

## WATER SERVICES

### Municipal water users losing faith in water services - study

*A recently published report on user perceptions of water services in South Africa reveals some problem areas requiring attention. Article by Sue Matthews.*



The confidence of urban South Africans in their drinking water has declined over the past several years, according to the Water Services Barometer Study 2022, a Water Research Commission (WRC) funded study undertaken in partnership with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA). Only 79% of people in Metros and other urban areas believe their tap water is safe or very safe to drink, compared to 88% in 2015, and this is reflected in their drinking water behaviour. Only 50% of urban consumers now drink tap water without boiling, filtering or cleaning it first, down from 70% in 2015, and the percentage who only drink bottled water has doubled to 8% – although the latter is largely related to people's standard of living.

Rural consumers are far less confident in their water supply, with

only 64% believing their tap water is safe or very safe to drink, and 12% responding that they get water from a well or river rather than a tap. No deductions can be made about changes over time because the 2022 study was the first in the series to include rural consumers.

The initial study, conducted in 2011, focused only on urban consumers' perceptions of drinking water quality, while the second in 2015 was broadened to include their perceptions of municipal water and sanitation services. Apart from surveying rural consumers, the 2022 study included a revised and expanded Service Quality Index to assess consumers' experiences, as well as their perceptions about their municipality's effectiveness in implementing Free Basic Water,

managing a water crisis and dealing effectively with non-payers, illegal connections and corruption. The 2022 study also added a Customer Satisfaction Index that measured consumers' satisfaction with water and sanitation services and tariffs.

For each of the three studies, the survey questions formed part of the NielsenIQ Omnibus syndicated survey, in which multiple clients 'buy space' on a national survey. The questions were developed by the WRC project team – led by Sarah Slabbert of BHI32, who compiled the study reports for the WRC – and were piloted by a group of postgraduate students supervised by Dr Josephine Letsoala from the University of Limpopo's Department of Geography and Environment Studies.

NielsenIQ's syndicated Omnibus Survey covers a scientifically drawn, representative sample of adults (15+ years) living in urban and rural areas nationwide. The 12 questions were asked in personal, computer-assisted interviews that were conducted in the homes of respondents, in the preferred language of the respondent.

The probability sample of 3 302 households was selected using Nielsen's computerised household register (more than 6 million actual addresses in urban areas) and from maps for rural sampling. The sample was stratified by race, by community size within region. The sample is post-weighted to reflect estimated population in 000's. Only the weighted data was analysed.

One of the trends highlighted in the report is the change in relative position of the Metros over time with respect to perceived quality of water. While it is not surprising that Nelson Mandela Bay ranked lowest for the last two surveys, given the ongoing water shortages in Gqeberha and surrounding areas served by the Algoa Water Supply System, the City of Cape

Town's plummet from the highest ranking in 2015 to 6<sup>th</sup> position in 2022 is noteworthy. The City of Tshwane leapfrogged up the list to take the top spot, with 100% of consumers believing that their water is very safe or safe to drink.

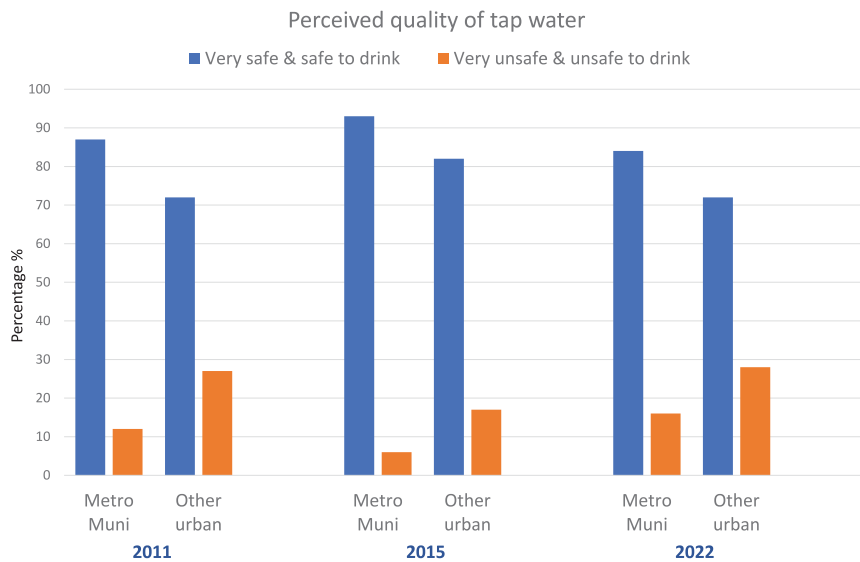
The Department of Water and Sanitation's Blue Drop Progress Report 2022, released in March 2022, told a slightly different story. Of Tshwane's 11 drinking water supply systems, only seven achieved acceptable to excellent microbiological and chemical compliance, and both microbiological and chemical monitoring programmes were reported as not adequately aligned to SANS 241:2015 requirements. Cape Town, by contrast, was commended for its excellent compliance in terms of both water quality and monitoring.

*"In 2015, 82% of consumers in Metros and other urban areas said that they seldom (less than once a month), or never, experienced interruptions in their water supply. In 2022, this figure dropped to 67%."*

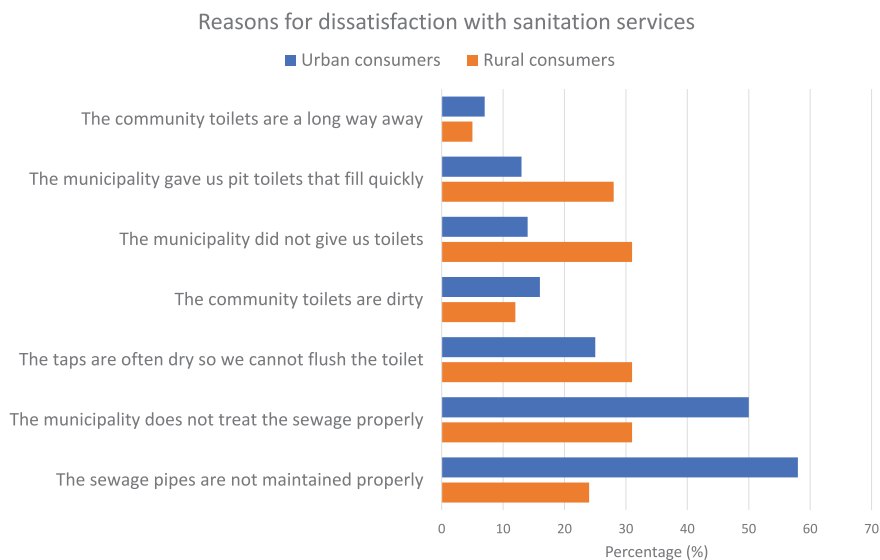
People interviewed for the Barometer Study did not generally base their perceptions of water safety on Blue Drop status though. Indeed, they were asked to give a reason for their rating, without being prompted for specific answers, and only 4% of consumers in Metros and other urban areas mentioned their municipality's Blue Drop status when responding. Rather, the fact that nobody got sick as well as the appearance, taste and smell

**The 3 302 households surveyed in the Water Services Barometer Study 2022 were considered representative of South Africa's population.**

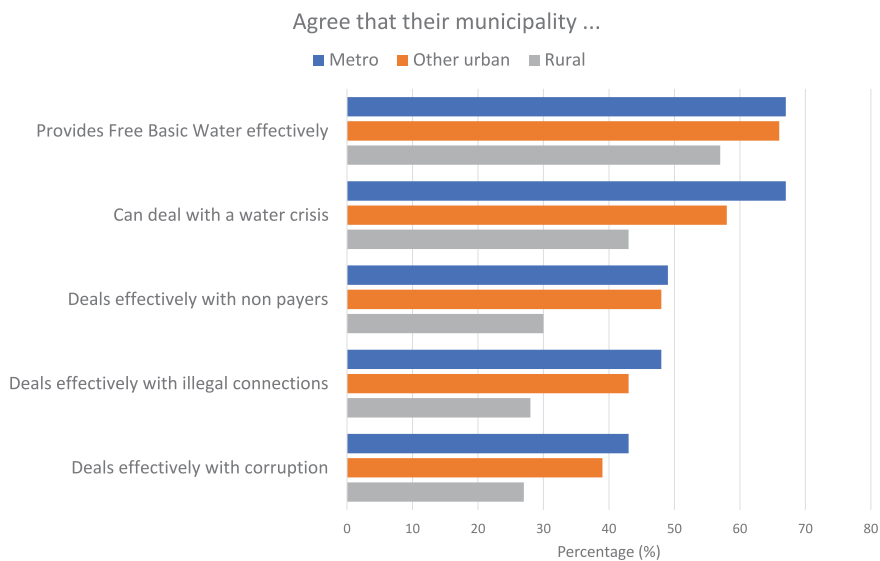
Municipal area								
Metro			Urban			Rural		
1637			927			738		
Province								
WC	EC	KZN	FS	NW	NC	MP	LP	GP
534	348	570	160	204	80	224	244	938
Race								
Black		Coloured		Indian		White		
1976		735		158		793		
Age								
16-18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+		
282	516	723	734	525	328	194		
Living Standard Measure (LSM)								
Group 1-3		Group 4-5		Group 6-7		Group 8-10		
131		754		1487		930		
Education								
Up to primary complete		Some high school		High school complete		Tertiary education		
136		853		1463		846		



Public perceptions of water quality have fluctuated over the past decade.



Urban and rural consumers have different reasons for dissatisfaction with sanitation services.



Consumers' confidence in their municipality's effectiveness in dealing with corruption is particularly low.

of tap water were the main reasons behind perceptions – not unlike findings of similar surveys all over the world.

“The smell of chlorine in tap water could either induce a positive perception that the water is safe to drink (15%) or a negative perception that it is unsafe to drink (22%),” notes Slabbert in the report. “The impact of the media on perceptions, although still below 10%, has almost tripled since 2011. This will have to be investigated further, but it is likely that interpersonal interaction on social media is having an impact.”

Certainly, in response to fake news circulating in WhatsApp groups in Cape Town in February 2022, when messages were being posted urging the public not to drink tap water and inaccurately linking an outbreak of typhoid fever in the Western Cape to the water supply, the municipality felt compelled to issue a statement assuring residents that its tap water was safe to drink.

It is also possible that perceptions might have been tainted by the unfortunate timing of the survey, which took place in June/July, shortly after loadshedding was ramped up to Stage 6 for the first time since December 2019. Many municipalities experienced problems at water treatment plants because of power outages, the City of Cape Town among them. In early August, it issued a precautionary boil notice after some areas experienced discoloured water. This was lifted a day later when the problem – attributed to a process control fault at the Faure Water Treatment Plant due to the cumulative effects of loadshedding – had been resolved.

Slabbert cautions against drawing speculative conclusions about the reasons for changes in ranking of the Metros for any parameters, but agrees that contextual factors could influence perceptions.

The main issues consumers in Metros and other urban areas have with their municipality’s water and sanitation services, according to the Service Quality Index scores, relate to:

- Responding to complaints and queries
- Solving water and sanitation issues in the community
- Repairing leaking or broken water or sewage pipes, and
- Cleaning up sewage spills.

Some 50% of urban consumers feel their municipality never attends to these issues or only sometimes.

“In terms of effectiveness, most urban consumers agree that their municipality gives Free Basic Water to people who need it (67%) and is able to deal with a water crisis like a drought or flooding (63%),” notes Slabbert in the report. “They are less confident that their municipality deals effectively with non-payers (48%), illegal connections (46%) and corruption (41%).”

The Metros scored better than other urban areas for the Service Quality Index, and in this case the City of Cape Town took the top spot, scoring 7 out of 10, with Nelson Mandela Bay again coming in last on 6,09. Importantly, though, perceptions about municipal service quality in both Metros and other urban areas were strongly linked to LSM group. The Living Standards Measure, developed by the then South African Advertising

Research Foundation (SAARF), categorises the country’s population into 10 LSM groups based largely on household infrastructure and appliances. People from the higher (wealthier) LSM groups rated municipal service quality higher than those from the lower LSM groups.

The percentage of urban consumers who indicated that they don’t pay for water increased from 12% in 2015 to 20% in 2022, even though those who said they don’t pay because they don’t have to stayed about the same. More encouragingly, 86% of consumers mentioned that they actively save water, primarily by not leaving taps running and repairing leaking ones.

While the Service Quality Index is based on consumers’ experiences of particular aspects of water and sanitation services, the new Customer Satisfaction Index reflects their emotional response when asked how satisfied they are with water and sanitation services and charges. Consumers in Metros and from higher LSM groups were again found to be the most satisfied with services. Dissatisfaction with sanitation is high for the lower LSMs, which can be expected, given that many of the respondents would not have flush toilets inside their houses. Overall, however, urban consumers cited poor maintenance of sewage pipes and inadequate wastewater treatment as the main reasons for their dissatisfaction.

The findings for rural consumers – based on a sample of 738 households post-weighted to reflect estimated population in 000’s – were very different from those for consumers in Metros and other urban areas. Apart from the lower confidence in drinking water quality mentioned earlier, rural consumers have a significantly more negative experience of water and sanitation services and are more negative about the effectiveness of their municipality. They are also significantly less satisfied with the services they receive, but their dissatisfaction with sanitation services is primarily due to problems with on-site sanitation, communal sanitation and an unreliable water supply. So unreliable, in fact, that 29% of rural consumers said that they experience water interruptions at least once a day and 24% at least once a week.

“As rural consumers perceive themselves to be lagging behind in all aspects of water and sanitation services, it is recommended that municipalities actively work to improve water and sanitation services to their rural consumers and address their specific needs as described in this report,” notes Slabbert.

Overall, the study found that the main concerns relating to water and sanitation services from the perspective of consumers are water quality and reliability of supply. These two concerns are also raised as reasons for dissatisfaction with water tariffs.

“On the other hand, it was evident that South African consumers are becoming increasingly aware of water scarcity and that they are prepared to actively reduce their water use. It is recommended that public campaigns of the Department of Water and Sanitation and other organisations strengthen this resolve with targeted messaging.”

*To download the report, **The water services barometer study 2022** (WRC report no. TT 909/22), visit: <https://bit.ly/3O8bZuA>*