

South Africa

POLICY BRIEF

Strengthening citizen voice and power in the water sector

For South Africa, the enormous water services achievements of the first decade-and-a-half of democracy may be compromised if measures are not found swiftly to change the current supply-driven approach to service provision. An approach focused on accountability to citizens would enhance their voice, and responsibility in service provision, and reinforce the profoundly pro-poor intent of sector programs.

In 1994, as apartheid drew to a close, one-third of South Africa's population lacked access to safe drinking water within a reasonable carrying distance and one-half did not have a toilet that supported basic health improvement. As a result, the government set very ambitious targets for rapidly improving access to water and sanitation. For instance, where the UN Millennium Development Goals seek to halve the proportion of those without services by 2015, South Africa's government pledged to eradicate water backlogs as early as 2008 and sanitation backlogs by 2010. And there has been no relaxing of delivery schedules. The commitment is to provide services in all areas by 2014, in line with the target date for upgrading informal settlements.

But an unintended consequence of this emphasis on targets for addressing distributive justice is that it has undermined citizens' and users' voice and power to shape policies and hold service providers accountable—in spite of the people-centered, inclusive, and democratic vision for the sector. This dimension is essential to the sustainability of service provision, particularly where the majority of beneficia-

ries are poor and most vulnerable to the impacts of service failures.

How did this happen? To meet bold targets for improved access to services, the government has largely abandoned inclusive approaches to service planning, delivery, and oversight, in favor of highly centralized approaches where citizens' role is essentially passive. An implicit assumption was that standardized approaches to technology choice and service levels would enable economies of scale, but practice has proved otherwise. Average unit costs have increased—more than doubling over the past decade—rather than decreasing. And one study argues that this was caused in large part because suppliers raised their prices, taking advantage of the pressure on municipalities to meet targets.

The emphasis in performance monitoring has been on infrastructure delivery and whether funds assigned have been spent. The effectiveness of public spending receives inadequate attention, particularly in relation to infrastructure design, quality of construction, cost-effectiveness over its full design life, and service performance on-site. The long-term



operating requirements of the new service infrastructure have often been overlooked—particularly for sanitation. A large and growing number of VIP toilets are now unusable. And in the urban sector, a recent assessment revealed that in Gauteng, the country’s best resourced province, two-thirds of process controllers at wastewater treatment works lack the skills required for the job they do. Many infrastructure investment decisions are aggravating skills constraints and raising the recurrent costs of service provision beyond the resources available. The result: service failures that compromise government’s commitment to service improvements.

Far greater transparency and accountability are needed around how decisions are made about service improvement options, and far closer monitoring is needed of tender processes, project expenditure, and the quality of service provision.

What is the current water and sanitation situation for South Africa? Nearly half of all South Africans have an in-house water supply, while a quarter have a water connection reticulated to their yard (figure 1). About 20 percent source their water from a communal standpipe within 200 meters—the supply standard for a basic level of service—and an estimated 4 percent lack access to an improved supply. As for

sanitation, only 56 percent of the population has full water-borne sanitation. This picture varies sharply from urban to rural, with the former enjoying far better access.

The accountability problem

In searching for ways to improve South Africa’s water and sanitation delivery, it is helpful to visualize the complicated process under which public services operate as a triangle with a long route and a short route (see figure 2).

For the long route, there are two legs (citizens’ voice and the compact), which together embody the traditional view of how accountability for public services emerges in the modern state. In this view, citizens elect and influence their political representatives. These representatives in turn form and lead a government to deliver a variety of public services. There is a compact between politicians and service providers within the state to do so. If it does so poorly, the citizens will vote the politicians out of power, and hence the politicians, the theory goes, have a strong incentive to hold public servants accountable for services.

The reality, however, is that the long route, by itself, is rarely enough to deliver service to the poor. It needs a complementary mechanism: the short route, which focuses on the direct interaction between the citizens and the

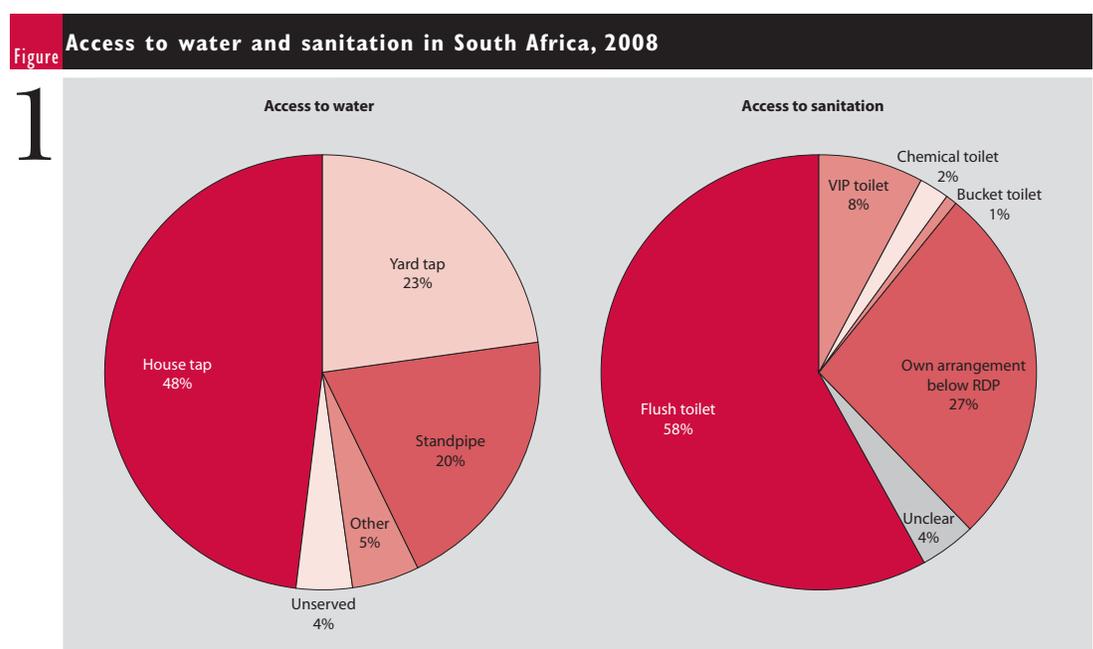
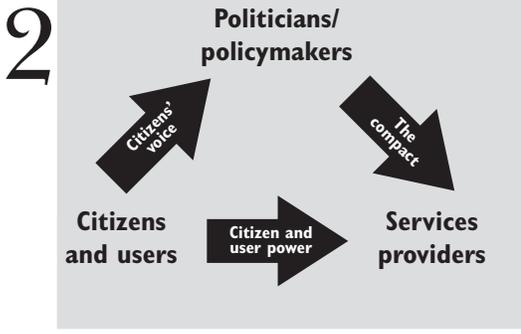


Figure Accountability mechanisms in public services



service providers. When services are delivered, the citizens should be able to exercise various degrees of influence over the service providers, which we call “client power” or “user power.”

The problem in South Africa is that policy and legislation have focused on the requirements for accountability between government and service providers (the compact) rather than that between citizens and service providers (client power) and between citizens and their political representatives (citizen’s voice). Since water and sanitation were municipal responsibilities, this involved focusing on the accountability relationships between different spheres of government, and between municipalities and service providers.

In addition, the targets track only outputs, not outcomes. Technology choices and implementation options have been limited. Users complain that they are not even consulted about where on their plot their new toilet will be put. And there has been virtually no accommodation of the needs of people with disabilities or construction of wider toilet top-structures to enable caregivers to assist those who are sick. The extremely high prevalence of HIV infection in South Africa adds particular urgency to improving water and sanitation services.

Policy recommendations

Accountability must be rooted locally, on the ground, and at the interface among citizens, service providers and elected representatives. Citizens should have recourse through the regulator, but primary engagement and response

must be local, where problems are felt and where immediate intervention is usually required. So what can be done to remedy the situation?

First, strengthen citizens’ voice and power. One way to do this is by dedicating significant resources in every municipality to building public understanding of how water and sanitation services work, and helping citizens understand their rights, entitlements, roles, and shared responsibilities. In turn, the municipalities and providers should become better informed about citizens’ needs and perspectives.

Ethekwini Metro, the municipal area serving the big port city of Durban, is an example of a municipality that has been working to improve public understanding of water services for many years, using street theater, house visits, school programs, and pamphlets to educate users about the vulnerabilities of sewered sanitation and their rights and responsibilities. The comprehensive public education program is resource intensive, but Metro officials can prove conclusively that the benefits far outweigh the costs, with the program reducing overall maintenance expenditures.

Another tool is user platforms, which involve the ward councilor, interested citizens, and representatives of the service provider. It can build a relationship between service providers and citizens that goes beyond the monthly service bill. The City of Cape Town set up such user platforms in several townships, following a 2006 “Citizens’ Voice” pilot program, which was aimed at exploring participatory mechanisms to strengthen national regulation. The result has been better informed citizens and users and an improved dialogue with city officials. In 2008 Ethekwini and Ekurhuleni Metros began building on Cape Town’s experience with their own Citizens’ Voice process, and others, like Msunduzi, are following suit. One challenge will be to ensure that the approach’s potential is not compromised by an emphasis on scaling up too rapidly without first ensuring that the solid foundations of public education are in place to build trust.

In addition, citizens' report cards—piloted in Ethekwini—can be used to better inform sector regulation. Sector regulation is only as effective as the information made available to it allows, and both water service authorities and water service providers have a strong incentive to disguise poor performance. Current monitoring and evaluation systems are improving across the sector, but off a very low base. There is a vital role for citizens to make monitoring and other information available to the regulator to buttress the regulator's effectiveness.

Second, strengthen the compact within the government and its service providers. This can be done by introducing regulations to make performance contracts mandatory between all Water Services Authorities and their Service Providers, irrespective of whether the water service provider is the internal technical department of the municipal or an external service provider. The current exemption of Water Boards from competitive tendering needs to be reviewed. Citizens are entitled to fair and transparent assessment of all contending service providers. Section 78 of the Municipal Systems Act could be revised to promote a more balanced, rigorous, and consistent assessment of provider options. The current phased approach is inherently biased toward retaining existing internal arrangements, even if they are not necessarily the most effective or best able to serve the poor. Finally, water services institutions could be required to use qualified personnel to take management responsibility for the provision of water supply and sanitation services, together with establishment of certified water services managers with the minimum qualifications established under the National Qualifications Framework.

Third, promote alternative models of service provision in remote rural areas. Most Water Boards have little experience in managing services in low-income communities, and their financial

performance is often poor. The current reliance on under-skilled local operators and remote technical support disempowers both citizens and the operator. This calls for use of locally accountable operators and O&M crews to augment service provision capacity. There is a lot of scope for greater use of service partnerships with locally based small or medium enterprises and community based organizations—particularly in rural areas where municipal service providers struggle to provide the needed support and management oversight. Alignment of settlement-level structures with the municipal service provision framework could also be considered to hold service providers to account locally. Operators would be employed by the water service provider or its agent, but the local structure would share management and oversight responsibility.

Fourth, strengthen efficient, economic, and effective resource use. This can be done by including a greater emphasis on sound asset management, along with conditionalities in the provision of grant funding—which would provide incentives for municipalities to explore other technologies that are more cost-effective and sustainable. This would include experimenting with models that put purchasing power directly in the hands of citizens. For example, a voucher system could channel part of the grant directly to citizens, enabling them to choose their toilet type. There is wide scope to explore instruments that will reward municipalities for good asset management, for example by providing Municipal Infrastructure Grants above a basic threshold only to municipalities that demonstrate good asset management practice. Financial ring-fencing of municipal water services could be made mandatory in every municipality within five years. Economic regulation of water services is not feasible without reliable information on water services income and expenditure for each municipality.