

GUEST ESSAY

My City Has Run Out of Fresh Water. Will Your City Be Next?

July 19, 2023

By Guillermo Garat

Mr. Garat is a journalist living in Montevideo.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay — For at least 80 days, ever since drought and mismanagement sapped the drinking water supply of my country's capital, the water that has come out of our taps has tasted terribly of salt and smelled awfully of chemicals. Those of us who can afford bottled water use it for everything. We cook pasta, wash lettuce and make coffee with it, buying more and more plastic water containers that wind up in the dump. When we shower, we keep it short and keep the windows open, because trihalomethane compounds in the steam may be carcinogenic. Washing machines don't foam, and the electric water heaters are failing from a buildup of sodium. Dishwashers leave salty streaks on glasses and plates. Brushing your teeth tastes like taking a gulp of pool water.

At the height of the crisis, sodium and chloride levels rose to double and triple the maximum values allowed by our national drinking water regulations. A few weeks ago, I visited a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, where people had no other option than to drink the tap water. People complained of belly pain and diarrhea. The government warned that children under 2 years of age, pregnant

women and people with high blood pressure, kidney failure or heart problems should limit their consumption of the water or, in some cases, avoid it altogether. Supposedly, poor people will now be getting a subsidy to buy bottled water. But that's not enough.

Here in Uruguay, clean water is part of our national identity. Schoolchildren are taught that the country is blessed with abundant and high-quality water, thanks to many large rivers and six great aquifers. For most of our history, we could count on rain to fill these rivers and aquifers. And in 2004, we became the first country in the world to write access to safe drinking water into the Constitution.

But the most severe drought in 44 years, coupled with aging infrastructure and gross mismanagement of the Santa Lucía reservoirs, has rewritten that comforting story. Now the metropolitan area around Montevideo, home to about 60 percent of the nation's 3.4 million people, is living through the consequences.

The Santa Lucía River, which provided a steady flow of fresh water to the capital for more than 150 years, has almost disappeared for some stretches. In February, a reservoir that until recently contained up to five billion gallons of water was sucked nearly dry. Another dwindled, at one point, to just 2 percent of capacity. As the sweet waters from Santa Lucía have emptied, the salty water from the Río de la Plata, an Atlantic Ocean estuary, has intruded into its riverbed. Our main water purification plant doesn't have the technology to remove the salt, so it enters our pipes, our homes, our bodies.

The government has no plan B for this crisis, which could last until October. One senator has tweeted to pray for rain.

As bad as it is here, Montevideo's water crisis is not unique. In 2018, Cape Town started making plans for the chaos that would ensue in the very real scenario that it could run out of water entirely. In Brazil, which owns a significant fraction of the world's fresh water, numerous cities have restricted its use. In Mexico City, 70 percent of the population has access to water for only 12 hours a day, according to a 2017 United Nations study.

The 2023 U.N. World Water Development Report shows that one in four people lacks access to clean water. "We cannot claim surprise at the next drought," Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, the U.N.'s special rapporteur on human rights and drinking water, told me.

“No matter how strong and long it may be,” he said, “there must be alternative, complementary, supplementary sources,” and there must be a plan to “establish priorities during the emergency.”

Last week, Mr. Arrojo-Agudo, in a statement with other experts, told Uruguay it “must put human consumption at the forefront, as indicated by international human rights standards,” ranking the demand “with an ethical priority.” The government took issue with his statement, saying the chemical levels were not as alarming as he claimed and that helpful measures were underway. But the rapporteur knows the problem all over the world is about the same and that rationing people’s consumption while leaving industrial or agricultural use unchecked will, as he told me, “wear down more water and generate a greater risk of contamination.”

It’s not just our health that’s at risk. The agricultural sector, which is the largest industry in the country, has suffered losses of about 2 percent of Uruguay’s G.D.P. Six in 10 of our companies are now facing production issues. Pharma, food, construction, chemical industries — all of them are in a scramble for water, leaving their employees as anxious at work as they are at home.

How did we get here? Over the past four decades, the nation allowed the agricultural and mining industries to pollute the Santa Lucía and interrupt its natural cycles, damaging the supply that continued to dwindle over three years with little rain. And despite obvious population and economic growth, our country did not invest in drinking water reservoirs, even when the problem started to come into view. Since March 2020, the government declared several emergencies for agricultural producers, granting tax waivers and grace periods. But it waited until June 19 of this year to declare an emergency for the rest of the population.

Now it’s left to scramble. The government is trying to build reservoirs in tributaries and is planning a plant to desalinate water from the Río de la Plata, but that is unlikely to come online in the next three years. The public water company recently started operating new wells in the heart of the city, hoping to load tanker trucks with water from an aquifer and distribute it to hospitals.

Many of my neighbors are drilling, too, hoping to find groundwater for their families. One of them showed me the results of the water quality test. They are scary. My neighbor’s well contained a bacterium called *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, which is associated with blood, lung and urinary tract infections. It’s too late for us to

engineer our way out on our own.

Over the past two weeks, it rained three inches, and that helped, for the moment. But local weather forecasts, global climate change and irresponsible land use are all pointing us in the same direction. It's not just Montevideo: Every city in the world needs to start prioritizing its drinking water now, while there's still half a chance for better outcomes. Water is our most precious resource. Keeping it safe and available must be our first priority. Enough is enough.

Guillermo Garat is a journalist living in Montevideo.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.