Environmental Justice Fund

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WATER JUSTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA:

VOICES FROM COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

Contents

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Introduction

In February 2025, the Environmental Justice Fund (EJF) issued its first thematically focused call for proposals – a call concentrated specifically on **water justice**. In previous years, EJF issued open calls covering the full range of environmental justice issues, but this time the call centred on responses to South Africa's escalating water crisis. This approach is a response to the urgency of water injustices in South Africa, and EJF's conviction that community-based organisations (CBOs) must be at the heart of the solution.

As an activist-driven funder, EJF believes that supporting those most affected by environmental challenges to design and lead their own responses is the surest path to lasting change. The decision to put out a thematically focused water justice call also emerged from the fact that – despite the urgency of the water challenges in South African communities, and its profound intersection with human rights, gender equity and climate resilience – water justice had been under-represented in previous applications.

This report reflects on the themes that emerged from the proposals which were received in response to this call. Specifically, it homes in on how CBOs describe the water challenges facing their communities, the actions they have already taken to address these issues and what water justice means to them. The aim of this report is to deepen our understanding of how water justice is being framed and advanced by CBOs across South Africa, and of how this work can be supported.

South Africa's water crisis

This water justice call comes amid a deepening water crisis in South Africa – one rooted in systemic issues of injustice, failing infrastructure and environmental stress. Decades after apartheid ended, water access remains profoundly unequal. Under apartheid, the bulk of South Africa's water resources were allocated to white farms and urban areas, leaving Black and rural communities with minimal safe supply. Despite progressive policy reforms post-1994, many towns, villages and townships still lack reliable water services. Aging pipes, failing treatment plants and under-resourced, under-performing municipalities translate into poor water service delivery for millions.

Environmental pressures compound these challenges. South Africa is a naturally water-scarce country – it receives only about half the global average rainfall, and what water exists is unevenly distributed geographically. Now, climate change is intensifying water challenges, causing more frequent severe droughts in some regions while driving devastating floods in others. Water quality is also deteriorating as pollution rises: untreated sewage effluent, runoff from mining and industry, broken wastewater plants, and plastic and disposable nappies choking streams and rivers, all contaminate the limited water that is available.

In many cases, under-capacitated governance and inequitable water use worsen these problems, leading to ineffective management of water resources. Powerful industries and wealthy suburbs are often able to access plentiful water, both on and off the municipal grid, while poorer communities face chronic shortages or contaminated supplies. Indeed, it is predominantly working-class and rural communities who face the brunt of dry taps, waterborne diseases and climate disasters.

Responses to the call

Geographic spread

In total, 123 applications were received in response to this call for proposals. However, the applications were screened according to EJF's eligibility criteria. To be eligible for support from EJF, applicants must be:

1. An organisation or network based in and part of the community they serve;

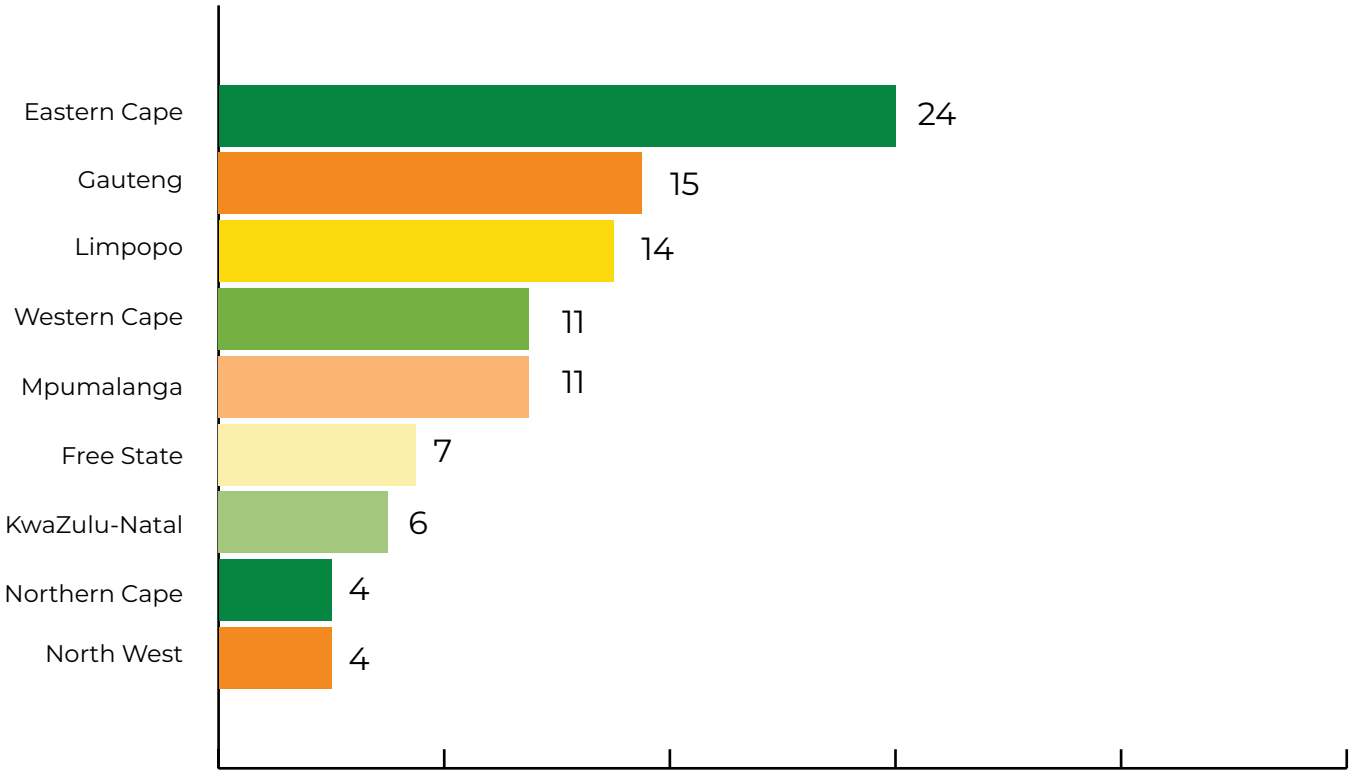
2. Working on environmental justice issues;

3. Based in South Africa.

In total, 26 applications were found to be ineligible, leaving the 97 eligible proposals that are reflected in this report. Applications were received from CBOs across all nine provinces.

The graph below shows the distribution of proposals received from each province, except for one proposal which was unclear about where the applicant was based.

This spread demonstrates the wide relevance of water justice for communities. The largest number of responses came from the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo – provinces where there are long-standing struggles over access to water, service delivery, and environmental degradation. The distribution also shows that CBOs in rural, peri-urban and small-town contexts are very active in addressing water justice concerns, not only those in the major metropolitan centres.



Thematic clusters

For review purposes, EJF grouped the 97 eligible proposals into five thematic clusters. Each group covers a distinct but overlapping dimension of water justice.

Community protection and custodianship: **12 proposals** focused on community efforts to safeguard local springs, rivers, wetlands and catchments from degradation and overuse – often linking ecological restoration with cultural and spiritual care for water.

Equitable access to water: **19 proposals** focused on campaigns for fair, affordable and reliable household access to water – including anti-privatisation struggles, leak-fixing and advocacy against inequitable water services.

Governance of water resources: **9 proposals** addressed the need for inclusion and meaningful participation of communities in water related decision-making, and accountability in municipal and national water governance.

Water infrastructure: **15 proposals** focused on locally managed infrastructure implementation or maintenance – such as boreholes, tanks, laying pipes and community-led repairs – often combining technical fixes with training and youth skills development.

Water quality, pollution and environmental health: **42 proposals**, by far the largest cluster, focused on community responses to contamination from sewage, mining waste, industrial effluent and poor waste management (including plastic and disposable nappies).

What water challenges look like

The proposals submitted to EJF's 2025 water justice call reveal a consistent pattern: water scarcity and contamination are not only technical problems but symptoms of systemic injustice. The following key water challenges were identified.

1 Failing infrastructure and unequal water services

The most widespread challenge identified is the **collapse of municipal water systems.** Communities across all provinces describe aging, leaking and poorly maintained infrastructure, broken pumps and taps with no running water – often for weeks or months. In many small towns and informal settlements, water delivery is erratic and unequal – deepening existing inequalities between urban and rural areas, and between those who can afford private storage tanks or water trucks and those who cannot.

> *There were long queues from 4h00 until 14h00 and sometimes water gets finished early and [we] have to wait for another day for [a] truck to deliver water.*

> *They are not supplied with clean water by the municipality because they are in a deep rural community... They do not have money to buy Jojo tanks due to poverty, unemployment and socio-economic inequality.*

> *The water challenges in our community are dire. We're facing a humanitarian crisis, with taps running dry and tens of thousands of residents not having access to clean water. The situation is exacerbated by the collapse of our water infrastructure...*

> *Sometimes even those who have taps can stay for about a month without water, even schools that we are working with.*

The water challenges in this urban centre range from issues of water pollution, unaffordable water bills, water management devices and water leaks. Water access remains a challenge, due to pricing...

2 Pollution and contaminated water

A second urgent concern is the **contamination of local water sources**. Almost half of all proposals mention polluted rivers, streams, or taps, often contaminated by sewage, mining effluent or agricultural chemicals.

We find that wetlands and dams are being damaged by factories and industries as a result of water pollution.

The community is impacted by pollution from nearby mining activities, which contaminate the local water sources.

The water we are consuming is not clean. It is brown with mud and sometimes it has a bad smell... People are getting sick, running tummy and develop rash.

River pollution is on the highest levels as [the] municipal sewer system dumps sewerage waste in the stream and this causes health risks to locals and wildlife near the stream.

3 Climate stress and ecological degradation

Many communities connect their struggles for water to **climate change and ecological breakdown**. They describe drying springs, failing boreholes and unpredictable rainfall patterns that undermine traditional sources of water and local food production. Floods, too, are increasingly destructive and threatening.

The crisis is exacerbating climate change, with droughts lowering groundwater levels and irregular rainfall causing flash floods that damage infrastructure.

Over the years the climate changed a lot of things like springs that have fallen in, some have dried up.

More extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are occurring as a result of shifting weather patterns brought on by climate change. Efforts to manage water resources are made more difficult by these developments.

Sometimes, the stream gets dry due to environmental or climate change, and they will struggle for several months to get water.

4 Gendered burdens of water injustice

The burden of water scarcity falls disproportionately on **women and children**, a reality clearly articulated in many proposals. They often have to walk the longest distances, wait in queues and manage household survival when water is scarce or contaminated. This gendered labour of care leaves less time for education, income-earning and rest, and can make women more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

The people with the energy and power to fetch water in these difficult places often are in the cities and this pushes the burden to women, the elderly and children.

> *The significant distance between water sources and communities means long and arduous journeys to collect water. This burden falls primarily on women and children.*

> *Ingesting or using contaminated water can lead to a range of health problems, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant women and the elderly.*

> *Women and children are disproportionately affected, as they spend long hours collecting water when taps run dry, limiting their time for school, work and other activities. Schools struggle with water shortages, affecting hygiene and sanitation*

> *Our findings were that women and people with disabilities were the most affected by [the] water crisis. They said they have to negotiate all the time with people from neighbouring communities and walk long distances to fetch water and were unable to get enough water to clean their houses, care for the sick and do washing.*

> *Women and children have to walk long distances to fetch water... Exposure of women and children places them on highest vulnerability to rapists and brutal killings.*

5 Poor governance, neglect and inequality

Beneath all of these challenges lies a **crisis of governance and accountability**. Communities describe being ignored by municipal officials, promised action that never arrives and excluded from decisions that directly affect their access to water. Many express frustration at political neglect and the cycle of unfulfilled promises.

When the water is coming from the tap not in [a] healthy condition, we report that to the Municipality but nothing better they are doing.

The community went to demand good services from the Municipality. The Municipality promised to come... but they did not meet their promise.

All our municipalities don't have the capacity to provide clean water to the residents.

Worse there [is] no local government involvement in trying to assist in making the life [of the] poor and the marginalised community better.

What communities are doing

Applicants were asked to write about the work they are already doing to respond to these water challenges. This was in recognition of all of the work and leadership that CBOs carry out even without any funding or other support.

The proposals show a wide range of existing efforts – from practical repair work and citizen monitoring to education, mobilisation and legal action.

1 Repair, maintenance and localised solutions

Many CBOs have taken matters into their own hands by fixing or maintaining local water infrastructure. They repair burst pipes, clean rivers, plant trees to prevent erosion around water sources and install tanks and boreholes. These initiatives are often small in scale but significant in impact, and in the ways that they signal active citizenship in the face of widespread governmental dysfunction.

> *We installed a community bore hole in one of our villages to reduce the burden of fetching water from long distances.*

> *We did start to fix leaking taps.*

> *We are busy cleaning illegal dumping and river pollution, and planting trees to prevent soil erosion and protect our water.*

> *We arrange cleanups of the streams in our community for the proper flow of water.*

2 Education and youth engagement

Many organisations are building local understanding of water issues through education and awareness campaigns. CBOs hold workshops in schools and villages, carry out citizen monitoring of water quality, and include young people in a range of water conservation activities.

> *We are conducting environmental awareness campaigns and door-to-door education on clean water, sanitation and health.*

> *We have trained young people who conduct water testing, awareness campaigns and school-based workshops on water conservation.*

> *We are involving youth in community clean-ups and educating them about how to take care of our rivers.*

3 Advocacy, citizen monitoring and accountability

A strong current running through many proposals is advocacy and campaigning for accountability. Communities are organising petitions, public meetings, and protests to demand that municipalities repair infrastructure and deliver clean water. Some groups use citizen science to document contamination; others partner with legal allies to pursue rights-based claims.

> *We conducted water testing to assess the safety and quality of local water sources. This included collecting and analysing water samples from local rivers, streams, and boreholes.*

> *We are currently conducting small-scale water quality monitoring to assess the health of our rivers and springs.*

> *We are organising community dialogues and using social media to raise awareness and call for action on water issues.*

> *We report them to the city officials and follow up on them until the leaks get fixed.*

> *The results have been used in advocacy efforts and legal actions, including the proposed litigation to hold the municipality accountable for non-compliance...*

4 Collaboration and solidarity

Another striking feature of the proposals is how often CBOs emphasise collective work and partnerships. They form alliances with schools, churches, traditional leaders, environmental NGOs and other community movements to share resources and amplify impact. Through these networks, local struggles become part of a wider movement for environmental justice.

> *We have been working with other organisations to share ideas and collaborate in our fight for clean water.*

> *We partnered with the municipality and other stakeholders in cleaning the rivers and planting trees.*

5 An intersectional focus on gender and care-based action

Across rural and urban contexts, women are recognised as the ones who manage household water, care for the sick and ensure that families have enough to drink, cook and clean – meaning that they bear the brunt of water scarcity and inaccessibility. Therefore, a large number of CBOs direct their efforts toward women as key participants and change agents in the struggle for water justice. These initiatives express a feminist ethic of care, rooted in everyday realities and ongoing gender injustices.

These proposals show how, at the community level, intersectionality is not a theoretical concept but a lived reality. CBOs recognise that water injustice is experienced through overlapping inequalities of gender, disability, geography, etc. These intersections shape both the experience of the problem and the design of solutions. Because this analysis emerges directly from lived experience, communities tend to take a naturally intersectional approach to their work, often addressing multiple, connected forms of injustice at once.

> *Our organisation is committed to addressing water scarcity and improving household water access, with a strong focus on water justice for rural communities, women and youth.*

> *We are in a process of conducting community awareness and assist rural women as they [are] the primary respondents on water quality, they are the most affected groups.*

> *We have installed standpipes to provide easier access to water near homes, ensuring that women, who often bear the burden of water collection, can save time and effort.*

Defining water justice

As part of the application process, each organisation was asked: “What does water justice mean to you?” Their responses give a deeply grounded sense of how South African CBOs understand and articulate this concept – not in abstract or academic terms, but through their lived realities and struggles. Below are the key features of water justice, as articulated by CBOs.

1 *Water is a right, water is life*

> *Water is not a privilege, it’s a right*

> *Every human being must have access to water at all times.*

> *Water is life, and justice means ensuring that life is sustained for all.*

> *Water is one of the most essential resources for life, therefore people should be afforded access to clean and safe water. All individuals should have sufficient, safe, affordable and accessible water for personal and domestic use.*

> *For our organisation, water justice is recognising fundamental human rights to water and addressing the systematic issues that prevent our community from accessing clean water.*

Water justice means right to life as water is viewed as a source of life.

2 Equity and access

Water justice means ensuring fair and equitable access to water resources, particularly for communities that have historically depended on water for their livelihoods.

Water justice means: access for all – no-one should struggle for clean water while others have unlimited access

It means that water is equally accessible for all South Africa's people, irrespective of religion, gender, political affiliation, race or economic or social status, that it is affordable for the poor.

Water justice refers to the equitable distribution, management and access to clean water and sanitation, particularly for marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Every member of our community must have access to clean, sufficient, safe and affordable water.

3 Addressing historical injustice

Addressing historical injustices and disparities in water access and management, particularly for marginalised and indigenous communities.

Justice involves addressing the historical injustices that have denied small-scale farmers, particularly those from marginalised communities, access to land and water.

Water justice is part of a larger movement for socio-environment justice. It requires a transformative change to deliver water [for] all.

4 Responsibility, stewardship and sustainability

We think it means the protection, conservation and sustainability of water resources.

It also means that water is used responsibly and not wasted or polluted.

Protecting traditional water sources, such as springs, rivers, and wetlands that hold cultural and spiritual significance.

Water justice means that water is a living entity as well which was living nicely on this planet up until humans came and deserves a lot more respect than it's currently getting.

5 Inclusive and participatory governance

Water justice is a movement that aims and ensures water for all citizens and it promotes sustainable development and democratic water policies. It requires a collective action from communities and institutions working together.

Water justice is fairness, holistic inclusion and legal right to access water.

> *True water justice goes beyond just supplying water – it means empowering communities with decision making roles, holding authorities accountable for infrastructure maintenance and pollution prevention, and ensuring that no one is forced to rely on unsafe or inaccessible water sources.*

Taken together, these responses provide a vivid, grounded view of what water justice really means in people's lives. CBOs speak of water as life, as a right, not a privilege – something that everyone should have, every day, without having to struggle for it. They link justice to care for rivers and springs, to shared responsibility and to holding those in power accountable.

They are clear that water justice is not only about access to water, but about having a voice and a role in decisions about how water is managed – justice in the sense of participation, representation and inclusive governance. They remind us that water justice is also about history – about repairing deep inequalities and recognising those who have carried the burden of water inequalities the longest.

Conclusion

This report aims to provide a window into the realities of South Africa's water crisis, seen and described by those who live it every day. The CBOs who responded to this call for proposals are not waiting for change – they are cleaning rivers, monitoring water quality, implementing indigenous knowledge and holding government to account – often with no funding. With this report, we also want to deeply acknowledge and thank all of the organisations that took the time to apply, sharing their often very painful experiences, as well as their inspiring visions for change. Funders, government, NGOs and the water sector at large have a responsibility to listen to what these organisations are saying – to support their efforts, strengthen their networks and help create the enabling conditions for their work to flourish. Water justice will only come through standing in solidarity with those who are already building it, in their communities, one day at a time.

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