

## Free Basic Water and Climate Change

---

proceedings from EMG's second informal but structured discussion on  
*water and climate change*

11 February 2009, Josephine Mill, Cape Town

### Introduction

Jessica Wilson, EMG, welcomed all participants, who came from government, civil society and academia. Many others had expressed interest in attending but were unable to. A taxi strike meant there were last minute apologies from people from Khayelitsha.

Jessica thanked those who had attended the first seminar that had been used to design the seminar series for 2009 (overview available). The seminar purpose is twofold: firstly to *explore the content* and links between water and climate change, and secondly to *build a group of people, a network*, that can interact over a sustained length of time. This in itself is an adaptation response and part of building resilience.

In terms of content, we know that climate change is real, that the water crisis is real, and that we need to look at them together. This series explores *how* we respond and reminds us that no response or a bad response will leave people more vulnerable. EMG's intention is to write a 'thought piece' emerging from each of the seminars to track the conversation and ideas.

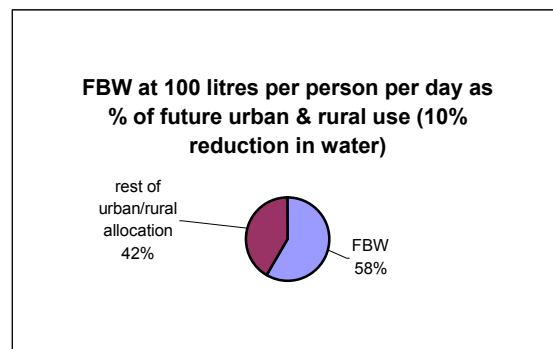
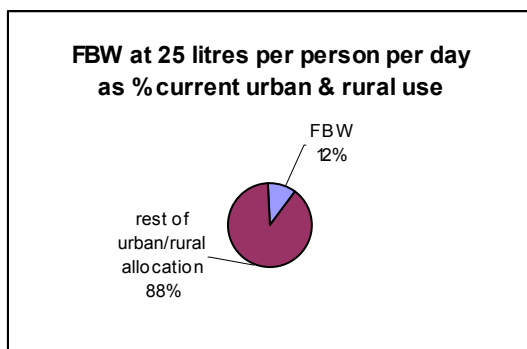
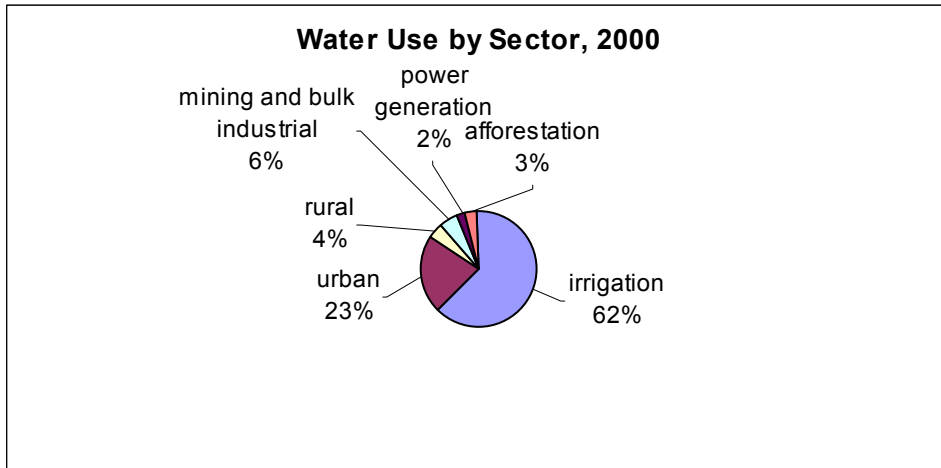
Today's seminar is on *Free Basic Water and Climate Change*. Why? There are three reasons:

Firstly: climate change impacts on water provision at a primary level through resources changes, for example in the Western Cape where water may become more scarce. It also has secondary impacts through finance. Getting water to people will become more expensive due to higher infrastructure costs (rebuilding storm-damaged wastewater treatment plants, possible desalination, and so on), greater distances between available water and where it is used, increased variability of water which impacts assurance of supply.

Secondly: more and more municipalities are citing scarcity as a reason to restrict peoples' access to water. (If it is not *resource* scarcity, it is *financial* scarcity).

Thirdly: 25 litres per person per day (or in some instances less because it is 6kl per erf/plot per month) is not enough. The Johannesburg High Court ruling on the Mazibuko case states that 6kl is a *floor* not a ceiling, and orders the City of Johannesburg to supply 50 litres per person per month. (The ruling is currently under appeal).

Jessica finally presented three pie charts for participants to think about.



### Why do we have to rethink Free Basic Water: a human rights perspective

Jeff Rudin from South African Municipal Workers Union presented a paper (attached). He argued that the problem is primarily a political one. He explained the importance of universal provision, and of dignity when deciding on a minimum amount of water (SAMWU argues for 94.5 litres per person per day, *excluding* water needed for flush toilets). Inequality is reflected in water supply and sanitation. FBW is being applied to fewer and fewer people, thus dividing the poor, “means testing congratulates the rich for their charity.” He argued that there *is* enough water for all, that the failure is with water resource management and that water allocation is market driven. Golf courses take precedence over people’s needs. Financing should be restructured to ensure: all users, including industry pay for their profligacy; rising block tariffs with proper cross-subsidisation; central government redirects some of the billions from Gautrain, parliamentary openings and other things to water.

### What are the resource constraints to providing free water for all?

Patrick Dowling from Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) presented some points for us to consider in our discussions (slides attached). In commenting on SAMWU’s ‘cheeky’ position of 94.5 litres, he noted that many people in rural areas use a lot less than 25 litres and that our (W. Cape water caucus) Water Leaks Project showed that poor households can also use a lot of water (often through unfixed leaks). So was it a question of providing all water for free, or paying for some of it? He noted some problems with providing large

amounts more for free. These include increased profligacy, less independence, collapse of ecosystems and high energy use for desalination (thereby exacerbating climate change). He said we needed to tackle the flat rate tariff system for industry and experiment with alternative sanitation options in rich households.

## Discussion

After some plenary debate, we broke into small groups for deeper discussion, to identify striking issues and to explore whether we need to re-think Free Basic Water in light of climate change. What emerged included...

### **Is water scarce in South Africa? and how much should people be getting... free...**

It is difficult to say how much water there is in South Africa altogether as it depends on which water is being considered. South Africa has about 1000 cubic metres (a million litres) per person stored – not as bad as India and not nearly as “good” as Canada<sup>1</sup>.

25 litres per person per day is grossly insufficient. The question is whether additional water that people need is provided free (for all or some) or paid for (by all or some). FBW could be provided in context of other sources, e.g. augmented with rainwater harvesting.

Is there a meeting place of FBW and affordability? “Freeness” affects attitude, rights and responsibility, etc

### **Can tariffs do the trick? And other thoughts around pricing and financing**

Currently water pricing is punitive for the poor, but truly excessive use (by the rich?) is not unduly penalized. A tariff system should provide FBW, then ease in, then *high* charges. This raises a question of whether there is necessarily a direct relationship between wealth and high consumption; between high consumption and excessive (prodigal) use; and whether tariffs are the best instrument for regulating consumption. (*This issue will be explored further in EMG’s water and climate change May seminar that focuses on tariffs*).

We need to know how much it costs to produce and provide water. These costs must be considered when deciding how much water is for free and what the price

---

<sup>1</sup> Population Action International (PAI) adapted Falkenmark's concepts to calculate water stress and scarcity in 1995, with an update in 1997 and projections for 2025 and 2050. The results are startling: in 1995, PAI estimated that 31 countries, home to nearly half a billion people, regularly faced either water stress or water scarcity. In 2025, 48 countries containing about 3 billion people will face water shortages. By 2050 the figures will be 54 countries containing 4 billion people, or 40 per cent of the projected world population of 9.4 billion. More recent estimates underscore how bad the situation has gotten since 2000. UNEP, in its Global International Waters Assessment in 2006, claims that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will already be living in conditions of acute water scarcity, while two thirds of humanity (over 5 billion) will be living in countries experiencing water stress (shortages for all or part of the year).

A substantial portion of the total freshwater supply is needed to sustain marshes, rivers, coastal wetlands, and the millions of species they shelter. As humanity withdraws a growing share of all available freshwater, less is available to maintain vital wetland ecosystems. Already, over 20 per cent of the approximately 10,000 freshwater fish species in the world are either endangered, threatened or going extinct.

of additional water is. Costs vary from municipality to municipality for various reasons. The role of Water Boards was noted. They act as middle managers, take money and increase the price of water. There is no tariff regulator so the price of increased FBW will be different for different municipalities.

### **To link or not to link FBW and climate change**

The link between FBW and climate change is not there and not helpful. By linking we are putting pressure on FBW. It is also not useful to link them because of the complexity inherent in both.

On the other hand... we need a precautionary approach. FBW is a subset of other things. The right to a particular quantity of water won't help anybody if the water is not there. We need to link them because we are adapting to a changed future. This requires lots of contextual information and a systematic approach.

### **Water and human development**

Water is critical for human dignity and many other things, but it will not on its own solve problems of poverty. It should be linked to a Basic Income Grant and form of package; people could be given money to pay for it. This would allow cross-subsidisation at a national level.

### **Water and the economy**

We need to see how water contributes to society's well-being, which includes GDP. Balance the different users and look at appropriate use within each, which includes a broad understanding of efficiency, such as which crops to plant. Agriculture and industry must also be engaged. How significant are domestic users as total of all users? (*this information is remarkably difficult to pin-down*).

### **What of rainwater harvesting?**

Rainwater harvesting was suggested as a way to augment supply but it is not necessarily the best or cheapest way to capture and store water; it depends on area and climate. In the Western Cape most rain falls in winter, whereas it is the summer months that the shortages are most acute. A technical discussion on the merits and difficulties of rainwater harvesting began. (*This will be picked up in a future seminar.*)

### **Concluding remarks**

Jessica observed that some issues emerging were whether FBW should be universally provided or targeted at only some households, quantities of water that should be free and/or at affordable levels, what the *actual* links are between water and climate change, the importance of understanding costs of water provision and the implications of different financing options. Jeff and Patrick were given the opportunity to make concluding remarks.

*Jeff Rudin, SAMWU*

My paper doesn't mention what I've subsequently described as a class bias because it emerged (if it emerged at all, other than for me) only during the course

of the morning. What struck me during the meeting is that very few of the concerns about FBW – supply, cost, environment, global warming etc – were specific to FBW yet they were being raised in the narrow context of FBW. The interpretation I gave to this otherwise strange phenomenon was a class one: faced with the prospect of increasing FBW to the poor, the rich – i.e. us – raised all sorts of objections which were much more appropriately raised in the context of water in general and national water use. Climate change is probably a clear example of this. Objecting to increasing the amount of *basic* water because of its impact on global warming without raising even stronger objections against profligate water use by the rich and industry etc. is clearly a class bias. Or at least, this is my argument.

Jeff also commented on people's critique of SAMWU's 94.5 litres stating that most numbers are Cape Town's *own figures*, e.g. for bath or shower and based on their waterwise calculations. He said we needed to look across the sector for efficiency, e.g. what crops are grown and for whom. Finally he said a stepped tariff system can ensure universal provision (as opposed to only providing those who have 'proved' they are poor).

*Patrick Dowling, WESSA*

Water is the key element of a total ecosystem that also supports human social existence and economic activity. Its integrity is therefore essential, but it is already stressed. New supplies are difficult to guarantee under these circumstances.

It is therefore extremely important to evaluate where water is being used at the moment and adjust sectoral provision equitably without ecosystem impairment. (I can just imagine all the dam engineers punting the need for more water for the desperate poor as justification for huge new impoundment projects).

When talking water it is imperative that we emphasise its value and responsibility for husbanding it well – and not just bang on about rands and cents issues. (I wouldn't give a tinker's cuss if people got all the water for their needs for free as long as it did not promote prodigal use and compromise ecosystems. (Collapsed ecosystems have never been good for people – viz Easter Island, Tahiti, Newfoundland, Mediterranean, lake Victoria, Aral sea – list goes on)).

I would be especially reluctant about augmenting supply to anyone with an indifferent, ignorant, careless or cavalier attitude to the value and dynamics of water and its place in our total society, economy and natural environment.

## **Evaluation**

Glad to hear the debate on FBW; nice diverse group of people; want to know how this feeds into policy – looking to EMG for feedback; didn't learn enough about climate change; need a whole day; look at what other sectors, e.g. irrigation are doing; didn't get the connection between FBW and climate change; want to see the issue taken forward; insightful; similar debates on energy tariffs.

Suggestions for future seminars and other work:

- Series of statements on topic with red dot indicators of support from participants
- Getting input from CMA head honchos
- Factoring in resource economics perspectives
- Listing best practice examples – high and low tech
- Taking forward into policy with feedback to participants

### What next?

We agreed to consider working towards ‘agreed conclusions or statements’ emerging from this seminar series that could help guide policy. In the meantime, participants will raise issues as and when they can through existing policy processes (e.g. SA Water Caucus discussion with DWAF and DPLG).

The discussion emerging around tariffs will be taken further in EMG’s May seminar, *household water provision: the role of tariffs and other allocation mechanisms*.

EMG will write a ‘thought piece’ on *FBW and climate change*, arising in part from this seminar’s discussions.

### Participants and thanks

Thanks to all the participants:

Atoofa Jamal	Independent
Bradley Nethononda	Dept. Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (W. Cape)
Faldela de Vriess	City of Cape Town Citizens Voice
Gina Ziervogel	University of Cape Town
Hameda Deedat	SA Water Caucus / Ecocare Trust
Jeff Rudin	SA Municipal Workers Union
Jessica Wilson	Environmental Monitoring Group
Ludwe Mbhele	Sustainable Energy Africa
Nadine Methner	UCT – PhD student
Patrick Dowling	WESSA
Taryn Pereira	Environmental Monitoring Group
Tony Brutus	Dept. of Water Affairs and Forestry, W. Cape
Tony Davenport	Josephine Mill
Veronica Mukasa	Dept. Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (W. Cape)
Yachika Reddy	Sustainable Energy Africa

Thanks also to Heinrich Böll Foundation and Masibambane who support EMG’s work on water and climate change.