

Water Governance in Rural Communities: Challenges and Recommendations for Sustainable Livelihoods

Mbele, S. and Mubangizi, BC¹

SUMMARY

In this policy brief, we explore the challenges faced by rural communities in water governance within the context of the uMzimvubu River catchment of South Africa. Water accessibility in rural communities is dependent on both a robust institutional and legal framework in the water sector and a sound ecological infrastructure. Water resources are, however, becoming less plentiful and of lower quality because of watershed degradation, conflicts, and lack of community involvement. To address the community's reliance on water resources and its impact on the elimination of poverty, the South African government adopted and evaluated a number of policies, including the water policy. The needs of the expanding population have proven difficult for these policies and initiatives to meet, and many have fallen short of their intended goals.

Although local people are aware of catchment management and degradation, they perceive a lesser level of local government involvement in matters pertaining water administration. Additionally, they also believe that catchment management does not consider their local administrative expertise. Additionally, despite collaboration across various administrative levels and government agencies as well as intergovernmental processes guided by the Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) framework, difficulties are still encountered because various departments have various missions and mandates. Therefore, there is still a need for coordinated efforts to address the problems that have been highlighted and for effective water governance in rural areas to continue to be a concern. The paper concludes that intergovernmental collaboration, capacity building, and community-based initiatives are required to promote sustainable water governance and guarantee the availability of water resources in rural communities. This policy brief suggests community-based initiatives, participatory governance, and enough resources, among other measures, to enhance water governance in rural communities.

What is the Issue?

Natural resources are crucial for rural livelihoods, national development, and economic prosperity in many countries, including South Africa. However, it is difficult to successfully manage these resources in a way that benefits the masses, especially those in rural communities. The marginalisation of vulnerable communities is frequently a result of power dynamics, limited or restrictive governance systems, and competition over land resources, which leads to inadequate and occasionally dangerous access to resources like water. Water scarcity has a detrimental effect on human life and is a major problem for sustainable livelihoods. Depending on how they are managed, catchment regions are essential for both supplying and sustaining continuous water availability. To address how watershed regions naturally function, catchment management aims to control the hydrological cycle. Water governance in the Alfred Nzo District, which are a part of the uMzimvubu-Tsitsikama Water Management Areas (WMAs), pose a threat to water availability and use. Water governance requires significant financial investments, involves public,

¹ Mubangizi, BC. South Africa Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods. University of KwaZulu-Natal. Mbele, S. Doctoral candidate under the Chair.

commercial, and non-profit actors, and is crucial for addressing development needs. To strengthen water governance strategies in uMzimvubu, this policy brief explores water governance strategies in the upper uMzimvubu catchment including community participation and degradation.

This policy brief is based on a study conducted in the uMzimvubu watershed river basin, which is on the northern edge of South African province of the Eastern Cape. The river originates from the rugged Maluti-Drakensberg watershed of Lesotho and flows over 200 kilometres via deep gorges and coastal plains to Port St. Johns estuary in the Indian Ocean. Four tributaries that make up the catchment, which accounts for 15% of the county's total river flow, 40% of which comes from the uMzimvubu system; have the highest mean annual rainfall in the county. However, the river is regarded as the biggest yet least developed in the country. This paper focuses on the upper parts of uMzimvubu catchment, specifically on the Tertiary Catchment T31 in the Eastern Cape. The study area is located in a traditional tribal settlement under KwaSibi Administrative Area (A/A), which forms part of the former Transkei homelands. The majority of the population lives in rural, scattered settlements where residents rely on spring water and are dependent on a healthy river catchment for their daily needs. However, the invasion of alien plants, overgrazing, frequent burning, and inadequate landscape management, particularly poor water

governance, have led to the degradation of water resources in the uMzimvubu catchment, which is a significant issue. In order to better understand community-based watershed management for increased water availability and water conservation in the future, the research intended to evaluate the participatory processes on water governance for catchment management. The main objective of this study was to manage catchments in a participatory manner with local residents and the government to improve the quality of water resources and decrease water shortages in rural communities.

Research Methodology

The case study research design and qualitative research methodology were all used in the study,



Figure 1: A gully formed by erosion in the Upper uMzimvubu river catchment.

which was guided by the constructivist and interpretive paradigm. Focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, semi-structured and loosely structured questionnaires, and observations were used to gather data.

private, and civic organizations, organises regular quarterly meetings to which all representatives are invited and where updates on existing and ongoing projects are presented. The UCP also sends out email notifications to stakeholders about upcoming tasks, events, and partner-led get-togethers. The public is not fully involved and people's voices are not sufficiently heard in proposed and carried out initiatives of the local administration, notwithstanding these efforts. As a result, residents and NGOs continue to feel

What have we learned?

Stakeholder involvement

The upper uMzimvubu catchment uses a variety of stakeholder engagement and discussion techniques are employed in to manage its water resources, including traditional approaches such as community meetings, iZimbizo, and municipal outreach programs, as well as contemporary media outlets like radio stations, newspapers, and social media. The uMzimvubu Catchment Programme (UCP), a local consortium of public,

disregarded and excluded from the management of the upper uMzimvubu catchment's water resource management resources.

Conflicts with local administration

Conflicts within the area mostly manifest in the form of petitions and demonstrations against the local government. The rural communities and the local water administration, acting as the local government, frequently find themselves at odds. The traditional authority and the democratically elected local council members occasionally have subtle misunderstandings, although these can usually be resolved. Conflicts develop because of disagreements on meeting locations, a lack of community input, and unfulfilled expectations from the local government. These conflicts are further intensified by a scarcity of water and challenging terrain, leading individuals to feel neglected by the local and provincial government. The upper uMzimvubu catchment features uneven, stunning landscapes, and steep, undulating slopes, which pose challenges for the seamless establishment of bulk water infrastructure. This is exacerbated by the stretched human and financial resources available to rural local municipalities.

Catchment degradation

Deforestation, urbanisation, agricultural intensification, quarrying and sand mining, as well as other human activities can all cause the soil, water, and vegetation in a certain area or catchment to deteriorate. This degradation can have severe negative consequences for water supplies, soil erosion, and agricultural production,

and subsequently for the social and economic well-being of communities that rely on these natural resources for their livelihoods. The uMzimvubu catchment has experienced a significant decline in its water resources due to various forms of watershed degradation and invasive alien vegetation. The region has witnessed a steady decrease in rainfall over time, resulting in frequent periods of severe drought, and the springs and streams that provide groundwater have significantly reduced in quantity. The deterioration of grazing grounds within the watershed area is caused by a combination of natural variables, institutional flaws, including inefficient water resource management, and societal issues such as increased stock theft. The municipal water division is blamed for neglecting the community's indigenous knowledge of managing communal land, as well as for failing to help stop the spread of fire in the catchment area. The maintenance of boreholes and the disregard for documented complaints have also drawn criticism.

What are the practical and policy options?

- (i) **Development of water supplies:** Policymakers should prioritise the development of water supplies, especially in the uMzimvubu catchment. A systems-based approach to water governance should be adopted, paying attention to all aspects of the water cycle, including sustainable urban drainage, wastewater treatment and reuse, and varied sources to account for seasonal and inter-annual variations in precipitation.
- (ii) **Participatory governance:** This is essential to achieve more suitable and equitable service delivery, and participatory governance. The voice of the stakeholders should be projected, regarded, and prioritised. The characteristics of sustainable and inclusive governance include openness, accountability, and efficiency from both state and non-state actors ought to be given priority.
- (iii) **Community-driven development:** Policymakers should consider community-driven development as a simple, universally supported, and results-driven alternative to current approaches to transforming meeting room concepts into substantive development in rural communities. Therefore, the government and its development organizations need to implement governance structures and policies that ensure the local populace is informed, included, and motivated to contribute to the development of issues that either directly or indirectly affect them.
- (iv) **Incorporating traditional leaders and indigenous knowledge:** The governance structure of the uMzimvubu catchment is diverse, and it is crucial to recognise the guardianship of the land by traditional leaders and communities. Indigenous meteorological knowledge ought to be taken into account when formulating water regulations. The management of water resources should be the sole emphasis of communal structures run by community members.

- (v) **Establishing Catchment Management Associations (CMAs):** The South African government should establish CMAs in each of the nine current WMAs, as Catchment Management Forums (CMFs) cannot function independently. CMAs should be given the legal responsibility to locate the participants and execute their plans.
- (vi) **Recognise and support local initiatives to manage the catchment:** The uMzimvubu Catchment Programme (UCP) should be recognised and supported as a credible and representative body to facilitate effective water resource management and decentralised catchment management.
- (vii) **Funding schemes:** Policymakers should establish funding schemes to support other legislative and institutional frameworks and empower effective evaluation and monitoring mechanisms. The development of a financial model is necessary to improve decision-making and action plans, as it is challenging to achieve complete public engagement without adequate financial backing.

In conclusion, these policy options can integrate water governance into government plans and programs, ensure community-driven development, incorporate traditional leaders and indigenous knowledge, and establish CMAs and funding schemes. By implementing these policies, the negative impacts of catchment degradation on water supplies, soil erosion, and rural livelihoods can be mitigated, and the social and economic well-being of communities that depend on these natural resources can be improved.

Cite this policy brief

Mbele, and Mubangizi, 2023. *Water Governance in Rural Communities: Challenges and Recommendations for Sustainable Livelihoods*. Policy Brief No.3. Durban: Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Acknowledgement

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby recognised. Opinions expressed and conclusions drawn are those of the authors and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

