



Publication: Citizen, The (Daily) - Main
Title: OPINION: Is it a state Disaster?
Publish date: 17 Aug 2023
Page: 8

Reach: 24431
AVE: R 94249.51
Author: Staff Reporter

OPINION

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⇒ **Call on premier demonstrates accountability from citizens.**

Sewage pollution in South African cities and towns often makes news headlines.

Municipal officials and experts associated inadequate wastewater treatment with the recent cholera outbreak in Hammanskraal and Parys.

This highlights the importance of properly managing and maintaining such facilities to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Forty-seven people died. Farmers nearby also complain about the negative consequences on crop production.

The most recent example, reported by the media, is sewage pollution in Mokopane. What drew attention was the Mogalakwena Concerned and Affected Communities' call to announce a state of disaster.

The group says it is not normal for the environment to be full of sewage lakes and fountains due to a broken sewage plant.

Is the call for Limpopo premier Stanley Mathabatha to announce a state of disaster a political ploy or justified?

Interest groups use various tactics to draw attention to a policy problem. Direct personal communication between groups and government officials or administrators is one. Political science considers it the most effective. The call for a state of disaster is a tactic to highlight the seriousness of the issue.

The disaster narrative shows how people view the matter, react to it, and how the government should respond. Further-

Is it a state of disaster?

MOKOPANE: ENVIRONMENT FULL OF SEWAGE LAKES AND FOUNTAINS



HEALTH HAZARD. Sewage spills in Thulani, Snake Park, in Soweto recently. Picture: Nigel Sibanda

more, local governments and their governance mechanisms must change the narrative through proper water politics and governance.

Politics is critical in enhancing water governance processes as the authoritative allocation of values and resources in the polity.

Residents have a more subjective view of pollution problems, but their beliefs based on observation are not useless. The Green Drop Report supplies objective scientific evidence supporting their concerns. The 2022 report highlighted that the Limpopo department of public works needed to prepare adequately for the Green Drop audit. The department should have provided information to aid the

audit process or strive for positive scores.

The recently appointed sanitation administrator needed to be made aware of the department of water and sanitation's regulatory role and the outcomes of earlier Green Drop projects. The department observed a regressive pattern in the province's Green Drop status.

The Green Drop programme solely inspects sewage treatment plants, not the entire wastewater system. Nonetheless, given the recent cholera outbreak, it is understandable that people are concerned about sewage flowing in the streets.

To clarify, we must pay attention to the Green Drop programme's findings and the

wastewater that flows through residential areas, ending up in streams and rivers. Deteriorating environmental health does not bode well for human health.

It is, therefore, understandable that Mogalakwena Concerned and Affected Communities (MCAC) are calling for the declaration of a state of disaster.

The disaster narrative is a tactic by the organisation to communicate their belief in the seriousness of the issue.

What are the prospects of the provincial government declaring a state of disaster? We must review the Disaster Management Act regulating disaster governance to answer this.

The Act defines a disaster as a natural or human-caused event that can occur suddenly or gradually and affect a wide area or a specific location. It may result in loss of life, injury, illness, damage to property, infrastructure,

or the environment and disruption of community life. The impact of a disaster can be severe and beyond the ability of the affected individuals to handle it on their own.

The Act mandates national, provincial and local governments to prevent or reduce disaster risk. The MCAC may have a point in calling on the premier to declare a state of disaster.

Sewage pollution could be a severe public health threat, cause damage to the environment and disrupt community life. Authorities still need to find the source of the Hammanskraal cholera outbreak, which is a case in point. Although media reports associated it with poorly maintained municipal wastewater infrastructure, laboratory test results found no presence of the virus in the wastewater.

However, in Mokopane, the situation fails the test of a disaster along two lines: it is mild and within the ability of residents to handle using their resources. The pollution has not caused a severe epidemic resulting in deaths or injury. Based on this alone, there is no need for a disaster declaration. This is not to say the status quo will remain.

The call by the MCAC indicates that residents take exception to pollution in their communities; they know the potential risks. They communicate a de facto vote of no confidence in the municipal council to respond to the situation. The call on the premier speaks for itself.

In a democratic system, accountability is a governance cornerstone. Those actors delivering governance must be held responsible for their actions. None or poor service delivery annoys citizens, and accountability from citizens is essential for democratic governance.

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Residents take exception to pollution in their communities