



Exploring the science of involved citizenship

South Africa's National Water Act (NWA) encourages citizens to play an active role in the way in which the country's water resources are managed and distributed. Authorities agree that effective stakeholder engagement is crucial to sustainable water resource management. But why do stakeholders choose to become involved in the water affairs of their catchment and, more essentially, what compels them to stay involved? These are some of the questions a current Water Research Commission (WRC) study hopes to answer. Article by Lani van Vuuren.

It is becoming increasingly important to understand the interdependence between people and ecological systems as pressures rise to manage shared resources equitably and sustainably. The challenges regarding the effective and equitable management of water resources in South Africa could potentially be addressed more effectively if there was an understanding of what drives and inhibits stakeholder engagement.

The Wilderness Lakes and Swartvlei systems, in the Southern Cape, have sustained communities for thousands of years. Various groups make use of the lakes and adjacent catchment area. Agriculture, forestry and municipalities all abstract water from the various rivers feeding into the lake systems, while communities use the resource for cultural practices, subsistence and recreational

fishing. People also use the lakes and associated estuaries for other recreational uses, such as boating and skiing.

ALLOWING PEOPLE TO TELL THEIR STORIES

The various stakeholder groups represented in the areas (varying from government authorities, tourism and nature protection organisations to retired professionals and poor communities) as well as the long histories of engagement over the lakes have motivated the selection of these systems as study areas for the WRC research project. The research, led by independent consultancy, The Narrative Lab, is investigating how citizens become and remain engaged in decision-making regarding the management of their natural resources and to

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determine if they feel empowered and if they have sufficient knowledge to engage.

The project team uses narrative research techniques to capture the experiences of stakeholders. “Simply put, we use narrative as a vehicle through which we surface the mindsets, perceptions, values and beliefs that govern people’s behaviour,” says project leader Aiden Choles, MD of The Narrative Lab. “Narrative is a helpful research tool as it cuts through the surface of opinions and simple analyses people give, and uncovers a more substantive description of how they see the world and choose to act in it. We then analyse the database for drivers and patterns within the stories that inform us about what governs people’s behaviour with regards to a complex phenomenon, such as water resource management.”

THEMES AND ISSUES PERTAINING TO ENGAGEMENT

The project team found stakeholders eager to participate both in the Swartvlei and Wilderness study areas. “The management of water at these sites is really a hot topic. People have some very strong opinions about what is happening, or not happening at Swartvlei and Wilderness,” notes Choles. “We also find that stakeholders enjoy being listened to – this is where giving people space to tell their stories is helpful.”

Initial interviews and consequent workshops with various stakeholder groups in the study areas revealed



a number of themes and issues pertaining to engagement. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University George Campus helpfully provided the location for the workshops. Workshops were facilitated in such a way as to also offer an opportunity for the stakeholders to provide feedback on these results. Attendance included representatives from various forums, associations, sport clubs, government departments, spiritual groups and businesses.

Participants held active discussions around stakeholder maps and timelines created for each study area.

The first identified theme is the apparent significant role of key individuals. It seems some people have a knack to spur on increased levels of engagement. “We have seen how influential personal leadership styles and characters are for citizen engagement,” notes Choles. “Although water is a technical issue, we have seen how open,

Top and above: Stakeholders discussing a stakeholder map drawn up for one of the study areas.



Above: Stakeholders spent much time in the workshops discussing the timelines of significant events in the study areas.

Below: Project team members discussing stakeholder engagement in one of the study areas. (From left to right) Masters student Aneri Vlok, project leader Aiden Choles, project member Sonja Bignaut, WRC Executive Manager Dr Inga Jacobs and project member Chrislia van Tonder.

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Others, through their power of authority, simply influence a resource as a result of their authoritative position. Stories abound in the area, of the influence of PW Botha over the Swartvlei, for example. There project team recorded various anecdotes about how the former statesman insisted on the opening of the river mouth whenever his rose bushes were in danger of being flooded.

The second key theme is that of the continuity of a forum. “Stakeholders seem to have quite different reasons for becoming and staying involved. From a forum perspective, the need to be informed and available when called upon for public opinion seems to be an important motivation,” explains Choles. “Individuals have different reasons for joining forums and getting involved, some do it for practical reasons, for example when their houses get flooded, while others join because

of a strong belief in the principles of democracy.”

An interesting observation made by workshop participants was how the arrival of social media had changed forums – people no longer needed to attend meetings, but could stay informed through traditional channels such as newspapers and newer mediums such as Twitter and Facebook. As people’s lifestyles became busier they also tended to have less time for stakeholder engagement. At the Wilderness and Swartvlei study sites a significant proportion of active stakeholders are retired professionals.

Another important theme is access to the natural resource. In the study areas private land ownership has made it difficult for some stakeholders to access the water resource, which has prompted engagement in the hope to attain access.

The project team observed how difficult it was for some stakeholder groupings found it to understand the perspective of other stakeholders. “The ability to be aware of your own stakeholder grouping and its associated agenda is critical for self-awareness for engagement processes to be healthy,” explains Choles. The workshops also confirmed the old adage of ‘the person who shouts the loudest gets the most attention’, with some stakeholders struggling to find a voice in engagement.

In the end the project team hopes to equip citizens in South Africa with principles, suggestions and guidance on how to stimulate stakeholder engagement in areas with water resource challenges. “Addressing water challenges cannot simply be left to the authorities,” says Choles. “Our issues are deep and complex enough to warrant more dedicated stakeholder engagement. Also, there are citizens who are eager to assist but perhaps don’t know how best to go about it themselves and/or how to get their fellow citizens to journey with them.” □

