

Access to clean water a question of lifestyle and fairness

March 24 2015, by Lars-Olof Karlsson



eThekwini is a municipality in South Africa, where the town of Durban is located. eThekwini is pointed out as being a good example with regard to the distribution of water to all inhabitants and in 2014, eThekwini was given the Stockholm Industry Water Award. However, many residents feel the system is unfair. For some, getting hold of clean water is a daily battle while others have swimming pools. This has been shown in a thesis from the University of Gothenburg.

When the apartheid government fell, water became an important symbolic issue in South Africa. Providing everyone with [clean water](#) was a way of demonstrating the intention to make society more inclusive.

Fair access to water is also an important component of all discussions about sustainable development, for instance, what is going to come after the UN Millenium Development Goals. At the same time, in many countries huge investment in water distribution systems is needed and the authorities do not have a budget for such amounts of money. The World Bank Group and other funders have therefore recommended collaboration with private investors. In some countries, transnational companies like Suez have paid for the renovation of pipework, investments in purification plants etc. in return for a fee from the users.

South Africa and eThekweni have chosen a different route. The right to water is stated in South Africa's constitution and in eThekweni, water is distributed by the municipality. Every resident has the right to a certain amount of water, free of charge, which is to cover basic needs. Over and above that, water must be paid for.

Sofie Hellberg has interviewed residents in both poor and wealthy parts of eThekweni. Her thesis shows that the water distribution model chosen by the municipality does mean that more people have access to water but at the same time, it reinforces the social hierarchies in the municipality.

"The municipality has taken a first step but the system does reinforce the problem of inequality in society and it is rather far off from the promise of an inclusive society that was made when the old government fell," says Sofie Hellberg.

Even if eThekweni has made more progress than other parts of South Africa when it comes to guaranteeing its residents access to water for basic needs, there are still people who do not have water, especially in rural and slum areas where infrastructure has not been fully developed. These people have to rely on dirty river water and/or water sources that are far from home.

The study also shows that the question of water, especially when access is limited, is about so much more than simply survival. It is a matter of identity and lifestyle and how people feel about themselves and other people. Hur en person känner sig inför andra och sig själv.

To get closer to the ideals of equality that the ANC government expressed, Sofie believes that [water distribution](#) must be organised in a different way so ability to pay does not control how much [water](#) a household has access to.

Sofie Hellberg also thinks that when discussing what is to come after the UN Millenium Development Goals and other contexts concerning sustainable development, market solutions should be questioned.

"Essentially, the question is what do we put into the term "[socially sustainable development](#)"? Does it mean evenly distributed access to vital resources, or access in relation to the size of one's wallet?"

More information: The Biopolitics of Water: Technology, Subjectivity and Lifestyle in eThekwin Municipality, South Africa. Thesis abstract: gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/37701

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