

## Water and society

### Social water scarcity and water use

**A completed WRC-funded project has successfully identified the important link between social water scarcity and water use.**

#### Background

The way in which water is management as a resource is often determined by political, economic and social power dynamics. Since secure access to water is an integral part of people's livelihoods, manifestations of social water scarcity become most evident at the micro-levels of social organisation, namely communities and households at the local level.

This WRC-funded project surmises that local people are often aware of these power dynamics and therefore see social water scarcity as largely an end-product of dominance by the more powerful political, economic and social interests. The latter tend to define and dominate discourses over meaning, the structure of resource allocation and relations between themselves and water services institutions and institutional actors.

Where such meanings, institutions and relations are perceived to be sub-optimal, local communities and households will exercise their agency to adopt a range of livelihood strategies to safeguard themselves against vulnerability to risks. They mobilise their individual and collective livelihood assets such as financial resources, human labour, social networks and socio-political platforms, to cope with water insecurity and/or engage with institutions on the need for change.

#### What is social water scarcity?

Social water scarcity is when people on the ground perceive themselves to have inadequate access to water of sufficient quality and quantity to meet their multiple-use requirements.

#### Literature review

The project started with a literature review on water scarcity as well as linkages between multiple-use of water and water services planning. Particular attention was given to social dimensions of water scarcity and 'water security'.

Literature was also reviewed regarding the dynamics between water scarcity and socio-political stability. In light of a 'paucity of theory' in the water sector to explain and predict the critical elements of social stability.

The review finds that although the post-apartheid South African government has broadened access to water services by historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs), many people living in informal urban and rural parts of the country still lack adequate and safe drinking water. Inequitable access to water has since 2004 become juxtaposed with an exponential increase in social protests.

This report points out that social protests and socio-political stability in the South African context should be seen in light of Section 17 of the national Constitution, which states that 'everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions'. Hence, although protests might appear to be an organised and consolidated expression of anger against government, they are also a manifestation of awareness by South African citizenry of the democratic right to freedom of expression.

#### Empirical findings

The final report further presents empirical findings on people's water sources, uses, adaptation and coping strategies, aspirations and expectations for service delivery. Such



*Mbuzini woman doing laundry at a communal water point.*

findings are cross-referenced, where possible, with findings on institutional responses vis-à-vis water services planning and implementation towards meeting people's water access and use requirements.

This chapter is based primarily on rapid appraisals of case studies in selected rural and urban water scarce contexts, namely Sannieshof, Khayelitsha, Cala, Mbuzini and Muyexe. Findings from all five sites suggest that, irrespective of socio-economic status, people in local communities and households expect government to provide 'acceptable' levels of water services.

Empirical research also reveals that a major problem with the linkage of water scarcity and use at micro-level and water resource planning at meso-/macro-level relates to unresolved institutional issues. Although the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) framework is intended to ensure effective integration and coordination between various sectors and spheres of governance, this study found that in some cases water needs expressed and prioritised by communities were not similarly prioritised in terms of implementation funding.

There were also discrepancies between population and water use data at meso-/macro-planning levels and ground-truthed data at micro-levels. In some case study sites, such as Sannieshof and Cala, respondents cited lack of institutional, financial, technical and skilled human resource capacity as key constraints to addressing water scarcity and use issues.

In Sannieshof and Mbuzini, issues of corruption, cadre employment and local cultures of political allegiance rather than 'downward accountability' emerged as major constraints. Implications therefore appeared to be that planning

strategies and interventions were likely to continue missing service delivery targets unless outstanding institutional issues were resolved.

## Conclusion

The study began with the hypothetical view that institutional responses that are designed to proactively plan for changing resource demand-and-supply scenarios and predicated upon good governance principles, sound data and clear understandings of people's multiple water uses and requirements for water services are more effective at ensuring water and livelihood security than those that are not. Research findings confirmed, in principle, this hypothesis.

Furthermore, application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework by the research revealed more clearly the mechanisms and pathways by which water scarcity and water use are socially constructed, articulated and contested. A number of key issues were identified by the research.

One of the main key issues identified was the need to optimise governance of water services planning. Robustness of water services planning was found to be weak often, particularly with regard to the burgeoning of informal urban settlements. Effectiveness of water services planning in other contexts fell far short of people's expectations for water services.

### Further reading:

To order the report, *Social water scarcity and water use* (**Report No. 1940/1/11**) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: [orders@wrc.org.za](mailto:orders@wrc.org.za) or Visit: [www.wrc.org.za](http://www.wrc.org.za) to download a free copy.