

Executive summary

Background

Water is the lifeblood of any community. If an area is without water for an extended period of time, it becomes a desert and uninhabitable. Effective Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) in South Africa is a critical but complex task. The multitude of diverse stakeholders involved and the various interactions and behaviours within diverse community and stakeholder groupings add to the technical complexity of ensuring long-term sustainability of processes, structures and resources. It is with this in mind that The Narrative Lab (TNL) investigated the behavioural drivers of engagement and volunteerism with respect to agencies, organisations and individuals involved in water management.

Objectives

The research study identified three primary objectives:

1. Generate an understanding of the factors that drive community/stakeholder engagement and volunteerism, within a particular community/stakeholder grouping of water users [specifically three communities in the Crocodile (West) Marico catchment around the Hartbeespoort dam].
2. Explore how these factors can potentially be utilised to:
 - a. Enhance community/ stakeholder engagement, communication and volunteerism in the focus area, and
 - b. To potentially generalise these findings for broader application in catchments and communities that are in need of greater engagement and volunteerism.
3. Investigate the applicability of narrative- and complexity-based research methods within the realm of IWRM.

Research Focus

The research study investigated several possible factors that influence an individual or community's drive towards engagement and volunteerism. In particular, the notions of civic agency, stakeholder empowerment, individual resilience, salience and motivation were investigated. The prevalence, and level of influence, of these factors may differ markedly depending on the stakeholders involved in a particular context, but they are however key to effective interventions. An additional focus of the study revolved around finding out whether there are similarities across stakeholder groupings with regards to the constructs mentioned above.

Methodology

The methodology utilised in the research study was that of a narrative-based qualitative approach. A foundational starting point in the methodology was that it was conducted from a pre-hypothesis perspective. That is, the research was not conducted to assess any framework or theory regarding volunteerism and stakeholder engagement, but to rather adopt an epistemological position of curiosity. This was done for two reasons: firstly, to ensure the research would be open to the possibility of unexpected insights and results, and secondly, to make strides in establishing hypotheses for future research in the field.

In terms of the approach, individual interviews and group sessions were conducted where respondents were prompted for narrative material relating to IWRM and volunteerism within their context. Secondly, the respondents were presented back with their own material where a form of self-analysis was conducted on the material that rendered archetypical characterisations of the perceptions of these communities on the IWRM context in general as well as the drivers of engagement and volunteerism. The outputs from these sessions were then collated and analysed for insights relating to engagement and volunteerism.

Findings

The key findings generated as a result of the study are as follows:

1. That creating awareness of the water challenge by providing appropriate

information, packaged in a contextually relevant way is a necessary, but insufficient driver for engagement

2. That individual and civic agency is essential to engagement and volunteerism. If agency is lacking, engagement and volunteerism will not be possible without outside intervention

3. The salience of an issue significantly impacts the levels of engagement and the number of volunteers as well as the length of time that engagement can be sustained

4. Appropriate leadership can significantly fast track the emergence of high levels of engagement and volunteerism, however if findings 1, 2 and 3 are present, leadership may emerge organically. Leadership can either be an individual, a project or an initiative

These constructs are necessary for the emergence or stimulation of volunteerism, although they may not in themselves be sufficient, as the context within which they occur plays a significant role