

Service delivery

Exploring the link between social protests and water service delivery in South Africa

A recently completed Water Research Commission (WRC) study investigated community protests and water service delivery in South Africa.

Background

Since 2012, the frequency, geographical spread and violence of service delivery-related protests have reached historically high levels, with more than one social protest occurring every day in the country. Water service delivery issues have been a part of a range of grievances that masquerade under the general rubric of 'service delivery' that underpin many rallying calls for social protest action. Although such conflation reflects the inter-relatedness of social services, it also masks the precise nature of the specific water service delivery issues in question.

This prompted the WRC to investigate the phenomenon of social protests and their connection to water issues. The research is based on a survey of the numerous social protests that have been reported from 2004 to 2014 led by the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) based at the University of the Western Cape.

When and where are social protests more likely to occur?

The research findings suggest that there are four main factors that contribute to the eruption of social protests associated with water service delivery (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Main factors contributing to social protests associated with water service delivery.

The research indicates that the majority of social protests associated with water service delivery tend to occur in working-class urban and peri-urban localities characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and disjuncture (including communication breakdown) between water services development planning at especially municipal level and water users at local household and community levels. This occurred irrespective of the party affiliation of local government.

Such disjuncture can predispose people in such localities towards protest action. In many of the cases examined, residents expressed frustration over unmet expectations for water services, lack of downward accountability by municipal officials, alleged corruption, indifference and lack of monitoring by water services authorities and/or municipal officials.

On the other hand, municipal officials voiced their frustrations over wasteful water use, unaccounted-for water, infrastructure theft, breakdown and lack of financial budgets for repairs of existing and building of new infrastructure. Both sets of viewpoints tended to be simultaneously complementary and contradictory; thus pointing to a need to develop a shared understanding of water service delivery issues in case-specific localities.

Violent protests were more likely to take place in urban and peri-urban formal housing areas and informal settlements in which dynamics around poverty, unemployment, population growth, relative deprivation, marginalization, injustice and histories of struggle activism by predominantly black residents coalesce with unmet expectations for water and related services. Communities in these areas also struggle with uncertainties as a result of drivers of change, such as mining-based economic decline, shifts in agricultural and industrial production systems, and rising food and utility prices. This trend is changing, however, as recent violent protests in rural areas indicate.

Water services delivery issues

A number of water service delivery issues were identified among protest grievances. Among others, these included:

- Problems relating to water supply, even when infrastructure is situated within 200 m from the household;
- Poor quality of water from existing infrastructure;
- Old and deteriorated water reticulation networks;
- Poor operation and maintenance of infrastructure;
- High tariffs (and sometimes too low);
- Intermittent water supplies;
- Lack of monitoring of service delivery by private

- contractors;
- Perceived and alleged corruption in the awarding of private contracts;
- Water restrictions and disconnections after installation of supplies;
- Difficulties in access at night due to threats to personal safety and security; and
- Comparison with more affluent neighbourhoods, which creates feelings of relative deprivation.



Apparent lack of sustainable service delivery drives many communities to protest, but usually only when peaceful communication with water service authorities fail.

However, findings clearly showed that grievance issues, such as the above, on their own were not the main causes of protests. The question arose therefore what could be driving social protests associated with water service delivery in some but not other contexts?

Key drivers of social protests

Six key drivers of violent social protests were identified. The first and the second drivers relate to the rapid transformations of both the a) urban landscape and b) rural landscape with associated increase in population, changing demographic profiles and citizen expectations. The third driver is unemployment, with surplus labour partly deriving from mine closure in certain parts of the country.

Negative perceptions about governance in general, and municipal governance in particular, also trigger social protests. The fifth driver is the emerging politics of engagement, which have increasingly become characterised by new mobilisations by civil society as well as an expansion of rights-based social networks of aggrieved people's organisations. Lastly, the era of social media amplifies grievance issues, creating public awareness and outrage,

which could lead to an acceleration of social protests. Lack of communication a trigger

A critical link in the shift from grievance perception to protest action is the disjuncture between water users and municipal authorities. Such disjuncture is often multi-faceted and includes poor communication, lack of downward accountability by municipal officials and councillors, and differences in perception between what practitioners consider to be effective ways of rendering water services and what water services users consider as their legitimate needs and expectations.

A common refrain in many protests was that, when residents perceive a water services delivery issue, their first reaction is to peacefully communicate their grievance or dissatisfaction by reporting to relevant municipal authorities. Responses by authorities (or lack thereof) tend to be associated with the quality of governance, and are often critical to residents' decisions whether or not to escalate the efficacy of their engagement strategies.

When authorities demonstrate that they are committed to resolving reported grievances residents do not proceed to protest.

Rather, they await further communication and/or resolution of the grievance issue. It is only after the waiting time has exceeded residents' limits of tolerance that they may resort to take action in a variety of ways to have their grievance cleared. In many instances, residents repeatedly voice their grievances peacefully before engaging in contentious action.

Conclusion

The issue of social protest is complex and dependent on a variety of contexts, drivers and scenarios. What is critical for policy is not so much how to make sense of the how social protests come to occur, but rather to glean from among the commonly identified key points of disjuncture between citizens and authorities, plausible pre-emptive and remedial interventions. The objective of such interventions would be to address the issues contributing to water insecurity and thereby avert future protest action.

Further reading:

To order the report, *Social protests and water service delivery in South Africa (Report No. TT 631/15)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za