we *really* to meeting this goal and *if* we have achieved this goal, why still do we hear of a coalition of 27 international charities demanding action to give fresh water to 1.1 billion people who currently have poor supplies / poor quality water? It is a known fact that global warming -- amongst other exacerbating factors -- is compounding the water crisis, furthermore, that two-thirds of the world's population will live in water-stressed countries by 2025. This in itself, and evidenced in South Africa, leads to massive instabilities and conflict between communities and their governments.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF³ (the United Nations Children's Fund), there are 1.1 billion people, which represents 18% of the world's population, who lack access to safe drinking water and 2.6 billion people (42%) who lack access to basic sanitation. This calamity leads to many other problems, not least the health issues such as those of diarrhoea and the fact that 443 million school days are lost globally to this illness and 1.8 million children die from water related diseases every year. Realistically, while the MDG for access to safe drinking water appears likely to be reached in most regions, sub-Saharan Africa does not appear likely to achieve this goal.⁴

Consider the fact that the WHO/UNICEF estimate that an additional investment of US\$ 11.3 billion per year⁵ will be required to achieve the MDG for the most basic drinking water and sanitation, it takes no genius to understand that this is a global crisis and that all hands will be required on deck, so to speak.

Clearly, whilst this problem directly affects individuals -- and mostly those in outlying rural areas -- there are also massive implications upon businesses, who are not immune to the consequences. A social entrepreneurial South African company engaged in prospecting for, and developing new energy and new water resources, Touchstone Resources (Pty) Ltd, quickly points out that a key issue facing our businesses relates to the assurance of its water supply (AOS). AOS is the guarantee that a given quantity of water, including its pressure and quality, will be delivered at a given place and time and such that through its provision the business operations will not be disrupted.

Interestingly, according to the National Water Resource Strategy of 2004, 98% of the national water resource had been allocated as AOS at that date. That AOS is now rapidly declining and some enterprises will start to see more frequent breakdowns as the security of our water becomes more threatened. When the breakdown happens, it can be catastrophic, particularly considering our existing challenges with service delivery in most of the municipalities in South Africa, who offer piecemeal repairs. These breakdowns can become permanent and those businesses who are largely dependant on water -- as a part of their operations -- will need to expedite their risk strategy to consider the manner in which they deploy on-site water storage, redesign their operational parameters as well as the manner in which they will generate water pressure required for their factories, which is normally provided by the water bulk suppliers.

Once again, there is a call upon the attitudes and actions of governments and business leaders regarding their strategic plans, their timing and the investment they are instituting to address a worsening and potentially catastrophic situation.

Simply put, when there is no water, our health, our food and our business supply chains are directly impacted and human health protection becomes a major challenge. And so the final question remains; have we run out of time to save the world's most precious resource -- fresh water -- and if not, will South Africans act with the same speed and action undertaken in our US example, to protect and sustain the people of our nation?

1. *Water will be source of war unless world acts now, warns minister - by Ben Russell, Political Correspondent, Saturday, 22 March 2008*
2. *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG%20Report%202010%20En%20r15%20-low%20res%2020100615%20-.pdf>
3. *WHO/UNICEF - <http://www.unicef.org/>*
4. *WHO/UNICEF, 2005 : 26*
5. *WHO/UNICEF, 2005 : 2*

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