



SAVING WATER ONE FLUSH AT A TIME: WHY SOUTH AFRICA'S SUSTAINABILITY FIGHT MUST INCLUDE CLEANING AND HYGIENE

By **Melusi Maposa**
CEO Tsebo Cleaning and Hygiene

South Africa's water crisis is no longer a future risk. It is a present operational reality impacting municipalities, businesses, hospitals, schools and communities across the country. Conversations around water security often focus on infrastructure, agriculture and energy. Yet one of the most overlooked contributors to meaningful water savings is found in the everyday operational practices within cleaning and hygiene.

Every day, thousands of commercial buildings, hospitals, shopping centres and workplaces consume vast volumes of water through routine cleaning protocols. In high-use environments, toilets can be flushed hundreds of times daily as part of hygiene procedures. Multiply this across thousands of facilities nationally, and the environmental impact becomes impossible to ignore.

The challenge facing South Africa is clear: how do we maintain world-class hygiene standards while dramatically reducing water consumption?

At Tsebo Cleaning and Hygiene Solutions, this question led to a complete rethink of traditional cleaning protocols and the results have been significant.

The hidden water cost of hygiene

Cleaning and hygiene are essential public health services. In hospitals, schools, workplaces and public facilities, hygiene failures can have serious consequences for human health and operational continuity. Yet historically, many cleaning protocols were designed at a time when water scarcity was not a national concern.

One example is toilet-cleaning procedures. Conventional protocols often required flushing both before and after every clean, regardless of

whether the toilet was visibly dirty at the start of the cleaning routine. While effective from a hygiene perspective, the cumulative water usage across multiple facilities was enormous. Recognising this, Tsebo revised its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in both 2023 and 2024 to introduce smarter, evidence-based water-saving practices without compromising hygiene standards.

The shift was simple but transformative. At the start of the cleaning procedure, toilets are now flushed only if they are visibly dirty, and then flushed after cleaning. What sounds like a small operational adjustment has created large-scale environmental impact.

Small operational changes, national-scale impact

The revised water-saving cleaning protocols have already produced measurable results across South African client sites.

Achievements from the initiative include:



385 client sites impacted by revised cleaning SOPs



Managing **23.8 million** weekly flushes across all sites



More than 50% reduction in flushes compared to previous protocols



More than **158 million litres** of water saved annually

These figures matter in a water-stressed country where every litre counts. But beyond the statistics lies something more important: proof that sustainability does not always require billion-rand infrastructure projects or breakthrough technology. Sometimes, meaningful impact comes from operational discipline, behavioural change and rethinking everyday processes.

Sustainability must move beyond reporting

South African businesses are under growing pressure to demonstrate measurable ESG impact. Yet many sustainability strategies remain trapped in boardroom presentations and annual reports.

Real sustainability happens operationally.

It happens in the decisions made on-site, by frontline employees, every day. It is reflected in procurement choices, waste management systems, energy consumption and cleaning protocols.

This is where integrated facilities management businesses can play a critical role. At scale, operational service providers influence how buildings consume water, energy and resources every single day. The industry therefore has a unique opportunity and responsibility to drive sustainability outcomes that are practical, measurable and immediate. The future of cleaning is no longer just about appearance or compliance. It is about resource stewardship.

Hygiene and sustainability are no longer opposing goals

One of the greatest misconceptions in the cleaning industry is that sustainability compromises hygiene outcomes. In reality, innovation is proving the opposite.

Technology-enabled cleaning systems, IoT monitoring, smarter chemical usage, QR-coded quality management and data-driven operational protocols are enabling organisations to reduce environmental impact while improving service consistency.

At Tsebo, sustainability initiatives within cleaning and hygiene have extended far beyond water-saving protocols. Circular economy practices have diverted more than 190 tonnes of waste from landfill, while digital learning platforms and IoT-enabled systems are reshaping operational efficiencies across client sites. The business has also prioritised skills development, with hundreds of learners completing accredited cleaning and hygiene programmes to prepare for a future-ready workforce.

Importantly, sustainability in facilities management is also deeply connected to social impact.

Operational ecosystems create jobs, support SMMEs, enable community partnerships and contribute to healthier, safer working environments. Sustainability therefore cannot be viewed purely through an environmental lens. It must also include people, livelihoods and long-term societal resilience.

South Africa cannot afford business as usual. Water scarcity is expected to intensify as climate pressures increase and urban populations grow. Businesses that continue operating with outdated resource-heavy models will face rising

operational risks, reputational pressure and increasing regulatory scrutiny.

The organisations that succeed in the future will be those that embed sustainability into operational execution, not as a compliance exercise, but as a business imperative.

South Africa does not only need innovation at policy level. It needs innovation in practice.

Sometimes that innovation begins with something as ordinary as a flush.

Because when multiplied across millions of daily actions, operational choices become national outcomes.

And in a country where water security will define economic resilience, every drop saved matters.



Melusi Maposa,
CEO Tsebo Cleaning and Hygiene

CONTACT US

a TSEBO solution

+27 (0) 87 820 4146 | info@tsebo.co.za
www.tsebo.co.za

