

## Water resource management

### Stakeholder engagement cycles within water resource management

## A completed WRC-funded study has explored stakeholder engagement cycles and identities within water resource management, using narrative techniques.

### Background

The Water Research Commission (WRC)-funded research project, undertaken by The Narrative Lab during the course of 2012/13, investigated the social dynamics of stakeholder engagement and volunteerism using narrative techniques at two study sites in the Western Cape, namely the Wilderness and Swartvlei estuaries, which are situated on the Garden Route.

In particular, the study aimed to understand why citizens choose to engage with water resource challenges, how they translate the engagement into action and participation, and how such engagement may be cyclical in nature. The study investigated how citizens become and remain engaged in the decision-making regarding the management of the natural resource and to determine a) if they feel they are empowered, b) if they have sufficient knowledge as well as c) guiding principles on how to act or start an active engagement process.

### Rationale

The terms 'stakeholder management' and 'stakeholder engagement' are easily entwined with each other and used interchangeably when describing any process whereby an entity interacts and communicates with people or entities who are affected by a course of action or project. There is a nuanced difference between the term describing a broader, more inclusive, and continuous process between a company and those potentially impacted that encompasses a range of activities and approaches, and the term referring the way in which stakeholders engage with a water resource challenge.

The focus of this research study was to investigate the latter form of stakeholder engagement, i.e. the way affected individuals, groups, parties and entities choose to engage with a water resource challenge. In other words, stakeholder engagement refers to the manner in which citizens and representatives of stakeholder groupings come to the decision to participate and remain involved in alleviating the challenges associated with water in their locality.

This focus then also encompassed the traditional process of stakeholder engagement whereby an entity engages with stakeholders through a structured process of interaction and communication, but the primary intent was to understand how to create and sustain levels of engagement among stakeholders with a water resource challenge.

Two study sites were selected, namely the Swartvlei and Wilderness lakes systems near George, in the southern Cape. The study sites were chosen because of a recent track record of stakeholder engagement levels and events that were of interest to the project team. In particular, relationships between citizen stakeholder groups and the managing agency, South African National Parks (SANParks), had become fragmented and had deteriorated significantly regarding the management of the lakes systems.

In particular, engagement issues revolved around the opening and closing of the estuary mouths at Swartvlei and Wilderness. Flooding of houses and properties was of significant concern to local stakeholders when the mouths were not being manually opened in time by SANParks.

The main aims of the research were thus to:

- Generate a body of knowledge on stakeholder engagement cycles within integrated water resource management in South Africa by investigating the history of



*Stakeholder mapping exercise.*

- engagement within selected communities; and
- Understand the dynamics that drive the cyclical nature of engagement and how to overcome them so as to create sustainable engagement levels in communities.

## Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodology that focused on the application of narrative techniques to uncover the stories of engagement at the study sites. Stakeholder maps, historical timelines and engagement themes were generated through the collection of narrative material from respondents in interviews and workshops. Fieldwork was conducted by The Narrative Lab team in conjunction with a locally-based Masters student, Aneri Vlok, who submitted her Masters dissertation based on the study.

## Results and discussion

The outputs of the Stakeholder Mapping and Historical Timelines were of particular interest to the research team as well as stakeholders who are residents and representatives of stakeholder groupings in Wilderness and Swartvlei.

Firstly, the stakeholder maps for the respective study sites are larger than residents had assumed. Through the dissemination of the maps citizens experienced a broadening of their own assumptions of who the stakeholders were at the study sites. They were also able to position themselves and their agendas within the context of other affected stakeholders who also have legitimate benefit sharing needs of the estuaries.

The history of engagement at the study sites dates back to the 1800s where the project team were able to establish that the opening and closing of the river mouths, originally performed by local farmers, became an issue as management agencies established themselves and began managing the estuaries.

Certain events are key to sparking increased levels of stakeholder engagement in relation to water management. These events were highlighted in emergent engagement themes that were extrapolated from the narratives contributed by participants in the study.

Specifically, the themes that spark the psychological and emotion management that transforms into active participation area:

- The role of key individuals and changes in personnel within water forums;
- The reason why people choose to engage;
- The continuity of a forum;
- Access to the natural resource;
- Tourism;
- Housing and land development;
- Droughts and floods;
- Management of the lakes; and
- Pollution

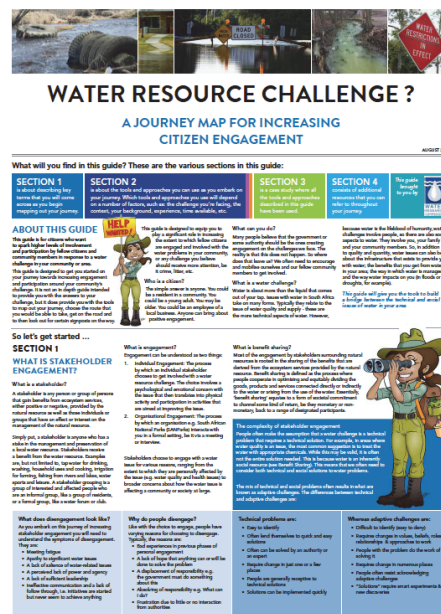
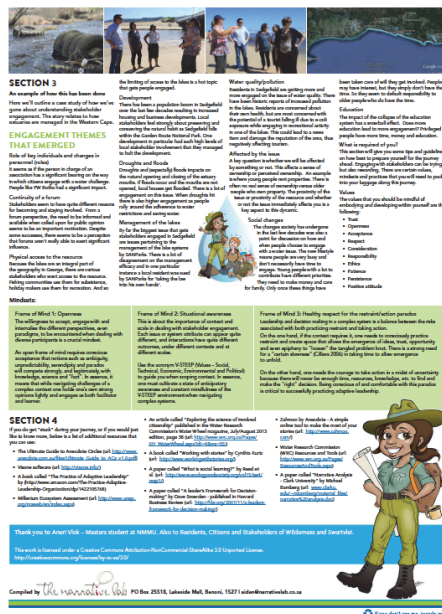
**A key finding of the study was that citizen engagement levels are highly individualised and variable in nature, driven by complex individual and social dynamics.**

While engagement may not seem to be cyclical over time, it is certainly variable, and the study has identified issues and discourses (themes) that affect engagement levels. Another key finding was that citizen stakeholders seem to be limited in their overall view of the stakeholder landscape and the history of engagement at the study sites. These partial viewpoints, while valid in their own right, are not the whole picture, and citizens can benefit from stakeholder mapping and historical timeline activities that bring more people into the fold.

Swartvlei and Wilderness are unique in the sense that there exists a large cohort of retired people, many of whom have engineering backgrounds, who reside in the areas. These retired people are highly engaged and involved in the water resource challenges, and are very vocal with regards to the shortcomings of SANParks in the area. Unfortunately, the retired community and SANParks officials have not yet found a way of working alongside each other constructively.

One of the key outputs of this study was the development of a user-friendly Citizen Engagement Guide. The Guide was developed to equip citizens with the narrative techniques utilised in this study so that they could begin gathering material to characterise and understand the nature of engagement in their own areas, wherever they may be.

# WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



## Citizen engagement guide

## Observations and reflections

While the results of this study are not exhaustive, there were some key observations that emerged from the project:

- For many citizens, engagement is not perceived as an issue worthy of spending time on being addressed or spoken about. For these people, the water challenge is the issue.
- There are subtle and sometimes direct identity dynamics at play in stakeholder groupings that influence the way in which individuals choose to get involved.
- The socio-economic status of individuals plays a role in the extent to which they get involved as well as informing the nature of their concern regarding the natural resource.
- It is particularly difficult for representatives of a single stakeholder grouping to fully appreciate and understand the identity, mindsets, priorities, values and agenda of those in another stakeholder grouping. This seems to be due to the fact that representatives of stakeholder

groupings socially interact with those mainly from within the same grouping.

In reflection, the project team felt the ethical burden of conducting stakeholder mapping and historical timelines. The power of deciding who is included in a stakeholder map is the power of inclusion and exclusion.

The same is true of representing the history of a location, although different in that history is ultimately subjective and depends on how certain people prioritise the importance and significance of certain events over others.

### Further reading:

To order the report, *Investigating stakeholder engagement cycles and identities within water resource management, using narrative techniques (Report No. 2076/1/13)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: [orders@wrc.org.za](mailto:orders@wrc.org.za) or Visit: [www.wrc.org.za](http://www.wrc.org.za) to download a free copy.