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Article: We all have a role to play in making city more sustainable.(News)

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As the fine bristles of a toothbrush do their work, water gushes down a drain. A shopping trolley is full of products with packaging that will be in a landfill within days. An office is filled with equipment humming 24/7. A man sits alone in his car on the highway day after day, along with a million others. This is life in Cape Town. And we complain about service delivery.

It's right to hold the government accountable, but it's time to acknowledge that we also need to be accountable for our profligate lifestyles, and that the state's planning has a role in supporting or discouraging our behaviour.

The need for a reimagined infrastructure that underpins our city and assists citizens to be more ecologically responsible has never been greater, and is required to promote economic growth, compact urbanisation and a more equitable society.

Economists talk of efficiency for maintaining competitiveness, and poorly conceived infrastructure can make the physical city itself inefficient. Not only when there are inadequate roads, pipes or treatment plants, but also when design perpetuates waste.

And the competition for scarce resources adds social pressures to an already stressed job market.

With the pressure to invest for economic growth, what is going to give the Western Cape a common objective around which enabling infrastructure can be planned? Everyone seems to love mega projects, but the World Cup style of "hard" infrastructure needs to be complemented with social infrastructure - schools, clinics, hospitals, sports fields, orphanages and so on.

We have written before about the power of public spaces as platforms where democratic rights are entrenched and nurtured, complementing the exchange of ideas through various media. But this requires localising community, moving away from the idea of "the masses" and embracing debate around locally relevant concerns. And this is where a creative form of infrastructure can blossom.

Consider community-initiated campaigns that confronted government decisions, such as the one to preserve the Sea Point pavilion; or that rehabilitated public space through partnerships, like the Friends of the Liesbeek River. These successfully mobilised individuals around a shared cause that was locally important, but which had broader implications for city management.

But there's a problem. If our city officials are unable to quantify things like how much water is wasted and how best to ensure that there are fresh sustainable forms of potable water beyond the next five years, we as citizens have failed in our duty to hold government accountable. If we as citizens do not feel empowered to ask our councillors how their wards are contributing to a reduced ecological impact, then we have failed ourselves and them. We are all responsible.

Concepts like ecological health are important concerns for the future of Cape Town, but need to be packaged with initiatives that are locally relevant. Like Reclaim Camissa, "the place of sweet waters". This is an initiative to restore rivers and springs in the city, but it is much more than that.

Rivers in the inner city once sustained a population of 111 000 and replenished passing ships. Today, only 55 000 people live in the city bowl, and none of them uses this resource. This waste not only adds to the cost of supplying Cape Town with drinking water, it is a missed social opportunity. Restoring rivers as social infrastructure would mean recognising the full potential of the river corridors for recreation, education, sport, and any number of activities that serve not only residents adjacent to them, but the broader community as well.

Added to this is the concept of ecological services ("free services" provided by nature such as water treatment in reed beds, or pollination by bees) as a valuable resource. The provision of renewable (clean) energy through the re-instatement of water wheels would renew the water, irrigate urban landscaping and power the lighting of the public spaces of the city. But if waste is not seen as an economic cost, there is little incentive to reduce it. If we begin to pay for the real value of these "free" resources, then the potential benefits of projects like Reclaim Camissa might become more apparent.

Consumption-driven growth that ignores ecological costs and benefits has produced an unsustainable urban form that overburdens municipal systems and worsens social inequities. The state needs to achieve higher levels of productivity from its human and physical resource base to deliver services.

Ask your ward councillor what is being done to make your part of the city more sustainable. Does he or she know what sustainability means? Tell us what you find out - we would love to hear.

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