



a publication of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance and the  
South African Water Caucus

# Water and Tradition



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# 1

## Introduction

We began to understand the moral value of cultural religious groups practice based on natural water.



# Who are we



## **Samson Mokoena**

My name is Samson Mokoena I was born in Free State Province in a town called Raitz. My family moved to Evaton Township in the seventies I went to primary School at Khunoana Primary and wrote my Matric at E.D Mashabane Secondary School. I become politically active at High School. In 1994 my family moved to Steel Valley, a small community on the outskirts of Vanderbijlpark west of Iscor (now known as ArcelorMittal South Africa)

In Steel Valley I became a community and environmental activist. In 1996 the community found out that the water was contaminated and the pollution was coming from Iscor. We started the Steel Valley Crisis Committee. In 2002 Groundwork, an NGO, invited community organisations to participate in the world summit on sustainable development and it is where South African environmental activism was strongly formed.

Because of the work of Steel Valley Crisis Committee and the Friends of Steel Valley

we engaged with other community organisations that were addressing the environmental struggles in the Vaal Triangle.

In 2004 we held a workshop in the Community Hall of Louisrus to establish the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance. On the 10 October 2006 it was launched as the regional Environmental Justice Movement.

I am currently working as the coordinator of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA). VEJA has managed to employ 3 permanent staff, an office consultant and a part-time office cleaner. We also have many volunteers that work on different programmes. I am married and have 3 boys.

### **Mduduzi Tshababala**

I am a positively influenced and optimistic young person with self motivation and I get inspired by others. I am born and bred in Sebokeng. I have been involved in the non-profit organisation/non-governmental organisation (NPO/NGO) sector since 2009 and have acquired a wide range of experiences within the sector. I have registered a community project as an NPO by the name of Botle ba Tlhaho Environmental Group [BBTEG].

BBTEG campaigns for a clean and better environment within communities of the Vaal Triangle area. The organization is now six years old. We became affiliated to VEJA in 2012.

I joined the VEJA community monitoring school in 2012. In 2014 I became a facilitator of the community monitoring school hosted by Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance and supported by the Bench Marks Foundation. I also participate in the public and innovation youth network known as Activate Change Drivers, an initiative that is aimed at promoting active youth to be leaders in communities. It is a national program. In 2014 I became involved in the Changing Practice course a social learning short course facilitated by Rhodes University, managed by the Environmental Monitoring Group and supported by Water Research Commission.

## **Thandi Ngcanga**

I am currently working as an administrator at Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) a non-profit organisation based at Vanderbijlpark in the Vaal. I am a loving and caring mother to my son. I originate from Sasolburg in the Free State. This spring I will receive my accredited certificate in Entrepreneurship at Mill Park College Johannesburg.

I started volunteering at VEJA from 2012 as a monitoring school student. I wrote articles and short stories about what is happening in my community. These articles were published in the monthly newsletters of the organization. Participating in this 'Changing practice' research study made me realize how passionate I am about the environment and how I still want to help educate people in my community about their environmental rights because everyone has a right to live in an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being.

When I am not writing or working I enjoy attending meetings in my community to hear about challenges we are facing and how these problems can be resolved.

# Introducing our change project



This case study is about spiritual practitioners that are protecting our indigenous knowledge traditions and customs in these challenging times of trying to build a new constitutional democracy. VEJA, on behalf of the Gauteng Water Caucus (GWC) and South African Water Caucus (SAWC) are saying that African Traditional Healers and spiritual water users have been excluded from water governance platforms such as Catchment Management Forums (CMFs) and water policy.

VEJA nominated three water quality delegates to participate in the 'Changing Practice' course and case study. The team members were excited and eager to meet up with traditional health

practitioners and spiritual groups. Our engagement with traditional health practitioners broadened our understanding of their indigenous practice.

This became the theme of our change project: to learn more about African customs and beliefs systems; and to think about how the 'Changing Practice' course could help VEJA to start a conversation with government officials and Traditional Health Practitioners and Spiritual Groups to address the issue of their exclusion from water governance.

We argue in our case study that spiritual water users are the custodians of our rivers, fountains and dams and therefore should be involved as monitors of our water. We also advocate that spiritual

water users, like other citizens of South Africa, should have the right to access clean water for their spiritual practice.

The decision to focus on Traditional Healers as water users was made because their voices are excluded from water governance management. This insight was informed by VEJA's water quality task team and the work they have been doing, for the last six years, within the local CMFs. They noticed that groups, such as traditional healers, spiritual groups, fisherfolk, small scale food gardeners, women's groups and emerging farmers are not represented in these CMFs and they do not participate during water policy development. CMFs are mostly dominated by representatives from industry and government.

It is important that traditional healers and spiritual groups are brought forward to these important water governance platforms and that their constitutional rights to access clean water are protected.

# 2

## Our research approach

“It has been historically claimed by many religious believers that every religion has its connections to water hence water is perceived as life”



*The Rietspruit enters the Vaal at the Vaal Barrage flood gate known as Loch Vaal*

The area where this change project took place is within the Upper Vaal water management area and the water catchments of Rietspruit, Leeutaai and Bosch Spruit. We spoke to people in towns such as Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Bophelong and Sasolburg.

The interviews were conducted with individual spiritual healers, traditional health practitioners, traditional healers' organization, spiritual/ religious groups,

Emfuleni local municipality and the chair of the Rietspruit forum. We have also analysed law and policy relating to the practice of traditional healers and spiritual groups.

An “Adopt a Wetland” campaign at Dhlomo dam in Sharpeville is one action that has emerged from the project. Further the change project is aiming to initiate an “Adopt a River” campaign for one more of the above mentioned rivers.



# 3

## Background to our change project

Africans have known God from the beginning. African Kingdoms worshipped God by communicating with God through the ancestors.



*Traditional healers speaking to the ancestors before a workshop*

When white colonial missionaries arrived on the African continent many centuries ago they described the people of this continent as uncivilized. They wanted people to know a Western version of God. But

Africans have known God from the beginning and many African kingdoms worshipped God by communicating with God through the ancestors. For many years African Traditional belief systems



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**Every religion has connections to water. Water is a symbol of life.**

were not recognised by the past South African government and this has almost destroyed our spiritual practice. African people had to adapt to these oppressive conditions and adapt how they practiced their beliefs.

Every religion has connections to water. Water is a symbol of life. Water is used spiritually for healing, cleansing and praying ceremonies by different religions including African Traditional Healers (a'Masangoma) and African Prophets (abo'Mpolofithi). African Independent Christian churches, referred to as "a'Mazion", also conduct their healing, cleansing and blessing (christening) practices in the rivers, springs and dams. Initiation into the practice of a traditional Healer (u'kutwasisa) is a certain practice that needs to take place at a specific river so that the initiate can be guided by the ancestors. Church members also go to specific rivers to be guided by the ancestors who reside in the rivers.

African Traditional and Spiritual Groups are key actors on water resources in South Africa because they use water for spiritual practice. We argue that they are the custodians of our tradition and spiritual custodians of rivers, streams and fountains. They have used water in this way for centuries and

have great respect for rivers, streams and fountains. Even though this is so, the organisations that were interviewed, that represent spiritual practitioners, told us that no water authority has contacted them or engaged with them about water.

This shows that our new democratic government has not fully valued the work of traditional and spiritual healers when they developed water policies and regulations.

Much research work on the topic of African religion and spirituality refers us back to how important water is for these groups which is why they need to be consulted and engaged as interested and affected stakeholders (Bernard, 2013).

Mr Tshidiso Thoahlane of the Emfuleni Bophelong traditional healers organisation said “the new government has not consulted us. They owe us a meeting”. The mining sector, agricultural sector, big businesses and other interested parties are all recognised as having a stake, particularly an economic stake, in water, but government has not recognised spiritual practitioners as stakeholders who need to participate in the formation and implementation of policies, for example, the National Water Act, and the National

Water Resource Strategies and forums. In the registers of the forums we attend there is no representative for traditional health practitioners or African churches.

We argue, in this case, that African Traditional and Spiritual Groups are water users. We also argue that it is negligence and a lack of moral value to see traditional spiritual practitioners and African churches as pre-historic and uncivilised. We believe that they are still relevant in modern day society as custodians of our waterways and as people who can monitor water and identify when water security is disregarded. All water users must be informed about water management decisions that affect them therefore DWS, CMAs, CMFs and other relevant water forums should be inclusive of all water users, not just economic water users, and recognise them as valuable stakeholders in protecting, what is, in the African tradition, a spiritual resource.

# 4

## Stories of practice

Our practice recognises water as a gift from God and the Ancestors. It is a gift to future generations, therefore people should take good care of natural water.



Using informal interviews and observation we went through the process of identifying and talking to spiritual water users to try and understand what their relationship is to water. One key interview was with Gogo

Tshupane, a traditional spiritual healer. Mduduzi describes how she contributed to the groups understanding of the relationship between spiritual practice and water. Below are three examples of the

evidence we gathered from traditional healers and prophets as stories of practice.

### **Gogo Tshupane and the gift of water**

*Mduduzi Tshabalala*

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**The Traditional Healer helps individuals or patients with physical, spiritual and psychological healing as a totality.**

Gogo Tshupane's everyday name is Gloria Somoro. She is open minded, positive and very helpful. On the 22nd January 2015 I interviewed Gogo Tshupane. Gogo Tshupane is the name she was given by the ancestors when she received a calling to be a spiritual healer. She describes where she comes from: "I grew up in Evaton with my family then later we moved to reside in Sebokeng, a township derived from the old surrounding towns and townships such as Top Location, Sharpeville and Evaton". Gloria continued to give a brief history of where she grew up, "the history of Sebokeng dates back from the days of apartheid when there were lots of riots and the rates and taxes boycotts." Gloria is an educator by profession and to follow her career she moved to a region in the East Rand of Gauteng province. She has been practicing as a Traditional Healer for the past seven years.

Gogo Tshupane explained the difference between Medical Doctors and Traditional Healers. "Medical Doctors help with the physical and psychological healing of an individual or patient whereas the Traditional Healer helps individuals or patients with physical, spiritual and psychological healing as a totality". She also explained how water is used as a key element in healing: "Our practice recognises water as a gift from God and the ancestors. It is a gift to future generations, therefore people should take good care of natural water. When "aba Gogo" (Traditional Healers) take people to rivers to perform rituals it will either be a cleansing ceremony or the

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blessing of initiates. They give people water to drink. This water will be water from the fountains or springs. They will pray over the water and ask for direction from ancestors and only if they get a positive response from the Ancestors will they enter into the river or utilise water. Gogo Tshupane heals people of all ages and with no gender exclusion. "When we go to these rivers, we don't have any modern approach in terms of verifying how safe the water is. But before we may enter any natural water we believe in praying first to plead to our Ancestors and with their lead we are able to perform what we do best" said Gogo Tshupane.

### **Mr Lethoba raises the issue of limited access to the river**

*Samson Makoena*

I have known Mr. Lethoba as a community leader and activist within his community. He is also a leader of the Saint Paul William Apostolic Church in Zion in Bophelong ext 17. When this project started I decided to talk to Mr. Joseph Lethoba and his son Phillip Lethoba as they use the Vaal River as a place of worship for cleansing and baptising church members.

Mr. Joseph Lethoba, as the leader of the church, allowed me to be part of their journey so I could learn how the church is using water and in particular the Vaal River for cleansing and baptising their members. Mr. Lethoba has been practicing as a bishop since 1998. This is when he established St Paul William's Apostolic Church. They explained that they when they started the Church they were answering a call from God and the ancestors.

When I met Mr Lethoba I informed him about VEJA's objective to work with African traditional healers and African spiritual



*Effluent discharge from the Rietspruit Sewer plant flowing into the Rietspruit River.*

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**Currently their access is restricted to only certain areas next to the river as most parts of the Vaal river are fenced off from the public by private owners.**

people that are been marginalized in society and sidelined when it comes to the participation in policy for managing water resources. This was important to do so that Mr Lethoba understood that my aim was not to just gather information about their practice but to truly understand the important relationship that his church has with the water of the Vaal river.

Mr Lethoba became excited and wanted to be part of our change project. His son also wanted to be involved as he wants African churches to be recognised by the government so that they can access rivers for spiritual use. Currently their access is restricted to only certain areas next to the river as most parts of the Vaal river are fenced off from the public by private owners. I noted that this was their main concern. They were more interested in gaining access to the river than concerned about water quality.

It was on Wednesday, January 14, I arrived at Mr Lethoba's house and waited to go with him and the congregation to the banks of the Vaal River for cleansing and baptising. As men and women arrived I introduced myself to them and I introduced the work that I will be doing and that I will be joining them on the banks of the river to observe their ceremonies and practices.

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**I suddenly felt that I understood why people were going to pray at the river. The river is all about life and how you are alive on this planet. The flow of the river links you to God and your Ancestors.**

Reverend Radebe, a junior pastor of the church based in Sharpeville, who was going to the baptising, told me that going to the river for these ceremonies links him to his God and Ancestors. He said: "You must be prepared through praying and listen to the guidance of your Ancestors."

Bishop Lethoba was preparing his African medicine and his white chickens. He was making sure that when he leaves to go to the river everything is in place. Everybody was waiting for his son to arrive because his son holds the spirituality of the group. His son is the one that prays on the banks of the river and no one can go inside the river before he prays.

At about 5pm everybody jumped on the back of the van to go to the river. We had 4 chickens and a bath for the ritual. I suddenly felt that I understood why people were going to pray at the river. The river is all about life and how you are alive on this planet. The flow of the river links you to God and your Ancestors.

When we got to the river people were split up according to their different reasons for attending as the rituals of cleansing and baptism are different. Men and women don't mix. Before the rituals could start the chickens are slaughtered, the candles are lit and Mr Lethoba and his son begin praying over the river water. I witnessed and felt how the praying of Mr



Lethoba and his son became a symbol of hope. Using African medicine Mr. Lethoba continued to talk to God and Ancestors. He did not speak to anyone else until he had finished his work.

### **God protects us from polluted water**

*Thandiwe Ngcanga*

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**I asked what rivers they use and whether they test the water before using the river?**

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Friday the 9th of January 2015, the time is about 4pm as I go to find somebody to talk to at the Holy Spirit Apostolic church. When I got there I found a male person named Kelly. I got scared and my heart was beating fast because of the bad experience I had with my first interview where a man tried to take advantage of me. I calmed myself and greeted the man, introduced myself and told him why I am here and asked if I could talk to him? He looked at me as if he was suspecting something and he said, 'what is your story sister, we can talk'. 'Ok', I say, 'I was wondering if I can talk to the pastor of the church regarding the project I have just explained to you. Is it possible to speak with him now or maybe do you have his contact details so that I can setup an appointment with him?'

He said, 'My pastor is not available at the moment, he is out of town, but you can speak to me. Then I asked him how long has he been attending this church and perhaps do they as church members know about catchment forums happening in this area and whether are they part of them? The answer I got from my brother was as the church they don't know anything about catchment management forums. I asked what rivers they use and whether they test the water before using the river?'



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**We don't do anything before going to the river we just pray to our God to protect and show us light. We go to the Vaal river and we don't test water.**

By looking at him I could see the conversation is becoming intense now. He said, 'we don't do anything before going to the river we just pray to our God to protect and show us light. We go to the Vaal river and we don't test water. We pray before getting in and by so doing we believe God will protect us from whatever harm can be in the water.' He suggested I join the church on Sunday and witness what they do.

It is Sunday the 11th of January. The sun is shining bright. Perfect weather indeed. Looking in my wardrobe see if I can find something to wear and a dress specifically. In my church I can wear anything that I am comfortable in and nobody will say anything but this time I am going to a different church where women don't wear jeans. It's 8am and I am busy preparing myself as the church starts at 10am. My intention is to arrive early to witness everything. I took my phone, my bag and off I go to the Holy Spirit Apostolic church. I was the 3rd person to arrive. The other two were brother Kelly and another father of which I found out later his position is the right hand of the pastor.

Brother Kelly had already informed members of the church about me coming. That was a relief to me. Members are beginning to arrive. Looking at my time it is 10h05am. I am observing because I was told I am only allowed to observe and not take pictures. I realise that there are more women than men in this church and most are elderly. I am listening when they talk. They use a spiritual language like "in the name of JESUS that will happen, father we thank you amen". I pulled one of women aside and ask her is it the church language they are using and why?

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**They keep telling each other ‘things will be ok if they can worship and pray together’. I noticed that some women are the church leader’s wives. The pastor is responsible for opening and sharing of the word.**

Well she said to me they do this because it is their belief. We are involving God to our situations, we are always positive and we have hope and faith in everything we do.

As I overheard the woman communicating with another I noticed they speak in a motivational way. They keep telling each other ‘things will be ok if they can worship and pray together’. I noticed that some women are the church leader’s wives. The pastor is responsible for opening and sharing of the word.

As the church went out I went back to brother Kelly to thank him for inviting me and also for telling other members about the project. I told him I will keep in touch with them. I asked him if it is possible for me to go with them to the river? And then he said that he is not sure but they usually go after 3 months or when there is a serious need to go, but he will let me know so he took my contacts and I took his.

### **Exchange programmes of traditional healers and spiritual groups to Mpumalanga**

As VEJA will be building on the change project, the organisation realised that it is important to look at what is happening at national level. VEJA, in collaboration with the Mpumalanga Water caucus, organised an exchange tour with traditional spiritual groups in Mpumalanga so that the groups can exchange information and knowledge about spiritual practice and water.

The traditional spiritual practitioners shared their experiences of how they use water and how they are struggling to get access to water resources. Traditional healers, in rural areas, are not organised, unlike in urban areas where traditional

spiritual groups are organised and are defending their practice in urban centres.

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**We recognised that there is still a need to educate and raise awareness amongst traditional spiritual practitioners on how they can participate in water governance through monitoring the river and participating in local water catchment forums.**

In both areas water authorities did not engage with traditional spiritual practitioners especially when it came to water pollution. We recognised that there is still a need to educate and raise awareness amongst traditional spiritual practitioners on how they can participate in water governance through monitoring the river and participating in local water catchment forums. In Mpumalanga the traditional spiritual practitioners have a long history of working with civil society doing river cleaning and making sure that where the practice is happening there is a level of cleanliness so that the health of traditional spiritual practitioners is not at risk. The Mpumalanga Water Caucus and the Environmental Monitoring group is also very active in raising awareness on the impact of the large scale plantations on water resources and how this threatens spiritual practice by reducing the availability of traditional herbs and damaging sacred pools (Ndhlovu, Mashile and Mdluli).

The Vaal traditional spiritual practitioners are well organised under different organisations such as traditional health organisation's and Bhekabezayo traditional healer's organisation. These organisations are also strong in Kwa-Zulu Natal and have been challenging the Department of Health on important issues such as access to health facilities and health regulations. They were interested in the links between their practice and water governance and were keen to begin participating in local catchment management forums.

# 5

## Key arguments

We have witnessed the continuous water pollution from industrial effluent, sewage spills and agricultural pesticides into the Vaal river system.



### **Water Pollution and impacts on traditional healers**

One campaign that VEJA has been working on for many years is water quality monitoring in the Upper Vaal Water management area. We have witnessed the continuous water pollution from industrial effluent, sewage spills and agricultural pesticides into the Vaal river system, and

the government is failing to protect the resource.

Traditional healers and spiritual practitioners that we have interviewed have noticed that the water of these resources are changing in quality. They have no tools to monitor water quality. Their tool is to pray for protection. According to Joseph Lethoba and Phillip

Lethoba: “We are praying to our ancestors and Jehova.” They are not taking samples for monitoring the health of the rivers. This causes problems for Traditional Healers and spiritual practitioners who use the Vaal river system. While doing Assignment One of the Changing Practice course we witnessed baptism and cleansing ceremonies in the Vaal river system which we know is highly polluted. The need for Traditional Healers and spiritual practitioners to be present at the CMF is critical and urgent so that they can be frequently updated on the quality of the water and to have direct communication with all relevant parties, especially water authorities.

When we interviewed the chairperson of the Rietspruit Catchment forum, during Assignment Two, he raised a concern that these groups are not given notice if there are possible spillages. He understood that it will be important to get to participate in the catchment management forums and other important water governing structures.

During interviews conducted with spiritual practitioners they acknowledged that as water users, they are becoming worried because they can no longer access sacred places because private ownership denies

them access. They are also not aware of the catchment management forums and other water management forums. We also learnt that the government officials at Department of Water and Sanitation are not aware of the relevant contact people responsible for liaising with spiritual practitioners. This may be because they are not recognised as water users. The only government departments that work closely with spiritual practitioners are the Department of Health and Social Development; Department of Home Affairs; and the South African Police Services.

Since the inception of the NWRS1 the Department of Water and Sanitation has not come up with a strategy that includes nor recognises spiritual practitioners as water users.

### **Policy arguments**

In terms of policy, this study analysed the bill called The Traditional Health Practitioners Act 22 of 2007. Section 1 of the Act defines a traditional health practitioner as a person who is registered under this Act in one or more of the categories of the traditional health practitioners act. The categories of the act include: ‘diviners

herbalists, traditional birth attendants and traditional surgeons.

Chapter 2, section four of the Act gave powers to the Minister to establish the Governance of Interim Traditional Health Practitioners Council of S.A. In terms of Chapter 2 of the Act, the council must determine who qualified for registration in terms of the Act. The traditional healers organisations and spiritual practitioners have raised this as a concern. It is clear that the traditional health practitioners council must be cautious not to divide the African spiritual groups through this classification process. From our interviews we found that this division is already happening and some spiritual practitioners are concerned that the new regulation may discriminate against them (Tshehla, 2015).

The National Water Act No. 36 of 1998 recognises that, while water is the national resource that belongs to all people, the discriminatory laws and practices of the past have prevented equal access to water and use of water resources. There is provision in the Act to address this historical legacy of unequal access. The National Water Act defines in chapter 1, 4(a) entitlement to water use, who may use water and for what purposes such as reasonable domestic use, domestic gardening, animal watering, fire fighting and recreational use. These sections exclude religious purposes. Also redress does not extend to traditional health practitioners and spiritual groups. It is important that when Department of Water and Sanitation and the traditional health council implement laws, policies and strategies (such as the National Water Resource Strategy) that they take into account the needs of traditional healers, and protect their rights to access clean water that will not harm them.

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**We, the people of South Africa recognise the injustice of the past; honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land, respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.**

# 6

## We will continue monitoring!

We will continue monitoring and campaigning for the inclusion of spiritual practitioners and spiritual values in the management of our water.



Our recommendations in relation to the implementation of the NWRS2 are as follows:

- The NWRS should be inclusive of SWU's by explicitly recognising spiritual water users as stakeholders in water resource management.



- The NWA needs to explicitly recognise that spiritual practitioners are water users and spiritual custodians of water resources.
- The Department of Water and Sanitation should include on their database the organised structures of SWU's;
- SWU's must be invited to all necessary platforms and forums where water resource management decisions are made.
- Spiritual practitioners right to practice in water that will not damage their health needs to be enforced as a constitutional right.

This is a case that argues for the inclusion of spiritual practitioners in decisions relating to water. This case does not stop here. It has become a key campaign of VEJA and the SAWC. We will continue monitoring and campaigning for the inclusion of spiritual practitioners and spiritual values in the management of our water. Below are the key questions that will guide our work as we go forward.

1. Are policy makers prepared to look at how policy affects traditional healers and spiritual groups?

2. Are CMFs willing to allow traditional healers a space to engage with their traditional knowledge systems and water management practices?

3. Are water authorities willing to recognise traditional healers as water users?

4. Are traditional health practitioners and spiritual groups willing to engage with water authorities and if not, why not?

We will also be extending the project to include other regions of the Upper Vaal water management area.

# 7

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