



Johannesburg Water Crisis: A Human Rights and Economic Emergency

For attention:

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14 October 2025

RE: Urgent Response to Johannesburg's Water Crisis and Immediate Action on the People's Demands

Dear Mr Mayor and Esteemed Leaders,

We, the undersigned civil society organisations, community representatives, and residents of Johannesburg, write to you in unity and with deep urgency. Our city is facing a worsening water crisis that demands immediate, transparent, and accountable action from its leadership.

We therefore call on you, as the Executive Mayor and principal representative of Johannesburg's residents, to respond to our collective demands for an improved and equitable water system.

On **Saturday 1 November** we are gathering in protest at the **Johannesburg Council Chambers, at 11:00am**. After representatives of communities voice their experiences and expectations, we will be asking you to respond to the demands that are listed below. Your presence and response at this event will demonstrate a genuine commitment to listening to and working with, the people you serve.



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While you, Executive Mayor, are the primary respondent to these demands, we also call on all those addressed in this letter to ensure that authorised representatives attend the gathering.

The demands we set out below represent actionable steps toward restoring dignity, reliability, and justice in Johannesburg's water services. We look forward to your leadership and accountability in addressing them.

The realities we face

Johannesburg's water crisis has deepened into a human rights and economic emergency, crippling essential services, endangering public health, and eroding public trust. Millions of residents face daily water interruptions, dry taps, and inadequate sanitation. Hospitals, schools, and small businesses are being forced to operate without this most basic necessity - water.

Despite repeated assurances and public commitments, there has been no significant improvement in water access, infrastructure performance, or accountability. The people's right to water, enshrined in Section 27 of the Constitution, is being systematically violated through neglect, mismanagement, and the diversion of public funds.

Over the past few years, we have heard many excuses for the lack of water, from too much demand, load-shedding, to vandalism, old infrastructure, and no funds. These may all be true, but for the people on the ground these are mere excuses.

We believe that there are solutions to stabilise the system based on the Joburg Water's Turnaround Strategy. We welcome and support the Strategy, but we are concerned about the commitment of the City to implement it and the pace of its implementation. For this reason, we want greater transparency in implementation and the ability of civil society groups to monitor the process going forward.

Our demands are set out below.

1. Ringfence Water and Sanitation Infrastructure Funding by December 2025

Ringfencing allows for the revenues from the sale of water to be strictly used for Joburg Water and related infrastructure and not reallocated to other services in Johannesburg. The Executive Mayor has implied that this could be done by June 2026. This is too late.

The short-term plan presented by Joburg Water to the Presidential Joburg Working Group PJWG 2 on Water and Sanitation stated, "by August 2025 complete the framework (process plan) for the ringfencing of Joburg Water and start implementation". However, it appears that deadlines keep moving.



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We demand:

- **A completed framework by December 2025, enabling early implementation in 2026.**

2. Restore and Protect Johannesburg Water's Full Budget

We are deeply concerned about reports that R4 billion was swept from Joburg Water's account by the City of Johannesburg and not returned. While "sweeping" of municipal accounts is permitted under National Treasury rules, funds must be returned the next business day. The City's failure to do so violates Treasury regulations and raises serious concerns given the requirements of the Municipal Finance Management Act.

Budget cuts, withheld transfers, and financial interference have directly compromised maintenance, repairs, and service delivery. This is evidenced by the fact that many contractors working on key projects to restore sustainable water supply in Johannesburg have stopped work or left site due to non-payment.

We demand:

- **A public report on the R4 billion moved from Joburg Water accounts and where the funds are now or how they have been utilised.**
- **Evidence that contractors, whose payments were delayed due to this sweeping arrangement, have been paid**
- **Assurance that Joburg Water will receive its full, council-approved annual budget**

3. Implement and Publicly Track Infrastructure Repair and Expansion Projects

As the most populous city in the country, Joburg's deteriorating water infrastructure and management have brought it under scrutiny. Years of neglect, mismanagement, and corruption have plunged the city into a water crisis that threatens its residents' quality of life, economic stability, and future.

The end of Joburg's water woes will require a multifaceted approach that is focused on collaborative action. Immediate and decisive action is essential to prevent further deterioration.

The Joburg Water turnaround strategy recognises the urgency plaguing the sector and outlines clear short to medium term goals.

We demand full transparency on all ongoing and planned infrastructure projects, including:



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- **A detailed progress report and timeline for work on six reservoirs (HH2, Modder Hill, Meadowlands, Aeroton, Dunkeld, and Crown Gardens) that was due to commence in July 2025.**
- **Updates on the construction of five additional reservoirs (Yeoville, Jabulani, Power Park, Lenasia, and Alexander Park), with the process scheduled to start in October 2025.**
- **Going forward a monthly public dashboard tracking performance, repairs, and expenditure to restore confidence and accountability.**

4. Improve Response Times and Service Quality

One of the key issues plaguing the city is the percentage of water losses. Almost 44% of the water provided to the City of Johannesburg by Rand Water is lost through leaks or burst pipes and the theft of water that is not billed for.

We Demand:

- **That Johannesburg Water honours its commitment in the Turnaround Strategy to reduce response times for bursts and blockages from 48 hours to 24 hours.**
- **The establishment of district-based rapid response units by January 2026.**
- **Monthly statistics on callouts, repair durations, and areas affected.**

5. Review of Billing System and an Investigation into Air Billing

The City of Johannesburg's revenue collection sits at just 82%, well short of the National Treasury's 95% benchmark. The billing system is a huge concern for many residents who receive exorbitant bills, even when they go for weeks without water. The nightly throttling results in air filling the pipes and flowing through the water meter, creating false readings and bills. This long-ignored issue must be addressed to restore fairness and trust.

We demand:

- **Dedicated teams to urgently resolve billing anomalies.**
- **A full investigation into air billing and subsequent action to ensure that accounts reflect actual water usage.**

6. Establish Independent Oversight and Civil Society Participation

There is growing awareness and involvement of ordinary people in the affairs of the City of Johannesburg. Civil Society has been playing an important role – monitoring water access, exposing corruption, testing water quality, ensuring that communities



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get water during long outages and being more present and active in various groups such as the bomb squad and the Presidential working groups.

It is imperative that the government recognise the vital role that civil society can play given the wealth of knowledge, commitment and public intelligence available to move us beyond the risk of infrastructural collapse and towards a path of co-governance of water.

We demand:

The establishment of a single water forum that includes equal representation from civil society, community leaders, government and business sector representatives.

This body should:

- **Ensure public access to performance and expenditure data**
- **Monitor the implementation of the demands set out in this Memorandum**
- **Promote co-governance to sustain long-term accountability.**

We propose that the Presidential Johannesburg Working Group on Water and Sanitation be restructured to include equal representation and thus be able to play this role.

Civil society representatives on this forum commit to holding quarterly report-back meetings with residents of Joburg.

7. Ensure Transparency and Oversight of Water Tanker Use

The increasing dependence on water tankers in Johannesburg is unacceptable. Tankers were meant to be an emergency measure — not a permanent substitute for reliable, piped water. Their continued use represents a failure of governance, systemic neglect and an opportunity for corruption and profiteering. Johannesburg residents will not accept a future where access to clean water depends on who controls the tankers.

We demand:

- **A clear plan and timeline from Johannesburg Water to phase out reliance on tanker supply.**
- **The immediate publication of all water tanker contracts, including the cost per tanker per day.**



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- **A transparent accounting of the total expenditure on tanker services over the past three years.**
- **Speedy investigations and referral to relevant law enforcement authorities when there are allegations and evidence provided of corruption.**
- **A programme for the installation of piped water to be budgeted for and scheduled in low-income areas and informal settlements.**

8. Strengthen Governance and Accountability of Johannesburg Water's Board

Effective oversight of Johannesburg Water requires a board that is transparent, representative, and equipped with the necessary skills to manage such a vital public utility. The current governance structures must be reformed to restore public trust, improve performance, and ensure that decisions are made in the public interest rather than for political or private gain.

We demand:

- **Transparent appointment processes and term limits to prevent political interference and entrenchment**
- **The inclusion of representatives from key stakeholder groups — including civil society, labour unions, business, technical experts, and community organizations — on Johannesburg Water's Board.**
- **Skills and integrity assessments to ensure that board members have the requisite expertise in water management, finance, engineering, and governance, before they are appointed**
- **Regular public reports provided by the board on performance, spending, and service delivery outcomes.**

9. National and Provincial Support to address the Emergency

The right to clean, reliable water is not negotiable — it is a constitutional and moral obligation. Johannesburg's water crisis is no longer a local problem — it is a national emergency requiring coordinated intervention.

We demand from the Gauteng Provincial Government, the Department of Water and Sanitation, and the Presidency to provide:

- **Technical and financial support to stabilise the water supply network.**
- **Independent oversight to ensure transparent and effective use of funds.**
- **Capacity-building assistance to strengthen the City and Johannesburg Water's ability to deliver reliable services.**



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Executive Mayor, we are sending the above demands to you before the planned protest on 1 November 2025 so that you can respond to residents on the day.

The steps outlined in our demands offer a clear path toward restoring stability, accountability, and public confidence in the water system. Together, we can ensure that every resident enjoys their constitutional right to water and that Johannesburg becomes a city defined not by crisis, but by collective action and responsible leadership.

Kind Regards

FROM THE UNDERSIGNED BODIES

Abahlali Freedom Park

Abahlali Base Zola

Ahmed Kathrada Foundation

CADE

Climate Justice Coalition

Defend our Democracy

JhbCAN

Joburg Crisis Alliance

Professionals and Business for Change

Region F Civil Society Partnership

Rivonia Circle

Water Crisis Committee

WaterCAN

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