MEASURED **RESPONSE**

Inzalo Capital Holdings board chairman Sihle Ndlovu on how smart digital water-metering has a crucial part to play in mitigating the demands associated with water scarcity.

BY SILKE COLQUHOUN

WATER has played an integral part throughout Sihle Ndlovu's career. During the drought in KwaZula-Natal, South Africa, four years ago, he made headlines in the local Witness newspaper after offering to supply the parched neighbouring communities with water from his farm – for free. In the middle of the drought-stricken

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region, his thriving farm near Boston was home to six dams that were constantly being replenished by underground streams.

'Water is critical to all life and, as a scarce resource, needs to be managed in a more sustainable way,' says Ndlovu, who was named Farmer of the Year in 2016, holds an MBA and several corporate directorships, and is the co-owner of Inzalo Capital Holdings. So it seemed a logical step for him and his business partner Sbonelo Mazibuko to acquire a majority share – through Inzalo – in leading smart water-management company Utility Systems.

Inzalo's leadership will create value for the water-tech business as both executives bring their substantial expertise and existing networks in the public sector with them, which will drive the transformation of Utility Systems and the broader economy. Mazibuko has been appointed chief executive of Utility Systems and Ndlovu is the executive chairman of the board. They will be actively involved in the day-to-day business, striving to strengthen the collaboration with government and strategic partners from the private sector.

The Durban-headquartered company will now be able to benefit from the Department of Trade and Industry's Black Industrialist Policy, which offers significant tax incentives and other government support to high-potential black-owned enterprises.

While Utility Systems has a large international footprint, it is essentially a home-grown South African success story. 'Our proudly South African devices are manufactured in Pinetown and we're making a positive contribution to water-scarcity challenges in South Africa and our neighbouring nations,' says Ndlovu. 'For now, we're predominantly focusing on the SADC region where we […] already have a foothold in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia.'

In South Africa, Utility Systems was instrumental in the efforts to relieve the drought that saw the City of Cape Town edging dangerously close to running out of water ('Day Zero').

At the time, the municipality installed 60 000 of the company's smart water-management devices (WMD) to help indigent communities and those residents who were using more water than the restrictions permitted. To date, Utility Systems has provided 300 000 units in the Western Cape. The municipality recently announced that every water meter in the metro would be supplied with a WMD in the near future.

Advanced metering systems have a wide range of socio-economic as well as environmental benefits. The WMD can, for example, convert analogue ('dumb') water meters into smart meters that are capable of flow limitation, prepaid metering and bulk-water management. This not only enables automatic data collection, which leads to more accurate billing and planning, but it also allows leak- and tamper-detection in near real-time, which means that the valve can be remotely restricted or shut off to minimise water wastage.

Consumers benefit from standard-transfer-specification prepayment water devices, which work on the same principle as prepaid electricity. 'Our prepaid solution gives people control over their water usage so they won't be surprised by the bill at month-end,' says Mazibuko, adding that the company's smart technology is 'a non-proprietary and very flexible end-to-end solution that can integrate with any water meter across the globe, as long as it has a pulse output. We're able to supply all the metros across South Africa and are already working with the City of Joburg, City of Cape Town, eThekwini and Mangaung, assisting them in collecting water revenue through our cutting-edge technology'.

In addition to the municipalities, Utility Systems is engaging with government at a national level, and supplying sub-metering solutions to private complexes and companies. The company is currently building new facilities in the special economic zone at the Dube TradePort in Durban and has big plans for the future.

'We are speaking to 26 countries globally at the moment, because we have a new and exciting offering that will inculcate LPWAN [low-power wide-area network] platforms that form the basis of smart cities across the world,' says Ndlovu. 'By 2020, Utility Systems devices will be able to connect to the world's largest LPWAN networks – SigFox, LoRa, Wireless M-BUS and NB-IoT. As multiple devices from different manufacturers will all work on the same network, they will provide cost-efficient connectivity for devices that transmit small amounts of data at regular intervals.'

This shows yet again how smart digital water-metering can make water management more efficient, cost effective and convenient – in South Africa and beyond. ADL