City must refrain from disconnecting households' water and electricity services until Project Phakama billing system is fixed and bills verified

The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) is a non-profit organisation providing socio-economic rights assistance to individuals, communities and social movements in South Africa. SERI conducts research, engages with government, advocates for policy and legal reform, facilitates civil society coordination and mobilisation, and litigates in the public interest.

Our thematic areas are housing and evictions, basic services (water, sanitation and electricity) and migrant rights & livelihoods. SERI regularly represents communities who have been unlawfully disconnected from water and electricity services.

SERI is deeply disturbed at the current billing chaos within the City of Johannesburg, the richest and best-resourced municipality in the country. It is clear that the City’s much touted Project Phakama - an IT system intended to streamline all municipal services accounts into one billing account – has failed to be implemented appropriately, despite the City prematurely winning a gold SAP Quality Award for the successful implementation of the system in June 2010.

Failures with the implementation of Project Phakama have resulted in inaccurate and often highly inflated bills being issued to residents, or no bills being issued at all. It is reported that pre-paid water and electricity have been receiving bills erroneously. Further, it is reported that over 41 000 households have been disconnected from services. The City has acknowledged the failure of the implementation of Project Phakama and has admitted it could take between six and 12 months to rectify problems with the highly complex system.

SERI urges the City to refrain from disconnecting water and electricity to households until it has consolidated and verified all bills.

The detrimental effects on households that are unfairly disconnected from water and electricity cannot be underestimated especially where, as is often the case, water and electricity are essential to healthcare needs e.g. refrigerating medication, washing and ablutions, home-based care for AIDS patients, electric nebulisers, charging electric wheelchairs, maintaining life support systems etc.

Further, disconnection of both water and electricity without notice, and without providing the opportunity for households to make representations to the relevant municipal entity, is inconsistent with provisions in the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act (PAJA) as well as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The City faces a potential barrage of litigation if it disconnects on the basis of incorrect information supplied through its compromised system.