

## Water supply

### Incentivising community engagement in water management

## A newly-completed Water Research Commission (WRC) study has investigated ways of incentivising community engagement in drinking water supply management.

### Background

During the past decade, the South African water sector has gone through substantial changes in addressing the disparity between access to drinking water and sanitation provision. Recent service delivery protests on water and service provision have, however, highlighted the fact that communication between municipalities and communities is often unsatisfactory, resulting in a lack of trust and constructive engagement.

This WRC study was based on the premise that community engagement is paramount to water supply management and sanitation provision. The research proposed an investigation into the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in order to engage rural communities in water supply monitoring and the reporting of services faults.

Thus the aims of this project were to, among others, develop a research methodology to analyse engagement between municipalities and communities; to analyse and assess current practices of community engagement in field study sites; identify incentives for reporting supply problems in collaboration with the community and the municipality; and to design, develop, implement and evaluate an ICT tool as well as incentive structures.

### Main results

The project design was based on using an action research in a case study setting with the intention of developing an ICT intervention. In order to design the ICT, a co-design

approach was chosen which required communities and the municipality to become a resource in the research project and take an active part in the design of the tool.

Two local municipalities in the Eastern Cape were identified as the case study location, namely the rural municipalities of Kou-Kamma and Ndlambe municipalities. In each of the municipalities three communities were identified as case study sites.

The analysis of the municipalities prior to the ICT implementation showed that both municipalities had a negative capacity due to the limited financial and human resources, which resulted in their inability to respond to service delivery challenges.

The municipalities did not engage productively with their communities and a lack of information was identified as a hindrance to inform citizens appropriately. The expectation of the ICT implementation for both municipalities was that it would improve internal communication and engagement with the communities by building trust.

Communities experienced their engagement with the municipalities as limited prior to the ICT engagement. There was a certain amount of frustration with limited feedback being received and trust in existing communication and engagement structures, such as ward councillors, depended on the relationships within the community and their representative.

The ICT tool was designed using the feedback from communities and municipalities in order to respond to the identified needs. A toll-free line was established in order to

allow a cost-free complaints registry and a please-call-me line allowed citizens to use their mobile phones to request a return call from the municipality.

The system also responded to the requirement to provide feedback to citizens by agreeing with municipalities on a revised process when lodging complaints. The system was web-based with access given to the relevant stakeholders, including councillors and community development workers.

In November 2014, the system was implemented in Kou-Kamma and Ndlambe using training workshops in each municipality. The communities were informed of the system through public meetings, focus group sessions and pamphlets.

The ICT evaluation showed that there was a high experience of perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use for the municipal staff. In the six-month testing period the municipalities received over 800 complaints in total, emphasising the need for the system.

Both municipalities were equally constrained by their resources in their use of the system, but adapted it to their own needs. Unfortunately, the municipalities did not remain committed to the original process change of providing feedback to the citizens.

The adaptive capacity assessment after the ICT implementation showed that the capacity for both municipalities only marginally improved through the ICT system. The resource constraints of both municipalities were too substantial to use the system constructively in order to improve access and feedback to citizens.

In both municipalities the system was of greater benefit to the municipal staff than it was to the communities. The hope that information would be shared more easily between departments was not confirmed during the six-month period.

## Conclusion

This project showed that ICT systems can support complaints management in municipalities and can result in a measurable improvement of adaptive capacity. However, the impact and the improvement are arguably not enough to leave either municipalities or the communities in a better position to adapt and respond effectively to the changes.

This does not necessarily mean that an ICT solution is not useful in order to improve municipal processes, but

implementing any system in a rural resource-constrained environment should be done cautiously, focusing on the changes that can be achieved when considering the resource limitations.

ICTs are not the silver bullet that can compensate for resource limitations that result in water and sanitation issues not being addressed. The study highlighted the fact that the ICT system improved the overall knowledge and data tracking, but could not improve the effectiveness with which complaints raised by citizens were addressed.

### Further reading:

To order the report, , *An assessment of incentivising community engagement in drinking water supply management* (WRC Report No. TT 657/16), contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; 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.