

Energy, water and food in spotlight at WWF-SA conference

WWF-SA's annual Living Planet Conference, held in Johannesburg on 30 July, explored the ways in which three of the most pressing crises currently facing South Africa - energy, water and food - might be addressed.



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The conference facilitated three panel discussions, one per issue. From the outset, however, speakers and delegates acknowledged that these are not discrete, siloed fields. Instead, they are so heavily interrelated that any attempt at separating them is not only artificial but, more importantly, indicative of a detrimental blindspot.

Deon Nel, conservation director at WWF International, contextualised these issues on a continental and regional level. He discussed discrepancies and opportunities, indicating that while South Africa has maxed out its water resources, only 7% of the continent's hydro power potential has been tapped. "The choices that Africa makes in the next five to ten years (in terms of energy, water and food) will lock us into a development pathway far into the future," said Nel. "It's a very critical time in Africa's development."

Energy discussion

Panel speakers during the energy discussion explored how the transition to an energy system that is flexible, resilient and adaptable might be funded. Conversations focused on renewable energy sources and the attending issues of responsibility, capital cost outlay and, according to Dr Velaphi Msimang, of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, the necessity for paradigm shifts. "South Africa's economy was built on the exploitation of minerals and the mindset is difficult to shift," he said.

In the panel discussion on water, speakers unpacked the fundamentals that need to be changed in rethinking water security for South Africa. Conversations explored the mismanagement of waste water and effluent, and of the role currently being played by local municipalities and governmental entities.

Shanaaz Majiet, of the Department for Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, emphasised the necessity for experienced, skilled government personnel, the need for collaboration between different departments and the introduction of ingenuity. "We need to make innovation our mantra in government," she said, "all of government."

Food production

"Fifty percent of people in South Africa don't know where their next meal is coming from," said Tatjana von Bormann, the head of WWF-SA's market transformation initiative. "There are therefore two main focus areas for WWF-SA: to produce more with less, and to be better stewards of the food we're producing." The role of small and large scale farmers was analysed, as was the role of retailers, suppliers and household consumers.

In his wrap-up of the day's proceedings, the head of WWF-SA's Living Planet Unit, Saliem Fakir, commented: "We don't want to just think about the environment in isolation of the economy. We want to think about what is needed by society across all walks of life. We can't think of South Africa as an island. Our economy is part of a regional, global system."

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