Cities worldwide are facing severe physical, social, environmental and economic impacts due to climate change. These are anticipated to be felt with greater intensity in the developing world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, in the near future. Coupled with this, cities in Africa also need to plan for increasing populations, rapid urbanisation and the rising demand for more infrastructure.

The impact of climate change on water resources and infrastructure is particularly profound. It is well recognised that freshwater is linked to all aspects of human development and wellbeing. Its availability is the single largest major natural limit to economic growth, given that all other sectors are dependent on its secure supply. Water resources are globally scarce and cities are having to resort to extreme measures to establish water security. It is therefore particularly important for cities to implement more efficient water management practices.

Superimposed on these existing scarcities and supply challenges, are the impacts of current climate variability and climate change. There is growing realisation that the impacts of climate change in Africa will be experienced through floods, droughts and extreme weather events, with very direct and potentially severe socio-economic impacts. This is translating into recognition that cities need to adopt integrated and innovative water management strategies. As a result, it is vitally important that the design of infrastructure, and the daily operations and long-term planning of cities and water utilities, take climate change into account.

A sustainable and secure supply of water can act as a key catalyst to unlock Africa’s development potential. Such an approach has the potential to create a ripple effect and inspire the continent to meet the ambitious globally adopted Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Smarter, more resilient water infrastructure is needed to meet the needs of today and demands of the future, and cities can harness a variety of innovative solutions to transition towards a more climate resilient future. This includes, among others, nature-based solutions, harnessing of wastewater and stormwater as a resource instead of an end product, and design and implementation of decentralised infrastructure that is more resilient and adaptable to the needs of growing cities.

Water will be the defining resource in our urban future as it will determine how and where we live, our economic successes and failures, and our growth. It will ultimately shape the cities of the future. Cities across Africa can make a choice to develop smartly to harness innate innovation and to turn water challenges into water opportunities. With home-grown, local solutions and leapfrogged technology, they can indeed become the world’s leading water-wise and climate resilient urban hubs.

“Water will be the defining resource in our urban future.”

~ Kobie Brand, Regional Director: ICLEI Africa

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