

A recently completed Water Research Commission (WRC) study investigated community protests and water service delivery in South Africa.

Since 2012, the frequency, geographical spread and violence of service delivery-related protests have reached historically high levels, with more than one social protest occurring every day in the country. This prompted the WRC to investigate the phenomenon of social protests and their connection to water issues.

When and where are social protests more likely to occur?

The research findings suggest that there are four main factors that contribute to the eruption of social protests associated with water service delivery (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Main factors contributing to social protests associated with water service delivery.

The research indicates that the majority of social protests associated with water service delivery tend to occur in working-class urban and peri-urban localities characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and disjuncture (including communication breakdown) between water services development planning at especially municipal level and water users at local household and community levels. This occurred irrespective of the party affiliation of local government.

Such disjuncture can predispose people in such localities towards protest action. In many of the cases examined, residents expressed frustration over unmet expectations for water services, lack of downward accountability by municipal officials, alleged corruption, indifference and lack of

monitoring by water services authorities and/or municipal officials.

On the other hand, municipal officials voiced their frustrations over wasteful water use, unaccounted-for water, infrastructure theft, breakdown and lack of financial budgets for repairs of existing and building of new infrastructure. Both sets of viewpoints tended to be simultaneously complementary and contradictory; thus pointing to a need to develop a shared understanding of water service delivery issues in case-specific localities.

Water services delivery issues

A number of water service delivery issues were identified among protest grievances. Among others, these included:

- Problems relating to water supply, even when infrastructure is situated within 200 m from the household;
- Poor quality of water from existing infrastructure;
- Old and deteriorated water reticulation networks;
- Poor operation and maintenance of infrastructure;
- High tariffs (and sometimes too low);
- Intermittent water supplies;
- Lack of monitoring of service delivery by private contractors;
- Perceived and alleged corruption in the awarding of private contracts;
- Water restrictions and disconnections after installation of supplies;
- Difficulties in access at night due to threats to personal safety and security; and
- Comparison with more affluent neighbourhoods, which creates feelings of relative deprivation.

Key drivers of social protests

Six key drivers of violent social protests were identified. The first and the second drivers relate to the rapid transformations of both the a) urban landscape and b) rural landscape with associated increase in population, changing demographic profiles and citizen expectations. The third driver is unemployment, with surplus labour partly deriving from mine closure in certain parts of the country.

Negative perceptions about governance in general, and municipal governance in particular, also trigger social protests. The fifth driver is the emerging politics of engagement, which have increasingly become characterised by new mobilisations by civil society as well as an expansion of rights-based social networks of aggrieved people's organisations. Lastly, the era of social media amplifies grievance issues, creating public awareness and outrage, which could lead to an acceleration of social protests.

Lack of communication a trigger

A critical link in the shift from grievance perception to protest action is the disjuncture between water users and municipal authorities. Such disjuncture is often multi-faceted and includes poor communication, lack of downward accountability by municipal officials and councillors, and differences in perception between what practitioners consider to be effective ways of rendering water services and what water services users consider as their legitimate needs and expectations.

A common refrain in many protests was that, when residents perceive a water services delivery issue, their first reaction is to peacefully communicate their grievance or dissatisfaction by reporting to relevant municipal authorities. Responses by authorities (or lack thereof) tend to be associated with the quality of governance, and are often critical to residents' decisions whether or not to escalate the efficacy of their engagement strategies.

When authorities demonstrate that they are committed to resolving reported grievances residents do not proceed to protest.

Conclusion

The issue of social protest is complex and dependent on a variety of contexts, drivers and scenarios. What is critical for policy is not so much how to make sense of the how social protests come to occur, but rather to glean from among the commonly identified key points of disjuncture between citizens and authorities, plausible pre-emptive and remedial interventions. The objective of such interventions would be to address the issues contributing to water insecurity and thereby avert future protest action.

Further reading:

To order the report, *Social protests and water service delivery in South Africa (Report No. TT 631/15)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za