



THE KUILS RIVER CATCHMENT

The Ways the City of Cape Town Neglects
Working Class Black Communities



Introduction

In this case study, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) looked at water access and quality, service delivery and management in communities near and around the Kuils River catchment area. Through engagement with the Western Cape Water Caucus (WCWC) – a network of community activists and civil society organisations dealing with water problems – reading and reviewing scholarship on pollution and water management, and conducting our own research into the state of the Kuils River and water management more generally, we were able to get a fuller sense of the problems afflicting communities.

Gathering the research - EMG and the WCWC have, over the past year, been engaged in a process of understanding the depth of pollution of the Kuils River and the impact this is having on communities when it comes to engaging around water more broadly. We used three processes as a means of gathering information and spurring activism – firstly, we researched the state of the Kuils River Catchment area, learning about a river in Cape Town that is overflowing with pollution and endangering the health of those communities who live alongside it. Secondly, through the Community Resilience in Cape Town (CoReCT) project in collaboration with University of Cape Town (UCT)'s African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) and the Centre for Complex Systems in Transition (CST) at Stellenbosch University and the WCWC, we were able to gather stories and collate data about problems with water access, delivery and management from the communities organised by the WCWC members. Thirdly, the Action 24 funded process assisted in building the capacity of community members to understand and engage with government at provincial level to advance public participatory justice. Concurrently, the WCWC members conducted research in their communities using the SenseMaker tool.

The impact of results - The combined processes yielded powerful results through the collation of evidence about what is happening regarding water service delivery, but also, it presented an opportunity to engage actively with the local government – the City of Cape Town (CoCT) in the Western Cape province. This process empowered the participants to better understand their water issues and circumstances and engage the CoCT head on with facts and evidence. Although this happened mainly at a local governance level, the elements of capacity building and public participation, which are at the core of the Action 24 funded process, were key drivers in the work.

The state of the Kuils River Catchment represents a pressing and urgent microcosm of the state of water access and quality, service delivery and management in South Africa. The harsh reality is that the CoCT has systemically neglected the water delivery management of communities that are overwhelmingly working class, poor and black.

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What follows is our findings from this case study, the activism that we undertook, and the questions that we continue to seek answers to as a result of our research, and engagement with the communities in question.



WCWC group monitoring different points of the Kuils River

Part 1: The CoReCT Project

Background & Methodology - The WCWC expressed interest in collecting data on their experiences with water management that could assist their activism in communities and support their engagement with government. In response, EMG and UCT's ACDI partnered to create the CoReCT project, an initiative to collect data about the experiences of water-related issues in working class poor areas through narrative research. To do so researchers used SenseMaker, a tool that allows respondents tell their stories and the meanings thereof; and allows researchers to make sense, draw connections and extrapolate statistical data from the multitude of stories collected through interviews.

Twelve (12) participants from the WCWC group were nominated for the role of citizen-scientists, responsible for going into their communities and gathering stories. This happened in two phases: in the first phase the citizen scientists worked with academics in a 4 day workshop to design questions and interview techniques, and then did the interviews with members of communities who agreed to be respondents. In the second

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phase, the follow-up 4 day workshop saw participants analyzing the data gathered through conducting what is called story sense-making out of the data gathered.



Figure 2. Very few respondents are usually able to resolve problems with service delivery.

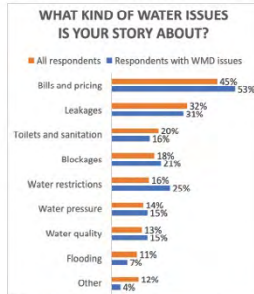


Figure 4. Compared to most respondents, those with WMD problems are more likely to have other water issues as well.

Examples of the CoRect project data findings - courtesy of ACIDI - UCT

On the last day of this workshop CoCT officials attended, and the citizen scientists presented the findings of the data. Later on, the findings of the stories collected were shared back to community members in Du Noon, Mitchells Plain and Makhaza. This was an important part of this phase as often when research is done in marginalised communities, the results and findings are rarely shared with community members who have participated. For the study to make sense, it was important that the results be shared with those who contributed their experiences. The aim being to present them with a complete picture of how differently communities are serviced (or not) by the CoCT, towards a shared understanding of the knowledge, to foster solidarity between communities and inspire shared solutions for activism on water issues.

Sensemaker Results – A total of 311 interviews took place as part of this process, and data captured contained the individual respondent’s stories of their experiences of water access and management problems, and how they attempted to solve them. The dominant theme in all of the stories was of frustration with the water system and the CoCT’s operations:

- Often households with water management devices would still get high bills, and they experienced various difficulties trying to fix their water management problems, including knowing where to go and finding the right person to get help.
- Less than 15% of the interviewees were able to get their water problem fixed – and when there was a solution, it usually came from fellow community members or from them fixing the problem themselves.
- Only 8 stories out of the 311 interviews related that the CoCT stepped in and addressed the problems in a satisfactory way.

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One respondent said:

*"My water bill comes sky high even though I have a water management device. I'm sick and tired of going to the City and getting no solution. ... Sometimes we sit without water for days, but our bill still comes out high. Where can we go for help?"*¹

The data echoes the words above, showing a severe disconnect between the CoCT and the communities they are meant to be delivering services to. Water management devices are often installed without consent from households, and if there are issues with the devices, the CoCT is not viewed as helpful in fixing them.

Another respondent shared:

*"I have no faith in the Council as my complaints fall on deaf ears. ... I have reported [my broken water management device] many times and was promised that it will be seen to. It kept leaking water and my water [allocation] ran out quickly. My husband asked a plumber in our area who charged us R200 to fix it so we can have water."*²

In turn, the disconnect between the CoCT and its constituents build up feelings of distrust, resentment, and scorn from community members. Maybe this is why when respondents were asked who they want to hear their stories most of them (77%) said CoCT.

From another respondent:

*"I'm very, very angry. I have a water management device which was installed without my consent. Now I'm facing a huge water bill and leakages. I have no one to talk to."*³

The benefit of the CoReCT project may be self-evident – the fact that the workshops included CoCT officials means that community members were finally beginning to be heard. The simple act of community members telling their stories to members of the water caucus is an empowering process, as more people got to tell their stories and to understand that their experiences are common, and they are not alone in facing water issues. In the future, WCWC members will be able to use the stories and data to push for more effective change in systems at the local, provincial and national levels of government.

Part 2: Kuils River Catchment project

Geography and background - the Kuils River starts in the northern part of Cape Town in Durbanville hills, and flows southeast downward through the Cape Flats to Macassar. The southern part of the river has some wetlands, and it eventually joins with the Eerste River, and flows in a southwestern direction into the sea at False Bay. In total the Kuils River is 23 km long, and runs through a multitude of communities,

^{1,2,3} "Beyond the Day Zero Drought: Community Perspectives on Water Justice and Informality in Cape Town's Low Income Neighbourhoods." Enqvist, J. et al, International Journal of Water Resources Development (in review)

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including Brakenfell, Bellville, Mfuleni, Sandvlei and Macassar. The river's flow has changed from historically drying up during summer and flowing during winter, to flowing all year round as it was transformed by canalisation and the addition of effluent due to industrialisation of the area.



Water Quality - research on the Kuils River, as well as first person accounts, have found that the river is extremely polluted. Part of this has to do with the effluent i.e. treated sewage that is being dumped into the river by the Zandvlei Wastewater Treatment Plant. This effluent has been found to contain high levels of steroid hormones⁴ – which interferes with wildlife and the natural ecosystem. Downstream of the plant, residents at Sandvlei are left to deal with the consequences of living next to a river rife with sewage that contaminates their water, exposes them to waterborne diseases, disrupts the ecosystem and degrades the recreational green areas. Added to this, the river also receives chemical waste from industrial drains, for example from the Somchem Munitions Plant in Macassar.

The river has recorded unacceptably high levels of E-Coli bacteria, as well as high levels of pollution related to urbanisation: the sources of pollution include residential waste being thrown into the river, and it being used as a toilet – because of a lack of delivery of waste management and sanitation facilities. Another source of pollution is attributed to fertiliser and pesticide run off from agriculture in the catchment area, and other miscellaneous debris blown into the river.⁵

⁴ "Rapid detection of selected steroid hormones from sewage effluents using an ELISA in the Kuils River water catchment area, South Africa." Swart N, Pool E. Journal of Immunoassay & Immunochemistry, 01 Jan 2007, 28(4):395-408

⁵ Mwangi, F.N. "Land use practices and their impact on the water quality of the upper Kuils River" University of Western Cape, 2014



Kuils River, Durbanville



Kuils River, Mfuleni

Health Outcomes and the Gendered Impact - the toxicity of the Kuils River is a major impairment to the health and wellbeing of the residents of the catchment area. Even if residents do not drink the water, they still use it for a multitude of reasons – for sanitation, for hygiene, for cleaning, for laundry, and for a place of recreation for children to play, or youth to gather. Whenever residents use the polluted river for any of these activities, they are at high risk of exposure to waterborne life-threatening diseases which when contracted cause long term harm to health such as dysentery, E-Coli and Covid-19.



Kuils River, Burundi - children at play

Because the use of the river as a toilet is their only choice, it presents a danger to girls and women because of overcrowding and lack of services in informal settlements. To preserve their dignity, they go to the river at night, often reserving eating and drinking for most of the day. Gendered cultural taboos about women's ablutions mean men do not accompany women or children, and alone they become vulnerable to robbery and sexual assault, as explained below.⁶

⁶ "Hydropolitics in South Africa" Mduyvelwa, A. Environmental Monitoring Group, 2020 pg 24

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A woman resident living near the Kuils River said:

“We are not yet close to civilized time we fought for in South Africa because some of us still have to fetch water far from our places of stay. This requires us (mothers) and our daughters to do the job as it is treated as if it is our responsibility. When we ask our husbands or any male figure in the house to accompany us when in need of relieving ourselves we are seen as people who do not respect them as men.”

The river also threatens the residents’ food supply system as there is small scale farming of cows, goats, pigs and sheep. The animals drink the toxic water of the Kuils River, which means the milk and meat from cows for example becomes contaminated, and is sold and consumed by residents.



Livestock along the river

Environmental Racism - the most polluted parts of the river are around working class poor communities that were displaced during apartheid – like the Burundi and Sandvlei communities. These communities tend to be largely ignored by the CoCT, even when residents lodge complaints - there is often no response, or the CoCT denies that the river is polluted altogether. The fact that the local government of the City of Cape Town, and the provincial and national government departments so willingly to turn a blind eye to the basic water service delivery needs of working class poor black communities, that they ignore research pointing to toxic pollution and environmental health impacts, that they are unmoved to act urgently in response to the daily suffering of residents that are suffering – is a clear sign of the environmental classism and racism of the government.

Hearing First Person Accounts - In research conducted by EMG’s Apiwe Mdunyelwa, she was able to collect first person accounts of residents affected by living next to the polluted Kuils River.

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For instance, an elder of the Burundi community who has been fighting for environmental justice said:

*"I have been in Mfuleni for the past 20 years now but there hasn't been any progress with regards to the filthiness of this area and I doubt there will be any change anytime soon and I guess I will die and leave behind my children in this chaos. I have been complaining to the subcommittee about the condition of the area but they do not seem to care about a decent living area, as if nobody is affected by this condition. People were tired of complaining to the committee and decided to take it up to the City of Cape Town offices in town but still there was no progress. Last year the members of the community got me arrested because they did not understand why I chased their children away when they are playing in this channel, and all I was doing was to protect them from the unknown diseases that may rise because of the polluted water. Later after they got me arrested, a number of children were sent to the clinic by their parents and report back from the clinic was that the sickness they have is caused by water. The doctors and nurses from Mfuleni local clinic investigated the cause of the similar sickness found in children staying in the area, and it was concluded that they have what we call dysentery which is a combination of nausea, abdominal cramps coupled with severe diarrhoea which is caused by polluted water."*⁷

Community Response - in response to the pollution of the Kuils River and the affect it is having on community members, EMG and the WCWC set out to try and enact change by creating a *Kuils River Infographic* that distills the information gathered into ten facts to spread environmental knowledge about the catchment area.

EMG and the WCWC have also launched a petition that demands "City of Cape Town: Step Up and Serve All Communities - Clean Up the Kuils River Now!" on [Change.Org](https://www.change.org). We believe it is important to hold government accountable for clean and safe water access, sanitation facilities and waste management services.

In the process of making the petition, EMG researched the relevant sub-councils, departments and officials responsible in local and provincial government to direct and target the petition, and make specific demands including:

- making the Kuils River Catchment a priority area in the 2020/2021 proposed amendments to the Integrated Development Plan,
- doing regular assessments and maintenance of water services,
- begin regular upkeep of the catchment, including consistently removing waste monitoring the catchment,
- regular educational programmes for the people residing in the catchment.

⁷ "Hydropolitics in South Africa" Mdunyelwa, A. Environmental Monitoring Group, 2020 pg 25

- recognise the Kuils River's toxicity as an ongoing disaster, and treat it as such in all future proceedings, with adequate health services in affected communities.

Our hope is that the knowledge of Kuils River will spread awareness about water issues in the catchment area, and put pressure on the CoCT to clean up their act and begin urgent service delivery to disadvantaged areas who need an urgent improvement of environmental health.

In Conclusion

Water is a human right - When considering the outputs and knowledge learned from both the Kuils River Catchment project and the CoReCT project, it becomes clear that what is most important is making sure that the residents are seen and heard by the CoCT, and afforded the service and assistance that every person has constitutional right to receive from government.

Who gets service delivery? - the research and activism on the projects also bring up pressing questions about who is being serviced by the government. In both instances, community members are being sidelined by the government, who is failing to clean up the polluted rivers, as well as fix water management problems in working class poor black communities. The Kuils River presents a stark contrast to another river in Cape Town, the Liesbeek River which originates in Table Mountain and flows south through the Kirstenbosch Gardens – popular Cape Town tourist destination – and high-income suburban areas. The Liesbeeck River is well managed with no water management treatment plant or industrial factories causing pollution – a clear prioritisation of water and environmental health management by CoCT.

So the central question for water activists and community members remains – how do we get the government to pay attention and deliver services to disenfranchised communities? And, perhaps more importantly, why isn't the government listening to the disenfranchised in the first place? What is the root cause of the fact that the Kuils River is overflowing with pollution, but the Liesbeek River is not? These are the questions that came up during the drafting of the Kuils River petition, and from the CoReCT process. And they are questions that will continue to be examined, thoroughly and answered as activism and community participation continues in our fight to make sure all residents of Cape Town have access to clean and safe water, sanitation and waste management, and improved environmental health.

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ACTION 24

Active Citizens for Responsive Legislatures



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