November 2012
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.

TECHNICAL BRIEF

Rural water practices

Ethnographic research methods to better understand household water practices

A WRC-funded study investigated testing the use of a non-interventionist and participatory ethnographic tool to understand rural water practices for regulatory purposes with a DVD.

Status quo of rural water services and use

A critical gap exists in South Africa regarding the status quo of water supply and use in rural communities, whether they are served by a local authority or not. Information surrounding challenges, availability, supply or lack of supply, water scarcity, management in times of drought and other water-related issues are largely absent.

It is a challenge to obtain valid reliable data from rural populations and research instruments are often not suitable for use amongst rural communities. The lack of information leads to an inability of the relevant authorities to deliver on the goal to provide basic water to all.

Ethno-visual tool

The ethno-visual tool was used to obtain insights into a number of practices on water supply and usage in rural communities. This study had no hidden agenda or desired outcome and was non-interventionist. The aim was to provide the community with different perspectives on their own practices. What they decided to do with the information was entirely up to them.

Record certain sanitation practices

It would appear as if the ethno-visual tool might not be an effective tool to record sanitation practices. However, it might be a more reliable tool than other research tools to obtain certain sanitation information, for instance on washing hands after visiting the toilet. The socially accepted answer that people are likely to give would be that everybody washes their hands after visiting the toilet but at the same household the film obtained from such a household showed that they do not wash their hands.

Capture infrastructure for water collection

The film footage obtained gave an accurate reflection of the infrastructure that was not functioning, much more accurate than what would have been obtained from official sources. Officials were unaware of the broken standpipes, that the water truck did not deliver and that virtually every household had an illegal yard connection or were aware of the amount of water each household is allowed to collect by the truck driver.

However, the camera on its own was not suitable to capture infrastructure that did not exist or a water truck that did not deliver. A combination of interviews, group discussions and graphic illustrations were required for more information.

Tool to capture water storage

The tool gave a more accurate reflection of water storage than other research tools might have given, specifically the unhygienic state of the containers and the fact that unsuitable discarded chemical containers were used.

Suitability to capture water use

The tool gives a more accurate depiction and in depth understanding of water uses than other research methods would, e.g. to determine whether someone would wash dishes in dirty water or whether water used for cooking

would be reused for washing dishes or that the same container would be used by numerous members of the household to drink water without washing it in between.

The households in the areas that had water connections in their yard used water far more liberally than those without water in their taps.

Capturing of water disposal

It is unlikely that the ethno-visual tool would provide better information on grey-water disposal than other research tools, since there does not appear to be a social stigma attached to water disposal practices.

Accurate capturing of challenges

The tool captured the problem far more accurately than any other research method would have. Methods relying on self-reported access to water might have been discounted by officials as being incorrect; however, the fact that 12 households were each filmed for two days and that the same situation of lack of access to municipal infrastructure was repeatedly recorded indicates that it is indeed a true reflection.

Suitable to capture coping strategies

Self-reported verbal or written responses would give the same results as this tool to record that people buy water from vendors. However, since the selling of water is a politically sensitive topic, such self-reported answers are likely to be discounted or disputed. The ethno-visual tool illustrated that such transactions actually take place.

Economic value of water

The tool could not effectively capture the exact amount of money paid to the vendors and self-reporting was required to determine this. The tool is suitable to capture exchange of goods and services for water, however, other tools are likely to give the same results.

Potential use of tool for further studies

Ethno-visual tools, ethnographic studies and the use of electronic equipment had been incorporated and used in research before.

However, in all of these studies a specific ideal outcome was part of the original research design to educate people about better practices or to make them realise that their own practices were not in their best interest.

Implications and usage

Further development and/or shaping of the tool may be required to fit the profiles and problems of specific communities. It is envisaged that the ethno-visual tool would have substantial value in similar situations and contribute to the discourse on community led participation. It would also allow for comparison of the use of the tool with other participatory rural research methods.

Further reading:
To obtain the report, *Ethnographic Research Methods to Better Understand Household Water Practices* (**Report No. TT 517/1/12**) 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.