



The rhetoric of community participation in urban South African water governance

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of the water insecurity challenge has manifested in weak government financial systems, insufficient technical capacity, and ineffective water governance systems in the global arena. This paper is a contextual analysis of community participation in water governance in urban South Africa since 1994. Limited community participation in urban water governance results in persistent inequality in access to water and sanitation services. New strategies and effective mechanisms are needed to include communities in water governance and pricing.

1. Introduction

The persistence of the water insecurity challenge in the global arena has manifested in weak financial systems, insufficient technical capacity, and ineffective water governance systems. Many governments fail to provide adequate water and sanitation services (WSS), especially to the low-income urban population (Adams et al., 2020; Martinez, 2022). One of the serious global challenges facing the low-income urban population is the critical shortage of clean WSS that has manifested in the swift spread of diseases such as cholera (Patrick, 2021). The failure of governments to provide inclusive WSS to urbanites has necessitated an integrated approach to water governance, emphasising community participation (CP). Sustainability in water management has proven to be a key challenge as countries worldwide struggle to provide clean water to all citizens (Martinez, 2022; Sinharoy et al., 2019). Human development records show that over 1 billion people are without the right to use clean water, and 1.8 million children die every year from water-borne diseases. The target fixed over the 30 years was to enhance water access standards (Sundararaman et al., 2022). However, disparities in the availability of safe drinking water constitute one of the primary underlying determinants of global health inequities and diseases due to contaminated water (Novaes et al., 2022; Patrick, 2021). Recent estimates indicate that half a million people die every year from preventable cases of diarrhoea caused by inadequate drinking water (Lebek et al., 2021). More than half of the cases of diarrhoea in middle- and low-income countries are attributable to insufficient drinking water,

inadequate sanitation, and poor hand-washing hygiene (Ngarava et al., 2019). In the quest to improve the lives of humankind globally, CP has been considered one of the best practices by governments to improve the provisioning of basic services such as housing, water, and sanitation (Bolognesi et al., 2022; Etongo et al., 2018). In sub-Saharan Africa, community-based management (CBM) has proven to be an enduring strategy for operationalising mainstream participatory development in rural water supply projects and programmes.

The participatory agenda took hold in the 1980s, the first United Nations “Water Decade”, in the face of general disillusionment with top-down and supply-driven approaches (Etongo et al., 2018). Sustainable Development Goal number six (SDG 6) ensures the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030. In particular, Target 6. b.1 is about supporting and strengthening the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management (Bolognesi et al., 2022; Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021). The challenge of water governance has been explored by scholars such as Akerboom and Craig (2022) and Shackleton and Njwaxu (2021). However, these studies have focussed more on policy implementation failure with less attention to CP in water governance.

Research directly addressing the challenge of CP in water governance in urban South Africa (SA) seems scanty. The main objective of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of CP mechanisms used across municipalities in urban SA to engage communities in water governance. This paper is deemed significant as the findings and recommendations may inform policymakers about the relevant factors that should be

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considered to ensure effective CP in water governance. We provide a contextual analysis of the community-based water governance challenge in SA since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The paper takes a global analytical perspective of the evolution of CP challenges in water governance to conceptualise the nature of urban water policy in SA. The review then reflects on the nature and characteristics of the CP challenge in water provision in SA.

The paper provides some existing perspectives on the definition of community participation. Section 4 discusses the evolution of CP departing from a global perspective to the South African context. We then analyse the challenge of WSS in SA before and after the dawn of democracy in 1994, starting with the Constitution of the Republic of SA. Section 6 provides the legislative framework for WSS in SA since the advent of democracy in 1994. Section 7 discusses the challenges of water service provision in SA, highlighting the lack of CP as one of the key impediments to effective water governance. Section 8 focuses on the nature of CP in SA and the existing mechanisms to engage citizens in providing basic services such as water and sanitation. Section 9, which constitutes the last part of the paper, includes the discussion and conclusions. We synthesise the review and articulate key policy implications from this paper. Furthermore, the limitation of the analysis and areas for future research are highlighted in Section 9.

2. Defining community participation

The concept of CP has been defined by different scholars, such as Chess and Purcell (1999). However, there seems to be no definitive definition of community participation, according to Akerboom and Craig (2022), due to the complexity and dynamic nature of this concept. Luisi and Hämel (2021) argue that “a generally applicable definition of CP for theory, policy and practice development, though, remains elusive and contentious”. According to Chess and Purcell (1999), CP can be defined as active, direct involvement in government decision-making. From a similar perspective, Akerboom and Craig (2022) view CP as the devolution of power from government to citizens to promote the ability of citizens to influence public policy formulation and implementation. Concurrently with these definitions of community participation, Rut et al. (2021) provide another version of the concept, stating that it “refers to activities from formal participation in policy-making to the diverse actions that people take in their everyday lives”.

The preceding definitions of CP emphasise that the community should be at the centre of government developmental processes and exercise the right to participate directly in delivering basic services such as clean water. In this regard, one of the fundamental elements of community participation, according to Shunglu et al. (2022), is people’s direct involvement in the decision-making process and the development mechanism as stakeholders or shareholders. In this paper, our definition of CP is drawn from Kiss et al. (2022), who define CP as the involvement of individuals or communities in the planning, design, implementation, and maintenance of projects and policies to bring about the effective delivery of basic services such as water and sanitation. In line with the preceding definitions, we understand the concept of CP to mean the direct involvement of people in government decision-making processes with clear intentions to incorporate community needs in public policy formulation and implementation. In principle, this would result in social transformation, understood as the change in the urban environment characterised by effective water governance. In this paper, community participation is used interchangeably with public participation. The paper is based solely on the review of the extant literature on CP and water governance.

3. Methodology

The study provides a contextual analysis of the community-based water governance challenges in urban SA since the dawn of democracy in 1994, primarily based on reviewing the extant literature on

water governance and community participation.

The authors have read, interpreted, and reflected on the nature and characteristics of the water governance challenge and CP in South African urban townships. A defined set of questions on the challenge of water governance and CP guided the review. The next step was identifying and selecting scholarly works such as articles and government reports that were considered relevant to achieve the aim of this paper. The review sought to underscore the nature of CP in water governance in general and assess the involvement of citizens in the provision of WSS in urban SA, in particular.

The selected articles and reports were analysed against the central themes of the paper, and the results were synthesised, collated, and reported. Two central questions directed the review. The first question is, what is the nature of CP in water governance in urban SA? The second question is, what is the landscape or status of CP in providing basic services such as water and sanitation in the urban townships of SA? The analysis focused on the context and mechanisms for CP in water governance in urban SA to address these questions.

4. The evolution of community participation – a global perspective

Locating the notion and practice of CP in history is complex. A close review of the extant literature suggests that despite its emergence around the 1960s–1970s, CP has existed as a practice throughout human history (Luisi and Hämel, 2021; Novaes et al., 2022). There are various views concerning the origin of community participation. For instance, scholars such as Yang et al. (2022) state that a contextual analysis of CP shows that different factors, including international politics and research developments, have influenced this concept. Community participation stems broadly from social sciences like developmental and political sciences. Thus, the diverse nature and characteristics of the theory of CP make it a complex concept and practice.

Following the dominance of CP since the early 1960s, countries worldwide have commenced incorporating some key aspects of community participation, such as putting the people’s views first in their developmental policies and strategies (Ngarava et al., 2019). In this regard, CP implies a new developmental paradigm due to the failure of the top-down approach to bring about development typified by the effective delivery of basic services such as clean water and sanitation. Sundararaman et al. (2022) contend that adopting CP in governmental processes moved from the global, spatial, top-down strategies that dominated early development initiatives to more locally sensitive methodologies. This model characterised developmental government laws and projects in most developed and developing countries (Martinez, 2022).

Governments use different forms of CP mechanisms across the globe to engage communities. The International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) is just one example of the existing mechanisms for community participation in government developmental processes (Sundararaman et al., 2022). The central roles of structures such as IAPP are to consult, inform, collaborate, and involve communities in public policymaking and implementation that will effectively deliver basic services, including water and sanitation (Ahmad et al., 2019). Other examples of CP mechanisms globally are the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) and Citizen Community Boards (CCBs) in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan has created LGOs and CCBs to enable the participation of the communities in water affairs (Ahmad et al., 2019). It seems that these CP mechanisms have produced good results in effecting the involvement of the public in government policies. According to Ahmad et al. (2019), by implementing these mechanisms, communities are willing to give land and work with the government in water delivery.

Countries like Singapore and China have taken the role of CP in public policy formulation and implementation as an essential element in the quest for effective service delivery (Ngarava et al., 2019). However, CP, particularly in water governance, seems to face some challenges

even in developed countries like Singapore. For example, Rut et al. (2021) state that in Singapore, the nature of CP in effective service delivery seems to be inevitably influenced by the processes of rebuilding the nation and socio-historical conditions. One of the key features of the nature of CP in the global arena is exclusiveness (Novaes et al., 2022). While the government aims to improve ordinary people's lives, excluding other members of society seems to deter the effectiveness of CP for better services such as WSS (Adams et al., 2020). Commenting on the downfall of CP in bringing services to the people, Yang et al. (2022) contend that whether on purpose or not, the idea of citizen involvement can often imply exclusivity since laws that exclude refugees, undocumented immigrants, or stateless individuals may result in some segments of the population in a particular geographic area not being recognised as citizens.

In the African continent, the effort to eradicate the legacy of colonialism has been characterised by recognising the critical role of ordinary people in public policy formulation and implementation (Akerboom and Craig, 2022). While countries such as Nigeria, Algeria and Botswana have shown impressive progress in including communities in developmental processes, most countries, including Uganda and Zambia, struggle with effective policy implementation. The lack of CP is among the reasons for their failure (Kubanza, 2021). Despite the reality that developing countries in the African continent have not been progressive in formulating and putting into practice CP mechanisms to promote service delivery, according to Sundararaman et al. (2022), CP in developing countries is seen as a positive driver of water governance, rather than resource scarcity, climate change or public health. For community involvement systems to be successful, various stakeholders, including municipalities, decision-makers, and technical supporters, must be considered (Akerboom and Craig, 2022). However, development in Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan African countries such as Angola, has experienced active community protests. Key themes are poor service delivery, including lack of clean drinking water. The inability of the governments to deliver basic services to the people has been associated with poor CP in government processes (Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021).

The involvement of communities in public policy formulation and implementation in SA is articulated in various legislation, such as the National Water Act 36 of 1998. The government is mandated to promote CP in developmental projects (Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021). The government recognises the fundamental role of communities in shaping public policies. Scholars such as Kubanza (2021) argue that in SA, efficient resource management, particularly of resources like water, has proven to be challenging. Enforcement of environmental laws and regulations, proper institutional capacity, cooperation and collaboration among local governments, improved community participation, and general public knowledge among its members are all necessary for effective delivery (Kubanza, 2021). However, existential living conditions in urban SA before and after the dawn of democracy in 1994 depict a different story—a problem of lack or ineffectiveness of CP in the provision of WSS (Omotayo et al., 2021).

5. The challenge of water and sanitation services in South Africa

Like most developing countries in Africa, SA struggles to provide basic services such as water and sanitation to all the communities (Lebek et al., 2021). A review of the extant literature demonstrates that the sluggish provision of WSS is one of the major challenges the government has been battling since the dawn of democracy in 1994. At the centre of this problem is the lack or absence of CP in water governance as one of the key impediments to effective WSS (Kubanza, 2021). As a result, it is imperative to analyse the challenge of WSS before and after the advent of democracy in SA.

5.1. Provision of water and sanitation services in SA pre-1994

The contemporary WSS challenges in SA cannot be divorced from the historical developments of these services (Omotayo et al., 2021). Any attempt to disregard the history of SA water governance and sanitation services risks drawing premature conclusions (Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021). It results in analysing water governance and sanitation services without anthropological-historical grounding. Such educational practices cannot contribute to the solid discourse and solutions to the current water governance and sanitation challenges. Therefore, this section provides the trajectory of the WSS challenge in SA before 1994. However, it is prudent to state that the history of WSS in SA before 1994 is vast and cannot be encapsulated in this article. The purpose here is to highlight some key historical developments of water governance, particularly the relation between ineffective water delivery and community participation. This approach creates a context for analysing the contemporary WSS impediments, such as the lack of CP in urban SA.

The challenges of WSS can be traced back to the years of colonisation inaugurated by the arrival of the colonial settlers in SA. According to Funke et al. (2007) and Ncube (2022), after 1952, following the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and the Dutch East India Company, WSS in SA began to be privatised. Colonisation was characterised by racial injustices in SA, where most black people were forcefully removed from their natural resources, including land and water. Consequently, most indigenous people lost power over access to water and land (Funke et al., 2007; Ncube, 2022). Without control over natural resources, poverty was inevitable for most conquered black people. Many indigenous people were forced to work for the colonial settlers, who subjected them to inhuman working conditions (Guelke and Shell, 1992; Omotayo et al., 2021).

One of the reasons for the colonial settlers to forcefully take land away from the ownership of black people was the availability of water in such areas. For instance, scholars such as Enqvist and Ziervogel (2019) contend that despite superior natural harbours further north, the Dutch East India Company settled at Table Mountain in Cape Town because of the area's abundance of water. Reliable streams were required to provide a water supply for company ships and to generate enough food to feed the workers. The company established control by enacting regulations to prevent its residents from contaminating water sources and forcibly evicting Khoikhoi cattle herders and other indigenous populations from the area (Enqvist and Ziervogel, 2019). Therefore, urban areas such as Cape Town in SA were formed based on racial wars over water. During these times, safe drinking WSS in SA were exclusively meant for white communities.

The official coming into power of the National Party (NP) in 1948 resulted in the rapid formulation and implementation of various legislation, such as the Group Areas Act, to push the black population into water-stressed areas. For example, Shackleton and Njwaxu (2021) state that some of the primary objectives of the infamous apartheid policies and regulations of the NP were to extend previous racial discrimination practices through the expulsion of the majority of black people from fertile and productive land to peripheral urban townships, characterised by squalid living conditions with lack of clean WSS. Therefore, the historiography of SA demonstrates a story of black people conquered during the unjust wars of colonisation through land and water dispossession. The history of SA is inevitably also a narration of water privatisation through white hegemony bolstered by government legislation to specifically disadvantage black people.

5.2. The urban sprawl and the urgency of water and sanitation services post-1994

In South African history, 1994 symbolises the end of the apartheid regime typified by racial inequalities in WSS and the dawn of democracy that emphasises the accessibility of basic services on an equal basis (Ncube, 2022). During SA's first democratic elections in 1994, "about

20% of the population had no access to piped water at all, and this figure varied from 1 to 98% across different municipalities” (Lebek et al., 2021). The African National Congress (ANC) government needed to consider and understand this context to craft laws and policies to address the country’s WSS problems. As a response to this anomaly, the ANC government, led by the late former president Nelson Mandela, introduced various reforms, including the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of SA in 1996 (Hara et al., 2021). Post-1994, public policy directives accentuated the need to transform the water and sanitation sector by formulating and implementing strategies to effectively deliver safe drinking WSS, particularly to most of the previously disadvantaged black population under the colonial and apartheid era (Ncube, 2022).

The advent of democracy in SA resulted in the adoption of constitutional democratic principles such as CP in delivering WSS, including decentralised powers and intergovernmental relations in water governance (Omotayo et al., 2021). Emanating from the Constitution of the Republic of SA (SA, 1996), which provides for the right of every citizen to access WSS, the three spheres of government in SA are responsible for ensuring the practicality of this right (Harry and Malepane, 2021). In this regard, the national, provincial, and local governments should work together to provide WSS to the people, especially people experiencing poverty. The national government plays a crucial role in delivering WSS through crafting rules and strategies.

The national government formulates water and sanitation laws and programmes in coordination with provincial and municipal authorities to bring WSS to the communities (Omotayo et al., 2021). It is thus the responsibility of the central government to provide guidelines and requirements to both provincial and local governments for the delivery of WSS. The national government monitors the objectives and budget for providing WSS (Harry and Malepane, 2021). The Minister of Water and Sanitation oversees this process and ensures that a progressive and effective water and sanitation model is used to effectively and efficiently provide WSS nationwide, particularly to low-income communities. This policy creates national water and sanitation codes (Lebek et al., 2021).

The provincial government is key in delivering WSS in urban SA. In line with national legislation, policies and strategies for water and sanitation, the provincial government should ensure the effective delivery of basic services such as clean water to their respective provinces (Bishoge, 2021). The function of the provincial government is to facilitate WSS by developing policies and strategies that do not conflict with the national legal framework. Provincial authorities are expected to regulate and coordinate water and sanitation processes to deliver these services effectively to the communities (Lebek et al., 2021). Therefore, the provincial government assists and empowers the local government to distribute basic services like water and sanitation.

Local government has a fundamental role in providing WSS as a sphere closer to the people. Municipalities are mandated to ensure the continuous distribution of basic services such as water and sanitation to their communities of jurisdiction (Bishoge, 2021). As part of the local government, municipalities are responsible for setting water and sanitation objectives to facilitate the accessibility of these basic services to the people. However, such responsibilities of municipalities must be performed or executed in compliance with the national and provincial water and sanitation policies (Lebek et al., 2021). While the three spheres of government in SA enjoy the constitutional right of being independent in their functions, municipalities should ensure that their actions and strategies for WSS do not contradict the constitutional provisions (Harry and Malepane, 2021). Therefore, the laws and regulations for water governance and sanitation services developed at the national level supersede any policy or strategy crafted at the provincial and local levels. Municipalities must work in collaboration with their provincial governments to promote the right to WSS.

6. Legislative framework for water and sanitation services in South Africa

The new democratic water and sanitation laws, policies, strategies, and programmes were made possible by the end of the apartheid regime and the advent of democracy in SA in 1994 (Kubanza, 2021). In the existing water governance legislation and policies, including the South African Constitution, the notion of CP is considered one of the key principles to enforce local democracy. Despite the present legal framework for promoting CP in water governance, community involvement in water governance is somewhat dubious. Water governance legislation and policies have not yet produced desired outcomes from effective CP, such as the sustainable delivery of WSS to the low-income urban population (Bishoge, 2021). Scholars like Lebek et al. (2021) have recently referred to the lack of CP challenge as a public policy implementation failure at the local level. The existing community participation structures, such as public meetings, are ineffective. This paper argues that despite the current legal framework for WSS in SA, poor CP in urban water governance persists. Starting with the Constitution of the Republic of SA, some key legislation and policies for effective CP in water governance are discussed.

6.1. The Constitution of South Africa and the right to water

Water is a basic human right provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of SA Act 108 of 1996 (SA, 1996). Chapter Two of the South African Constitution (the Bill of Rights) states, “Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water.” The government thus carries a key mandate to ensure the continuous delivery of clean WSS to the communities (Lebek et al., 2021). As mentioned in the previous sections, the three spheres of government in SA, namely the national, provincial, and local governments, should interact to provide basic services such as water and sanitation. The roles and responsibilities of the three spheres of government are clearly defined in the Constitution. The Constitution stipulates that the central and provincial governments must empower and support municipalities to ensure that WSS are accessible to the people, particularly the low-income urban population (Omotayo et al., 2021). However, translating these rights into *de facto* socio-economic empowerment has proven complicated and slow (Hara et al., 2021). The relationship between the constitutional provisions and the existential living conditions in the South African urban periphery townships is dialectical, so the right to WSS, as provided in the Constitution, does not necessarily result in water provision, especially for low-income urbanites.

6.2. The White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation Services (1994)

The White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation Services was developed in 1994 following the end of the apartheid regime and the introduction of a new democratic state in SA (Rankoana, 2020). In an attempt to deal with the problem of water insecurity inherited from the colonial and apartheid regimes in the country, the government had to swiftly devise a policy to bring about transformation in the water and sanitation sector. As a result, the White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation Services was formulated to accelerate the provision of WSS to all communities, including most South African citizens deprived of the right to WSS under the colonial and apartheid times. According to Lebek et al. (2021), one of the objectives of the White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation Services was to address the problem of water insecurity and poor sanitation services, especially for low-income households. This White Paper stressed the importance of CP in sound and effective water governance in South African communities (Kiss et al., 2022). The policy also required the government, particularly municipalities, to work closely with various stakeholders, such as communities, to drive the processes of WSS.

6.3. *The Water Services Act, no. 108 of 1997*

The South African government formulated the Water Services Act No. 108 of 1997 to enforce the provision of WSS as enshrined in the Constitution. In addition to outlining the guidelines for WSS, one of the primary objectives of the Water Services Act was to set national standards and norms for the effective delivery of WSS (Ncube, 2022). The Water Services Act also emphasises the need for collaborative governance, including community participation, in providing WSS; the Act recognises the fundamental role of CP in water governance (SA, 2022). Thus, municipalities are expected to engage meaningfully with communities in water and sanitation delivery processes.

6.4. *The National Water Act No. 36 of 1998*

In 1998, the South African government developed the National Water Act to redress past racial injustices, especially regarding WSS (SA, 2022). One of the key aims of the National Water Act No. 36 of 1998 is “to provide for fundamental reform of the law relating to water resources; to repeal certain laws; and to provide for matters connected therewith”. Emanating from the Constitution of the Republic of SA, the Act gives effect to the right to water by providing water and sanitation legal guidelines for government institutions, including municipalities (SA, 2022). The Act emphasises the importance of equity in water provision, implying that the government is expected to promote gender equality in providing WSS (Lebek et al., 2021). Furthermore, the element of CP in water governance and sanitation services is explicitly articulated in the National Water Act No. 36 of 1998. The Act appeals to municipalities to promote inclusive water governance characterised by, among other things, meaningful CP (Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021). Thus, different CP mechanisms, such as public meetings, should be in place to effectively deliver WSS.

6.5. *National Water Resource Strategy*

The National Water Resource Strategy was formulated in 2004 by the South African government to give effect to the different existing water policies, such as the White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation Services (Harry and Malepane, 2021). The National Water Resource Strategy considers water from a broad perspective emanating from the National Development Plan (NDP) in SA. According to the Department of Water and Sanitation, the strategy is currently the legal instrument for implementing or operationalising the National Water Act No. 36 of 1998, and it is thus binding on all authorities and institutions implementing the Act (SA, 2022). Water should be understood as a crucial instrument to drive economic development at large; the burden of unemployment and poverty cannot be divorced from the problems of water insecurity in SA. Articulating the inevitable nexus between water allocation and other sociological issues such as starvation, the National Water Resource Strategy emphasises the “allocation of water for poverty eradication and contribute to gender and racial equity”. Furthermore, this strategy requires the water sector to provide resource protection, integrated catchment management, and water conservation. It also emphasises the importance of guaranteeing water availability for the economy to create employment opportunities (Ncube, 2022). Thus, the National Water Resource Strategy should be understood in line with other crucial government developmental tools such as the NDP.

7. Challenges of water service provision in South Africa

As already discussed, the South African government has developed and implemented various legislative acts and policies for WSS since the advent of democracy in 1994. However, effective implementation of legislation, policies and strategies for water and sanitation provision seems to be a major challenge (Shackleton and Njwaxu, 2021). Unfortunately, there is no one unique reason why, despite the implementation

of different water policies and strategies, there is still a problem of water insecurity and poor sanitation services, especially in the urban townships of SA. Literature reveals various aspects associated with the persisting challenge of WSS in SA, and these include the lack or absence of collaborative governance at the local level (Harry and Malepane, 2021). This top-down approach to service delivery is problematic. When decision-making powers are vested at the top government structures without involving communities, policies will likely fail at the implementation stage (Martinez, 2022). Such policies are crafted and imposed on communities without carefully understanding the context and existential living conditions at the grassroots level. As a result, the provision of WSS in SA has been characterised by active protests from the communities, with the central theme being the lack of CP in water governance (Harry and Malepane, 2021).

Due to the ineffectiveness of WSS provision, social movements have rapidly formed to fight water insecurity in SA (Martinez, 2022), such as the Water Homeless People's Federation, Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. Rankoana (2020) states these have been established because the government has failed to provide basic services, including water and sanitation. In this regard, communities have resorted to another form of governance led by social movements typified by community-based leadership. Scholars such as Shackleton and Njwaxu (2021) argue that there is a semblance of radical or insurgent water and sanitation service planning which is advancing urban transformation through social movements, changing the existing power relations from being exercised by planning institutions such as municipalities, and reducing barriers to low-income household's access to WSS in urban SA (Hara et al., 2021).

8. Community participation in South Africa

8.1. *Community participation and engagement approaches in urban South Africa*

Water shortage and poor sanitation services are among the most critical issues facing local South African municipal authorities (Harry and Malepane, 2021). Literature shows that the system's financial constraints, complexity and multidimensionality, and inefficient organisation are the main challenges local municipal authorities face in providing WSS. Local municipal authorities are the primary agencies responsible for efficiently and effectively delivering WSS (Rankoana, 2020). Despite the existing water and sanitation legislation and policies, including the White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation services, there is a lack of attention to understanding the role of CP in water governance (Shunglu et al., 2022). The provision of WSS in SA has proven to be a complex process mainly influenced by different aspects, such as the lack of financial and technical capacity on the side of municipalities to meet the demand (Kiss et al., 2022). While CP has become a key feature of various water governance legislative frameworks, incorporating the views and plight of ordinary people to service delivery approaches has proven problematic.

8.2. *Community participation mechanisms for water provision*

The role of communities in providing WSS in urban SA is inevitably one of the critical elements of transformative water governance (Kiss et al., 2022). Existing CP mechanisms, such as the use of community development workers (CDWs) and public meetings, have not produced impressive results in taking and translating the basic needs of citizens to influence government developmental initiatives. Simply put, despite CDWs and other CP mechanisms, such as public meetings in South African communities, CP in providing WSS remains a significant challenge characterised by poor water delivery and squalid living conditions in urban SA.

8.2.1. Community development workers

In 2003, the South African government introduced CDWs to bridge municipalities and communities in providing basic services like water and sanitation (SA, 2022). The government considered the establishment of community structures such as CDWs in SA as one of the essential strategies to enforce local democracy by enabling communities to take part in the processes of public policy formulation and implementation (Shunglu et al., 2022). In SA, CDWs are at the centre of CP because these are the structures that the government created to take community plights and report them to the relevant departments to influence government decision-making and service delivery. The fundamental purpose of CDWs in SA, according to the Department of Public Service and Administration (SA, 2021), is to:

"Improve the dissemination of information to the poor about benefits and services to which all citizens are entitled; assist the poor to access and benefit from the services that could materially improve their lives; provide an interface or bridge between municipalities and communities to enhance the existing local government structures to improve the level of participation between communities and the Integrated Development Plans" (SA, 2021).

From this excerpt, it is clear that CDWs were initiated as a strategic plan to facilitate CP for effective service delivery, including water and sanitation. Thus, the government acknowledges the fundamental role of CP in promoting effective water governance systems (Patrick, 2021). However, the issues of water insecurity and poor sanitation services in urban SA seem to persist, despite CP structures like the CDWs (Rut et al., 2021). The failure of the CDWs to promote CP in the provision of WSS has been associated with various challenges, such as the lack of proper coordination between municipalities and CDWs. Political interference with the work of CDWs at the local level is another impediment contributing to poor CP in the delivery of WSS (Shunglu et al., 2022). The effectiveness of CP mechanisms, including CDWs, depends on a good working relationship between the government and all stakeholders, such as local communities. Lack of social trust, characterised by the unwillingness of some communities to work with the government, is a key factor contributing to poor implementation of CDWs in water governance in urban SA.

8.2.2. Public meetings

The government considers public meetings as one of the fundamental mechanisms for effective CP in water and sanitation provision (Rut et al., 2021). The government uses public meetings to engage communities about developmental processes and water provision. Municipalities are expected to hold public meetings with communities to hear their plights regarding government services like water and sanitation (Luisi and Hämel, 2021). However, one of the major challenges with public meetings is that government officials use them to engage in political discourses with less emphasis on public service delivery. Commenting on this issue, Kubanza (2021) states that political restraints prevent a full and unrestricted discussion of development and governance at the local level in invited forums for public engagement. Thus, promoting social citizenship is challenging, understood as a shared commitment to democratic institutions and adequate provision of WSS to the communities, especially the previously disadvantaged in urban SA.

9. Discussion and conclusion

The challenge of water governance has manifested in the poor provision of clean WSS in South African urban townships (Harry and Malepane, 2021). As our analysis reveals, the lack or absence of CP in urban water governance in SA is at the centre of this glaring problem. The history of water governance in SA is the story of public policy implementation failure resulting in the consistent mismatch between the demand and supply of clean WSS in low-income townships (Rut et al.,

2021). While various factors seem to contribute to poor water governance in urban SA, the lack of CP has been highlighted in this paper as one of the major impediments to effective water governance. This paper analysed the effectiveness of CP mechanisms used across municipalities in urban SA to engage communities. In this regard, the South African government has developed and implemented various legislation and strategies, emphasising effective public participation in water governance since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Harry and Malepane, 2021).

The effect of the existing public participation mechanisms, such as public meetings for sustainable water delivery, remains dubious. This situation seems to result from poor communication and a lack of political will to improve water security, particularly in the previously disadvantaged South African urban areas. As articulated in the SDGs and NDP, the South African government has committed itself to ensuring access to basic services such as water and sanitation by 2030. However, based on the current sluggish delivery of public services and the prevalence of poverty in general, it seems that the government will not meet SDG 6 and NDP objectives. In principle, the involvement of communities in water governance initiatives seeks to eliminate the issues of inequalities among South African communities regarding WSS (Rut et al., 2021). Despite the existing structures of CP, such as the CDWs, one of the key characteristics of water governance in urban SA is the issue of inequality in communities with regard to access to WSS.

The government has highlighted equal access to basic services in SA as a major challenge emanating from the previous government systems before the advent of democracy in 1994 (Shunglu et al., 2022). Through the implementation of CDWs in urban SA, the government aims to improve the accessibility of WSS, particularly to low-income urbanites across the country. The government must embark on reinvigorating the existing structures of CP to enhance the provision of WSS in urban SA. Effective water governance can be achieved by understanding the role of communities in influencing public decision-making processes, particularly regarding water governance. Meaningful public participation in water governance means a direct involvement of the people in public policy formulation and implementation to effect social change in the form of the provision of clean WSS to urban townships of SA.

The South African government must devise effective mechanisms and strategies to include communities in water governance. Such strategies and mechanisms may include a consistent interaction between the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) and local communities. This approach would allow communities not to just engage the government regarding their needs concerning WSS but to propose different ways to achieve effective water governance in urban SA. The challenge of water governance is complex and vast and demands a broad approach. This paper only focussed on the element of CP by assessing its effectiveness in water governance in urban SA. Some aspects, such as water tariffs, the scarcity of resources and public leadership, need to be explored further to improve understanding of the water governance challenge. Therefore, further research analysing these dimensions is recommended.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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