

Water service delivery in Pietermaritzburg: A community perspective

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Abstract

South African service delivery paradigms are undergoing a period of decentralisation. Local government/local municipalities are the preferred vehicles, selected by national government, to implement national policy, manage and deliver water services to local populations. Municipalities face a significant challenge of reducing apartheid backlogs, raising the level of service delivery and maintaining working systems whilst concurrently undergoing a period of painful re-demarcation and facing financial and capacity crises. Municipalities, forced to recover costs, transfer pressures of payment to households in an environment of massive job losses, decreased employment opportunities, HIV/AIDS and rising household service debts. South Africa's democratic system lends itself to a heightened awareness of community voices and participation, it is this environment, encouraging community involvement, where community perspectives are sought to identify challenges and provide recommendations for the transformation of water service delivery systems. This article highlights the perspective of low-income urban households to the following (community-identified) major water service delivery issues: free basic water, affordability mechanisms and tariff structures, water meters, leakages and water demand management, political platforms for community engagement and municipal administration. Grass-roots perspectives are critical as they provide insight into how implementation strategies are working on the ground. This paper aims to provide a platform for the perspectives of low-income households to water service delivery in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal and provides community-suggested recommendations for the transformation of water service delivery systems.

Keywords: municipal water service delivery, free basic water, water tariffs, community

Introduction

Apartheid operated to produce persistent poverty and extreme inequality by deliberately institutionalising a number of context-specific causes of poverty (Hunter et al., 2003). Apartheid's policies of separate development ensured that services were delivered along racial lines, with black South Africans receiving inferior and inequitable services, or no services at all (Hunter et al., 2003; Hemson, 2004). The emergence of the new South African democracy in 1994 brought with it expectations of equalisation across racial, gender, socio-economic and geographic boundaries; fair and just delivery of services; access to basic services; and hope that all citizens could own their freedom and dignity. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) 1994, in an attempt to redress South Africa's skewed water resource and service legacy, recognised the right of all South Africans to access clean water and adequate sanitation for the attainment of household water security (African National Congress (ANC), 1994). Water, critical for the promotion of health and hygiene, was the RDP's primary objective. The right to access water, as stated in the RDP, was translated into national legal obligations, which were reflected in the South African Constitution 1996, which states that, "everyone has the right to have access to sufficient... water" (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1996). Commensurate with the legislative obligations, as issued in the

1996 Constitution, the Water Services Act 1997 was adopted as a necessary measure to ensure an implementation framework to "provide for the rights of access to basic water supply and basic sanitation" (RSA, 1997). The "sufficient" volume of water referred to in the Bill of Rights (RSA, 1996) was re-worded as "basic" and defined as the "prescribed minimum standard" of water supply services necessary for the reliable supply of a sufficient quantity and quality of water to households to support life and personal hygiene (RSA, 1997). The minimum standard for basic water supply services, as provided by the Water Services Act 1997 is:

- "the provision of appropriate education in respect of effective water use; and
- a minimum quantity of potable water of 25 l per person per day or 6 kl per household per month. . . within 200 m of a household" (RSA, 1997).

The South African constitution guarantees all people the right to access adequate and affordable potable water to meet basic domestic needs; and "water and sanitation services should be delivered equitably, affordably, effectively, efficiently, sustainably and gender sensitively to satisfy sector goals" (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996; Department of Water Affairs and Forestry [DWA], 2003).

However, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) introduced in 1996, ushered in a new era of institutionalised neo-liberalism and cost-recovery, and substantially shaped the texture and direction of certain infrastructure policies (Khosa, 2000). The delivery of water services, historically a duty of the state, shifted resolutely to municipalities

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