

Public Participation of Disadvantaged Communities in Water Management: A Case Study of the Msunduzi Catchment Management Forum of South Africa

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Abstract. South Africa's National Water Act strongly emphasizes the need of public participation in water resource management decision-making processes. However, achieving meaningful participation continues to be a challenge especially for the previously disadvantaged communities. The purpose of this research was to find out whether the disadvantaged community participants find their participation in Catchment Management Forum to be meaningful. A qualitative research approach that involved the use of primary and secondary data sources were used to achieve the aim of this study. Information obtained from participants were analysed thematically. The results established that, the disadvantaged communities did not find their participation to be meaningful because their expectations have not yet been met. The reliance on community organizations also excluded the majority of the population since these organizations did not interact with the community, hence not serving as intermediaries. Also, it was observed that participants did not understand the technical nature of information presented, which may be attributed to insufficient knowledge of water resource management. It is suggested that, emphasis be placed on disadvantaged community participants ability to understanding the information presented in order to make a meaningful contribution.

Keywords: Water management, Water resources, Public participation

1. Introduction

Public participation in South Africa is critical to the political transformation process which is about redressing the inequalities of the past by including those who were marginalized and excluded from benefits and rights as citizens of the nation (Racheln, 2006). The general lack of public involvement in decision-making at the grassroots level in South Africa in the past, affected broad based decision-making on environmental issues (Khan, 2007). Public participation in water management institutions in South Africa was identified as critical for the management of water resources because it provides the opportunity for water management institutions to share ideas with the local community (James, 2003; Karar, 2003; Anderson, 2005; Faysse, 2005).

Generally, it is agreed by the different stakeholders in water management (policy makers, researchers and water managers) that sustainable, integrated water resource management must be done at the level of the river basin or catchment (Anderson, 2005). Water management institutions in South Africa have therefore been re-structured to ensure the participation of the public in water resource management. The catchment management forum (CMF) in the view of James (2003) and Karar (2003) is the institutional level in water resource management which provides the opportunity for citizens to express their views on water resources management. The CMF according to the National Water Act (NWA) of 1998 is a non-statutory water

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management institution which is to assist in the setting up of statutory water management institution. Water resources management institutions such as the CMF were required by legislation to include previously disadvantaged and marginalized community groups in order to address the past social injustice. The legislation is aimed at addressing the past alienation of citizens in decision-making and gives equal rights to citizens as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). The National Water Act (NWA) of 1998 mandates the participation of the general public, especially those from the previously disadvantaged and marginalized groups, as critical in achieving its goals in the areas of water conservation, management and monitoring which are the objectives of water management institutions. According to Du Toit (2005), policies and legislation on public participation processes in South Africa are silent on how best public involvement can be achieved. Faysse (2005) found that little emphasis has been placed on the capacity of participants and how they feel about the process. This study was aimed at exploring the involvement of previously disadvantaged and marginalized communities in Catchment Management Forums (MCMF) in South Africa.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in the Msunduzi river catchment, located in the Msunduzi Municipality in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. The catchment covers an area of 540 square kilometers, with most of the people living in the catchment coming from the previously disadvantaged and marginalized communities of South Africa and lacking understanding of environmental and development issues (Rivers-Moore and Hay, 2002).

A multi research data collection method, comprising of primary (semi-structured interviews) and secondary data sources was used for the study. The secondary data sources comprised of minutes of catchment management forums, internal reports by the Department of Water Affairs (DWA), policy guidelines, and memoranda on CMF and other published literatures.

The sampling method adopted for the study was purposeful, with only those who have attended or attending CMF included in the study. The respondents were selected from the lists of participants who attend CMF obtained from the DWA and then used to represent the population of eligible respondents for the study. The sample size for the study was achieved through saturation of data. A total of 19 participants, comprising of members of organizations from the disadvantaged communities, advantaged NGOs, company, municipality and DWA.

After the interviews, significant themes from the participants' statements were identified and presented in illustrative quotes and used for discussion as suggested by Soneryd (2004). The themes from respondents' statements were categorized based on the questions which were designed to answer the objectives of the study. The themes from respondents were analyzed by subjectively examining the underlying trends in the themes.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis and discussion of this study is accompanied by applicable question from the questionnaire and quotation from the interview transcripts of respondents. The Department of Water Affairs has had minimal relationships with the general public in the past. The support for public participation emerged as the results of new democratic principle in South Africa which has made it obligatory to involve the public in DWA deliberations. The historical lack of public participation has created a gap in expectations between what DWA can do and what participants expected from water management forum. The lack of clearness about the purpose of CMF was evident from the views expressed by the disadvantaged community representatives. Respondents were asked whether they feel their contribution have impact on the decisions made in order to determine whether they are familiar with the objectives of the CMF. The following quotes capture some of reasons by respondents:

“When we go to meetings whatever we say we don't see any changes and they (DWA) don't come to check whether what you (we) said is true or false”

“What I can say is that my views are not taken in the decision making process because things always remain the same”

“I must say my contribution does not affect the decision making because you (I) don't see any change”

Environmental Protection Agency-EPA (2000) has suggested a clarification of goals in terms of what participants can achieve in a participation process in order to reduce or eliminate the gap between expectations and opportunities that a participation process can provide. The CMF can be classified as tokenism under Arnstein's ladder of public participation without any compulsion by the organizers of the forum to implement their views. The non-binding nature of participant's views on organizers is based on the legal status of CMF in the water management institutions structured described by Karar (2003) which is non-statutory and concerns by participants that their views do not reflect the final decision can be attributed to their lack of awareness that the CMF is a non-statutory or decision-making institution. The current political dispensation has transferred all responsibilities to the government in the opinion of Du Toit (2005) that may have created the generally unrealistic expectations among participants in a public participation process in South Africa. This has therefore created the impression among citizens that their views as expressed in a public participation process should be implemented.

One of the main objectives the main NWA of 1998 is to ensure the participation of those who have interest or have been affected by issues to be discussed in the water resource management arena. According to Khan (2007), South Africa is striving for a participatory democracy that will ensure the involvement of all citizens especially those at the grassroots level a voice in decision-making. In the view of Sewell and Coppock (1977), however, participation process cannot include all citizens because it will neither be useful nor possible and can lead to alienation due to the large number of people that the process may attract which will be constrain by space, time and money. Reliance has therefore been placed on community based organizations (CBOs), environmental groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in modern democracies in expressing the views of citizens, under the assumption that those channels of communication are easily accessible to citizens because these groups may represent a wide range of interest that individuals may not have (Solitare, 2005). Due to the issue of accountability of these groupings in recent years and the assertion that they do not have the mandate of the people since they do not represent any constituency but themselves, Naidoo (2003) and Nelson and Wright (1995) have argue these groupings should be investigated for their effectiveness. Based on this assertion, the DWA representative was asked whether they investigate these groupings about their objectives, funding as well as achievements in their own communities. The following quote is the response of the DWA representative for CMF:

“We don't investigate the organizational structure of NGOs and CBOs and their objectives...we don't investigate their number or years of existence, their success in the community but they introduce themselves at the forum as to who they are but we don't investigate them”

The above statement indicates that these groupings are not investigated that can create an illusion that; they are interacting with the community or serving as intermediaries which in reality the organizations may exist for themselves. Respondents were asked whether they interact with members of their community after meetings since most of them belonged to one or more of these groups.

“After the meeting we share it (information) in our organization but not to the whole community but I often call meeting with members of my organization and we are only eight (members of that organization)”

“After meeting (the CMF) I call a meeting with members of my organization to inform them what we discussed (at the CMF) but I have to give them transport which I don't have so it doesn't happen always but if I have the money I call them to tell them”

“No I used to tell (what was discussed at the CMF) members of my organization but not the whole community”

“I am the secretary so I am the one who often attends the meeting (CMF) and when I come back (from the MCMF) I call a meeting to tell members of my organization what was discussed...we are eight in the organization”

The statements by representatives of these NGOs and CBOs attending the CMF indicate that, they are not serving as intermediaries between their communities and DWA due to their lack of interaction after the forum with the community which makes them less favorable at the moment for DWA to depend on as intermediaries between the community and the forum. There is a need for investigation of the background of participants who represent organizations in order to know whether they have the mandate of their community. Naidoo (2003) have suggested the development of a self-regulatory method of accountability such as development of code of conduct to determine the standards expected of NGOs and CBOs in terms of their performance in their communities with DWA. This is to ensure that community organizations voluntarily give themselves the responsibility of reaching out to people in their locality and in so doing serve as intermediaries. The lack of interaction between participants from the disadvantaged community and the general public in their community makes these participants less favorable as intermediaries between the community and the organizers of the CMF. Other existing leadership structures in the community such as resident associations; ward councils and committees should therefore be engaged by the organizers of the MCMF to ensure a broader participation of the public. Councilors were identified by Smith (2003) as key communication channel in the local administration setup and suggested that, they could be key intermediaries between DWA and communities. People with an interest in community welfare such as the parish priest can also serve as a valuable source of information at the grassroots level since they are most often involved in resolving community issues and will be able to identify community members that have an interest in water resource management.

Access to relevant information and ability to comprehend the information are also critical to a participation process which are also affected by the language, style and format in which information it is disseminated. Effort should be made according to EPA (2001) to ensure that most participants understand the language that is used in the participation process through the avoidance or explanation of unfamiliar terms and jargon through repackaging of the technical information so that participants understand and engage in deliberations is therefore vital in a participation process. Participants were therefore asked if they understand the information presented during the CMF. Below are some of the responses obtained from respondents:

“The information they present is always calculation which I don’t understand”

“Sometimes they talk about things you don’t even understand”

“They just give us statistics that two months ago the water was like this and this time the water is like this sometimes for the whole year. They say we tested this time and the water was so much dirty or clean but we are getting improved but I am not clear because we don’t know how the technicians do (arrive at their answers)”

The responses above from these disadvantaged community participants indicate that, the information presented at the CMF is often technical. A DWA representative was asked to find out whether participants from the disadvantaged community have sufficient knowledge to understand the technical information presented in the CMF.

“The technical issues is the heart of the forum I guess in this particular instance (CMF) because the water quality is a huge issue so the technical issues and its language will be difficult for them (disadvantaged community stakeholders)”

It is argued that any participation process with a technical information whereby participants do not understand amounts to tokenism of participation, since participants are unable to absorb the technical information and contribute. There is therefore a need for the content of technical information to be presented

in plain language that will ensure that participants understand what is presented at the forum (Kilipo et al., 2005, Lankford et al., 2005). The mode of presentation of information in a participation process also affects the information comprehension by participants. This is because individuals learn differently, which requires a variation in the manner in which information is presented to them. The presentation of information in a participation process should therefore be in a form that will be relevant to everyone in a participation process.

Respondents were asked how information is presented during meetings. All the respondents answered that information is always presented by power point which was confirmed by DWA representative. The challenges associated with power point presentation that it creates a distance between the speaker and the audience, with the audience becoming passive which makes active participation after presentation a difficult task (Scottish Parliament Participation Handbook, 2004). Multiple methods of information presentation such as site visits should be explored. The use of site visits has been found to be useful in a participation process by improving learning, interaction among participants and improving learning since participants get the opportunity to come into contact with issues that may not be found in the localities (Petts, 2001).

4. Conclusion

The legislative framework has greatly improved the relationship between stakeholders and DWA. What is needed is the improvement of the participation process itself to address issues such as unrealistic expectation of participants, involvement of stakeholders who can serve as intermediaries, information accessibility and comprehension, and awareness creation. The MCMF is in a unique position to shape and enhance its procedures and mechanisms for the public participation process because it is relatively new compared to others such as Inkomati Catchment Management Agency. Emphasis needs to be placed on the development of skills and capacity of participants to understand and make meaningful contributions, especially participants from the disadvantaged communities. The skill and capacity of the organizers of MCMF also needs to be developed in order to allow them to know how to relate to participants in order to know their level of satisfaction in the participation processes.

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