

Disintegration of water and sanitation services aggravates C-19 threat

THE effects of the novel Covid-19 pandemic are sending shockwaves through the world on many levels. In South Africa these effects, mostly resulting from the intense lockdown, provide a hint of our weaknesses and what the changing climate will force upon us - this according to Cobus Meiring of the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF).

As part of a series of ongoing debates with key stakeholders, GREF interviewed esteemed epidemiologist and community health expert of Stellenbosch University, Dr Jo Barnes, on the importance of water in the context of community health and how water may well become a vector for more diseases in the immediate future if drastic

amelioration measures are not heeded.

Says Dr Barnes: "The pandemic of the new coronavirus across the world is the single-most destructive health event for more than a century and it continues to cost human lives and wreck the economy.

"As the outbreak carries on spreading, the role of water in combatting the virus becomes more and more dire. Handwashing with soap, when done correctly, is critical in the fight against Covid-19.

"However, a significant segment of our population has no consistent access to safe water to wash their hands. This is particularly distressing, given the longstanding efforts to make basic hygiene and safe sanitation available to the whole population.

"Water tanks are being made available to many communities to bring water closer to homes, but no mention is made of the provision of soap. Rinsing hands without proper washing with soap is basically a waste of water and offers little protection, since water alone does not dislodge more than a small number of the virus particles," she says.

Dr Barnes also raises concerns about the number of water tanks installed in communities. "There is little information on how many of these tanks have actually been installed and, even more importantly, on how often and from where they will be refilled.

"Research on other strains indicates that the virus can survive up to 12 days in room-temperature tap water, two to three days in room-temperature wastewater, and much longer in both at cooler temperatures. We do not yet have reliable information on the present virus.

"This has serious implications for the many families who have to fetch water from a distant source and store it in a bucket or open container. It also indicates that poor disposal of water after use in the home can pose risks to the environment and the health of other people," warns Dr Barnes.

"One of the most urgent weaknesses brought into sharp focus by this pandemic is the lack of sufficient progress in the



WHAT A WASTE: Covid-19 highlights the lack of sufficient progress in the provision of safe access to water to countless communities across South Africa - Photo: Dr Jo Barnes

provision of safe access to water and sanitation in a large number of communities across South Africa.

"When the outbreak has been brought under some sort of control, we must reprioritise our activities to pay far more attention

to basic human needs. This is not negotiable," she concludes.

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), 47% of the world population is going to experience water scarcity by 2030. Desertification is on the increase everywhere in the world.

In Africa, almost 70% of the continent is arid or semi-arid. If no measures are taken, water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, is expected to cost some regions up to 6% of their economic growth.

In March, World Water Day 2020 focused on the interconnectedness of water and climate change. According to the WEF, water is the primary resource affected by climate change, with repercussions on the supply of drinking water, sanitation, and water used for food and energy production.

In other words, as agreed by environmental experts: "If climate change is a shark, then water is its teeth."

• GREF is a public platform for environmental management entities in the Southern Cape, and a regional think tank on climate change mitigation and adaptation.



PRIMARY PROTECTOR: Dr Jo Barnes is an epidemiologist, community health expert and senior lecturer at the Department of Global and Public Health at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences of Stellenbosch University

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News Briefs

• By 6pm yesterday, provincial data were updated for the period up to 1pm on May 26, when the Western Cape had 7,555 active cases of Covid-19, with a total of 15,756 confirmed cases, 7,844 recoveries, and 357 deaths. The number of tests totalled 128,558. Of 665 hospitalisations, 178 were in ICU or high care by yesterday afternoon.

The total number of cases in the Cape Town Metro was 13,747 (7,160 recoveries), with Garden Route numbers as follows: Bitou 14 (six recoveries), Knysna 45 (20), George 60 (21), Mossel Bay 30 (22), and Oudshoorn nine (three).

Screenings done on the Garden Route counted 83,132 by May 25, with 433 cases referred for testing. Visit the dashboard at www.westerncape.gov.za/coronavirus for additional data.

The total of 128,558 tests completed in the Western Cape by Tuesday represents a 400% increase in the number of tests conducted in the province since April 25. This increase has resulted in a considerable backlog in the processing of these tests and in the release of results by the National Health Laboratory Services.

The Western Cape has previously written to both president Ramaphosa and Health minister Mkhize regarding these backlogs, which has now grown to 18,000 tests. During his recent

visit to the province, Dr Mkhize indicated that the delays were due to the shortages of reagents and test kits experienced worldwide.

Local door-to-door screening this week include The Crags (Kurland Village), Sedgefield, and Thembaletu Zones 3 and 4 in George.

Note that community screening is not the only option, with other methods including the self-assessment risk tool at www.westerncape.gov.za/department-of-health/sars-cov-2-risk-assessment-form; any primary healthcare facility (be sure to call ahead to book your screening); and your local GP or district hospital (call ahead).

• The Democratic Alliance (DA) last week welcomed the election of Leon van Wyk as mayor of George. Said local constituency head Geordin Hill-Lewis: "We congratulate Leon and wish him and the DA team in George well for their term in office."

"Leon brings with him the integrity, energy and humility needed for the job. He will take the lead in focusing on attracting investment, growing the local economy, and retaining George's status as one of the best places to live in South Africa."

Hill-Lewis concluded that this was also a historic election: "To our knowledge, it was the first time a mayor has been elected in a virtual council meeting."