



# Poor and angry – Research grapples with reasons behind social protests

*Social protests over service delivery issues, such as housing, water and sanitation have become a daily occurrence in South Africa. But what is driving people to the streets, and why are some angry why others stay silent? These were among the issues discussed at a recent seminar, hosted by the Water Research Commission (WRC), on social protests and water service delivery in South Africa. Lani van Vuuren reports.*

In Cato Manor in Durban a woman is shot and killed and another injured as the community protests over housing. Meanwhile, in Bekkersdal, in Johannesburg, 18 people are arrested for public violence and looting as people march for better service delivery. At the same time, at Mooiplaas informal settlement in Pretoria, police are stoned by protesting community members. These are typical headlines describing the almost daily occurrence of social protests in South Africa.

Public protest is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. However, as research by the University of Johannesburg (UJ) shows, these protests have reached unprecedented levels. According to UJ's Dr Carin Runciman, in 2012, at least 470 social protests had occurred in South Africa – more than one a day.

The latest data on service delivery protests available from the Service Delivery Protest Barometer, an initiative of the Community Law Centre at the University of the Western Cape, confirms that protests are becoming more frequent, more widespread and more violent.

Most social protests occur in Gauteng and the Western Cape, which together accounted for over half of protest activity during 2012. However, social protests are no longer an urban phenomenon, with an increasing number of protests occurring in rural areas.

Protests are not only increasing in frequency, but are also far more likely to turn violent. According to Prof Jaap de Visser, Project Coordinator at the Community Law Centre,

in the first eight months of 2012 nearly 80% of protests turned violent – a 27% increase from the average of the previous five years. (Violent protests are defined here as protests where some or all of the participants have engaged in actions that create a threat or actual harm to people or property).

Of the 180 protests Prof De Visser and his team have counted in 2013 to date around 70% have been violent. This includes the flinging of excrement by protesters in Cape Town earlier this year. Prof Runciman, however, is quick to point out that violence does not always stem from the side of the protesters only. "Heavy handedness by public order police can lead to an escalation of violence," she noted.

## UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROTESTS

Why do some communities choose to protest? Researchers at the WRC seminar agreed that the underlying reasons for social protests are much more complex than media

reports often lead us to believe, and requires deeper investigation. While 'flagship' issues, such as labour issues or service delivery might be raised by the press, there might be many hidden reasons for communities to go over to protest action.

Seminar keynote speaker, South African Human Rights Commission Deputy Chair, Pregs Govender, called on researchers to not only identify the cause of social protests in South Africa, but to find ways in which to address these causes. She noted that it was often poor communities' frustration at not being heard by government which led them to voice their anger in the streets. "Twenty years after apartheid we are still seeing [communities] venting frustration over a situation they cannot change."

Grievances related to municipal services – including lack of electricity, water, sanitation or roads – are the most frequently cited category of grievance. An increasing number of communities are protesting over water-related issues. This has prompted the WRC to direct a number of calls in recent years to investigate the phenomenon of social protests and their connection to water issues.

"As a country we need to start asking ourselves serious questions when our democracy leads to loss of life and destruction of property," notes WRC Executive Manager for Water Use and Waste Management, Jay Bhagwan. "Once these protests are brought under control it does not

necessarily mean that the underlying issues have been resolved."

"It is important that we establish the correct structures within our municipalities for citizens to constructively air their concerns and grievances," he noted. "By understanding the reasons behind the phenomenon of social protest, research can ably inform and advise decision-making."

## SOCIAL PROTESTS AND WATER SERVICES

A current WRC-funded study, lead by Dr Barbara Tapela of the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), is aimed at developing a better understanding of the reasons why communities protest over water-related issues.

The main objectives of the study are to determine the range of grievances pertaining to water service delivery, identify the diversity of local contexts in which water service delivery-related social protests have occurred, and examine the geographical profile, historical background, socio-economic setting, water services issues and social protest features of selected examples.

The project team has sifted through records of hundreds of protests, searching for those related to water. "A major challenge to the filtering of catalogued protests was that water service delivery issues are often part of a range of conflated grievances that masquerade under the generalised rubric of 'service delivery', and underpin many rallying calls for social protest action," noted Dr Tapela. "Although such conflation reflects the inter-relatedness of social services, it also masks the water service delivery issues in question."

With regards to water service delivery issues, findings show that water service delivery issues include inadequate access to water, poor quality of water from existing supply infrastructure, poor operation and maintenance of infrastructure, infrequency of water

### DE DOORNS UNREST – REALLY A WAGE ISSUE?

In August, 2012, violent protest shattered the normally idyllic rural town of De Doorns, in the Western Cape.

The protest was labelled a 'labour unrest' by the South Africa media, who focused largely on farm workers' call for improved wages. However, closer inspection by researchers from the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) revealed that there were 21 substantive issues that were strategically muted and encapsulated in the rallying call for "R150 a day!"

These included issues of poor access to water services and sanitation for workers still based on farms, and issues of affordability of water services for evicted farmworkers resettled in agri-villages and rural townships. Interviews revealed that a particularly poignant issue was the lack of housing for farmworkers, some of whom slept in horse stables and lacked secure access to water and sanitation. In other cases farm owners, who were responsible for supplying workers with basic services, would deduct basic service payments from farmworkers' wages. This meant that these workers did not have access to free basic water and electricity as do many other South Africans.



supply, high tariffs, privatisation, inaccurate water bills, disconnection (due to water demand devices and/or non-payment), and apparent inaction/apathy by local municipalities to address the problem.

The WRC study went further to explore the characteristics of selected

### What is a social protest?

According to the University of the Western Cape, any complaint or issue cited by protesters, whether related to service delivery claims or not, over which citizens decide to engage in protest activity.



case studies of urban, peri-urban and rural localities in which violent protests have emerged. “Our research findings also show that the majority of social protests associated with water service delivery tend to occur in working-class urban and peri-urban localities characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and disjuncture (including communication breakdown) between water services development planning at municipal and national levels and water use at local household and community levels, irrespective of the party affiliation of local government,” noted Dr Tapela.

Such disjuncture can predispose people in such localities towards protest action. In many of the cases examined, residents expressed frustrations over unmet expectations for water services, lack of downward accountability by municipal officials, corruption, indifference and lack of monitoring and censure of non-compliance by water services authorities, and officials. On the other hand, municipal officials voiced their frustrations over wasteful water use, unaccounted-for water, infrastructure theft, breakdown and lack of financial budgets for repairs of existing and building of new infrastructure. Both sets of viewpoints tended to be simultaneously complementary and contradictory, thus pointing to a need to develop shared understandings of water service delivery issues in

case-specific localities.

The WRC study revealed that violent protests often take place in urban and peri-urban formal housing areas and informal settlements in which dynamics around poverty, unemployment, population growth, relative deprivation, marginalisation, injustice, and histories of struggle activism by predominantly black residents coalesce with unmet expectations for water and related services. Communities in these areas also struggle with uncertainties as a result of drivers of change, such as mining-based economic decline, shifts in agricultural and industrial production systems, and rising food prices.

By comparison, non-violent protests tend to be associated with black and white working class neighbourhoods characterised by different perceptions of relative deprivation. In the predominantly white neighbourhoods, relative deprivation is seen in relation to past experiences of municipal service delivery, which are perceived to have been better than that provided by the post-1994 municipalities. These relatively more affluent sections of the population tend to adopt institutionalised engagement strategies, often declaring legal disputes against the municipality, and thereby withholding rate payments.

Additionally, violent and non-violent social protests are expanding into hitherto ‘peaceful’ rural areas. The eruption of rural protests appears

## PROTESTORS’ REASONS FOR PROTESTS WITH REGARDS TO WATER ISSUES

- Inadequate or lack of access to water from existing supply infrastructure
- Poor quality of water from existing supply infrastructure
- Lack of water supply infrastructure
- Poor operation and maintenance of infrastructure
- Old and deteriorated water reticulation networks
- Water shortage or intermittent supplies
- Water cut-offs, restrictions, and/or disconnections
- High tariffs and/or privatisation
- Inaccurate water billing
- Frustration over poor governance, corruption
- Marginalisation of certain groups within municipalities
- Politicisation of water services issues

*Source: PLAAS*

to mark a critical turning point in rural people’s engagement with authorities. It underscores the need for water services planning and development practice to take into account the rural-urban linkages that persist amid rapid urbanisation, decline of mining towns, evictions of commercial farmworkers and farm-dwellers, and rural-urban and cross-border migrations, among others.

Within this rapidly changing social milieu, the South African citizenry no longer seems content to divest the responsibility of tackling issues of marginalisation, deprivation and injustice to an amorphously ‘representative and democratic’ local government. A critical question is how to channel this renewed energy into tangible gains for water services governance and delivery, and a deepening of democracy.

It is hoped that through the WRC study and others the necessary knowledge will be obtained to constructively address the phenomenon of social protests in South Africa. □



*Lack of sustainable service delivery is a significant issue for many communities, driving many of them to protest.*

PLAAS