



Communicating Water Conservation in Rural South Africa: The Nexus of Dialogue

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ABSTRACT South Africa is intensifying water conservation campaigns in the face of a worsening water crisis. However, the water conservation campaigns are plagued by ubiquitous challenges and are yet to resonate with the critical mass, rural dwellers particularly. This paper investigated the role of participatory dialogue in communicating and mobilising the rural populace to play their part in conserving the scarce water resource. The qualitative method approach was used based on the participatory action research paradigm. The findings revealed that engaging participants through participatory dialogue were effective in building knowledge, changing opinions and attitudes towards water conservation. It was concluded that participatory dialogue provides a powerful strategy for motivating rural dwellers to cultivate water conservation habits.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of unsustainable water demand amidst dwindling water resource, national and provincial water authorities in South Africa are intensifying efforts at encouraging people to use water wisely. Nonetheless, apathy to water conservation persists. The Department of Water and Sanitation (2015), reports that many South Africans are not conserving water. The indifference appears more pronounced in rural communities where residents are either unaware of water demand management strategies or do not seem to recognise the importance of water conservation. Onyenankeya et al. (2017: 2) found that many rural and peri-urban communities are disconnected from the water conservation campaigns as they “do not have adequate information on what to do, how to do it and why it should be done”.

The limited impact of current water conservation campaigns among the rural population could be as a result of the top-down nature of the water communication strategy which is primarily concerned with persuading rural dwellers to adopt prescribed water behaviour (Onyenankeya and Salawu 2018).

There is little or no attempt to understand the social dynamics underpinning the water conservation behaviour of rural dwellers or what and how the rural folks think about water scarcity (Onyenankeya and Salawu 2019). While media may be effective in getting the population informed about water issues and advocating change in water use behaviour, it appears limited in stimulating individuals to develop a culture of water-saving. As has been argued, “media, no matter how technologically advanced; messages, no matter how skilfully packaged; and information, no matter how relevant, are not enough to bring about meaningful and sustainable results” except the people involved (stakeholders) are part of the process leading to change” (Mefalopulos 2008: xi).

Therefore, having an expanded view of what and how rural people understand water scarcity is key in designing water conservation commu-

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nication. This broader view can emerge through an interactive communication which not only helps to unpack the seriousness of the impending water scarcity and the implications it holds for economic and human development in the country but also, offers an opportunity to seek stakeholders' understanding and commitment toward determining a common solution. It has been argued that people are likely to resist and oppose 'scientific facts and technocratic solutions' when there is no previous 'discussion and awareness of risks and choices' (Moser and Drilling 2012: 169). Engaging and getting everyone involved in water conservation is critical not only in ensuring optimal use of available water resources, but also, in equipping the populace with "the requisite social adaptability to manage in the face of physical water scarcity" (Zolli and Healy 2012). This becomes even more important given the poor knowledge about water scarcity and varied perceptions of water conservation among the populace.

Objectives

This paper investigated the role of participatory dialogue in communicating and mobilising rural populace in the water conservation drive using a water dialogue event in Gaga, a rural community in the Eastern Cape Province as a point of departure. The paper assumes that communication is a necessary prerequisite for bringing about change in society and argues that participatory communication which places a premium on dialogue and community participation, offers a more effective way of engaging stakeholders to bring about this desired transformation (Barranquero 2011). It was further assumed that the participants possess communicative competence and bringing them to one single space will trigger a "united reflection" (Freire 1972: 61) which will, in turn, enable them to take the desired action. There was also "the assumption that the knowledge and wisdom needed are already present and accessible and that intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in creative ways" (Fouché and Light 2011: 29).

The Context

South Africa faces a water supply challenge as domestic and industrial demand continues to

rise. Black and King (2009) project that water scarcity could crystallize in the country by 2050. Water scarcity emerges when there is a higher level of demand for water than available supply (FAO 2008). The prospect of water scarcity has raised concerns in various quarters because of its socio-economic implications. For instance, Hedden and Cilliers (2014) hold that a physical water scarcity situation could significantly imperil South Africa's human development. Water supply in South Africa is constrained by a confluence of factors. South Africa has limited freshwater resources due largely to its peculiar hydrologic conditions. Yearly rainfall remains low, uneven and varied across the nation according to the Department of Water Affairs (DWA 2013). The average yearly rainfall in South Africa hovers around 495 mm which is below the 'world average' of 1033 mm. Meagre rainfall and high natural evaporation levels combine to make South Africa one of the driest and water-stressed countries (DWA 2013). A country becomes water stressed if the average water resource per person falls below the threshold of 1700 m³/capita per year (Falkenmark 2013).

South Africa's water supply potential is further aggravated by limited groundwater resource. Groundwater, that is, water flowing within aquifers below the water table, contributes only about 13 percent of South Africa's total water supply (Riemann et al. 2012). In recent years, climate change arising from global warming has orchestrated a spate of drought occurrences in the country adding pressure to the already challenged water supply situation. The National Planning Commission states that climate change "has the potential to worsen existing systemic water shortages over the medium to long term" (RSA 2011: 20). Aside from surging domestic and industrial demand, water availability in South Africa is also imperilled by infrastructural deficits and poor maintenance (Hedden and Cilliers 2014). There are also historical, political and business dynamics that have replaced a skewed water supply and distribution system resulting in surplus supply in some areas and acute shortage in others. Currently, water supply and distribution in South Africa remain under the influence of a "web of powerful actors, interests and motives" (Swatuk 2010: 522). The challenge is how to engage the populace to

use available water resources judiciously. This requires a communication strategy that is inclusive and participatory.

The Nexus of Participatory Dialogue in Communication

It has been argued that there can be no effective communication without dialogue (Freire 1972). Expectedly, the concept of participatory dialogue has continued to attract considerable scholarship in the communication field especially in the area of change communication research (Melkote and Steeves 2015). However, the meaning of the term 'dialogue' continues to acquire disparate interpretations. In some literature, dialogue is taken to mean interpersonal communication encompassing talk and conversation (Habermas 1981; Mody 1991; Buber 1992). Some conceive dialogue as that conversation which enables humans to "connect within and across cultures, forming and sustaining communities through intersubjectivity and cultural creativity" (Banathy and Jenlink 2005: 3). Here, a dialogue is seen as the one conversation that empowers and liberates. Nevertheless, dialogue is not just an ordinary conversation or a mere chat.

According to Gergen et al. (2004), simply engaging in a chat does not translate to authentic dialogue. Wierzbicka (2006: 689) argues, that true dialogue goes beyond exchanging of ideas or knowing what the other group thinks, but of understanding how they think, and being similarly understood". Dialogue, in this form, helps to generate knowledge (Mefalopolous 2008). A genuine dialogue also seeks to bring about mutual understanding. Pruitt and Thomas (2007: 20) hold that the strategic intent of dialogue "is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover".

In essence, a participatory dialogue is not an attempt to convince the other party by bringing personal opinions or judgements but is a conversation intended to help individuals communicate and understand one another (Bohm 1998). This may explain why some scholars frame dialogue as the process of seeking the truth. For instance, Vanhoozen (1997: 46), defines "dialogue as a means to the truth", while Lamb (2004: 154) describes dialogue as being "closely concerned with the question of truth". To some pro-

ponents of interfaith communication, truth is an intrinsic feature of genuine dialogue.

However, while dialogue might have some inherent properties which make it apposite for negotiating the truth, its primary focus remains to help parties understand the way other group thinks (Wierzbicka 2006). Participatory dialogue presents a platform for collective communication which "may be transformative or generative in nature as well as strategic" (Banathy and Jenlink 2005: 6). In other words, dialogue provides the forum for individuals to create new ideas or change their perceptions or values concerning a phenomenon or issue. This is consistent with Freire's (1997: 70) conceptualisation of dialogue as "an act of creation, and the act of naming the world". Participatory dialogue can engender social creativity because of its circular communicative flow (Mefalopolous 2008). This quality of dialogue allows different, often antithetical voices of society to have a shared discourse (Buber 1992). By sharing thought and knowledge dialogically, individuals can generate new ideas capable of changing current views and enabling them to originate fresh ideas and "cultural artefact" (Banathy and Jenlink 2005). These fresh ideas, in turn, become a powerful vehicle for changing the social order (Cooperrider et al. 2003).

Participation constitutes one of the overarching aspects of any change process. Mefalopolous (2008) argues that stakeholders' participation and empowerment grows every time communication is used to enable dialogue, sharing of knowledge, and mutual assessment of the situation. By merely getting involved in the decision process affecting their own lives, alienated and marginalised individuals "tend to gain confidence and feel more empowered". Participation through dialogue confers a sense of ownership and provides a platform for individuals to contribute to shaping the transformation process. As Freire (1997) has argued, the act of naming the world should not be the exclusive preserve of a few.

Everyone has the right to participate in deciding issues that demand a change in their lifestyle - "ensuring that everybody says the word is a task of dialogue, which is needed to empower stakeholders and thus enabling a meaningful change" (Freire 1997: 70). In spite of the dialectic

tics over definition, participatory dialogue remains at the heart of communication for social change (Dagron and Tufte 2006). This is because it provides not only the leeway for people to freely express and share ideas (Mefalopolous 2008) but also, ultimately, enables the generation of new options that are capable of transforming prevailing beliefs (Banathy and Jenlink 2005) or resolving a “commonly identified problem” (Pruitt and Thomas 2007: 20). In this study participatory dialogue represents a meeting ground (Turner 1969) – a forum where individuals with disparate views converge “in a safe space to understand each other’s viewpoint to develop new options to address a commonly identified problem” (Pruitt and Thomas 2007: 20).

METHODOLOGY

This paper investigated how residents of a South African rural community engage with and react to dialogue that seeks to change their perception and attitude towards water conservation. First, the researchers conducted a focus group discussion consisting of 7 community members aged 18–65 years (Male: 3, Female: 4). Then, a total of 48 structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to identify entrenched social, contextual and cultural dynamics that could impinge on the attitude towards water conservation. The focus group and in-depth interviews also helped to obtain a more nuanced response on people’s knowledge and experience as well as establish the ‘normative and control beliefs’ underpinning residents’ perceptions and attitudes towards water conservation (Ajzen 2006).

Seven overarching beliefs and perceptions emerged from the focus group and in-depth interviews: (1) Saving water is important; (2) Water is surplus in South Africa. (3) City dwellers should conserve more water. (4) Water scarcity is untrue. (5) Water shortage result of planlessness and corruption. (6) Not enough information about water issues, (7) Climate change does not cause of water scarcity. Thereafter, 48 participants were then invited to participate in a water dialogue event held at GAGA Community Hall. The participants were chosen randomly from among the 55 people that participated in the focus group and face-to-face interviews. In

the course of conducting the discussions and interviews, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a dialogue event at a later date. Virtually, all the participants indicated their willingness to participate and readily provided their contact details.

Procedure

First, the researchers sought and obtained approval of the councillor and community leaders to hold the event at the Gaga community. The lead facilitator and one of the community leaders mobilized the selected participants for the event. The researchers had previously secured the commitment of Mr Thando Mngxekeza, Area Manager, Water Service Provider/ Water Service Authority, Amathole District Municipality, Fort Beaufort to give a 30-minute talk at the event. The dialogue was patterned after Ackerman and Fishkin’s ‘Deliberation Day’ framework and adopted some elements of The World Cafe’ dialogic method (Brown and Isaacs 2005). This format was adopted ostensibly, to stimulate an open and intimate discussion, engender methodical scrutiny of and cross-pollination of ideas as well as strategic thinking on water conservation.

Before the commencement of the dialogue, we first established the “social sphere” which is considered fundamental in bringing about effective interactive communication. Bohn (in Onyenakeya 2017) holds that for genuine discourse to occur between parties they must first establish the “social sphere” without trying to solve a problem. Wood (2013) refers to this stage as the initial contact, during which parties in an interactive communication decide whether the relationship is worth pursuing. It is only after parties to dialogue have established contact and defined the parameters of their relationship that, they can now move to the next stage – participation or involvement. It is at this stage that groups decide to commit themselves to discover each other better by disclosing more of their feelings and ideas and thereafter trust or intimacy is established (Wood 2013).

The water authority representative was introduced to participants and everyone was informed that the programme was neither a political gathering nor social event, but a forum where

they were expected to speak freely about their feelings concerning water scarcity and water conservation and suggests ways that will ensure that everyone is involved in conserving water. Respect and goodwill are also key ingredients for true dialogue. Wierzbicka (2006) contends that an attitude of respect and goodwill is critical for genuine dialogue to ensue. Consequently, participants were advised to refrain from saying certain things or even criticising one's partners in order not to kill the dialogue (Wierzbicka 2006).

Dialogic communication according to Moe-meka (1994) is one that aims to educate to enable participants to arrive at an informed decision and take appropriate action. As a result, the dialogue was structured to ensure unencumbered discourse or the free exchange of ideas in which participants were at liberty to ask any questions about water resources. There was no script, the water authority officers and participants were not debriefed before the event as to what to say or how to behave. There was no predetermined outcome. The event aimed to engender a shared, no-holds-barred dialogue, without any pre-set outcome.

Mr. Mngxekeza kick-started the event with a talk¹ and the as earlier indicated, was unscripted and dwelt on the process of sourcing, purifying and distributing water. Mr Mngxekeza later fielded questions from participants. The councillor representing Gaga community, Mrs M. Guzi, also joined in the question and answer session. The poor maintenance culture and slow service response were some of the issues that resonated with participants. The dialogue was interspersed with a folk theatre written and performed by the "Dimbaza Dramatists". The seven-member cast was drawn from among Dimbaza youths. The drama touched on other issues facing water supply in the country such as misuse of water, poor rainfall and global warming.

At the end of the event, 28 participants selected randomly were interviewed by the researcher and three assistants. The questions focused on the seven overarching themes that emerged from the earlier focus group discussion and interviews. The interview aimed to see if the dialogue and drama influenced any shift in the attitudes and beliefs of the people concerning the above themes, and possibly their future

water conservation intentions. The data was analysed using the themes established earlier.

RESULTS

Saving Water is Important

Virtually all the participants felt it was a good thing to respect and save water resources. Some of the participants viewed water as a valuable resource that must be used wisely to ensure its continued availability. This is consistent with the views of the majority of the participants in the initial focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. Majority of the participants stated that the interaction with the water authority representative and views from other participants provided further clarity and accentuated the urgency and importance of conserving water.

Long before the government started the campaign to save water, I have always known that it was good to use water wisely but after listening to the man from the municipality I can now understand why everyone needs to save water (Participant 8M).

I have always believed saving water is very important and as the man from the Water Authority has pointed out water is becoming scarce and we have to do our best to save water because without water life will be difficult (Participant 1F).

From the talk by the municipality officer and the drama, it is very clear we need to conserve water because water is precious and essential for the survival of human beings (Participant 24M).

While many of the participants agreed the dialogue event reinforced their views about conserving water the findings suggest that participants' interest in saving water is not necessarily as a result of water conservation campaign but more to do with their ecological worldview. One of those interviewed stated that the community generally believes that "nothing created by God should be wasted or abused." This category of participants stated that they save water out of habit and the belief that saving water was a way of preserving "God's gift to man". Dialogue encourages the people to participate by providing them with the platform to construct their own "ecological good behaviour" instead of being

forced to abide by the so-called universal environmental dicta passed on by the mass media.

Water is Surplus in South Africa

In the focus group and interview conducted before the dialogue event, the majority of focus group participants and more than three-quarter of interviewees held the view that there were abundant water resources in South Africa. These participants believe, albeit, erroneously, that the presence of rivers and ocean translates to the abundance or unlimited supply of drinkable water. However, after the dialogue participants acknowledged that the presence of rivers and ocean does not necessarily translate to an abundant water supply.

I use to think that the water in our dam comes from the ocean and when they say the dam is drying and the ocean is overflowing I get confused but from what I have heard from Mr Mngxekeza now I know better (Participant 16F).

For me, I think the drama was very explanatory it was in our language so we can easily identify those things they are saying about drought and the low rainfall. Up until now, I didn't know rainfall affects water supply. So yes, the rain has not been falling much... so yes, I agree there is a problem (Participant 15f).

Nevertheless, a small number of those interviewed insists water is not scarce. Those who took this position were reluctant to agree that the country's surface and underground water could be exhausted. Participants' also expressed divergent opinions on the issue of drinkable water being an unlimited resource. While some agreed that water was exhaustible others differed. Those who think there was enough drinkable water attribute scarcity to poor planning and lack of maintenance of water facilities.

I think we have enough water in South Africa is just that the politicians are not doing their job. If they can maintain the water facilities and plan properly they should be able to cope with the increase in demand (Participant 3m).

No, I don't think so... for instance, my ancestors sourced water from the Klipplaat River. It is still there and there are many such rivers across South Africa (Participant 12f)

Some of the participants believed that water was a free resource and therefore, individuals should have the right to use all the water they want as long as they are not using it for business. Some participants argued that the quantity of water used by individuals at home was minimal to lead to depletion or scarcity. When presented with the fact that not only humans need water that other entities, for instance, farmers and livestock, the public electricity provider, ESKOM, need water to water their crops and animals and generate electricity. Many participants maintained that the water they use was so negligible that it pales into insignificance when compared with what city dwellers and farmers use and therefore, their water consumption constitute only but a small portion of the overall domestic water use in the country.

"We only use a minimal amount of water in our households so I don't think that allowing people access to the small amount of water they need will affect the farmers ...we only use a small amount of water" (Participant 6m).

"Our people are entitled to use the water they want because they don't even use that much water and I don't think the little water our people use will affect the farmers and livestock. So it is left for the government to ensure that people get water to use at home and farmers get water for their farms and animals" (Participant 3f).

This line of thought suggests that the participants felt asking them to modify their actions may be a subtle way to reduce their access to water and free up more water for the privileged few. The responses also indicated a general lack of knowledge about the limited water resources in the country. This finding also highlights the need for extended dialogue and education on water issues. A one day dialogue may not be sufficient to provide the necessary information or understanding. There still exist some layer of ignorance and differences over the effect of increasing demand (consumption) of water amidst limited supply. As noted by Banathy and Jenlink (2005) dialogue does not bring instantaneous resolution of differences between groups but it generates communication that produces new evidence that could help alter differences in opinions or values among groups.

City Dwellers Should Conserve Water More

A greater proportion of the participants acknowledged that saving water should be everyone's priority. This represents a significant shift from the outcome of the focus group and in-depth interviews in which the majority of the participants stated that water conservation should be the priority of city dwellers.

I think everybody should save water no matter how little but, I believe people who live in the city should save water more (Participant 10F).

Yes, I think water conservation should concern both city and rural dwellers the rich and the poor all of us must use water responsibly (Participant 9f).

Only a smaller number of those interviewed after the dialogue event insisted that city-dwellers who use more water should also conserve more. Some of those interviewed argued that many city people use water for entertainment and uneconomic activities. Although this category of participants acknowledged that both individuals and government had a role to play in conserving the country's water resources, they felt water conservation should be the major concern of city dwellers because they have more appliances and facilities that consume more water.

I think the people in the city should be more responsible for water conservation because that is where you find swimming pools and gardens and all kind of stuff, where people use water to wash their compound and terrace while people here are struggling to get water ... so I support they should save more water (Participant 2F).

The people in the city should be more concerned with saving water because they use more water and they have a lot of fancy stuff that uses water like swimming pools and big gardens. The rural folks do not have water-consuming appliances such as washing machines and baths... so, yeah, the city people should conserve more water (Participant 5M).

A considerable number of participants were of the view that the campaign for water conservation should be emphasised more in the cities especially in the choice residential areas where people use water irresponsibly. Participants who held these views also believe the government should charge this category of people more and

use the money to extend pipe-borne water to the unserved in the rural areas

"These are people government should make to pay more so they can use revenue from such lavish lifestyle" ... they should tax them more for their luxuries and use the money to conduct water to those who are not served with pipe-borne water" (Participant 23m).

While it may be true that city dwellers use more water, they also pay more for water. The high water consumption in the cities is due largely to rising population and economic activities. The continuous rural-urban migration will ensure higher water demand in the cities. This aspect did not come out clearly during the dialogue. As can be evinced from the findings, the dialogue was not able to resolve completely participants' views about who should conserve water more.

Water Scarcity is a Cover

Majority of the participants interviewed agreed water scarcity was real and not a political gimmick. These participants agreed the country has witnessed increasing growth in population and industrialisation, which could put pressure on current and future water demand. From the responses of the participants, it appears that the dialogue was able to disabuse the minds of participants from the misconception that the water scarcity campaign was 'scaremongering' or "propaganda" from the government.

I think I agree with the water people that we may experience water scarcity. I have seen that the water level in some dams have gone down (Participant 17M).

Yes, I didn't believe this water scarcity story initially. I thought we have enough water in South Africa is just that they (government) don't care much about the poor" but listening to Mr Mngxekeza, I think we may have a challenge of meeting our future demand. You know our population is increasing every day so we have more people who need water. So yea, there could be scarcity (Participant 1F).

Even so, a negligible number of the participants appeared unconvinced about the possibility of water scarcity in South Africa insisting available water resources were enough to serve the country. They attribute the current scarcity

to inefficient distribution of water resources. Those who hold this view perceive the water scarcity mantra as just spin from big business or an alibi by municipality authorities to cover their inability to conduct water to the unserved. They insisted that the water scarcity talk was purely scare-mongering by politicians and, an excuse to cover their failures. There were also a few participants who thought water scarcity especially in the rural areas, was as a result of long years of neglect of the rural communities and reliance on the inequitable distribution system instituted during the apartheid era.

I think the scarcity is as a result of the distribution system and our government attitude to the poor. To me, all this talk about water scarcity is just what politicians are using to cover their inability to give us the poor people regular water supply. We have enough water in South Africa (Participant 2m).

"I am not sure that it is because of more people that we are having this water scarcity. I think the problem is that the councils are not doing what they are supposed to do...We have enough water to go round but the government is concentrating on everything in the cities. Some people have more than they want while others can get what they want so that's the problem" (FG 1f).

"Yes, in reality, our population is growing so there would be more people to provide for. However, am not convinced we have a scarcity of water in South Africa because we are blessed with rivers and oceans even underground they can get water" (IP 13f).

"Our politicians cannot be trusted ion anything. They say a lot of things which they don't do so maybe the water scarcity is just to cover the fact that they are not able to provide water for the people" (FG D3f).

Although these participants admitted that some parts of South Africa were already experiencing water shortage they maintained that 'water scarcity' with regards to the availability of surface and groundwater, was a ruse arguing that the scarceness was as a result of uneven distribution. This finding indicates a huge gap in information with regards to the complex process of generating and distributing water. The responses appear to be underpinned by the belief that water is in surplus supply in South Africa. It appears participants continue to misconstrue the presence of oceans and rivers as evi-

dence of abundant supply of water. The findings suggest that participants see corruption, inefficiency and perhaps, historical neglect as the major reasons for water scarcity. But as evident from literature and Mngxekeza's presentation, the greater challenge facing the water sector is not only corruption, which of course, is a major concern in public utilities, but declining supply in the face of increasing domestic and industrial water demand. There is a sense that participants do not fully appreciate that South Africa has limited water resources.

Not Enough Information about Water Conservation

The findings show that the majority of the participants do not have enough information about the country's water situation. Some participants thought that current water conservation campaigns were insufficient to tackle the knowledge gaps especially in the area of efficiency behaviours. Most of those interviewed felt there was a need for government to engage the people at the grassroots on what actions they can carry out to conserve water, how they can go about carrying out those actions and why the actions are necessary. A few of the participants argued that many in the rural areas don't get to hear about water conservation messages saying the government need to make information on water conservation and water issues more accessible to the people.

The messages on water conservation only come up occasionally on the television. Government need to talk about it more. In Gauteng, you hear more about saving water but the Amathole municipality is not doing much about educating people on water conservation (Participant 28m).

No, they are not doing enough' There isn't enough information about this water conservation thing. So the municipalities should find a way of informing and educating the people at the grassroots about why and how they need to save water" (Participant 4f).

Yes, there is not enough information about water issues in the country as people have come to know about electricity and ESKOM problems. You are telling people to conserve water, why? What do the people stand to benefit from

doing that? I think that's where the government should look into (Participant 3f).

These findings correspond with the focus group and interviews result, where a number of the participants expressed frustration with the inadequacy of existing water conservation campaigns. Many participants felt the government was not emphasising the issue of water conservation properly. The finding is also consistent with the result of Onyenakeya et al. (2017) which indicated that rural dwellers were poorly informed about the importance of and strategies for water conservation. Unlike the surfeit of information on how to save electricity especially during the period of load shedding, water conservation messages are few, irregular and often concentrated in the urban cities. Often, the messages simply ask the audience members to save water without telling them why. For many rural dwellers who hardly receive regular water supply, such appeal does not resonate.

Majority of the participants stated that attending the water dialogue event has significantly improved their knowledge about the country's water situation and attitude to water conservation. Mr Mngxekeza's talk appeared to have struck a chord among participants.

This (the dialogue event) is a great idea. I learnt a lot from Mngxekeza's presentation. We don't know these things especially the process of generating drinking water. But the way he explained them in our language - we can now understand the challenges they face in providing water for us. Going forward, there is going to be a change of attitude from me and my household with regards to saving water (Participant 18F).

This is the first time in my adult life, am 52 now, that any water official will be coming to our community to talk about water. We always go to them. So now I know the things to do to save water (Participant 14m).

During his presentation, Mngxekeza' had explained that the procedure for procuring drinking water was not only cumbersome but also costly, and emphasised the need for residents to use water wisely and report water leakages and plumbing issues to the department promptly. Mr Mngxekeza stated that water scarcity was real as many dams across the country were operating below capacity because of low rainfall.

He also urged township residents to pay for water saying most people who use tap water in townships do not pay for water. This situation he said makes it difficult for the water body to get piped borne water to the underserved. "When people don't pay for water it affects our income and makes it hard to carry out maintenance and other services," he said. On the issue of corruption, Mr Mngxekeza said residents should report any water officials soliciting for inducement or engaging in corrupt practices to the appropriate authorities. While acknowledging that rural residents use less water than urban dwellers, he maintained that everyone must save water. He added that the municipality was trying its best to educate the people about water issues but these efforts are being constrained by inadequate funding.

Climate Change Does Not Cause Water Scarcity

Majority of the participants acknowledged that there has been a drastic change in the weather situation in recent years which could hurt water availability in the country. This is in contrast to the findings of the focus group and in-depth interviews which saw participants polarised almost into two equal sides with regards to the effect of climate change on water availability. Interestingly, a few of those who agreed that climate change affects water supply maintained that the change in climatic conditions has no direct bearing on the country's water supply situation. This category of participants also believes that farmers would be more affected by low or no rainfall arising from climate change. This suggests that many participants do not know that rainfall contributes to the stock of water in the country and that climate change could have a direct effect on them.

Yea, of course, the weather has changed, you can see that the heat is becoming unbearable and the rain has not been falling that much, so yeah, I think it could affect water availability somehow (Participant 2m).

The weather is changing every year but I don't see how it is connected with water ... Is the hot weather or cold weather drying up the water or stopping the municipality from pumping water? ...I don't understand (Participant 3f).

DISCUSSION

It has been argued that a man in an active dialogical context is capacitated to challenge causality. The findings of this study suggest that the dialogue event helped to deepen the understanding of participants concerning water issues. Majority of the participants stated that they now have improved knowledge about the water situation in the country and this has motivated them to endeavour to save water. This new disposition towards water conservation is consistent with Freire's (2006: 40) argument that:

The more accurately man grasps true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be...Once a man perceives a dialogue, understands it and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts... The nature of the action corresponds to the nature of his understanding.

The dialogue event has demonstrated potential in changing participants' perceptions. For instance, there was a positive shift downward in the proportion of those who believed water was abundant in South Africa. Also through the common discourse, many more participants become convinced that it was the responsibility of everyone to conserve water no matter the quantity of water you use. This speaks to the transformative or generative potential of dialogue. Banathy and Jenlink (2005) posit that communication emerging from a genuine dialogue produces new information that is capable of altering perceptions or values concerning a phenomenon or issue. The water dialogue interface provided extensive opportunities for participants to get good information exchange points of view and come to a considered opinion.

The introduction of theatre enabled participants to see the water scarcity problem in "fresh and critical ways" (Umenyilorah 2014) and imagine "why and how changes might be necessary and might come about" (Cornwall 1997 in Heras and Tàbars 2016: 951). Many of the participants attested that the drama which was presented in the local language not only facilitated their understanding of water issues but also succeeded in persuading them to commit to saving water. Theatre, according to Inyang (2016), can be a sustainable tool for community sensitisation and mobilisation. Dramatising the water conserva-

tion issues was a veritable way of making the issue resonates with rural dwellers (Nda and Ekong 2012). Theatre increases collective imagination and creativity (Heras and Tàbars 2016) as it not only engages the community mentally and artistically but also emotionally (Bentley as cited in Inyang 2016).

For many participants, who struggled to understand the convoluted meaning of water conservation with sometimes, mixed up and shifting terms such as "water savings" and "water use", the theatre performance in the language they understand helped to break these seemingly "invisible and often abstract concepts" (Anderson 2013) to something real and present (Corner 2013). Because the drama was performed by locals, in the local language using local setting and symbols, it was able to attract attention and connect passionately with the audience. Through the use of "comical farce, song, melodrama and the symbolic use of clown sequences" (Haseman et al. 2014), the drama could easily elicit "raucous audience reaction" (Murphy 2010 in Inyang 2016). This finding is consistent with previous research which found folk theatre an effective platform for not only creating awareness and educating the rural population about water issues but also helping to break down the misconceptions about water conservation (Onyenakeya and Salawu 2018). As a form of indigenous media, folk theatre with its interpersonal attributes offer a communication approach that assists people in the grassroots in negotiating the issues around water conservation (Onyenakeya and Salawu 2019).

However, as the findings indicate, a small number of participants still hold on to the view that water is not scarce in South Africa suggesting that the dialogue was not able to resolve all the issues. This is not surprising. Participants in dialogue do not necessarily hope to resolve all the differences in opinions and arrive at a consensus "rather, it is hoped that the two groups will discover some common ground – possibly, through the clarification of their respective positions. As has been argued, dialogue does not immediately remove differences between groups, instead, "genuine dialogue enables the evolution from individual consciousness to a level of conscious awareness of differences, to a level of dialogic consciousness" (Banathy and Jenlink 2005: 11).

In other words, a dialogue opens the door for a possible “change in their thinking” (Wierzbicka 2006: 689). As Hart (2013) has argued, promoting water conservation as sustainable development initiative using a one-dimensional model or universal perspective, is not likely to yield the desired results given that water conservation is multifaceted and culture-specific. Dialogue encourages the people to participate by providing them with the platform to construct their own “ecological good behaviour” instead of being forced to abide by the so-called universal environmental dicta passed on by the mass media” (Onyenankeya and Salawu 2018: 358). Servaes (1999: 33) advocates the abandonment of the persuasive bias for a different mode where individuals would not be compelled to take on new behaviours adjudged “beneficial” by the promoting agencies and governments, but “instead, people needed to be encouraged to participate rather than adopt new practices based on information”. As the findings indicate, dialogue event represents a potent platform to build trust, share knowledge, experiences and perceptions which will engender mutual understanding necessary to motivate individuals to adopt the new behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper suggest that engaging residents through dialogue are effective not only in raising awareness but also stimulating interest in water-saving activities. The finding revealed that through participatory dialogue, participants were able to vent their frustrations and seek clarifications. While the interactions provided a good platform for water managers to address residents’ fears, fill knowledge gaps and dispel long-held beliefs about water, the theatre provided visual demonstrations of the need for water conservation in the language, motif and symbols that reflect their lived experiences and perspectives.

Dialogue enabled participants to see the bigger picture, that is, to approach the water conservation issues from the point of view that will serve the interest of the majority of the public at large, instead of seeking to gratify self-interests. This is possible because in the process of dialogue new facts emerged, individual experiences were expanded and ultimately, people were

able to change their opinion or let go widely held beliefs. For a programme such as water conservation to be sustainable, people’s participation is paramount and dialogue as a type of public sphere, provides “both a realm of mutually socializing individuals able to create integrative spaces of solidarity and a realm of mutually criticizing individuals able to construct discursive spaces of reflexivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To galvanise the rural populace for and deepen their understanding concerning water conservation, the local municipalities and water authorities would have to organise more water dialogue events in the rural areas. As has been demonstrated by this study, the majority of rural dwellers do not have adequate information about the water situation and many do not know that the little effort they make by conserving water on a daily basis goes a long way in improving the overall water supply in the country. The water dialogue must be onsite – where the people reside and must be structured to enable the locals to actively participate in deciding the collective action or change to be made.

NOTE

- 1 The video of Area Manager, Water Service Provider/Water Service Authority’s presentation is available at <https://youtu.be/k72cn8yBzPA>

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