Empowering Philanthropy,
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SAPF Newsletter
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After Human Rights Day: From Promise to Action

Human Rights Day is more than just a date; it reminds us of our core values and responsibilities.

The gap between rights in law and rights in practice persists across South Africa, with dignity, access, and equality depending on the systems that support them.

Water highlights this disparity.

Recent national discussions, including the 2026 State of the Nation Address, highlight that water is a constitutional right and basic human need. However, continued sector challenges show that the problem lies in delivery, not policy.

This is not primarily an infrastructure challenge. It is a systems challenge driven by accountability gaps, leadership constraints, and limited technical capacity.

At SAPF, our work in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) is grounded in a practical framework:

- Rights define what must be upheld
- Needs define what must be delivered now
- Systems determine whether both are sustained

Encouragingly, innovation particularly from young South Africans, continues to demonstrate that viable solutions exist. The opportunity now is to ensure that these solutions are enabled within systems that function effectively and at scale.

If Human Rights Day is to retain its meaning, it must translate into measurable progress through capable institutions, accountable leadership, and systems that work.

This remains our focus.

Best,
Gill Bates (CEO – Southern Africa Philanthropy Foundation)

Human Rights: Beyond Frameworks and Ideals

Human rights extend beyond merely constituting a legal framework or abstract ideals; they represent practical responsibilities that significantly influence human dignity. Though established within international treaties, the realisation of human rights occurs when they are translated from theoretical "paper rights" into a concrete culture of accountability, responsibility and protection observed in everyday life.

On 21 March, South Africa observed Human Rights Day, commemorating the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre when apartheid-era police killed 69 peaceful protesters opposing pass laws. The conflict was bloody, but it gave rise to a framework for a country and a people to imagine a shared future.

The Bill of Rights established civil and political freedoms, but also included social and economic rights, such as access to healthcare, housing, and water. This framing moved these rights from abstract principles to fundamental needs essential for people's lives.

Thirty years on, we can celebrate several achievements: citizens now participate in regular elections, courts act independently, and civil society organisations function without repression. Yet, while we honour these milestones, Human Rights Day stands as both a solemn and urgent reminder of the ongoing challenges in achieving South Africa's constitutional ideals.

Water: A Fundamental Right and Necessity

Water is essential for life and raises the issue of necessity versus right. A purely rights-based approach to water would perhaps keep it in the realm of frameworks and ideals institutionalised but not acted upon with urgency and responsibility. Placing it within the context of need or necessity progresses the requisite action further.

Journalist Jeremy Maggs spoke with Dr Lester Goldman, CEO of the Water Institute of Southern Africa, about the nation's water crisis. They highlighted that the crisis is driven by failing infrastructure, weak leadership, and poor accountability. Up to 50% of treated water is lost due to leaks, theft, and inefficiency. The sector also faces a shortage of skilled professionals, poor management, and inadequate financial oversight, with municipalities struggling to maintain systems because of weak revenue collection.

Key solutions: hiring skilled staff, enforcing accountability, and improving financial management.

Audits like Blue Drop and Green Drop will be critical to track progress. Ultimately, better governance and accountability and not just more infrastructure are needed to resolve South Africa's water crisis.

Listen to the full podcast: SA's water crisis deepens as skills and leadership run dry

Water Access at the Intersection of Rights, Needs and Systems

SAPF operates within core areas when implementing Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) projects. This intersection forms a system that supports the broader ecosystem of community, geography, economy, and political will.

Whether it is installing essential water infrastructure or providing hygiene resources, SAPF remains mindful of all stakeholders including the environment, throughout its operations. The organisation addresses a fundamental need: access to water within specific geographic and environmental contexts.

These contexts differ, requiring nuanced approaches and project execution, including feasibility studies, stakeholder engagement, and the availability of local service providers and experts, among others. All these elements are integral parts of the "system," and project success depends on their alignment and agreement.

Drawing from years of practical experience rather than theory alone, SAPF has consistently delivered WASH projects and initiatives for its clients. At the core of this achievement is the commitment to viewing each initiative through the framework of Right,Needs, and Systems.

Image Source : (Unsplash)

SAPF Honours

Young South Africans who developed innovative water solutions:

- Unam Halam & Faith Claasen created "Drop Saver" at age 16 for leak detection, representing the country at the Stockholm Junior Water Prize.
- Ludwick Marishane invented "DryBath," a gel for cleaning skin without water, addressing hygiene and conservation in dry regions.
- Milo Shan developed "SMARter," an AI tool for monitoring soil moisture to conserve water in gardens
- Paseka Lesolang, founder of Wagienience, offers a water-leak solution for domestic and industrial markets.

These inventions address drought, water scarcity, and rising living costs in South Africa.

Unam Halam
Faith Claasen

Ludwick Marishane

Milo Shan

Paseka Lasolang

Looking Ahead

Our April edition highlights World Autism Day, World Health Day, and the World Day for Safety and Health at Work. In this issue, we examine how these priorities drive action through effective systems and partnerships that foster health, safety, and participation for everyone.

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