

A newly-completed study by the Water Research Commission (WRC), in partnership with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), shows an encouraging high level of satisfaction among urban water users in the country.

In 2011, the WRC commissioned a survey that investigated urban South Africa's perceptions of their drinking water quality and the variables that influence these perceptions. The response was positive: 81% of urban South Africans perceived their tap water to be safe to drink.

The objective of the latest study was two-fold. Firstly, researchers wanted to test whether perceptions of drinking water quality have changed in the past four years. Secondly, the scope of the study was broadened beyond drinking water quality to include general aspects of water services.

A total of 2 513 urban households were surveyed. Personal, at-home interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the household. The survey was undertaken prior to the advent of the latest drought conditions in the country.

Drinking water quality

With regards to drinking water quality, 88% of urban South Africans perceived their tap water to be safe to drink. This is 7% higher than in 2011, showing an encouraging upward curve. The finding concurs with international studies, which found that most people in countries with a reliable water supply perceive tap water as having a low safety risk to drink.

Consumers in the metropolitan municipalities perceive their tap water to be significantly safer to drink than consumers in the other urban municipalities. The metros with the highest consumer confidence were the City of Cape Town (98%) and eThekweni (97%).

The Blue Drop status of municipalities was found to be very low on the list of drivers of perceptions. Only 2% of people surveyed gave the Blue Drop as a reason for confidence in their drinking water quality. This can be improved with raising the profile of the Blue Drop assessment.

The top six reasons why people think water is safe to drink:

1. The water looks clean.
2. Nobody gets sick from drinking the water.
3. The water tastes good.
4. The water smells good.
5. People say the water is safe to drink.
6. The municipality cleans the water.

Service quality

With regards to service quality 72% of urban consumers believe that their municipality is competent to deliver a good water and sanitation service in normal circumstances. Households generally had less confidence about their municipality's ability to deal with extraordinary circumstances, with only 57% of consumers believing that their municipality is able to deal with water scarcity in the event of a drought.

Service quality index

A service quality perception tool was developed to calculate a service quality perception index score for each individual. The quality index is based on questions regarding reliability of service, maintenance, clear and accurate billing and customer service. The survey results show that the urban population rates the quality of the water and sanitation service at 6.34 out of a possible 10.

Generally, consumers in higher-income groups were more positive about the water and sanitation service that their municipality delivers than consumers in the lower income groups.

The service quality scores are sensitive for province and the size of the municipality. Consumers in Gauteng and the Western Cape have the highest index scores, in other words, they have the most positive perception of the

water and sanitation service that their municipalities deliver. Consumers in Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape and North West have the most negative perception.

Implications of findings for policy and management

Firstly, sensory aspects such as appearance, taste and odour have the strongest influence on South Africans' perceptions of the safety of tap water. This is an important supplement to the technical parameters in the Blue Drop criteria should take consumers' perceptions into consideration.

Municipalities' Water Safety Plans should take the drivers of risk perceptions into consideration when emergency plans are developed.

The findings point out several areas of drinking water quality which are insufficiently or ineffectively communicated to the general public. For example, currently the Blue Drop status of a municipality is a weak driver of consumer perceptions with regards to drinking water quality. Consumers seem unaware of the Blue Drop status of their municipalities. Lower income households seem to lack knowledge of water treatment processes. This could be addressed with educational programmes and visits to municipal water and wastewater treatment plants.

Municipalities with good drinking water quality should use this finding to improve their image and to build consumers' trust in their services.

Few South African consumers know how much water they use or what the cost of water is. It is therefore likely that consumers are wasting water in South Africa. A multiple strategy, including school and media campaigns, is recommended for communicating information about water conservation and water demand management.