

Politicizing Water Supply in South Africa: The Case of uMhlathuze Local Municipality

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Abstract: The global issue of water shortages and lack of access to clean water is particularly severe in South Africa due to a combination of historical inequalities, infrastructure difficulties, and politics. This article investigates the politics of water supply in the uMhlathuze Local Municipality, located in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. The article examines the intricate socio-political factors that influence water availability, distribution, and administration in the municipality using a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates political science, environmental studies, and public policy. Using empirical data and case studies, this analysis examines how governance institutions, political interests, community dynamics, and historical legacies influence water politics in uMhlathuze. The report also examines the consequences for water governance, social equity, and sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: Water supply, Politicization, South Africa, uMhlathuze Local Municipality, Governance, Social justice, Sustainable development).

Introduction

Access to potable water is an essential entitlement of every individual and a necessary condition for achieving long-term progress. As Lebek, Twomey and Kruger (2021) posit, stable provision of potable and sufficient water to every household is the basis on which good health, cleanliness and proper production of nutritious food depends. Moreover, in South Africa, access to clean water is guaranteed as a fundamental right enshrined in the constitution, which makes it the responsibility of the state through its agencies to ensure that citizens enjoy this life sustaining right. The state as one of the signatories to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shoulders the responsibility to create a conducive environment for its citizens to meet their needs and enjoy their rights. Hence, the South African government, through municipalities, is expected to deliver services or political goods to the people and water supply is not an exception. Be that as it may, government and communities should not be oblivious to the fact that due to drastic climatic changes, water is becoming a scarce non-renewable resource and therefore proper infrastructure and meticulous use of water needs to be a priority of any government. This is important, as water scarcity and poor supply can polarize communities and create serious divisions that are capable of leading to physical confrontations among members of society. Thus, water should be seen as one of the important ingredients for enduring peace and security and as one resource that guarantees good and healthy sustainable life. In this regard, Mwanza (2005) observes that water is the source of life but can also be responsible for dreadful conflicts that continue to tear African communities apart. The politicization and weaponization of water supply in municipalities for the purpose of gaining popularity can therefore exacerbate water scarcity which would hinder the accomplishment of the envisaged SDGs.

Water scarcity and unequal access to water remains a problem in South Africa, despite the country's dedication to achieving universal water access as stated in the constitution (Department of Water and Sanitation, 2018). This is not only a product of naturally induced activities, but it is also born out of the desperate actions that characterize the country's highly charged politicized environment. The aim of these actions is political gain and electoral support. Communities continue to suffer, and their constitutional rights are being trampled upon by electioneering machinations. The health hazard posed by the lack of, and in some cases blocked, access to clean and drinkable water is not taken into cognizance as something that might amount to a disaster and that might result in the government implementing the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002.

This article examines the politicization of water supply in uMhlathuze Local Municipality, which is situated in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. This article seeks to analyze the socio-political factors that influence water governance in uMhlathuze with the goal of understanding the obstacles and possibilities for attaining fair and sustainable water management in South Africa.

Literature Review

The sixth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) emphasizes universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for all (United Nations, 2018). South Africa is committed to the SDGs and has modern water legislation that guarantees the constitutional right to a minimum supply of safe water for all who live in the country (Republic of South Africa, 1998). However, over three million South Africans still lack access to basic water supply, with the majority residing in rural areas. Bazaanah and Mothapo (2023) state that water and sanitation play a pivotal role in fostering the growth and development of communities. It is frequently observed that local governments in South Africa face challenges in achieving long-term viability in providing access to safe water and fundamental sanitation services for the entire population.

Lebek et al (2021) acknowledge that there have been some improvements in the provision of water infrastructure since the 1990s. Currently 89% of South African households have access to water supply infrastructure. In addition, the improvement of non-monetary well-being, which encompasses access to clean water, sanitation, power, and housing as components of the 'social wage', has persisted since 1994 as noted earlier. Significant advancements have been achieved in the provision of water and sanitation services in South Africa, where the legislative and policy frameworks governing these services are regarded as very progressive on a global scale, (Sutherland, et al, 2014:470). Water is often regarded as a social good that plays a crucial role in facilitating transformation and fostering growth within a given country. The right to enough water, as stipulated in the Constitution of South Africa (1996), is ensured for all individuals within the limits of available resources, (Sutherland, et al, 2014). This commitment was further exemplified by the implementation of the Free Basic Water Policy (2001) in the country. However, the consistency in implementing this policy has decreased to 64% nationally and 42% in priority district municipalities (Department of Water and Sanitation, 2019). There are two primary causes for this lack of execution. First, 'water infrastructure backlogs' were monitored, and local governments were held accountable, putting pressure on them to rapidly provide new infrastructure while neglecting maintenance of existing infrastructure, (Lebek, 2021:272). In addition, the politicization of water delivery in uMhlathuze is a result of institutional deficiencies, governance challenges, and political motivations. Water infrastructure construction and maintenance have been compromised due to corruption, mismanagement, and lack of accountability, resulting in unequal access and service delivery (Naidoo & Singh, 2017). Political elites frequently exploit water distribution to centralize power and exert influence, exacerbating the marginalization of disadvantaged areas and perpetuating injustice. Even when the SDG is there to, "ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all", emphasizing interdependencies with other objectives and targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, (United Nations, 2018:6). In response to the SDG, some District and local municipalities have chosen a technocratic, top-down approach to service delivery to achieve development goals rapidly. This is in response to decades of underdevelopment of water services.

Moreover, the provision of free basic water and sanitation in South Africa is not distributed uniformly or equitably. The rhetoric around the supply of water and sanitation services is influenced by a rights-based perspective but is also influenced by the 'neo-liberal approach to cost in service delivery', (Sutherland, et al, 2014:470). The process of commodifying services entails that a portion of the population may face financial constraints in acquiring adequate access to water and sanitation. Which is the reality facing many poor South Africans who can barely make ends meet, (Masuku and Jili, 2019; Sutherland et al, 2014; and Lebek, 2021). KwaDlangezwa community is also amongst the affected communities who reside in rural and semi-urban areas. This situation prompts concerns regarding whether the primary objective of service provision is centered on recuperating costs or prioritizing principles of social and environmental equity, (Sutherland, et al, 2014).

Historical Context of KwaDlangezwa

To comprehend the current difficulties regarding water supply in uMhlathuze, it is crucial to consider the historical background. The apartheid administration in South Africa solidified racial disparities in the distribution of resources, such as water. The enduring impact of apartheid is seen in the socio-economic inequalities and distribution of resources in South Africa after the end of apartheid. Also, the high demand of water supply in uMhlathuze has resulted in persistent water shortages and unequal distribution of water supplies, especially in underprivileged populations. The governance institutions, particularly uMhlathuze water, that oversee water delivery in uMhlathuze

municipality have a significant impact on the politics around water management in the area. The uMhlathuze Local Municipality, like other municipalities in South Africa, functions within an intricate institutional structure that encompasses various stakeholders, including as government departments, water utilities, and community organizations, (Ziervogel, et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the municipality has substantial obstacles in achieving effective water management due to inadequate coordination, insufficient institutional capability, and limited resources.

Using kwaDlangezwa as one of the rural areas that fall within uMhlathuze Local Municipality is to illustrate the seriousness of the politicization of water supply. Indeed, South Africa inherited some of its challenges from the apartheid regime that lasted for more than four decades. The post-apartheid dispensation is anticipated to correct the injustices that were produced by the apartheid government. KwaDlangweza which is under the traditional leadership of Chief Mkhwanazi is heavily affected by the water crisis that is both influenced by the lack of proper water infrastructure and political interests. This area is home to the main campus of the University of Zululand, Khandisa Clinic, and various schools. For the proper functioning of these institutions water becomes one of the important factors. However, the community of kwaDlangezwa finds itself compelled to engage in violent protest to demand, among other things, a water supply. The water crisis in this area affects residents in such a way that they are unable to become productive and this further exacerbate the issue of food insecurity as people depend on sufficient water supply for a proper production.

Theoretical Lenses

This paper adopts David Easton's conceptualization of politics as "the authoritative allocation of values for a society". The adoption of Easton's approach to understanding politics is underscored by the fact that the distribution and supply of potable water in any other state becomes the principal political obligation of the government. As the state is responsible for delivering political goods and services. This conceptualization precisely captures the role of the political actors, particularly those that have the authority. Authority in this case will be defined borrowing from Heywood (2019) where he characterizes "authority as the legitimate power". Government as the political entity that exercises legitimate power is by and large at the core of the activity of allocation of valued resources. According to Sorzano (1967) Easton sees that the prevailing fundamental fact confronting all societies is the scarcity of some valued resources. This article employs this conceptualization to succinctly analyses how potable water in South Africa has come to be a scarce resource and as a result political actors use that as means to gain political support. Moreover, water also qualifies as one of the scarce valued resources that might trigger conflicts within society.

Relentless water supply in South Africa is the responsibility of the government through designated agencies starting from the national to the provincial and local government spheres. Water provision as the government's responsibility becomes one of the political goods that are used by the very government and those who have influence to bolster their position in society. The allocation and distribution of water is one service that is necessary, however, political actors find it necessary to use this process as the electioneering tool. Moreover, the process has become a levelled field for patronage politics where those who are in positions of power only grant tenders to supply water to their cronies. This is not just a mere means through which politicians help their allies, but it is a quid-pro-quo situation. Political actors or politicians to be precise use this to fund their allies who in return will finance their political campaigns. All in all, the decision as to which areas or people receive water and who supply them with that water has become a political decision, who gets what and when that is allocated to them. The water supply is now being reduced from being a necessity to being a weapon in the hands of politicians to control the masses. Moreover, the process of authoritative allocation of values allows political interests to find expression even in the cycle of delivery of services that constitute fundamental necessities. As a result, people tend to suffer because of parochial political interests.

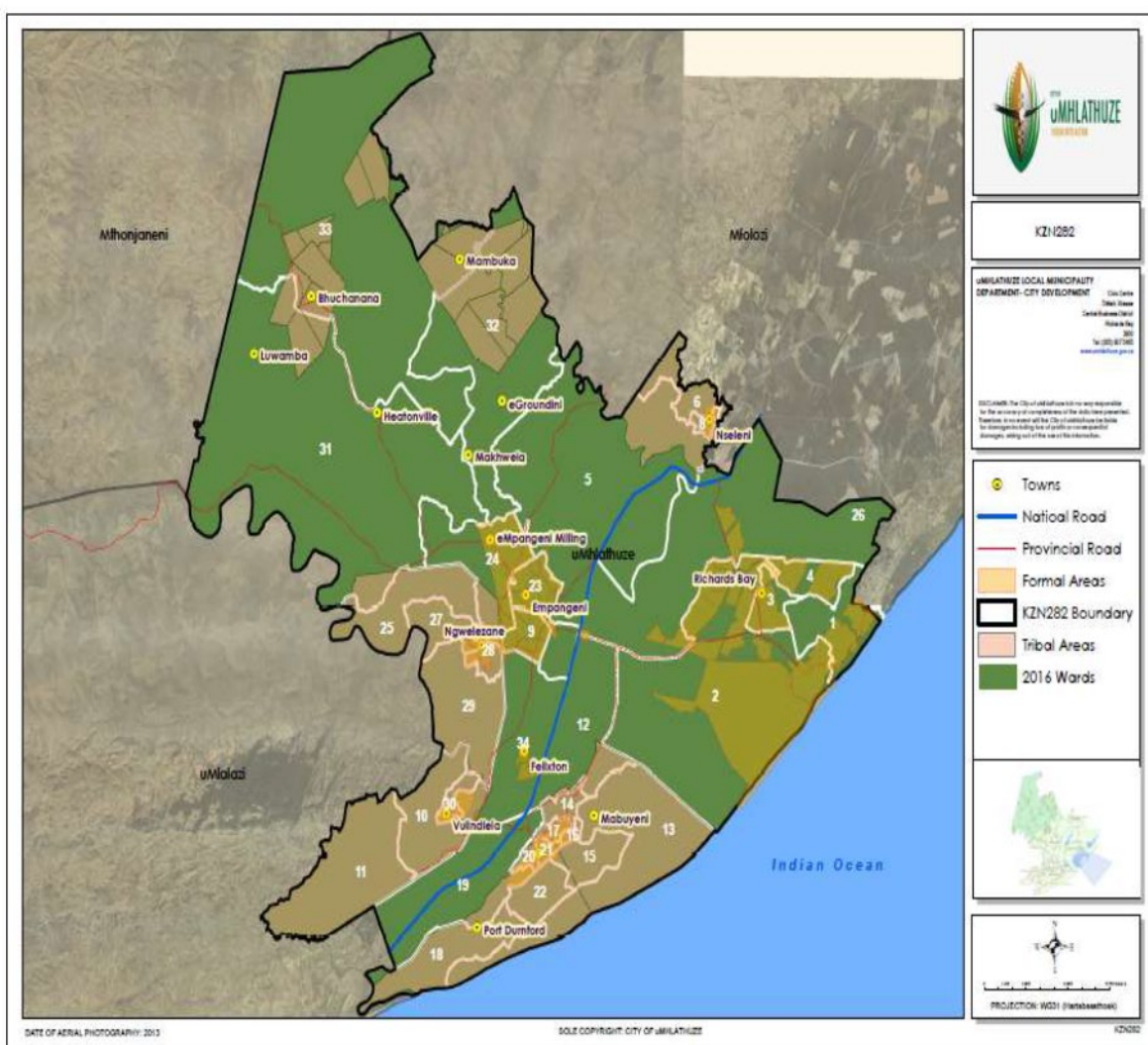
Study Area

The focus of this study is the politicizing of water supply in uMhlathuze Local Municipality that is situated within the King Cetshwayo District Municipality and further investigate other factors that contribute to the water crisis faced by the local communities under this municipality. The city of uMhlathuze is located on the north-east coast of the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This local municipality is made up of the central business district that includes, among others, Richards Bay, Heatonville, eMpangeni and Buchanana. Moreover, it is qualified as one of South Africa's economic zones, where people from various walks of life flock into this area with the sole purpose of eking out a living. Further to it being an industrial zone there are residential areas that the municipality shoulders the responsibility to supply with political goods, inter alia, provision of water supply and proper public health centres. These local residential areas among others include, eNseleni, Esikhaleni, Ngwelezane, Felixton, uMzingazi and Mandlanzini. In addition to these townships there are rural areas that are also expecting uMhlathuze Local

Municipality to supply them with water. These rural communities among others involve KwaDlangezwa, KwaDube, KwaBhejane, kwaMndlebe, Obizo, Buchananana, Somopho, Luhamba and Fatima. Moreover, there are also lavish urban areas of Birdwood, Aquadene, Meer en See in Richards Bay and on the other hand, there is Richem, Panorama, Grantham Park, Nyala Park, Kildare as well as Hillview of eMpangeni.

With all these different residential areas and the industries that serve as the backbone of the economy of uMhlathuze Local Municipality this municipality has a total area of 1196 Kilometer squared. According to the 2022 census the total population of the city of uMhlathuze is estimated to be around 412 075 (Stats SA, 2023). Mnguni (2018) most areas that fall within the demarcation of uMhlathuze Local Municipality are governed both by traditional authorities and the municipality. There are various traditional leaders that play a crucial role in the political terrain of this local municipality. In addition to that for water supply uMhlathuze Local Municipality rely on three dominant sources namely, Lake Nsezi, Lake Mzingazi and Mhlathuze River. However, that is not to trivialize other sources of water that continue to feed the city of uMhlathuze. The distribution and supply of water for personal and domestic purposes is the main responsibility of the municipality.

Figure 1: The Map of uMhlathuze Locality, (Source: Final IDP Review 2028/2019)



Discussion

Access to clean drinkable water remains a fundamental human right. That was further bolstered by the United Nations through the declaration made in the General Assembly that access to clean drinking water is a right for all

humans (United Nations, 2010). The basic human right to water entitles everyone to adequate, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic purposes (2010). Moreover, it was on this ground that equitable access to clean potable water was enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals as the sixth goal. Countries that are committed to the realization and the implementation of the SDGs have taken it upon themselves to make this human right a reality and South Africa is not an exception. As this is also espoused in the South African constitution as one of the human rights. The inclusion of sufficient access to water as one of the human rights enshrined in the republic's constitution is a clear indication that the South African government commits itself to be the primary bearer of the responsibility of providing water for all communities.

However, the provision of water in South African communities tend to be characterized by various conflicting factors. Moreover, these factors are a combination of both natural and human induced activities and the uMhlathuze region is not exempted from these factors that affect the provision of potable water for its local communities. On the one hand, one of the factors that are said to be naturally induced include climate change which among others lead to water shortage and lack of access to clean water. Dietz, Shwom and Whitley (2020: 1) simply defined climate change as “the long-term change in weather, including temperature, precipitation and storm events often as a 30-year average”. Climate change is responsible for erratic weather patterns like droughts and floods. It is these erratic weather patterns that further exacerbate the challenge of insufficient annual rainfall in South Africa affecting the water levels and the ability of the municipality to supply adequate clean and drinking water to local communities.

South Africa is known to be a semi-arid country that receives an annual rainfall of around about 450mm. According to Jury (2021: 1) “the semi-arid climate of South Africa can be traced to the high elevation, a sub-tropical latitude and the inflow of dry air from the South Atlantic”. Insufficient annual rainfall in South Africa contributes immensely to the challenge of lack of water and this is further exacerbated by poor and deteriorating water infrastructure. As the government is unable to collect sufficient water during rainy seasons. The study conducted by Buthelezi, Rawlins, Ilesanmi and Oladejo (2020) reveals that the severity of drought conditions contributes immensely to the low water levels of the lakes and other water sources that feed uMhlathuze Local Municipality. This constantly impacts on the effectiveness of the municipality to provide sufficient water for the local communities that it feeds. The combination of these drastic climatic conditions continues to affect water users and pose health hazards for the surrounding local communities. Moreover, the municipality itself finds it difficult to reconcile the usage of water by industries that are located within its demarcations with individual consumption. The fiasco on the part of the municipality to reconcile these two hinders South African government from meeting the envisaged SDGs more particularly the sixth goal. Thereby compromising the ability of the local communities to enjoy their right to access sufficient clean drinking water.

On the other hand, the undisturbed provision of water in uMhlathuze Local Municipality is made impossible by human induced factors, inter alia, historical inequalities, infrastructural problems, and political factors. Firstly, the infamous history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa bequeathed the democratic dispensation with nothing but the disparaging inequalities within our communities. As this policy of apartheid was deliberately based on racial segregation and according to Mamdani (2001) the biggest sin that civil society committed under colonialism was to introduce racism. The historical inequalities originate from the racist colonial and apartheid era. These historical inequalities are a direct and deliberate outcome of the discriminatory policies that were encouraged by the notorious Pretoria administration. Rural areas suffered the most as there was no investment in rural water infrastructure. The surroundings of uMhlathuze Local Municipality largely rural and township areas were not prioritized in terms of the pipe water. Only those who were able to pay for services were to get water from the government. This racial segregation further induced the element of affordability which reduced water from being a human right to being a privilege that is accorded to those who were able to afford water.

These inequalities continue to be the hallmark of the South African communities even during the contemporary democratic dispensation. Moreover, lack of access to reliable and perennial water apply is directly linked to poverty in most rural areas (Lebek, Twomey and Kruger, 2021). These combined twins, poverty, and lack of access to water cannot be divorced from the social inequalities that were produced by the apartheid system in South Africa. As it has been indicated before that during apartheid era water was only made accessible to those who were able to pay and further to that water infrastructure was only meant to service certain individuals at the exclusion of much of the people. As a result, that left most of the rural residents of uMhlathuze Local Municipality with no choice but to travel long distances to collect water from unreliable sources. Lebek, Twomey and Kruger (2021) in their work put it succinctly that women and children had to walk long distances to get water from compromised sources. This in rural areas does not only compromise their health and cannot be assumed to be an isolated challenge but it is directly linked to poor levels of production. As residents find it increasingly difficult reconcile water collection from remote

sources with the need to produce for themselves. Poor levels of productivity are born out of the reality that water in rural areas is not only meant for consumption but also for production purposes.

Community Dynamics and Social Justice

Community dynamics refer to the various social, economic, and cultural aspects that impact the distribution and accessibility of resources, such as water, within a community (Putnam, 2000). Within the framework of uMhlathuze, the historical consequences of apartheid have resulted in enduring socio-economic inequalities, particularly affecting vulnerable communities that experience the negative consequences of insufficient water infrastructure and service delivery (Bond, 2004). The presence of power disparities within the municipality, frequently based on race and socioeconomic status, intensify existing inequalities, and sustain social injustices (Mchunu & Ndebele-Murisa, 2018). In addition, the communities in uMhlathuze are not simply passive beneficiaries of water services, but rather they actively contribute to the development and implementation of water governance and management. Nevertheless, the presence of power disparities, societal divisions, and past grudges create complexities in community involvement and impede endeavors to advance social equity in water distribution. Disadvantaged groups, such as informal settlements and rural populations, encounter difficulties in obtaining water services and exercising their entitlements, (Simatele, & Simatele, 2015). Also, the politicization of the water supply in uMhlathuze has significant consequences for social justice and governance. Marginalized populations, which lack access to uncontaminated water, experience additional disenfranchisement, hence perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Furthermore, the erosion of faith in government institutions weakens democratic processes and intensifies societal conflicts (Republic of South Africa, 1996). To tackle these difficulties, it is necessary to adopt comprehensive strategies that enable communities, foster openness, and accountability, and give priority to the needs of the most susceptible individuals.

Political Interests and Resource Allocation

The provision of water in uMhlathuze is not solely a matter of technical and management concern, but it is also heavily influenced by political factors. Political factors, such as patronage networks, party politics, and electoral concerns, frequently impact the allocation of resources and decision-making processes for the development and delivery of water infrastructure, (Magadlela & Maserumule, 2016). For example, in KwaDlangezwa when there are water shortages, getting water from the tankers depends on which political party you are aligned within that area and which political leader is called the water tanker. The act of politicizing the water supply worsens existing inequities and hampers efforts to ensure fair and equal access to water for all residents of uMhlathuze. This further infringes on the fundamental human right to have unperturbed access to water for both personal and production purposes. As a result, water is no longer treated as a right, but a privilege strictly reserved for those who have the financial muscle to purchase their access to water.

Considering the afore-discussed degree of inequality within South African communities and in acknowledging that these inequalities are to a larger extent bred by the colonial and further entrenched by the apartheid system, political actors are anticipated to play a unifying and equitable role. However, in the contrary political parties and influential individuals continue to exercise their power to influence the process of water provision within our societies. This in uMhlathuze Local Municipality is exacerbated by the active roles played by both traditional and government authorities. As they are encouraged by our political system to use service delivery as one of the vehicles through which they amass support to gain sufficient votes to send them to government offices. Moreover, this act does not only hinder the government from meeting the envisaged SDGs, but it further polarizes communities, creating divisions along political lines. Thereby compelling residents to become accessories in the very process of infringing their own human right to have access to clean and drinkable water. The interference of parochial political interests is encouraged by the cadre deployment of political parties that are competing within this area. And this political interference gives a bad name to political participation as one of the pillars of democracy. As Masuku and Jili (2019: 6) put it concisely, “the fundamental principle of local democracy is political participation”. However, this vital principle of local democracy is being abused. This violation of political participation plays out in intra and inter party politics. People who are competing for deployment to public offices by their respective political parties tend to engage in activities that will make their competitors look incompetent.

Furthermore, on the one hand, this political game does not only affect residents of the surrounding areas, but it also interrupts businesses and the operations of public institutions like universities and other government offices. Thereby sabotaging production and economic growth within uMhlathuze Local Municipality, which ultimately renders the municipality to be unable to deliver other necessary services. Pointing out one example, recently, the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) was forced to suspend academic activities due to an interrupted water supply.

As students and staff members of the university were unable to perform their duties due to the cut supply of water that persisted for days posing health hazard for the university community. On the other hand, the interrupted supply of water become one among the factors fueling violent service delivery protests in South Africa and uMhlathuze Local Municipality is not an exception. South Africa is known to be a violent country and this violent character of the South African society tend to express itself during service delivery protests. According to Netswera (2014) political violence that influences these violent service delivery protest has its historical roots in apartheid South Africa. However, in the post-apartheid South Africa such protests are fueled by the failure of the government to deliver the anticipated political goods. Political actors within and outside the governing party or parties use this evident failure of the government to supply people with water as an opportunity to advance their political aspirations. As in some instances, they are accused of funding people within the very affected communities to organize these distractive protests. While these political actors only organize water tankers to supply water to those who are affiliated with them or their political parties. This becomes one of the ways through which political actors sabotage each other.

Implications for Sustainable Development

In this study, we define sustainable development by borrowing from different scholars. According to Brundtland and Harlem (1987: 2), “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own”. Mitlin (1992: 112) does not offer a definition of the term, instead he proffers what would be the best way to describe in terms of two components: “the meaning of development (i.e. what are the main goals of development: economic growth, basic needs, and rights etc.) and conditions for sustainability”. Therefore, the adoption of the SDGs by many countries is a clear indication that governments around the world want to improve the lives of their citizens.

Lack of access to potable water compromises the chances of the attainment of the SDGs and ultimately the accomplishment of the envisaged sustainable development. The failure of uMhlathuze Local Municipality to meet its fundamental obligation of providing potable water to its people mirrors what is happening within the majority of metropolitan, district and local municipalities across the country. It should be noted that for one to properly capture the status of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, a clear distinction should be made between levels of service access and population practices. As Hutton and Chase (2016: 4) note, “while all populations meet their water and sanitation needs in some way, it is often not sufficient, reliable, safe, convenient, affordable or dignified”. The problem is further exacerbated by the political influence that is at play when it comes to the provision of basic services such as water. The politicization of water supply in South African municipalities is tantamount to self-sabotage. These trivial politics used for electioneering coupled with the historical inequalities further entrench barriers for the government to meet sustainable development conditions.

The politics of water supply in uMhlathuze has significant consequences for the long-term viability of development in the region. Lack of sufficient access to uncontaminated water degrades the well-being of the general population, hampers economic output, and poses a threat to the long-term viability of the environment (United Nations, 2010). For example, students, staff, learners, and community members are affected when there is no water because they are not able to maintain personal hygiene and that decreases people’s self-esteem. Also, the surrounding clinic is affected even though it has a water tanker. Furthermore, the lack of access to water intensifies social conflicts and adds to the volatility of the political situation, which presents substantial threats to the region’s future development outlook.

Conclusion

To conclude, the case of uMhlathuze Local Municipality highlights the complex interplay between politics, governance, and water provision in South Africa especially when elections are approaching, be it national, provincial, or local elections. Political actors in the area sabotage each other and, in the process, it is the hapless residents who are most affected. Residents are used to start sponsored violent protests and to advance the agendas of certain politicians both at inter and intra political party levels. These man-made dynamics combine with natural problems to drastically affect the distribution of water within uMhlathuze Local Municipality and as such delay the attainment of SDG 6. To tackle the politicization of water, it is necessary to implement extensive reforms that prioritize transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in water governance. Furthermore, to accomplish sustainable water management, it is essential to give priority to social justice, community empowerment, and to ensure that all citizens have access to water. South Africa can only overcome the difficulties of water shortages and inequitable access and achieve its vision of a water-secure and prosperous future for all by taking coordinated action and demonstrating strong political determination.

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