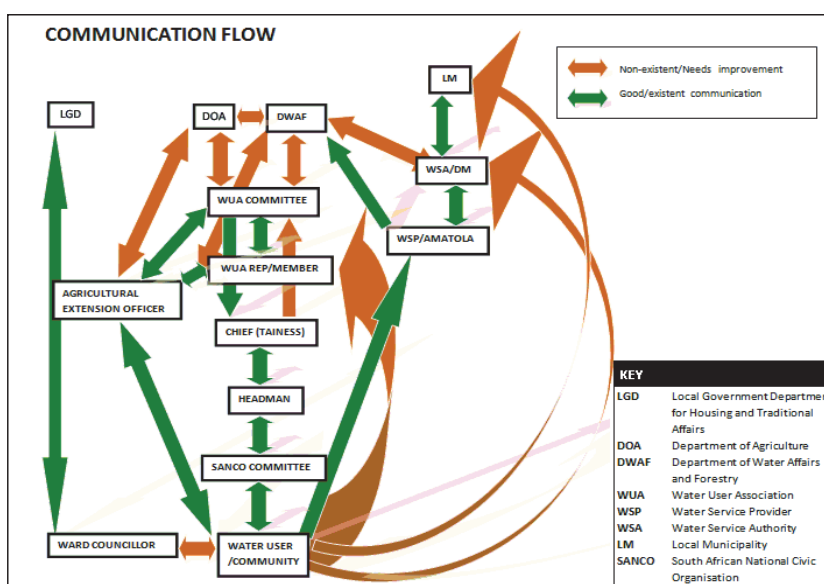


Water resource management

Institutional dimensions of water resource management in South Africa: Socio-cultural perspectives

The WRC funded a study with the objective to understand the relevance of socio-cultural issues in the new water management institutions, with special focus on the water user associations.



Communication flow between stakeholders

Integrated approach to water resource management

The National Water Act (NWA), no. 36 of 1998, developed strategies such as the National Water Research Strategy (2004) to ensure equitable and sustainable water resource management through the establishment of new water management areas and new water management institutions. An important feature of these institutions, namely the catchment management agencies (CMAs) and Water User Associations (WUAs), is to ensure an integrated approach to water resource management by devolving power to manage water resources to relevant stakeholders at the local level.

The new structures in the NWA make provision for newly-elected local officials within the water management structures. One of the main challenges of these structures is to integrate informal rules and cultural practices that govern water access and use and to define the roles and responsibilities of traditional authorities.

Relevance of socio-cultural issues

The rationale for this study was to understand the relevance of socio-cultural issues in the new water management institutions, with special focus on the WUAs. The main objectives of the study were to investigate and understand the effectiveness of new institutions; assess the relevance of socio-cultural issues in the institutions; identify typical water

resource management problems that arise as a result of lack of understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions; and to propose recommendations on the role of traditional leadership and cultural practices in the management of water resources and on mechanisms for strengthening institutional arrangements at the local level.

Study area

The Mzimvubu to Keiskamma (water management area no. 12), in the Eastern Cape, was selected as a research site as it illustrates typical water resource management challenges in rural South Africa.

Role of traditional governance systems and customary practices in water management

The authority of traditional leaders in terms of water management has been eroded and they acknowledged that they were not well informed about the current developments in water resource management. Though the CMAs and WUAs seek to integrate local stakeholders, the purpose of these new water management institutions is to implement State policy and laws and there is no explicit requirement for traditional governance systems to be incorporated.

Planning and management issues to address

- **Clarify the role of traditional leaders in the new water governance framework**
The traditional leaders need to be informed and empowered to assist in the establishment and efficient functioning of WUAs, as they can help to inform their communities of the government's rationale for and approach to water resource management and should be involved in development of national water policies and strategies.
- **Integrate cultural norms and practices into water resource management regimes**
Policymakers should investigate and better understand cultural practices and informal rules related to water management in rural communities where they are still practised, and need to be recognised by the State so that the communities feel their values are being incorporated into water resource management systems.

- **Clarify and communicate the functions of WUAs**

WUAs have a conflicting dual function: to maintain a common pool regime for resource management at the local level, but also to provide a mechanism for water demand management. Local stakeholders should be involved in establishing roles and limitations of WUAs.

- **Strengthen relationship between CMAs and WUAs**

At catchment level all stakeholders can be represented and be involved in integrated planning and decision-making to assist WUAs to have the CMA set up as a parallel process to the establishment of the WUAs.

- **Promotion of cooperative governance and comanagement**

There is a need to strengthen cooperative governance both vertically and horizontally to improve coordination between the Department of Water Affairs (DWA) regional and national levels and also within different divisions of DWA charged with water resource management.

- **Enhance links between research and practice**

A research and development unit should be created within the regional offices and DWA should collaborate with universities and other research institutions to monitor and integrate relevant information on water resource management.

- **Enhance public participation and strengthen capacity building efforts**

Improve the capacity at the local level to manage water resources effectively through WUAs, as required by the National Water Resource Strategy. Analyses, needs assessments and skills audits are needed to determine the skills requirements of resource users and a capacity development programme. An evaluation strategy to monitor the progress of the WUAs is also required.

Further reading:

To obtain the report, *Institutional Dimensions of Water Resource Management in South Africa: Socio-cultural Perspectives* (Report No. 1698/1/09) 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.