

South African local government perceptions of the state of water security

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ABSTRACT:

South Africa is one of the 40 driest countries in the world with an annual average rainfall of less than 500 millimetres. In addition, South Africa's rate of economic development is closely linked to its level of water security, as rising water stress and increasing supply variability, flooding, inadequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and higher levels of water pollution could be creating a drag on economic growth. Despite the high premium placed on our water resources, there is no commonly shared understanding of water security. This paper reports on a stakeholder analysis conducted in two South African municipalities to determine their state of water security. We investigated how people, from different lifestyles, perceive water security in the Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality and the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality. We specifically asked respondents if water security had been achieved in the areas. The inland-situated Sekhukhune has a drier climate and a rural socio-economic profile as opposed to the coastal, urbanised eThekweni with its complex economy and diverse socio-economic structure. We conducted face-to-face structured interviews with a diverse stakeholder group in the municipalities and focus groups in two communities of each municipality: Leeuwfontein and Motetema (Sekhukhune) and Inanda and Ntshongweni (eThekweni). Following a qualitative analysis, we found that water security, therefore, is a state of mind based on context-specific (i.e. localised and individualised) perceptions and practices held by individuals of water-related threats and/or opportunities and how it influences them, their surroundings and their interactions with others. For instance, people perceive drought to be a water security challenge only when it affects their daily lives such as household water supply or the availability of water for livestock. We propose a number of policy interventions and response strategies based on these context-specific water security notions.