

WORLD TOILET DAY 2024

Since 2013 World Toilet Day has been observed worldwide on 19th November. This Day was established by the United Nations General Assembly with two goals in mind:

1. First of all, to raise global awareness of the “3.5 billion people [who] still live without safely managed sanitation, including 419 million who practice open defecation.” (WHO/UNICEF, 2023) This means that for more than 3.9 billion people their human right of safely managed sanitation, “is under threat from conflict, climate change, disasters and neglect.
2. Secondly, to help achieve Sustainable Development Goal number 6 [SDG 6], which seeks to provide safe and sustainable sanitation for all people by 2030. Hence World Toilet Day is also about the “Countdown to 2030”

Over the years, the Day has come to recognise safe sanitation and clean drinking water as an inalienable human right. Hence the Day focusses on the role of safe sanitation and clean water for people’s health and the integrity of the environment.



WHAT IS THE THEME FOR WORLD TOILET DAY 2024?

The UN’s coordination body for the annual water and sanitation campaigns is called UN-Water. This body determines the theme for both the water and sanitation campaigns. Hence while the theme for World Water Day 2024 was “**Water for Peace**”, the theme for World Toilet Day 2024 is “**Sanitation for Peace**”. The overarching theme in 2024 is therefore **PEACE**.

The wonderful slogan for its activities and action is “**Toilets – a Place for Peace**”.

WHAT IS MEANT BY “SANITATION FOR PEACE”?

According to UN-Water,

- Toilets are a place for peace.
- Toilets protect our health and safety.
- Toilets are a platform for progress.
- This essential space, at the centre of our lives, should be safe and secure. But for billions of people, sanitation is under threat from conflict, climate change, disasters and neglect.
- Faster action to improve and safeguard people’s access to sanitation is critical to building a fairer, more peaceful world!

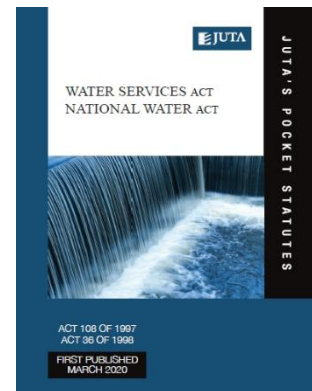
According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) “Sanitation for Peace” also means that a “toilet should be a secure, hygienic and private place where people can relieve themselves in dignity and safety – and it should be connected to a safely managed sanitation system to properly dispose of waste.”

WHAT IS MEANT BY A ‘SAFELY MANAGED SANITATION SYSTEM’?

In its News Release of 20th November 2024 the WHO explains it as follows

A safely managed sanitation system consists of a 4-stage “sanitation chain”:

1. **Containment:** human waste must be deposited into a hygienic toilet and stored in a sealed pit or tank, separated from human contact. Onsite containment may also safely treat waste.
2. **Transport:** if not treated onsite, pipes or latrine emptying services must move the waste to the treatment stage.
3. **Treatment:** waste must be processed into treated wastewater and waste products that can be safely returned to the environment.
4. **Disposal or reuse:** safely treated human waste can be used for energy generation or as fertilizer in food production.



WHAT IS THE STATUS OF ‘SAFELY MANAGED SANITATION’ IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA?

Access to safe and hygienic sanitation is a human right enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Chapter 2 of the Constitution provides that: “Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water.”

In order to give effect to this right, Parliament promulgated the Water Services Act (WSA) 108 of 1997 which provides for the right to basic water supply and basic sanitation services. The WSA recognises that the right of access to basic water supply and to basic sanitation services is necessary to ensure sufficient water and an environment that is not harmful to health or wellbeing of people and animals.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DELIVERY OF WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA?

All spheres of government, namely, national, provincial and municipal, must ensure that water and sanitation services are provided in an efficient, equitable and sustainable manner.

All spheres of government must strive to provide water supply and sanitary services sufficient for subsistence and sustainable economic activity.

National government manages water resources through various water boards.

Municipalities are responsible for the delivery of water and sanitation services and must draw up plans for delivery. These plans must include the effective delivery services to informal communities.

The Department of Water and Sanitation is the custodian of South Africa's water resources. It is mandated to promote effective and efficient water resources management to ensure sustainable economic and social development.

WHAT IS GOVERNMENT'S SPECIFIC ROLE REGARDING BASIC WATER AND SANITATION?

Government must provide:

1. At least 6 000 litres of safe water per household per month. The flow rate may not be slower than 10 litres per minute; the source of the water must be within 20 metres of the stand and safe for human consumption.
2. A toilet or ventilated pit latrine (VPL) which is safe, provides privacy, easy to keep clean, provides protection against the weather, well ventilated, prevents the entry of flies and pests which carry diseases and is environment-friendly.

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

At the conclusion of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which announced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Goal 6 of the SDG deals with the right to water and sanitation services for all in order to:

- Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
- Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030;
- Achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations by 2030.

South Africa has committed itself to achieve the SDG's within set time frames. Its National Sanitation Policy 2016 gives effect to these targets.



Picture: iStock

“DEATH-TRAP” PIT TOILETS: CATASTROPHIC SANITATION CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Notwithstanding South Africa's singularly progressive body of legislation, policies and various water boards, as well as its commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the country is facing a most serious sanitation crisis 30 years into its democracy. In a word: at more than 3,300 of South Africa's 23,000 public schools learners and staff have to relieve themselves in pit toilets or

practise open defecation! These underfunded schools are found mostly in the rural areas of the Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

The journalist Tembile Sgqolana produced the article **“No toilets. Pupils forced to use bushes” in the Daily Sun of 22 November 2024**. Sgqolana reports that Gcina Primary School in Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape, which was built in 1980, has no toilets at all. Learners and staff therefore have to “use bushes”, making themselves very vulnerable.

According to the Eastern Cape’s MEC for Education Fundile Gode 113,041 pupils at 427 schools across the province still use pit toilets. The MEC further said that “the department only plans to eradicate pit latrines this financial year”.

DA MPL Horatio Hendricks said:

“These toilets have proven to be death traps, especially for younger pupils as seats for pit toilets are often not sized for them and they can easily fall through into the pits below. Of the 427 schools listed, 141 are primary schools.”

In 2022 the department hired a contractor to build toilets. However, the contractor abandoned the site within a few days.

In the article **“New MPs in drive to fast-track overdue eradication of dangerous school toilets”** by the journalist Lisakanya Venna in the Daily Maverick of 17 July 2024, Venna reports that the chairperson of the new parliamentary committee for basic education is agitating for ‘speediness in tackling the long-standing crisis of dangerous pit toilets in South African rural schools’. The main agenda item of the parliamentary committee meeting was **“The Petition to Eradicate Pit Latrines in South African Public Schools”** handed to the parliamentary portfolio committee in 2023 by the Nguvu Collective, and calling on the minister of basic education to eradicate pit toilets and to protect the human rights of children in South Africa’s rural schools. The main points of the petition are based on an investigation into the critical state of sanitation in the Eastern Cape. They are:

1. Children and staff are forced to use “death-trap” pit toilets or resort to open defecation despite the Constitution guaranteeing the right to life, dignity, safety, health and sanitation.
2. The Polokwane High Court ruled on 17 September 2021 that pit toilets must be eradicated in all of South Africa, not just in Limpopo. Judge Gerrit Muller, criticising the lack of urgency by the national government, pronounced:
“...the replacement of pit toilets is a national emergency and must be treated accordingly.”
3. In 2018 President Cyril Ramaphosa and the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga ‘made a rosey presentation’ about how millions of rands have been raised and claimed to be “paying a dividend of democracy through education infrastructure”. Since nothing has happened, the questions raised in the petition are:
 - What happened to the money?
 - Why are we still discussing eradication of pit latrines?
 - Since 2018 how many pit latrines has the DBE demolished and replaced with proper toilets?
4. In the Eastern Cape 1 000 of 5 000 schools still use pit toilets. According to DispatchLive of 28 February 2023 the Eastern Cape forfeited R100 million of the Education Infrastructure Grant meant for public school infrastructure, although the infrastructure is ‘catastrophic’.
5. This particular article makes reference to the numerous hapless schoolchildren who have drowned in the pit toilet, or who have survived drowning but who are injured and scarred for life.
6. Minister Motshekga confirmed in March 2023 that the Department of Basic Education had identified 3,398 schools countrywide that use pit toilets. Hence the demand of the Nguvu Collective petition is that pit toilets in South African schools be eradicated by November 2024.



*A pit latrine toilet shared by more than five families in the Emandleni Section 1 informal settlement in Ekurhuleni on 29 November 2023.
(Photo: Gallo Images / Fani Mahuntsi)*

WILL THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY (GNU) ERADICATE “DEATH-TRAP” PIT TOILETS?

After the African National Congress (ANC) had lost its parliamentary majority in the Elections of 2024, it entered into a coalition with nine other parties to form a **Government of National Unity (GNU)** on 14 June 2024, with Cyril Ramaphosa as the president.

The new minister of basic education, Ms Siviwe Gwarube, promises to be a determined fighter for the eradication of pit toilet. At her maiden Basic Education Department Budget Vote 2024 / 2025 Minister Gwarube declared:

**“We cannot have learners in danger of drowning in pit toilets...
30 years into our democracy!”**

On 18 November 2024, the eve of World Toilet Day 2024, the non-profit organisation Breadline Africa celebrated its 25th school transformation of safely managed sanitation at the Deda Primary School in KZN.

The anniversary event was attended by Ms Siviwe Gwarube, Minister of Basic Education, and Mr Dean Macpherson, Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure, along with representatives from the Development Bank of Southern Africa and prominent businessman Mark Barnes, a long-time advocate for the elimination of pit toilets in South African schools.



Photographer James Howard-Davies 1

In her address at the event Minister Gwarube emphasised:

“School safety is a priority for me in the 7th Administration. Our learners need safe, conducive learning environments; this includes basic facilities such as safe and dignified flushing toilets.

Partnerships with the private sector and civil society will go a long way to eradicating all unsafe pit toilets in South Africa.”