

Sanitation

Towards sustainable free basic sanitation for informal settlements

A completed Water Research Commission (WRC) project provides valuable lessons from informal settlement janitorial programmes towards amending Free Basic Sanitation policies and practices.

Background

Over a decade has passed since South Africa's then Department of Water Affairs & Forestry set its basic water and sanitation standards and provided parameters for municipalities to provide free services to those who could not afford them. Municipal implementation of free sanitation in informal settlements has been fraught, however, due to various social and institutional constraints, resulting in provision of services that have failed to meet the government's and poor households' expectations.

What are these constraints? How can they be overcome? Answering these questions was the focus of a WRC-funded study undertaken by the University of Cape Town.

Urban sanitation implementation challenges

Provision and maintenance of sanitation services in urban

informal settlements still constitutes a very significant challenge for South African local authorities. One reason is that such settlements are difficult to service because of geo-physical, economic, legal and socio-political challenges.

Sanitation provision in many such settlements consequently tends to take the form of toilets in concrete cubicles along the edge of a settlement, clustered throughout a settlement between residents' houses, sometimes alongside a stand-pipe, or in ablution blocks offering other facilities alongside toilets. In such cases, fewer toilets are provided than there are domestic dwellings in the settlement – meaning that, other than the occasional case where a household has commandeered a toilet by locking it, households either have to share toilets, or they have to rely on public toilets that are accessible to all, including other settlement residents, visitors and passers-by.

Such circumstances have often led to filthy and dysfunctional toilets which, according to users, is not their responsibility to clean or maintain.



It is proposed that South Africa's current urban sanitation crisis exemplifies, as to many other similar examples, how a well-intentioned policy has failed disastrously in its implementation due to government officials' use of a top-down approach and its strong emphasis on using technological and social engineering methods to achieve its aims. This is opposed to a bottom-up approach which is an inclusive, people-driven form of governance constituted by a large number of persons and groups collaboratively interacting to make decisions and strategies together.

In this WRC report a bottom-up perspective is considered that includes the interests of all the various people who use free basic sanitation facilities as provided by public institutions, and who are responsible for managing them.

Research scope and objective

From the outset, the study explicitly planned to build on previous work undertaken with funding from the WRC, which indicated that technology choice is less significant than those social processes that underlie:

- The provision and management of free basic sanitation systems
- Officials' and users' responses to provided facilities, particularly if they are accessible and open to the general public.

This research further showed that those responses were driven by residents' expectations that, if no individual household systems are provided, public access facilities should be fully subsidised and served by (or through) an outside authority – namely the responsible municipality.

To realise such an expectation would, it was argued, mean implementation of a policy requiring that all toilet facilities shared by more than one household in urban informal settlements should have municipally funded janitorial services – a goal that would have significant costs and administrative consequences for municipalities already struggling to provide free basic toilet facilities.

The expressed objective of the follow-up study was to document the social and institutional constraints on implementation and management of municipal janitorial services for full-flush toilets, with a focus on three Western Cape informal settlements; and to understand those from the perspectives of those that used, managed or were responsible for the facilities on a day-to-day basis.

The research team defined a 'constraint' as being a limitation or obligation; 'social' as being people's practiced relationships

and adopted norms related to practices and perceptions; and 'institutional' as being organised and officially imposed systems of structures and processes.

Key research findings

It was found that persons involved in using and/or providing toilets in informal settlements had diverse and thus different expectations of what constitutes a free basic sanitation service, and of what should comprise the associated responsibilities of users and of various kinds of service providers.

Each party also experienced fear due to imagined and real health and safety risks, which affected their access to (i.e. having the right to enter, get near, or make use of) toilets in informal settlements.

'Public' janitorial services are generally more effective/reliable than 'communal' cleaning and maintenance systems in informal settlements because, with those being provided, officials and residents had similar expectations of what could access the facilities and who was responsible for maintaining the services. In addition, despite being under-resourced, municipalities seemed better equipped than residents to manage cleaning services.

Officials tended, in preference, to establish centrally administered and standardised systems, while janitors and residents preferred to be able to initiate situation specific systems.

Municipal authorities and contracted workers (e.g. service providers and janitors) can be held legally accountable for delegated operational tasks, whereas resident users cannot be legally bound to fulfil operation and maintenance responsibilities.



The effective implementation of free basic sanitation is impeded by a **lack of guidance from national policymakers from providing informal settlement services**, as well as by municipal incapacity and inflexible institutional processes. Residents' alternative sanitation practices often neglect the beneficial outcomes of measures established for provision of free basic services.

The report shows that national policymakers and municipal officials have missed by their having focused primarily on the top-down concerns and objectives highlighted in state policy.

In establishing janitorial services, municipalities such as Overstrand and City of Cape Town, but also eThekweni, have set a precedent in rendering local government responsible for all operation and maintenance tasks and costs incurred when providing publicly accessible free basic sanitation facilities in informal settlements.

That these publicly funded and supported janitorial services have been created and have proven to be needed also demonstrates that, in assuming that users would maintain and clean facilities provided in their residential areas, national authorities have misjudged the extent that such users would reasonably contribute to operation and maintenance tasks. It also indicates that they have overlooked critical aspects of local government's administrative and financial needs, particularly in the former's conceptualisation of the free basic services' sanitation component.

The data presented in the final report are evidence of a disjuncture between the state's top-down policies that dictate municipal practice, and the on-the-ground reality in informal settlements. It thereby suggests that sanitation policy at both national and local government levels need to be rethought to meet ordinary users' and municipal implementers' needs.

What the relatively recent institutionalisation of janitorial services for municipal toilets in informal settlements shows is that municipal officials are having to adapt their local minimum free basic sanitation policies – which were largely informed by national government's standards – in ways that were not originally considered by policymakers.

This occurred through the input of elected municipal level officials and of senior (executive) municipal management who then issued directives. Similarly, advocacy and pressure from civil society groups has produced adaptations to national policy in its implementation at local government level. A further influence that has led to adaptations in practice of national policy has come from the expressed needs

of those responsible for implementing service provision (e.g. junior-level municipal officials, contractors, janitors etc.) whose concerns have arisen from their experiences on the ground and from their observations of users' practices.

The above points illustrate that on-the-ground developers' practices – such as those of municipal officials- and their interactions with, and what they learn from, their 'target' populations in the course of their engaging in development interventions have the capacity to lead to policy change that can accommodate those on-the-ground practices. This finding suggests that, like municipal policy adaptations, national discourse can similarly be adjusted through dialogues and interactions with users and with persons who are directly engaged in providing sanitation facilities and services in informal settlements as well as with those directing sanitation measures from municipal offices.

Conclusion

The use of ethnography was selected as a research approach for investigating bottom-up concerns related to sanitation provision in informal settlements. The following has been shown through the presentation of often contrasting perspectives on such services:

- All too often, what policymakers and designers of sanitation services imagine is appropriate – in terms of technology and resource availability – is considered socially and culturally unacceptable and inappropriate by users and those tasked with caring for such facilities.
- There is a diversity of everyday sanitation experience in urban informal settlements, information about which is presently not being drawn up on by those who design sanitation facilities and their operation and maintenance procedures. It is suggested that such design processes should take cognisance of those diverse experiences and should become iterative processes that take serious account of all stakeholder concerns and are flexible enough to accommodate changing demands over even short periods of time.

Recommendations

The following are some bottom-up focused political and practical recommendations stemming from the report:

- **Using lived experiences to inform informal settlement servicing**

Assuming that unclean environments in informal settlements are caused by residents' lack of personal hygiene

leads to a top-down approach to introduce initiatives to 'educate' those people and make them aware of 'good' practices. Such an assumption effectively lays blame on residents rather than seeking to understand the structural contextual constraints on their lives, constraints which include inadequate servicing of informal settlements. A constructive, bottom-up informal settlement sanitation initiative would go beyond patronising residents through social engineering campaigns. It would require regular and well facilitated dialogue between users and service providers at all levels.

- **Financing skilled expertise, multi-disciplinary managers and support staff**

One of the report's findings is that implementation of a functional free basic sanitation service in informal settlements requires establishment of municipal janitorial services. It also shows that, to do that, local governments require national government funding for more than just capital infrastructure and off-site operation and maintenance costs. Funding is also required for on-site operation and maintenance costs, building and maintaining human resource capacity for creating local site-specific plans, and for local government officials to administer their free basic services operations.

The report also notes that it is misplaced to depend exclusively on technical professionals, with engineering or urban planning background, to achieve the goals of providing sustainable sanitation services in informal settlements. While such skills are undoubtedly necessary the dominance of such personnel seems to have resulted in repeated adoption of technology driven approaches.

It is argued that trained social facilitators and policy analysts are needed to work hand-in-hand with technical personnel in South Africa's urban infrastructure sector.

- **Establishing a free basic public services standard**

The data gathered in this study support previous research findings that there is a lack of practical guidance for providing public toilets in dense urban informal settlements. This gap suggests an implicit neglect of or lack of concern with the sanitation challenges within urban contexts. Moreover, as various municipal officials complained, focus on providing for rural dwellings resulted in its basing national standards of household sanitation provision of sparsely-populated rural contexts.

It is crucial now that national government develops and adopts a free basic public service definition for toilets shared by multiple households in urban informal settlements. A consequent recommendation is that a bottom-up perspective – based on the experience of those who use, clean and manage free basic toilets on a day-to-day basis – should inform the conceptualisation of this new standard, and that it not be written as if in stone but rather that it is flexible enough to permit a wide range of local adaptations.

Given the kinds of digital technology now available for dissemination of such standards, and of policy, a further recommendation is that all such standards and policy be not only recorded digitally for ease of access, but also that the institutions that produce such standards be required frequently to update them in light of experience from around the country.

Further reading:

To obtain the report, *Amending Free Basic sanitation policies and practices: Lessons from informal settlement janitorial programmes* (Report No.2120/1/14) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.