

Updating public participation in IWRM: A proposal for a focused and structured engagement with Catchment Management Strategies[#]

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Abstract

Despite the strong emphasis on public participation in the National Water Act (NWA), South Africa has yet to implement a comprehensive and functional approach to public engagement at the level of Water Management Areas. Part of the problem is that actual requirements are not explicitly articulated anywhere. This has led to the situation where public participatory processes are poorly conceptualised, misdirected and often perceived as confusing by stakeholders. 'Participation fatigue' is the consequence of this accompanied by a growing frustration with the implementation of the content of the Act. The intention for decentralised democratic water resources management is consequently seriously jeopardised if the public participation processes are not clearly presented in the public domain.

In this paper we draw on a number of sources, namely a national pilot integrated catchment management programme called the Save the Sand Project initiated in the north-eastern part of SA, a Water Research Commission project on public participation and a DWAF project that funded the exploration of public participation in the Sand River Catchment. The latter (2005-2007) supported a better understanding of public participation processes and dynamics in a high-density rural catchment, the findings from which are reported here. Additionally this paper is referenced against the current discourse on public participation in water resources aimed at elucidating public participation in integrated water resource management (IWRM) in South Africa. The focus of the work reported in this paper is specifically on the development and implementation of catchment management strategies as the locus of decentralised, democratised, participatory water resource management.

In this paper we start out by discussing how complexities surrounding public engagement might present newly established catchment management agencies (CMAs) with serious challenges and then move on to a proposed framework for focusing public engagement on specific IWRM tasks. The framework outlines tasks where multi-stakeholder platforms collaboratively design strategic water management actions that are assembled as the catchment management strategy (CMS), a statutory obligation for CMAs.

Keywords: public participation, catchment management strategies, National Water Act, integrated water resource management

IWRM in the South African context

Integrated water resource management (IWRM) with its proposed institutional arrangements as set out in the National Water Act (NWA, 1998) provides the broad context for the engagement of the general public in water resource management. Once CMAs are established they are expected to manage water in collaboration with local stakeholders. The NWA makes provision for a number of stakeholder platforms (catchment management forums – CMFs and catchment management committees – CMCs) where IWRM can be negotiated at the level of a water management area. A wealth of documentation, guidelines and research literature (DWAF, 2000; 2001a-d; 2004a,b; WRC, 2003; 2004a-c) deals with various aspects of the establishment and functioning of these platforms. The platforms are intended

to be more than places where stakeholders defend vested interests in water resources. They are platforms where decisions are taken and collaborative actions are designed in order to strategically manage water resources for and by the inhabitants of a WMA. South Africa has yet to implement a comprehensive and functional approach to stakeholder engagement at the level of Water Management Areas. One of the most important challenges relates to focusing the interactions on specific IWRM tasks (Du Toit et al., 2005). As multiple stakeholder environments are potentially conflictual it is essential that tasks are clearly articulated and well presented at such forums in order to appropriately direct interactions.

In this paper we draw on a number of sources, namely a national pilot integrated catchment management programme called the Save the Sand Project initiated in the north-eastern part of SA (Pollard et al., 1998; Pollard and Du Toit, 2004; Du Toit, 2005), a Water Research Commission project on public participation (Lotz-Sisitka and Burt, 2005; Du Toit et al., 2005), *Catchment Management Strategy Guidelines* (DWAF, 2007), and a DWAF project that funded the exploration of public participation in the Sand River Catchment. The latter (2005-2007) supported a better understanding of public participation processes and dynamics in a high-density rural catchment, the findings from which are reported here. Additionally this paper is referenced against the current discourse

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