



ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND RURAL WOMEN: A CITIZENS' VOICE MODEL FOR EMERGENT PRODUCTIVE WATER USERS

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The environment in which local government operates has become increasingly difficult. Limited resources, capacity constraints, complex socio-economic challenges and citizens' unmet expectations have led to changes in how people relate to the state. These changes have, in part, been reinforced by shifts in the way citizens understand and exercise citizenship, a concept that has many interpretations. This paper examines a project implemented by The Mvula Trust in Strydkraal and Apel, two rural villages located in the province of Limpopo. Its main focus is to assess the practical implications of active citizenship by looking at how rural women, as emergent productive water users, exercise active citizenship to engage with government in order to effect changes in their socio-economic conditions.



PHOTO: STRING

THE CITIZENS' voice model, which forms the crux of the project, is proposed as a participatory model that can be used to foster active citizenship by facilitating engagement between citizens and government (particularly local government) – citizens and government meet regularly to discuss service delivery issues and agree on solutions to any challenges. Moreover, the model includes civic education of

citizens so that they can understand their rights and the government service delivery systems and processes. As localised development agents, community-based organisations (CBOs) are best placed to assist in reaching local women engaged in the productive use of water. The paper aims to show that the citizens' voice model, when revised for rural environments like Strydkraal and Apel, has the potential to build

agency and active citizenship among women in these communities, to improve their access and rights to water and their livelihoods.

CONCEPTUALISING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Active citizenship is a contested concept, which is interpreted differently by the state, communities and civil society, involving the relationship and interaction between the state and citizens. At the core of active citizenship is the change in the way citizens approach citizenship, which in turn alters their relationship with the state (Nelson and Kerr 2006). The impetus for these changes are varied but can be classified into two arguments: first, globalisation has inspired structural limitations on the state's capabilities and, second, the state's post-1994 socio-economic transformation agenda for citizens has been implemented on a rights basis. With regards to the former, Sengupta (2001: 3137) indicates that many of the key challenges facing states are not limited to a state's territory. Technological advancements have led to increased capital flows that negatively affect a state's ability to raise resources through taxes, which has implications for its service delivery mandate (Schmitt et al. 2004: 133). In post-1994 South Africa, citizens have started actively fighting for public goods and services, to which they have rights that are recognised by the state (Miraftab and Wills 2005: 201). These drivers of the changing understanding of citizenship – increased limitations on the ability of the state to deliver on its responsibilities and citizens' rights-driven demands on the state – means that citizenship is seen not only as a status but also as a practice that emphasises governance instead of government in public affairs. The shift from government to governance concerns the sharing of responsibilities between the state and citizens (Jochum et al. 2005). The diverse understandings of what this means in practice has resulted in different approaches to implementing active citizenship.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

One approach is where the state supports active citizenship among its citizens (Nelson and Kerr 2006). In democratic states, active citizenship consolidates democracy by giving citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions as users of public goods and services (Jochum et al. 2005). This is done by encouraging citizens to take part in decision-making participatory processes and structures. In the case of South Africa, public participation structures may include parliamentary public hearings, izimbizo, integrated development planning (IDP) forums, ward committees, catchment management forums (CMF) and water users' associations (WUAs). These mechanisms emphasise active citizenship as a way of deepening participatory democracy.

However, some consider government-led participatory structures to be 'invited' spaces that are controlled by government (Skenjana and Kimemia 2011). Miraftab and Wills (2005: 202) criticise 'invited' spaces as a statist attempt to define active citizenship instead of citizens exercising their citizenship as they deem necessary to better their lives. This construct of citizenship holds that citizens should determine what is important to them and how they want to engage the state on their priorities, rather than legitimising – through their participation – a narrow and state-driven participatory democracy. Such a perspective emphasises the need for citizens to interact with each other not only on public issues but also to promote their collective interests through active citizenship (Jochum et al. 2005). The desire to mobilise outside the consultative structures of local government is viewed by some as a vote of no confidence in these structures by citizens (Fakir and Moloi 2011: 112).

An alternative approach to citizenship views citizen participation as not being limited to consultative government structures, which are aimed at ensuring

participatory democracy. Rather, citizens take part both in participatory structures and in implementing service delivery, as partners of government. They are therefore not passive receivers of public goods and services (Jochum et al. 2005). It is important to note that, in practice, different aspects of these diverse perspectives of active citizenship can manifest.

RESEARCH ON WATER AND RURAL WOMEN IN STRYDKRAAL AND APEL

The Mvula Trust¹ implemented a Water Research Commission (WRC) study² in Strydkraal and Apel in the Fetakgomo Local Municipality of Sekhukhune District Municipality. The study's focus was to determine whether rural women are supported in policy and practice to play the role of strategic users and managers of water, as envisaged in the *Water for Growth and Development Framework* (DWAF 2009):

Women should be thought of as strategic users of water. They manage the use of water for preparing food, for drinking, bathing and washing, for irrigating home gardens and watering livestock. Women know the location, reliability and quality of local water resources. They collect water, store it and control its use and sanitation. They recycle water, using grey water for washing and irrigation. Their participation in all development programmes should be given priority. Policies and programmatic interventions such as Water Allocation Reform need to factor this in to achieve the desired end results.

The WRC study reflects on the ability of women living in the two villages to improve their socio-economic conditions. In the context of this research, the significance of active citizenship relates to women's efforts as citizens to engage among themselves

and with the state regarding their right to water and sustainable livelihoods. The women in Strydkraal and Apel exercise their active citizenship by cooperating among themselves, supporting women's organisations, engaging in local socio-political structures and with local officials in decision-making processes pertaining to water supply and use, and empowering themselves in order to enhance their participation. Thus, the women are active citizens from both a household and a collective cooperation perspective.

STRYDKRAAL AND APEL

The village of Strydkraal is located within the Fetakgomo Local Municipality, which is part of the Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality. It is made up of Strydkraal A and Strydkraal B – Strydkraal B is adjacent to Apel (Greater Sekhukhune District 2010). Within Strydkraal, the Department of Agriculture (DoA) developed an irrigation canal system that dates from before 1994 and supplies 18 DoA farming projects. The water is untreated, as it is meant for productive use, but community members also collect water from the canal to use for domestic (including drinking) uses.

Compared to Strydkraal, Apel is more developed, with resources that include a shopping centre and the Fetakgomo Local Municipal offices, which enhances the village's citizens' access to local government. Water meters have been installed in Apel households but not in Strydkraal, although their installation is planned in the near future. Strydkraal and Apel both struggle with water cut-offs, with up to 43% of households not able to access water at the basic level (Fetakgomo Local Municipality 2010).

A number of community-based women's organisations, including the Rural Women's Association, Mante Vegetable Project, and Ngwanamante, operate in Strydkraal and Apel (Fetakgomo Local Municipality 2010). Women in these villages mobilise themselves through organisations to facilitate cooperation in their

predominantly agricultural livelihood activities (Greater Sekhukhune District 2010). The community agricultural activity is lower in Apel than in Strydkraal because Apel does not have a water canal.

The women's activities benefit the two villages through building food security, providing livelihoods opportunities for community members, reducing poverty and generating income. Women have been empowered and have, for instance, been able to make decisions about how household resources should be invested to boost livelihood activities (Molose et al. 2011b).

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AMONG THE WOMEN OF STRYDKRAAL AND APEL

The two main drivers behind active citizenship among women in Strydkraal and Apel are: the absence of men as primary income-generators, and limited or interrupted access to water. The unemployment rate in the Fetakgomo Local Municipality is 61% and, as a result, economically active men leave the villages to become migrant labourers (Loate et al. 2012). Women who participated in the study indicated that the remittances received from their husbands are often insufficient to sustain their household needs. Therefore, they are compelled to be active in creating sustainable livelihoods to supplement the remittances and meet their household needs (Molose et al. 2011b).

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The second driver is access to water for domestic (drinking, bathing, cooking) and productive use, especially for agriculture – food gardening, small-scale crop farming and livestock watering (Molose et al. 2011b). The women of Strydkraal and Apel also report using water for non-agricultural, social entrepreneurial and income-generating ventures, such as home-based care and within childcare centres. However, Strydkraal and Apel experience water cut-offs due to operations and maintenance (O&M) and water-sharing, as a result of water supply shortages.

FINDINGS ON ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN STRYDKRAAL AND APEL

The shortcomings of active citizenship practice in the village need first to be understood in order to establish whether the citizens' voice model can be used in these contexts. Active citizenship depends partly on women's ability to work together. Yet, although the women in the study worked together (having formed women's organisations), they have not been able to coordinate and engage effectively at organisational level (Loate et al. 2012). As the women's organisations do not meet regularly, there is no collective agreement about how to tackle water challenges/needs and possible solutions (Loate et al. 2012). This lack of agreement has weakened their capacity to engage with local officials, institutions and in local socio-political structures (such as ward committees, WUAs and CMFs) in a united manner that could place greater pressure for responsiveness on local officials (Molose et al. 2011b). The fractured approach to active citizenship is demonstrated by women raising their access-to-water needs individually (through their organisations) with local institutions and officials rather than collectively (Loate et al. 2012).

Instances where women in the villages assist each other's organisations are limited, and such support tends to focus on the more immediate, livelihood-related

challenges of their organisations (Loate et al. 2012). Thus, women provide advice, labour, seeds, etc. to other organisations but do not come together to identify common challenges or to develop strategies on how to engage local socio-political structures, institutions and officials. Their inability to cooperate on water service delivery and water for emerging productive use issues (such as livestock watering and small-scale irrigation) can be seen as a result of the tendency to view their organisations competitively (Loate et al. 2012). This competitive outlook is likely driven by scarce water resources in Strydkraal and Apel, limited financial support from local government and other institutions, partial access to markets and a lack of training. However, on an individual organisational level, the women recognise the importance of engaging with local structures over their water availability challenges.

The women do not appear to understand the government structures for engagement or that organisational collaboration would give them strength in numbers when raising their voice in local structures (Molose et al. 2011b). Therefore, capacity-building is crucial so that the women of Strydkraal and Apel can understand the workings of government, as well as their role within participatory structures. Equally important is to build capacity among local officials on how to foster effective engagement with local stakeholders such as women. As stated earlier, the women of the two villages do engage with local participatory structures and leaders over their water availability challenges, in particular with local councillors, Fetakgomo Local Municipality officials and ward committees. However, this practical exercise of active citizenship is hampered by a number of factors.

Firstly, the Fetakgomo Local Municipality has no legal water function, as it is neither a Water Services Authority (WSA) nor a Water Service Provider (WSP) (Loate et al. 2012). Despite this, many women bring water issues to the local municipality, as the closest government institution, even though the municipality

can do little but pass on these complaints and concerns to the WSA (Loate et al. 2012). This frustrates both the local municipality and the rural women who raise these issues. Moreover, even when women approach the WSA (the district municipality), they are often left frustrated because the WSA's satellite office lacks capacity, authority and information (which resides with its main office in Groblersdal), and adequate institutional communication (Loate et al. 2012).

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Secondly, the WSA satellite office cannot provide information about when O&M water cut-offs and water-sharing will occur, which would enable the women to protect their livelihood activities from the lack of adequate water. The main decision-making authority on O&M water cut-offs and water-sharing, Groblersdal is about 110 kilometres away from Strydkraal and Apel and so inaccessible to the women of these two villages (Molose et al. 2011b). The WSA also states that its mandate is limited to domestic water service provision and does not include productive water supply (Molose et al. 2011a). The Strydkraal and Apel areas lack water resource management structures, such as CMFs and WUAs, to facilitate engagement between government and women on productive water needs and challenges (Loate et al. 2012). As a result, the women's organisations struggle to engage effectively with the WSA, and women continue with water use practices (including using domestic water for productive purposes) that are unsuitable for their water supply and limit their livelihood activities (Molose et al. 2011b).

Thirdly, weaknesses in the ward committee system negatively affect relations with local government. According to the Fetakgomo Local Municipality, resourcing of the ward committee system is necessary but difficult because of budgetary limitations (Loate et al. 2012). Ward committee members do not understand the water sector adequately to represent the women's concerns related to domestic water supply needs and challenges (Loate et al. 2012).

Lastly, the women of Strydkraal and Apel have also approached the traditional authorities regarding water-related issues (Loate et al. 2012). However, communicating their water needs and challenges to local government through a go-between – the traditional authorities – is not as effective as it could be (Loate et al. 2012). Women of the two villages are denied a crucial non-state access point for active citizenship on water-related issues. This means that the success of active citizenship in Strydkraal and Apel depends largely on the state encouraging women to participate through available, invited, participatory structures established by the state. The inference is that the participatory structures in the two villages are not adequately developed or designed to respond to women's water challenges and needs, which affects active citizenship.

Local government and CBOs have an important role to play in assisting women to better comprehend their rights in relation to water and livelihoods, the way the water sector operates, and the participatory and decision-making processes and structures of local government (Loate et al. 2012). The citizens' voice model is potentially a good way to achieve sustainable cooperation between women, local government and CBOs. The following section examines how such a model could benefit the women of Strydkraal and Apel's active citizenship, and what changes would have to be made to the model to fit the conditions of the villages.

A MODEL FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The Raising Citizens' Voice in the Regulation of Water Services Project is a Department of Water Affairs project that was implemented by the Mvula Trust in the Ekurhuleni Metro. The project focused on citizens' public education and involvement in local monitoring of water and sanitation services (Smith 2009). At the core of this project is a participatory model – the citizens' voice model, which is premised on citizens being empowered to hold local government to account and having a structure through which they can engage with local government to monitor and solve water and sanitation problems (Smith 2009). The short-term objective of the model is to raise public awareness about the workings of (and their rights to) water and sanitation services. The medium-term objective is to transform this public awareness into increased public capacity to monitor the services. The long-term objective is to facilitate greater civil society involvement in the strategic planning of water services and, in doing so, to realise third-generational rights through a broadened decision-making process that maximises second-generational rights (Smith 2009).

The model seeks to capacitate citizens and use monthly "user platform" meetings between citizens and local government officials to discuss water and sanitation service-delivery challenges and solutions (Smith 2009). These meetings are crucial for institutionalising engagement on water and sanitation services, providing a channel for citizens' increased expectations on accountability that comes from their capacity-building. Moreover, exposing citizens to the limitations and challenges of service delivery could change their views that local government is not trying to provide high quality water and sanitation services. The citizen's voice model can help the women of Strydkraal and Apel to engage with local government and

overcome the challenges that they face, such as their limited knowledge about the workings of government structures, the tendency to view other organisations competitively, the lack of financial resources, the broad geographic spread of their locations and different interests.

A CITIZENS' VOICE APPROACH FOR WOMEN OF STRYDKRAAL AND APEL

The citizens' voice model is centred on local government acting as a partner for engagement with citizens. It benefits citizens, local government and community development by facilitating communication between local government and citizens, thereby ensuring cooperation in service delivery and development, and managing conflict (Smith 2009). Consequently, the model could help to lessen incidents of community protests by creating better and increased cooperation between local government and citizens. Better engagement with local government through the user platform would benefit women by forewarning them of O&M water cut-offs, water-sharing and the water tariffs to be paid.

However, in the context of Strydkraal and Apel, a purely local government-centred model would not work, as the Fetakgomo Local Municipality has no legal function to provide water services, and the women face water challenges related not only to domestic but also to productive uses. Legislatively the WSA is only responsible for domestic water use, and so the model would have to be broadened to include the DWA and DoA – the government departments that deal with providing and facilitating the use of productive water in rural communities.

The citizens' voice model would also need to be adapted to suit the specific priorities of rural areas. The model was previously used in a peri-urban setting, in

Ekhuruleni Metro, where the approach was to contract community facilitators. This may not be realistic in rural areas that lack human and financial resources. Focusing only on a participatory user platform may also not fit the situation in Strydkraal and Apel, as the WSA has significant capacity constraints and women want to assist the WSA with O&M to ensure that domestic water supply is not negatively affected.

The capacity-building component of the model should also include aspects related to emergent productive water use issues. This is because some of the domestic water service challenges, such as O&M and water-sharing, arise out of women using domestic water services for productive uses. Raising awareness of efficient productive water uses and alternative and supplementary water sources would benefit both productive water and domestic water use.

Promoting the on-going involvement of CBOs in the citizens' voice model has been difficult, in part because officials view CDWs as the vehicle for building citizens' capacity (Smith 2009). Officials are also unwilling to involve CBOs because of their mistrust of CBOs' advocacy positions on water issues (Smith 2009). This unwillingness to involve CBOs in the model may turn CBOs into an opposition front to the citizens' voice model, especially the user platforms. For the model to work in a manner that involves and maximises CBOs will require a shift in the mindset of officials, so that they can appreciate the support role of CBOs in active citizenship. Although no CBOs deal with water issues in Strydkraal and Apel, other CBOs that work with the women, supporting their livelihood strategies, should be involved. Their involvement will not only quell any potential opposition to the user platforms, but also CBOs can be used to build capacity and for advocacy in partnership with the local municipality, the DWA, the DoA and the WSA. This is particularly relevant in resource-poor rural areas, where government

institutions struggle with inadequate budget allocations. An exclusive community development worker (CDW) approach to capacity-building is impractical in rural areas because of the low number of available CDWs, the vast geographical areas that need to be covered and a limited transport budget. However, CBOs can in part lighten this human resource and financial load by helping to organise user platform meetings.

The citizens' voice model provides a way of allowing communities to develop their development agendas within a non-state structure, while continuing to cooperate with government officials as development partners. However, in order to promote functional active citizenship in Strydkraal and Apel, the citizens' voice model will need to be adjusted to accommodate rural dynamics, including user platforms and other productive water use institutions. Furthermore, the capacity-building element of the model needs to consider the dynamics of rural areas by including capacity-building in using productive water. With a modified model, community members will be able to effectively practice their citizenship and engage the state in securing and participating in their own development.

CONCLUSION

Active citizenship exists in Strydkraal and Apel, but its effectiveness is limited by a number of factors such as the lack of engagement among women's organisations, the lack of capacity to interact with government

institutions and officials, and weak institutions. Even though the women of these villages have used active citizenship to organise themselves and share resources to create and sustain their livelihoods, they have struggled to secure their emergent productive water needs through engaging with government. The citizens' voice model puts community and government relations at the centre of service delivery, so that their respective expectations and shortcomings can be understood.

The citizens' voice model would assist in dealing with the issues that limit active citizenship among the women of Strydkraal and Apel. Firstly, it would create direct and regular engagements between the women and government, circumventing the ward committee system, which has failed to connect adequately to the WSA. Secondly, it would build capacity among the women so that they understand the workings of the water sector and institutions and are able to engage on water issues. Lastly, CBOs could assist local government by providing capacity-building training to the stakeholders involved, as well as contributing their own human resources.

An adapted citizens' voice model could play a crucial role in providing the space for women in Strydkraal and Apel to engage on water availability, use and management. Livelihood strategies would also be strengthened by the women cooperating through the user platforms. The model could also create more cooperation between the women and local officials, thus decreasing conflict related to water service delivery.

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NOTES

- ¹ Founded in 1993, the Mvula Trust is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that was formed to deal with the collapse of basic water and sanitation services in the former homelands. It has developed into a crucial implementation partner for national, provincial and local government in water, sanitation, rural development and livelihoods development.
- ² The study relied on a qualitative research methodology, collecting data using in-depth interviews, literature reviews and focus group discussions, and analysing secondary data.