



Short communication

A strategy to enhance management of free basic water via communal taps in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

About 7.5 million South Africans access groundwater drinking water via communal taps provided by municipalities under a free basic water policy. Supplying communities for free to low-income communities is essential but can result in water wastage due to a potential indifference of non-paying end-users. The consequence is a loss of municipal water and financial resources. We propose a new strategy that rewards low-income communities for reducing water wastage. The incentive system promotes water conservation and community development and decreases recurring water-related public expenses. The concept is funded by a percentage of municipal cost savings yielded from the respective water conservation.

1. Background

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 of the United Nations aims at ensuring access to basic drinking water for all by 2030 (UN, 2016; Origgi et al., 2019). One of the major barriers when it comes to the expansion of basic drinking water supplies to the poorest in developing countries is financial because potential consumers are unable to pay for the services they require (Joynt et al., 2016; Joynt et al., 2019; Ntsho et al., 2019). To overcome financial barriers to providing drinking water to the poorest residents, South Africa introduced a free basic water policy in 2001 (Muller, 2004).

The provision of free basic water emerged from legislation in the form of South Africa's National Water Act (NWA) of 1998 and the Water Services Act of 1997 (Barnard, 2005). The local government sector was also redesigned around the time of the promulgation of these Acts and given extensive powers and autonomy under a policy of developmental local government (Van Koppen and Schreiner, 2014). There was a focus on decentralised decision-making and participatory governance and management, as well as the legislative integration of a variety of issues that encompassed environmental and social dimensions.

The free basic water policy includes an initial block of 6 m³/month of drinking water without charge per indigent household as part of a block tariff (WAF, 2002; Susho, 2017). By 2017, this policy was implemented

in 95% of all relevant municipalities, which are responsible for utility management in South Africa (DWS, 2017).

Local governments, however, have been largely unable to maintain effective operational and regulatory mechanisms within water management institutions, such as at a strategic oversight level having an up-to-date Water Services Development Plan, or at an operational level implementing reliable and consistent meter reading (Jordan et al., 2014). There is also limited capacity to adequately utilise these mechanisms (Clifford-Goldman et al., 2016). These challenges are compounded by the tendency of managers, politicians, and policymakers in the water sector to focus on improving organisational and institutional arrangements rather than focusing on implementation (Brown, 2011; Gashima, 2011). These frequently revised arrangements are resulting in a lack of confidence and trust between communities and water managers, as well as contributing to unreliable water supply. Governance structures that build relationships and trust, strengthened by flexible, locally negotiated service level agreements, could provide an easier and more adaptive way forward than the current trend of gradual restructuring of national legal frameworks (Clifford-Goldman et al., 2016; Susho et al., 2019).

It is estimated that about 13% (~7.5 million) of the South African population currently has access to drinking water only via public standpipes and 25% (~14 million) of the population live below or close to the food poverty line of ~384 USD per annum per person (STATSSA,

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