

Municipal services

Urban consumers give water services the thumbs up



Though water is a topic that sometimes reaches headlines for negative reasons in South Africa, the country's water has a lot going for it. Our drinking water is generally good, with standards that compare well globally. Petro Kotzé reports on the results of a survey on urban South Africans' perceptions of their municipal water and sanitation services.

As with any other goods and services, customer satisfaction is closely aligned to the users' perception of the product and service. Independent researcher, Dr Sarah Slabbert (of Sarah Slabbert Associates), points out that users have no choice of water service providers in South Africa, so they cannot 'shop around' for alternatives. However, she says, customer satisfaction is still the basic principle of service delivery. The simple question whether you are delivering a good service still applies.

So, what then are South Africans' perception of their drinking water quality and related service provision? National feedback on the topic from the perspective of the customer is limited. In 2004/5, the then Department of Water

Affairs and Forestry (now the Department of Water and Sanitation), in collaboration with the UK's Department of International Development (DiFD), commissioned a study into water services customer care and protection. The study included a survey among adult South Africans on their perceptions of the water services they receive from municipalities.

Then in 2011, Sarah Slabbert Associates led a Water Research Commission (WRC) survey on drinking water quality perceptions and the variables that influence these. This survey has now been repeated in 2015 in association with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA). The latter study covers a broader scope than the one in

2011. Instead of focusing on drinking water quality only, it investigated the general public's perspective on aspects of water services that SALGA has identified as relevant to investigate.

The study, published earlier this year, found that 88% of urban South Africans (7% more than in 2011) perceive their tap water to be safe to drink. This 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.

"We are still able to produce world class quality services, and the people have confirmed that," says WRC Executive Manager for Water Use and Waste

Management, Jay Bhagwan. "As a survey is a quick way to get an understanding of where people's satisfaction is, it is important to do this on a regular basis to see how the sector is delivering."

According to Dr Slabbert, the survey was completed in September 2015, before the brunt of the current drought started to be felt, which is good as it could have affected perceptions and skewed a comparison with the 2011 results.

South African's perception of their drinking water quality

As mentioned, results have indicated that most urban South Africans are still confident that their tap water is safe to drink.

Furthermore, the survey found that consumers in the metropolitan (metro) municipalities perceive their tap water to be significantly safer to drink than consumers in the other urban municipalities. For metro municipalities, the study found a 15% gap between the metros with the highest consumer confidence in drinking water quality and those with the lowest consumer confidence. These were the City of Cape Town (98%) and eThekweni (97%), and at the lowest end, Buffalo City (83%) and Nelson Mandela Bay (82%).

Consumers in the North West and Mpumalanga provinces have the lowest confidence in their drinking water quality. These two provinces also have the least reliable water supply in terms of consumer experience and perception. In the survey 60% of consumers in North West said that they suffered water interruptions at least once a month, or more frequently.

Though it is tempting to relate these findings with the municipalities' Blue Drop status, Bhagwan warns that this would be incorrect, as perception is based on service delivery, while the Blue Drop reports on technical functionality. Though there are subtle correlations, the two processes are not seamless, he says.

According to Dr Slabbert, It was not the purpose of the study to compare perceptions with municipalities' water quality compliance results. "However, in broad terms we can say that perceptions

in the Metros correlate with the findings of the Blue Drop report."

In concurrence with international studies, a very small percentage of the population (4%) base their perception of the quality of tap water on what they have heard or read in the media.

Instead, the top six reasons why people think tap water is safe to drink are that the water looks clean; nobody gets sick; the water tastes good and smells good; people say the water is safe to drink and the municipality cleans the water. Conversely, the top six reasons why people think tap water is unsafe to drink are that the water looks dirty, tastes bad, smells of chlorine, smells bad, some people got sick from it and other people say the water is unsafe to drink.

"The survey found that 61% of urban consumers do not know how much water their household consumes per month and 48% of paying consumers do not know how much they pay for water per month."

The outward appearance of water as an indicator of quality is a trend that is also picked up internationally, says Dr Slabbert. "Appearance could be deceptive; therefore, it is interesting that people also rely on the fact that nobody gets sick." She points out that results indicate that people will start doubting the quality of their drinking water when there is change in aspects like the appearance or the smell of the water. An example that is relevant locally and internationally is the clearly noticeable presence of chlorine – though people are unsure if it is good or bad for them.

The survey also looked at the use of tap water versus bottled water. The choice seems to be a combination of perceptions of drinking water quality and affluence. The less confident people are about how safe it is to drink tap water, the more likely they are to boil or filter tap water or to

use bottled water if they could afford it. In North West, where 56% of consumers are confident that tap water is safe to drink, only 54% of consumers drink water straight from the tap.

On the other hand, consumers in the higher Living Standard Measure (LSM) groups and with high incomes seem to be buying bottled water irrespective of their perception of the quality of tap water. "It is probably a status symbol to drink bottled water when you can afford it," noted Dr Slabbert. In the city of Cape Town, for example, 98% of consumers are confident that tap water is safe to drink, but only 67% drink water straight from the tap. Seven percent say that they never drink water – rather opting for coffee, tea, cool drink or wine.

Service quality

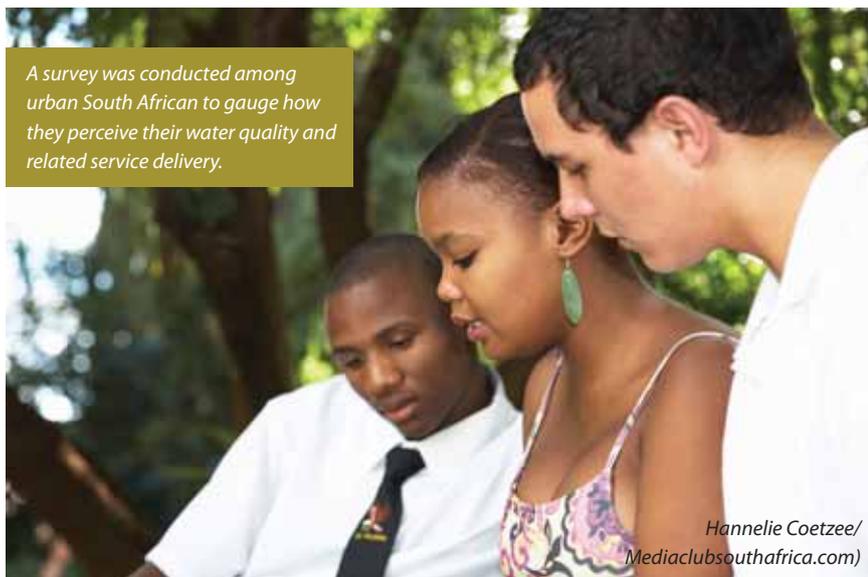
The survey found that 72% of urban consumers believe that their municipality is competent to deliver a good water and sanitation service in normal circumstances, though this confidence decreases for the municipality's ability to deal with extraordinary circumstances. Only 57% believe that their municipality is competent to deal with water scarcity in the event of a drought.

The urban population rates the quality of the water and sanitation service at 6.34 out of a possible 10 (9 to 10 being outstanding; 7 to 9 very good; 6 to 7 good; 5 to 6 adequate and less than 5 being disappointing or requiring urgent improvement). "The average is 6.34 but there are distinct demographic and area differences," says Dr Slabbert.

The service quality index indicated that consumers in the higher LSM groups are more positive about the water and sanitation service that their municipality delivers than consumers in the lower LSM groups. The findings for LSM groups correlate with income: the higher income groups are more positive about their municipal service than lower income groups.

There are no significant gender differences and, age-wise, the age group 35 to 49 has the most negative perception of their municipality's service. Furthermore, the service quality scores are sensitive for province and the size of the

A survey was conducted among urban South African to gauge how they perceive their water quality and related service delivery.



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.

Consumers in metropolitan areas (with an index score of 6.59) are more positive about their municipality's quality of service than consumers in smaller cities and towns (an index score of 5.93). "We do recognise that in smaller areas there are areas where we can improve," says Bhagwan.

For the Metros, the City of Cape Town (7.01), City of Tshwane (6.97) and City of Johannesburg (6.77) score highest, while Nelson Mandela Bay (5.83) and Buffalo City (5.6) scored lowest.

Awareness of consumption and cost of water

"This is a wakeup call", affirms Dr Slabbert. The survey found that 61% of urban consumers do not know how much water their household consumes per month and 48% of paying consumers do not know how much they pay for water per month. Furthermore, 79% of urban consumers are aware that they should save water and of how they could do it, yet 21% do nothing to save water. Higher LSM groups (LSM 6 to 10) and consumers with a matric or some form of tertiary education are better informed than consumers from the lower LSM groups and consumers without matric.

"It is likely that people would over report water-saving actions, because they know they are expected to save water. Taking that into consideration, a percentage of 21% admitting to doing nothing to save water is high," she notes.

Final thoughts

The WRC has compiled and distributed technical and ministerial briefs that highlight a number of implications that the findings hold 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.

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

It also notes that there are several areas of drinking water quality which are insufficiently or ineffectively communicated to the general public. Notably, the Blue Drop status of a municipality is a weak driver of consumer perceptions with regard to drinking water quality. As such, it seems that consumers are unaware of the Blue Drop status of their municipalities.

Furthermore, lower income households' apparent lack of knowledge of water

treatment processes can be addressed with educational programmes and visits to municipal water and wastewater treatment plants. Conversely, municipalities with good drinking water quality should use this finding to improve their image and to build consumers' trust in their services.

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.

The top reasons why people think water is unsafe to drink:

1. The water looks dirty.
2. The water tastes bad.
3. The water smells of chlorine.
4. The water smells bad.
5. Some people got sick from it.
6. Other people say the water is unsafe to drink.

Lastly, as few South African consumers know how much water they use, and what the associated cost is, it is likely that consumers are wasting water. A multiple strategy, including school and media campaigns, is recommended for communicating information about water conservation and water demand management.

In conclusion, Bhagwan notes that "against many of the challenges that the country is going through we are still able to maintain a good level of service."



To order the report, *Perceptions of municipal water and sanitation services (Report No. TT 647/15)*, contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Email: orders@wrc.org; or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.