

# Water and sanitation

## lessons from South Africa

by EBRAHIM-KHALIL HASSEN

**Water and sanitation are priority issues for the WSSD. The South African experience could provide lessons for the international community.**

Social movements represent the best option for re-orientating public services towards poverty eradication. The water and sanitation sector in South Africa provides lessons on how social movements can work with governments to transform policy. The Peoples Budget – a coalition between the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the South African National Non-governmental Organisation Coalition (SANGOCO) – is one of the main social movement interventions on public expenditure, including water and sanitation.

The delivery of water has always been a priority for government. According to government estimates, more than six million people have received access to water since 1994. The numbers are impressive. However, civil society organisations have questioned the sustainability of the projects. The programmes have suffered from severe implementation problems. The recent cholera outbreak illustrated the extent of the problem. In rural KwaZulu-Natal, where households often survive on less than R200 per month, many residents could not pay the R51 fee needed to ensure a continued supply of water. These communities returned to polluted river systems, which made them more susceptible to cholera.

Government's response has been to adopt a policy of providing free basic water for all. This approach offers hope for more sustainable water delivery systems. A basic level of water will have health spin-offs. Moreover, if linked to systems of increasing block tariffs – where the more one uses, the more one pays – the conservation of water could be encouraged.

The Peoples Budget has made representations to parliament and has argued for increased subsidisation of the poor to translate the policy into action.

**‘This change in government policy has been precipitated by intense mobilisation on the part of progressive civil society organisations.’**

### Building capabilities

Two new areas that are emerging as concerns for the Peoples Budget are the role of water in economic development and linking water and sanitation into a single programme. The purpose of development must be to build the capabilities of the poor. Water is an economic input. The current policy of providing a basic level of service, around 50 litres, is insufficient to support economic activity. Linking water supply to local economic development initiatives could improve income security and create employment opportunities. In turn, this would raise household productivity, particularly in rural areas. Adopting such an approach, however, requires policy shifts in the government's land, agricultural

and water policies. If capabilities are to be built, government departments will need to work together.

### Sanitation

Putting sanitation back on the agenda is crucial to sustainable water delivery. Since the second democratic election, the provision of sanitation has been elevated on the policy agenda. At the beginning of 2001, the national backlog of persons without access to adequate sanitation facilities was estimated to be 18 million, or three million households. The majority

of persons falling in this category live in rural areas, peri-urban areas and informal settlement areas. It is also estimated that up to 26% of urban households and 76% of rural households have inadequate sanitation. The problem is thus an extensive one.

Sustainable delivery of water and sanitation is a policy question that has elicited a number of positive responses from government. However, much more needs to be done. Social movements can intervene in this process by developing alliances and crafting alternatives to developmental problems.

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