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# Securing Africa's drinking water

*Water scarcity is a daily fact of life for more than a third of Africans. With climate change threatening to further limit availability, the continent needs an urgent integrated solution if it is to safeguard the future of its communities and economies*

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**W**hen people think of South Africa, many things come to mind: Nelson Mandela, safaris and wine, for instance. But when I think of South Africa, I think of one thing – one woman, to be exact.

I met her almost a decade ago while visiting water access, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects in poor and rural African communities. She was single and raising five children, none of whom were in school. In fact, as she welcomed me into her home, they were all doing something with water: one was doing laundry by hand, another washing dishes, and a few carrying buckets.

I remember wondering what their futures would be without education, or if she had lost children due to water-related illnesses. But as she smiled bravely and told me about her life, I just remember my heart breaking. Despite being women of similar ages, our lives couldn't have been more different.

Of the estimated 800 million people who live on the African continent, more than 300 million live in a water-scarce environment. Diseases caused by inadequate water supply and sanitation kill more people every year than all forms of violence, including war. As the climate changes and development degrades natural resources, the strains on water and the implications of water scarcity will only intensify.

Even a slight decrease in water security threatens livelihoods and sends ripples

◀ A woman collecting water in the Rwenzori Mountains, Uganda. Climatic change has resulted in a considerable drop in the water levels

throughout economies, governments and the environment. As less water is available, farms lose productivity and crops, sending rural families to urban areas for work, spelling an exponential increase in demand for water in major cities. The hydropower plants produce less electricity, prompting the destruction of forests to make charcoal fuel. Fewer forests mean less space for wildlife, more carbon in the atmosphere and decreasing water quality due to sediment and soil erosion.

## Healthy communities

To successfully address this interconnected web of issues, we must have an interconnected solution. Sustainable access to fresh water and sanitation leads

managed, taking into account the available groundwater, surface water, sources of contamination and all users of water within the basin – from families to farms to businesses to hydropower. If you don't bring in all these actors who are working and living within a basin, a tap installed today might be running dry in five years, or be carrying water that isn't safe to drink.

It is crucial to remember this as world leaders finalise the Sustainable Development Goals, a UN-led global framework that will guide development priorities for the next 15 years. The goals will marshal the focus of governments, philanthropy, development agencies and international finance institutions. Currently there is a goal drafted that is dedicated to water and targets that

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to healthier people and economic growth, which facilitate improved environmental management. In other words, healthy communities help preserve a healthy planet, and a healthy planet is the foundation for healthy communities.

In the past, WASH programmes have been enacted in their own silos, separate from community development, wildlife and ecosystem management. This is one of the primary reasons so many WASH projects have limited success. For long-term fixes, the entire watershed needs to be sustainably

include not only water access, sanitation and hygiene, but also integrated water resources management, ecosystems and trans-boundary cooperation on shared waters.

This is what we need. This kind of integration is the best solution we have for the 300 million Africans who live in a water-scarce environment – including one strong mum and her five children. When I met her, I committed myself to water security. Today, I am excited to see governments ready to commit to the global goals that can help take us there. ●