

7 reasons why rural sanitation, wastewater management is vital for SA

By [Chetan Mstry](#)

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We live in a digital and connected world where we can fashion medicine through genetics and send rockets into orbit like clockwork. Yet over two billion people still lack access to basic sanitation, and at least a quarter of those practice open defecation. The problem is very acutely a rural one: 91% open defecation and 72% of people without basic sanitation are in rural areas, according to Unesco.



Chetan Mstry, strategy and marketing manager for Xylem Africa

It's easy to forget about these people yet addressing their essential water and sanitation needs will boost all of the nation. I'm not alone in this opinion: a 2020 paper from Walter Sisulu University notes the connection between rural sanitation and overall social progress in a country.

Rural and urban areas are interlinked. I want to raise some examples of how rural conditions can impact national ambitions by asking why we should solve rural wastewater treatment and sanitation?

It can address the past

South Africa's colonial past has left a lasting impact on rural development. The majority of water and sanitation infrastructure reached a minority outside of urban centres. SA's Water Supply and Sanitation Policy notes that water and sanitation issues are related to the background of housing, migration, land, social progress and national development. Addressing rural water and sanitation challenges is a potent way to address the ghosts of historic segregation.

It makes women and children safer

Women, children and the elderly dominate rural populations. Thus, when we refer to this or that percentage of rural people, it overwhelmingly represents women and children. Many rural communities draw water from undeveloped local sources, creating ample opportunities for crime and inter-community conflict. Collecting water is also a tremendous time burden, reducing the community's effectiveness. Addressing rural water issues is a direct win for women and children, making them safer and more productive.

It saves energy

Not much needs to be said here: the lack of clean water means that rural communities use a lot of electricity to boil water or source local wood, leading to more environmental problems such as erosion. Several studies show that the availability of developed water and sanitation sources, such as dams and wastewater treatment facilities, impact local usage of energy and natural resources in positive ways.



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It's critical for education

South Africa suffers from a scourge of pit toilets - by the last count, over 3,000 schools still have only pit toilets. They are often filthy, smelly and unsafe for human use. Pit toilets are a problem in most underdeveloped communities, and headlines of children drowning in them are unfortunately not uncommon. Nor are stories of people being attacked in these remote and unattractive sites. Students who feel unsafe and uncomfortable do not learn well. Solving such rural challenges will be a big win for education.

It improves tourism

Many rural communities congregate around natural and undeveloped water resources. In their desperation to use those resources, which are often polluted by human activities, they engage in activities that devastate natural habitats that attract tourism. The practise of open defecation is also a deterrent for tourism activities. Yet if a community is equipped to access safe and clean water services, they also have reasons to protect the local environment and promote tourism activities.



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It eases healthcare burdens

The Covid-19 pandemic brought into a glaring focus that underdeveloped and rural communities do not have enough access to water for sanitation purposes. Many share communal taps, creating spaces for disease to spread. In situations where wastewater management lacks, contaminated water can pool to foster water diseases such as cholera. Pit toilets also contaminate the surrounding soil. If we can resolve rural water issues, it would take a tremendous burden off healthcare systems.

It helps secure water in South Africa

South Africa is a water-scarce country. There is a virtuous circle between good water access, wastewater management, and how much a community will care about those resources. If we help rural communities access water safely, we will ultimately reduce the burden on local water supplies.

According to the Environmental Performance Index, South Africa ranks 133 out of 180 for water and sanitation. This gap indicates a lot of potential we can exploit to make our country more inclusive and equal.



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We may face many challenges, but let's not think those are for urban dwellers and that the rural areas will inevitably follow the lead of cities. It works both ways: raise the tide for rural areas, and we'll see everyone benefit. Even just addressing rural water, wastewater management, and sanitation can spark a positive movement for all South Africans.

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