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The WRC operates in terms of the Water Research Act (Act 34 of 1971) and its mandate is to support water research and development as well as the building of a sustainable water research capacity in South Africa.

The role of communities as water services intermediaries in South Africa

A Water Research Commission (WRC)-funded study investigated community participation in the water sector, with particular focus on the existing policy and institutional frameworks that enhance or inhibit communities' roles as water services intermediaries in the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces of South Africa.

Background

Provision of water in South Africa is an area that has been shaped by legislation to become a development intervention for addressing social and economic inequalities. The government has put in place a water governance framework that has framed water as a human right (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996) and a basic need (National Water Act, 1998) at the same level of recognition as food, health, shelter and education.

The National Water Act (NWA, 1998) goes even further than that, by providing for the participation of water beneficiaries through the establishment of water management institutions such as catchment management agencies (CMAs), water user associations (WUAs) and water advisory committees.

At the local level, access to water and equitable supply for socioeconomic development of local communities has been delegated to municipalities by the Municipal Structures Act (MSA, 1998). In the same vein, the Municipal Systems Act (MSA, 2000) requires municipalities to promote the participation and empowerment of local communities for water services provision.

This developmental role assigned to water through legislation brings in an important aspect of water management – which is the empowerment of communities through participation as reflected in the MSA (2000). The compelling concerns behind community participation include equity to water access in terms of race and gender, poverty alleviation and the promotion of livelihoods, and

health and hygiene in which water services provision is critical.

For these concerns to be successfully addressed, the participation of communities in water supply management should be promoted.

South Africa's municipalities have been called upon to provide potable clean water and to empower local communities to participate in water supply management in view of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. However, despite such efforts at national and local government levels, access to piped water is dwindling in the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces – and disparities in distribution of water are growing.

Noticeably, such water inequalities are more prevalent in the formerly-excluded black communities in villages, townships, and settlements.

Study approach

This study was conducted with an interest in identifying the roles of the legislative framework and institutional arrangements in supporting community participation in the water sector, and the main objective was to explore the existing policy and institutional frameworks that enhance or inhibit communities' roles as water services intermediaries in the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces of South Africa.

The study's research was conducted in Mbizana Local Municipality in Alfred Nzo District in the Eastern Cape and in Ngwathe Local Municipality in Fezile Dabi District in the

Free State, with the constructivist paradigm being adopted to guide contact with communities because it advocates for interaction that privileges the life story narratives of the research participants.

A qualitative approach to the data collection was used as it provided for a two-way exchange built on mutual interest in the discussions on water supply in the research areas and purposive sampling was used to identify the two research areas – because of similarities in terms of water problems confronting the two provinces – and the sample groups of the study comprised beneficiary communities, municipal officials, the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), and the Mvula Trust – totalling 112 participants purposively identified for the study. Together, these methodological approaches enabled the study to source rich information that adequately addressed the objective of the research.

Main findings

The findings of the study identified the following areas of attention in relation to the objective of the study: legal and institutional factors that enhance community participation, and policies, procedures, and community-level factors that hinder participation.

Legal factors that enhance community participation include the water laws put in place to promote community participation, such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), Water Services Act (1997), National Water Act (1998), Municipal Structures Act (1998), Free Basic Water (1998), Municipal Systems Act (2000), and Water Resource Management Framework (2013).

Institutional factors that enhance community participation include the Water Services Act (WSA), water service providers (WSPs), district water boards, catchment management agencies (CMAs), water services intermediaries (WSIs), and the water services committees (WSCs).

Policies and procedures presenting obstacles to community participation include the narrow concept of 'water services intermediary', dysfunction within the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), the failure of CMAs, the top-down approach of the management and rigid integrated development planning (IDP) processes, incapacities in municipalities, ageing infrastructure, and monitoring and evaluation.

Community-level factors hindering community

participation include inadequate/non-existent access to water, poor water quality, restrictions on income-generating projects, loss of property, unemployment, violation of the right to water, the IDP approach, and ineffective monitoring and evaluation.

Despite its elaborate legal frameworks for water governance, South Africa has not managed to achieve water equity or to engage meaningfully with beneficiary communities as part of water management. Water inequalities are still predominantly characteristic of formerly excluded areas in the villages, townships, and informal settlements, and have grown in tandem with overall social and economic inequalities that are making South Africa the most unequal country in the world.

An added affliction is that these communities are not meaningfully participating in the decisions of water management and their needs are not adequately factored into the water supply decisions. This is in contrast to the UN SDG 6 requirement calling for water equity and the participation of beneficiary communities in the water management decisions that affect them.

Disparities in the allocation of water are still firmly entrenched along racial, gender and rural-urban divisions – making water accessible to the privileged few. Water inequalities and exclusion are compromising the livelihoods of these marginalised communities and their overall social and economic development.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has identified three areas of intervention to address policy and institutional shortfalls as well as the obstacles that impede meaningful community engagement and participation in the quest for water equity and recognition of water as a human right for development.

The first area – legislative and policy review – entails the amendment of the WSA of 1997, Section 51(3) to designate WSCs as vehicles of community participation, add water cooperatives as alternative institutions alongside WSCs, and make way for partnerships between municipalities and communities. There is also a need to review the IDP processes of community consultation to include capacity development and training elements for creating a common understanding and shared view of IDP based on transparency and mutual trust.

The second area – capacity building for municipalities to attain their development mandate – will require the intervention of the Presidency, CoGTA and the Treasury.

Finally, in the third area – community engagement – the study recommends adopting the ABCD approach. This approach sees communities as partners and not just consumers, as well as considers the range of strengths and assets that communities bring into water management rather than keeping the sole focus on their water needs and creating expectation and dependency on government handouts.

For more information:

The role of communities as water services intermediaries in South Africa: The case of the Eastern Cape and Free State provinces
(WRC Report no. 2945/1/21)