

## CHAPTER 8:

**Part 1: To participate or not to participate? There is no question that local communities need to be involved in water and sanitation management**

By Richard Meisner

**Part 2: Strategic developments that will support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management in South Africa**

By Mark Dent & Liz Taylor

### Abstract

Sustainable development is not a concept with one meaning only; it can also be infused with ambiguity, which should not be bemoaned. Sustainable development's indistinctness makes the concept pliable. This, in turn, allows a wide range of stakeholders to participate in a variety of programmes and plans to ensure that humanity meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Kates et al., 2005). Said differently, the concept's meaning is wide enough for all societal segments, from the individual to the largest entities, to be involved in sustainable development efforts. That said, sustainable development is not an exclusive government or international organisation activity; individuals and communities can also realise sustainable development goals. It was with the collective involvement in mind, that in September 2015, world leaders adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals at the UN Headquarters in New York, building on the Millennium Development Goals' success. The broad purpose of the Sustainable Development Goals is to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. These overarching goals form part of the new sustainable development agenda, with each goal, like that of the Millennium Development Goals, having specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years (UN, 2016). This article will investigate Goal 6.8: support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management. To do this, I am structuring the article as follows: in the first part, I will look at the concepts 'support' and 'strengthen'. To 'support' and 'strengthen', may seem to be familiar activities done by certain government-type actors, but there is more to it than meets the eye. I will then illustrate the various ways of supporting and strengthening with a number of examples I observed over the years. In other words, I will use examples from contexts I have experienced over the past two decades of researching water governance and politics. Throughout, I will link my observations of local community participation to Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. Lastly, I will end with a conclusion.

**What does it mean to support and strengthen local community participation in water and sanitation management? To some observers, this might mean that local communities would want to get support from their respective governments, international organisations or donor agencies. This is not the wrong answer, but it paints a lopsided picture of community participation and support.**

The view that governments and international aid agencies and organisations need to strengthen and support communities originates from top-down, regulatory initiatives drawn up by

policymakers within the government and other global international organisational structures. In other words, the view that the government and international organisations are necessary to support and strengthen community participation in the sustainable development goals originates from a perception that only the developers of the goals have the responsibility to strengthen and support. Nothing could be further from the truth, because communities can act as autonomous units in water governance and politics. As autonomous actors, communities support and strengthen other communities and themselves in realising the sustainable development goals of water and sanitation management. I will illustrate this argument in this chapter. To do this, I



will define 'community' in its broadest sense to include local communities in rural areas, the knowledge community of scientists and researchers, the policy community consisting of policy developers and implementers in the private and public sectors as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that step in where governments are unable to supply basic water and sanitation services. Part of the conclusion will be to reflect on what it means to support and strengthen community participation.

### Community Participation in Water and Sanitation

A quick look at SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation shows that it places a lot of attention on water resources and not so much on the interaction between humans and water resources. The Goal does state that 'water scarcity affects more than 40% of people around the world', and that number is projected to go even higher as a result of climate change. If we continue the path we're on, by 2050 at least one in four people is likely to be affected by recurring water shortages' (UNDP, 2015). By painting this statistical picture attention is not placed on how people interact with water resources in various contexts across the world. The Goal outlines a new vision, though, which entails 'more international cooperation, protecting wetlands and rivers, sharing water-treatment technologies and more' (emphasis added) (UNDP, 2015). Yet, again there is little in this vision on people's need for these biophysical elements to function properly. In this section, I will dwell on the 'and more' activities, which communities and practitioners could do to support and strengthen local communities in achieving SDG 6.

Before continuing, I would like to say a few words on what I mean by governance, since this concept is very much in vogue

when talking about the protection of the environment and water supply services. Governance is not an activity that we find in the government domain only. Individuals and communities, as well as scientists, can be part of governance initiatives and process, either voluntarily or by default (Meissner, 2015a). In this regard, water governance is the result of, often non-harmonious, interactive socio-economic and political forms of governing (Rhodes, 1996; Kooiman and Bavinck, 2013; Meissner and Jacobs, 2016) water resources in an effort to create opportunities and solve problems in water management. This definition of governance will manifest itself in the case study examples presented next.

### Interactive socio-economics

South African municipalities often experience difficulty in supplying clean water and sanitation to residents. The reasons are legion including lack of financial resources and appropriately trained staff, large geographical expanses where service delivery is stretched to the limit and failure of infrastructure in remote rural areas. It should also be noted that often some of the variables affecting water supply and sanitation is outside the municipalities' control. A case in point would be the GaManoke community, near Burgersfort in South Africa's Limpopo Province. We visited GaManoke in the winter of 2012 as part of a research project investigating the governance of wastewater treatment plants in the Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality. We arrived at the community and were promptly told that the community has been without water for the past three months. For basic household water use, community members used water directly from the Steelpoort River and bought water from other community members who own boreholes. Furthermore, the river's water is

often contaminated with partially treated effluent from wastewater treatment works (Ntombela, 2013).

Members of the community's water steering committee took us to the Steelpoort River and the purification plant that normally supplies water. Upon arrival, they indicated that the electric transformer driving the pumps and purification plant had been stolen. The community had, on numerous occasions, requested the electricity supplier, Eskom, and the local municipality to replace the transformer. Without the transformer, the purification plant is inoperable, resulting in water shortages. The result was that people bought water from water vendors that collected the water either from the river or boreholes selling 210 litres from the river for R50.00. People were also travelling to the river on foot to collect water and do their laundry. After we enquired with the local municipality about the situation, the local municipality instructed Eskom to replace the transformer and the community started receiving water. In February 2015, I visited the site of the water purification plant and found the transformer intact with the community receiving water (Meissner, 2015a).

The example of GaManoke and the role of scientists doing field research reveal a number of dynamics that is likely to play out as the global community moves towards realising SDG 6. The first is that communities have the ability to govern their water resources or at least the infrastructure supplying their water, to a certain extent. This is evident from the fact that the community had a water steering committee in place and that the committee had been communicating with Eskom and the local municipality on a regular basis regarding the situation (committee members showed us the letters they wrote to the municipality). Secondly, the scientific community can play

an active role in promoting community engagement with local authorities and other stakeholders, like Eskom, that play a pivotal role in water supply and sanitation. Scientists are not only supposed to do objective research and leave it at that. I strongly believe that the scientific community has a more active role to play in strengthening and supporting communities and the wider public in realising opportunities in the realm of water governance and management. Thirdly, because thieves had stolen the transformer indicates that the government is not always in control of water infrastructure networks. Theft and vandalism, together with poor maintenance, are probably one of the most pressing issues that could stand in the way of SDG 6. It is also not entirely impossible, when looking at the situation prevalent in GaManoke, that those who benefitted from the sale of water had stolen the transformer or at least colluded with criminal elements. This indicates governance's so-called dark side especially when considering that governance is an interactive activity that thieves can also engage in to create and opportunity for themselves while putting others at risk from contracting waterborne diseases. One of the ways communities can be strengthened to prevent such situations is to encourage community members to establish working relations with law enforcement structures in the area. One of our recommendations to the community's water steering committee was to establish a community police forum as a means to manage vandalism against water infrastructure (Meissner, 2015a). In other words, interaction with the government authorities, taking socio-economic circumstances into consideration (e.g. poverty-driven criminality), can pave the way to better management of water infrastructure enabling water supply and sanitation.



### Non-harmonious water governance

When talking about governance, there is a tendency within the discourse to talk about the activity as if it is only about collaborative efforts. There is, however, another side of the governance coin and that is the disharmonious mode of governance. Since governance relies a lot on the relationship individuals and organisations forge to create opportunities and solve problems, the likelihood exists that it will not always be cooperative. Relationships are a mix of conflict and cooperation. This should not be seen as a disabling factor for water governance.

An example of non-harmonious water governance would be the case of the OvaHimba in Namibia opposing the Epupa hydro-electric scheme. In the early 1990s, the newly independent Namibian government announced plans for the construction of a hydro-electric power plant across the Kunene River. This dam would have supplied Namibia with much-needed electricity as it was reliant on South Africa for electricity imports. The site of the dam was in Kaokoland, home of the minority indigenous OvaHimba people (Meissner and Jacobs, 2016; Meissner, 2016).

During the pre-feasibility study, the OvaHimba learned of the government's intention to construct the dam. A member of the feasibility team also informed a German interest group of the dam's perceived negative effects on the environment and the OvaHimba, in particular. The OvaHimba rely on the Kunene River and its riverine vegetation to sustain their large herds of cattle. They also attach spiritual significance to the river; burying their dead near the river. After hearing about the government's intentions, the OvaHimba started a campaign against the proposed Epupa Dam. This campaign culminated in a worldwide movement against the

government's intentions towards the proposed Epupa Dam. The completion of the dam would have provided much-needed electricity for Namibia and have a positive impact on the lives of the general population, at the cost of disrupting fewer individuals' and communities' lives.

What one should also consider when talking about support and strengthening, is that the support and strengthening can come from a source other than the government. In the case of the OvaHimba, they were supported and strengthened by a variety of interest groups from outside Namibia to campaign against the Epupa Dam and, in so doing, preserve their traditional way of life (Meissner, 2016) and rejecting potentially better water and sanitation services. Throughout their campaign against the proposed dam, there was a measure of ambiguity and contradiction at play.

When developing water and sanitation management policies, the argument I often see put forward is that policymakers want clear-cut answers from the scientific community on how to solve problems. I would like to argue that policy development and practices around water and sanitation management are not always clear and unambiguous.

A potential source of perceived unambiguity could be the expertise policy makers rely upon when they develop policies. The knowledge of experts is important, but by relying on a certain expertise, like cost-benefit analyses, can produce tunnel vision and an overconfidence in the power of objective observation (often the basis of cost-benefit analyses) that do not recognise change or the evolution of new dynamics (Meissner, 2015b).

When strengthening and supporting local communities, government policymakers, donor agencies and

international organisations should not be blind to evolving circumstances and rely too much on cost-benefit analyses. They should be more careful in assessing situations keeping in mind that situations can change leading to effects that would be the opposite of their well-intentioned plans.

### Conclusion

Policymakers should realise that the Sustainable Development Goals are defined broadly and, as such, constitute a strategic intent on ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all. This strategy can be interpreted by a wide range of stakeholders in a very comprehensive manner. As such, ambiguity could result where stakeholders' perceptions start to clash. This means that the ambiguity also constitutes the involvement of these stakeholders in all manner of programmes, plans and projects that governments are likely to develop and implement to realise the Sustainable Development Goals. The policy community should understand that ambiguity should not be shunned, but needs embracing since ambiguity is the stuff of policy development and implementation. Ambiguity is also the grease that lubricates democratic decision making, as one person or entity's view cannot account for the entire truth around a policy issue and how to address it. Debate and the participation of various stakeholders define the process of policy development and implementation, and ambiguity is a central characteristic of this process.

The element of ambiguity also brings to mind the way in which governments might perceive the implementation of policies, programmes and plans. In certain instances, a top-down approach is not likely to succeed, since communities, however defined, can empower themselves and be empowered by other communities.



To begin with a thorough understanding of bottom-up approaches, I propose that policymakers need to place less attention on water as a resource, and more attention on how people interact with the resource, even at the individual level. I believe that there is a predominantly skewed attention to water as a resource and how it sustains life and not a proper vision of how water gets mobilised by communities to create value for themselves and the rest of society. Said differently, a different view is necessary; one that focusses attention on the relationship between humans and water and not on water itself.

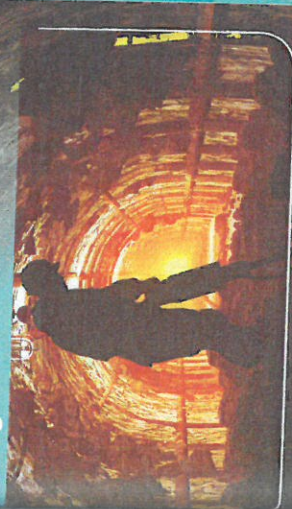
In both case studies I presented above, we see that communities and individuals played an active role in addressing water delivery difficulties and the threat to their traditional way of life. In the case of GaManoke, thieves caused water shortages with local government having virtually no control over the theft of the transformer. In the case of the OvaHimba, the Namibian government's plans to address the country's electricity shortage and deliver some measure of socio-economic development to Kaokoland led to an international outcry over the construction of the Epupa Dam.

What these examples indicate, is that governance is not a government activity only, individuals and communities are also capable of governing. Said differently, in GaManoke, the community realised SDG 6.8, to a certain extent, for themselves. In the case of the OvaHimba, it can be argued that SDG 6.8 goes wider than mere water and sanitation management, to prioritise the OvaHimba's traditional way of life where the Kunene River is their main water source. This last thought implies that policymakers should not only view water and sanitation management in light of potable water, but also water in its natural state as it flows in rivers and streams and locked in aquifers. After all is said and done, realising SDG 6.8 entails more than government action; it also entails understanding how people interact with water and what their development priorities are.

This means that the realisation of SDG 6.8 will not be a straightforward endeavour involving policymakers only; scientists, individuals, communities and a host of other entities will need to strengthen and support each other should the world want to make a success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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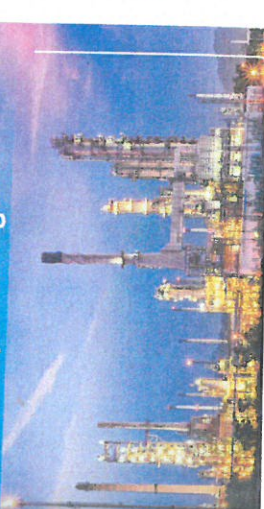
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