

Water supply

Community engagement in water services

A newly-published WRC report reviewed community engagement in drinking water-supply management.

Background

This review emanated from a previous WRC-funded study which investigated the possibility of incentivising community engagement in order to improve drinking water supplies in South Africa.

The research was based on the notion that an increase in community engagement, particularly in rural areas, would result in an increased understanding of the current shortcomings of drinking water supplies, an increased understanding of the communication challenges between communities, water service authorities (WSAs) and water service providers (WSPs), as well as an improved experience of greater transparency and accountability for all stakeholders.

Community engagement is an important component of sustainable drinking water-supply management. It provides, on the one hand, an avenue to establish the needs of communities and, on the other hand, ensures the buy-in and trust into systems developed by government authorities to deliver services.

Active community engagement relies on communities wanting to engage and contribute to the management and governance of services and on governance structures seeking pro-actively such engagement.

Challenges of community engagement

Based on previous research on the hindrances to reporting water-supply faults by community members has been the limited understanding of roles and responsibilities of local and district municipalities. Communities members are generally unclear whom to call, and are disillusioned when there is no response to their complaints.

The impersonal management of complaints through call centres has resulted in citizens withdrawing from complaining altogether. Aspects such as reference numbers for follow-up of a logged call are rarely understood and are perceived as making the process of complaining itself difficult.

Even in major metropolitan areas a difference between the numbers of complaints logged in affluent areas compared to under-resourced communities is clearly identifiable.

Information communication technologies (ICTs) have shown to offer new ways of engaging with the wider public on aspects such as governance. Recently, there has been an increase in literature suggesting such possibilities in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. The proliferation of mobile phones in developing countries and the rural areas could result in ICTs contributing to overcoming the existing barriers of reporting water-supply interruptions.



WRC report

The final report of the WRC project provides the necessary background to the above-mentioned research project in order to assess existing literature on the topic of community engagement, service delivery, incentivisation and ICTs.

The document is broken up into several sections. Chapter 1 provides an analysis of the current status of water-service delivery in South Africa using the Blue Drop reports on Drinking Water Quality of the Department of Water Affairs. Aspects such as the discrepancy between rural and urban municipalities, overall growth in service delivery and supply management and water quality are discussed.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the many ways in which communities engage with governance. An investigation into national and international trends provide a first assessment of how governments incentivise communities and public stakeholders in contributing to governance and resource management.

By analysing the local governance structures and government policies on community engagement, public participation and community managed supplies, some of the South African specific challenges to service delivery and community engagement are discussed.

ICTs have been used extensively over the last decade in the context of public engagement and governance. While historical events (such as the Arab Spring) speak to a particular aspect of governance and stakeholder engagement, there are some key lessons to be learnt in how to harness ICTs in this context. This is highlighted in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the current understanding and best practises of incentivising communities. A key aspect to this research is to understand how to assess and judge the success of incentivising communities.

The last section of the report provides overall conclusions. From the findings of the literature a first assessment of the project, the relevant research and possible challenges are identified.

Further reading:

To order the report, *Community engagement in drinking water supply management: A review* (Report No. TT 583/13) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.