

Mvula Civil Society for Water Quality Programme

Aim

The aim of this programme is to understand, support and strengthen civil society roles and capacities to improve and maintain high water quality, as an immediate contribution to solving the current “water quality crisis”, and building approaches and capacities for sustainability in water quality management.

Objectives

- Analyse public awareness and media coverage of “the water quality crisis” and compare this to situations on the ground and regulator knowledge.
- Explore and compare a range of civil society responses (tactics) to “the water quality crisis”.
- Develop interface between regulators and civil society, to deepen democracy through civil society participation.
- Explore existing legislated options for civil society participation in co-operative governance, focusing on catchment management and local government.
- Support appropriate technology choices for sustainability in water quality with the emphasis on waste water treatment, within the framework of climate change.
- Focus attention on rural water quality challenges in small scale settings.
- Develop a networked support capacity centred in Mvula for civil society to play its roles (as developed above) in water quality monitoring, improvement and maintenance.
- Build capacity for sustainable water quality in civil society organizations as well as through an internship programme in Mvula.
- Share information through publications, seminars and a conference.

Background

Water quality issues have risen to prominence in South Africa in recent years. The media has covered issues like dysfunctional sewage works in a shockingly large number of municipalities. These numbers are based on research from the Water Research Commission, and have been confirmed in various water sector meetingsⁱ. The issue of acid mine drainage (AMD) from currently operational as well as abandoned mines have been the topic of official concern, as exemplified in the Department of Minerals and Energy project on 6000 to 8000 abandoned mines. The issue was also addressed in public by the Chamber of Mines CEO Mr Lesufi, who expressed his concern about “rogue mines” who do not treat their AMD, at a national Water for Growth symposium.

The question of pollution from mine tailings, with high uranium chemical and radioactive contamination on the Far West Randⁱⁱ has been a topic of discussion, coupled with media pronouncements that South Africa faces a general water crisis. There is increasing activism to protect wetlands and water resources from what appears to be irregular coal mining prospecting and mining permits in Mpumalanga.

Government departments have demonstrated a range of responses to these problems. Legislation since 1994 regarding the environment, water services and water resources management - especially catchment management - and legislation on the environmental impacts of mining, have opened up information and possibilities for public participation. Current policy, for example the Water for Growth and Development Strategy, is explicit on the need for the best possible water quality in return flows and surface water, since all water resources are practically already allocated. While some regulation has been vigorously enforced, e.g. the “Green Scorpions”, and the current Green and Blue Drop campaigns, in other cases the impression is a lack of political will or capacity to enforce. The development of catchment management agencies, foreseen in legislation, has been slow. The building blocks for these agencies, local subcatchment forums show a wide range of engagement. They experience challenges of resources, demographic representivity in engagement, and challenges in the capacity of participants to deal with information that is often presented in an inaccessible technical format. However, some

The public has responded to these challenges with litigation (Save the Vaal Environment, Federation for a Sustainable Environment), mobilization and public protest (Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA)), increased participation in subcatchment forums (VEJA, the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Southern Africa or WESSA), withholding rates and taxes to municipalities (Sannieshof residents, National Ratepayers Union), and vigorous participation in media debates. Yet these responses appear unfruitful, with legal action leading to legal victories without improvement on the ground, a defensive attitude from the accused local authorities, and in some cases a clear division on racial grounds with better resources, privileged white residents pitched against black local authorities.

This proposal intends to draw on the social energy that is evidenced in these developments. However, it wants to engage with this energy in order to promote social integration in civil society, to use the options for public participation in current progressive legislation, to learn from citizens’ monitoring initiatives in other countries, to explore a broad range of citizens’

responses including participation in state forums (e.g. catchment forums and the Integrated Development Planning processes of local government), social mobilization, citizen monitoring and legal action (from education on legal rights to using legal instruments including court action), etc. These ideas are explored in more detail below.

Activities will be undertaken in a collaborative manner working with specialist institutions, including Northwest University, Wits University, Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance, Rietspruit Subcatchment Forum Green Drop Campaign, the Department of Water Affairs (DWA), the Centre for Environmental Rights, various local governments, water quality specialists and toxicologists, working group for sustainability in wastewater treatment, etcⁱⁱⁱ. Activities will be structured but flexible to respond to local context and specific issues. Activities will be aimed at developing a replicable model of support for communities facing water quality challenges.

Mvula programme to understand, support & strengthen civil society roles & capacities to improve and maintain water quality

- **Analyse public awareness and media:** explore public awareness through a media analysis, focusing on definitions, experiences and perceptions of water quality issues, who the role players are, and testing these against realities on the ground, technical, research and official descriptions. Draw conclusions about public awareness, perceptions, concerns and people's willingness to participate. Media images compared to local knowledge and awareness. (A media monitoring case study based on national, local and professional media, with archival component going back 2 to 5 years).
- **Explore civil society responses:** Responses have included withholding taxes, mobilisation and public protest, letter writing, legal action etc. Case studies will aim at understanding the dynamics behind these tactics, including the reasons for these choices, the resources, political background where relevant, access to science, legal assistance etc (Case study Upper Vaal and country wide).
- **Develop interface between regulator (from government) and civil society.** What are the possibilities for civil society to assist the regulator via citizen monitoring, lodging complaints, reporting accidents, taking own samples, etc? The project will explore overseas examples for guidance, and request their ongoing assistance in possible "twinning" arrangements. The project will emphasise interaction, co-operation and mutual understanding between civil society and regulators, e.g. DWA water sampling, local government environmental health unit officials. It will aim at developing contact, partnership and accountability practices between regulators and civil society, and in so doing deepen a participatory democracy in the issue of water quality, which can then be extended to catchment management and local government water planning.
- **Explore existing legal options for civil society participation in co-operative governance.** The initial case studies will come from the Upper Vaal subcatchment management forums, their relationship with the Catchment Management Agency (CMA) being developed now, their relationships with local governments as Water

Services Authorities (WSAs) and Water Services Providers (WSPs), participation in Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and how they reflect priorities of catchment citizens. Case study: explore the green drop framework in Rietspruit and other Upper Vaal subcatchment forums as well as alternative settings.

- **Support appropriate technology choices for sustainability in water quality with the emphasis on waste water treatment, within the framework of climate change.** The water sector, like other sectors in South Africa, needs to take into account climate change constraints on electricity use, as well as the recovery of resources. Other considerations of appropriateness are institutional settings such as skills levels of operators, support available, and resources that can be used for local economic development.
- **Focus attention on rural water quality challenges in small scale settings.** The hauling and storage of rural drinking water supplies, from various sources and in domestic conditions, needs more attention because of immediate health effects.
- **Develop a networked support capacity centred in Mvula for civil society to play its roles (as developed above) in water quality monitoring, improvement and maintenance.** Mvula brings together resources – e.g. legal advice to interpret legislation, capacity to undertake institutional analysis of roles and opportunities in different situations. Mvula develops, with other stakeholders, situation specific context specific and problem specific civil society strategies, links role players, provides access to media and provide access to scientific knowledge. The project will develop a model of how best to make these resources available on a networked basis, that is, making best use of existing resources by playing a facilitation and networking role.
- **Build capacity** – both in civil society through organizing seminars, courses, information and experience exchange, and by enrolling university and technikon students as interns in this programme and providing them with career guidance and contacts to work within the water quality sector.
- **Share information** through publishing articles, possibly a book of these experiences (in the later stages), a conference where beneficiaries and allies in this programme are brought together.

Duration and budget

Three year programme of R2 million per year = R6 million.

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ⁱWISA conferences on waste water treatment.

ⁱⁱ Various works by Tony Turton, Mariette Lieferink etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ While Mvula Trust has working relationships with these institutions, they have not yet been consulted on participating in this specific proposal.