

## Drought and democracy Mike Muller

# El Nino warning means SA is ripe for a debate on water

**N**OBEL prize-winning economist Amartya Sen famously remarked that where there was democracy, there was no famine. It was a little optimistic, but we know what he meant and, from Angola to Zimbabwe, via Ethiopia and Chad, Africa has had enough evidence of the contrary practice.

But can our version of democracy and the free speech that comes with it protect us from drought? Last week, the South African Weather Service warned of an impending El Nino event of the kind which, in the past, has been associated with droughts in southern Africa. Is this the beginning of the water crisis that we have all been waiting for since Eskom, strangled by the National Energy Regulator of SA and the politicians, was forced to switch the lights off last year?

On the bright side, there is evidence that the water sector is better prepared, in part because it avoided the dysfunctional regulatory structures that were prescribed for electricity and telecommunications. There are three, unlikely, indicators of this.

The first was the discussion in Parliament earlier this month on tariff proposals by the country's water boards, which supply most of the main conurbations (Cape Town and the Nelson Mandela Metropole have different arrangements). The second was the June issue of *Civil Engineering*, the journal of the South African Institution of Civil Engineering, one of our oldest professional institutions (it was founded in 1903), which focused on strategic water planning. The final indicator was the weather report, or more precisely the weather service's El Nino advisory.

The importance of these indicators was illustrated by the electricity saga, during which vested interests held information closely to their chests and fought behind closed doors using the convoluted language of a regulator designed to privatise, not provide, services, which excluded the general public.

By contrast, the water issues facing the country are now squarely in the public domain in relatively plain language.

So we learnt that many water boards tabled higher-than-inflation tariff proposals, mostly to support their plans for investment to meet future needs, although some were simply opportunistic or sought to compensate for municipal clients that had not paid their bills. But, with a few exceptions, the boards had identified their key challenges, were working to address them and had agreed on their proposals with the municipalities concerned.

Then the civil engineers told us that the most likely causes of future water shortages in the main conurbations are farmers using water illegally and municipalities that fail to implement water-saving measures. In the inland areas, water quality rather than quantity is the main problem, due largely to poorly



performing municipal sewage works. But their key message is that we can meet our water needs until 2030 – if we are disciplined in our use of water and make the necessary investments at the right time.

And perhaps it is here that the problem lies. In Parliament, many of the boards complained that Water Affairs Minister Buyelwa Sonjica (who presided over the electricity crisis, although it was created by her predecessor) is repeating the political mistake by curbing price increases because they are politically unpalatable, even if that causes crucial investment to be delayed.

An example of those crucial investments is the construction of the new Spring Grove dam in KwaZulu-Natal, whose implementation Umgeni Water is delaying, apparently because of financial pressures. As a result, with an El Nino looming, there is now a real risk that Durban could face water restrictions, if not in 2010 then at least by 2011 – the region fortunately starts with full dams this year. This

already tells an important story – even those parts of SA most blessed with water resources will run short if they are not properly managed.

The imminence of El Nino may help to concentrate some minds, although the awkward fact is that we cannot know if it will cause a drought. (The weather service carefully says that “the 2009-10 El Nino event may not be very strong. However, the intensity of El Nino events does not indicate how much the event may influence southern African rainfall totals during the summer months – the relatively weak El Nino events at the beginning of the 1990s were associated with intense drought over the region, while rainfall totals during the very strong 1997-98 event were close to the average over the larger part of SA. Notwithstanding, El Nino events are much more often associated with drought conditions over the region than not.”)

What is missing from this picture is the public debate. The water board pricing discussion was not reported in any of the major

newspapers. Similarly, the delays to Spring Grove dam, which could seriously damage the economy of the Durban region if we move into an overdue long-term drought cycle, are mentioned only in passing.

But perhaps that just makes the point. Democracy can defeat drought – but only if that democracy really works. That means not just having free speech but using it and nurturing the technical capacities that inform it. In our current conjuncture, while we have the trappings, it is not obvious that we can sustain them. The electricity debacle demonstrated that what gets the juices of our political classes running is the prospect of private profit rather than public gain. While the public allows that to continue, we live with the threat of dark nights and dry taps.

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