

FUTURE WATER RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM 2017
“Equity and efficiency in allocating water in South Africa
- Challenging attitudes, changing behaviours”

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

A key aim of the Future Water research symposium was to stimulate conversations between and across disciplines in order to use a multi-perspective approach in addressing the current water crisis and achieving water justice. During the afternoon session, participants were divided into seven roundtable groups, each with their own topic to discuss in relation to the overall theme of ‘equity and efficiency in allocating water in SA’. Some of the key points that arose from the discussions centred around issues of management, behaviour and responsibility and are highlighted below.

Management

The City of Cape Town is dealing with the dual crisis of mitigating water scarcity whilst also still ensuring that all of its residents have access to adequate sanitation and clean water. In addition to diversifying sources of water, successfully meeting the demand for water will require *measurement* of current water use, *prioritisation* of water use, and making this *information* accessible to all stakeholders.

Measurement: who is using water, how much and for what purpose? Who could use less, and who does not have enough? We need to better understand needs in order to inform how we regulate water. Stricter regulations – as well as public recognition – should both incentivise water-sensitivity and penalise high consumption.

Prioritisation of water use: An example is the case of the tourism industry which brings in significant revenue and employment. Yet at what point does the cost of tourism outweigh the benefits, particularly if tourists are not being held to the same standards as locals? These questions cannot be answered until we know how much water the industry is actually using.

Information: A critique of the current management of the water crisis is that information has not been transparent, consistent or urgent enough, leading to a slow response and an inability to meet maximum daily consumption targets. All sectors need to be clearly informed about what they can – and must – actively do in order to be more water sensitive.

Behaviour

Changing the way we think about water as a society is equally critical to good management and regulation. We need to rethink how we perceive, value and use water and to understand who (and what) needs water to survive (and this goes far beyond human requirements). We need to do away with the ‘flush and forget’ mentality, rooted in a culture of convenience and excess; to reimagine our relationships with water and waste. Thus part of introducing strict regulations around water would be to change the way water is valued in order to create a new norm of water sensitivity.

The discussions also suggested that we need to rethink the notion of ‘fit-for-purpose’ with regard to our water usage; i.e. we need to change our perception of what ‘polluted / waste water means’ and to rather shift our gaze towards its potential for use. In order to more effectively allocate water, we

could reclassify sources in terms of their uses, such as effluent, potable, domestic use and resource recovery, thus reframing the meaning of “usable” water.

It's everyone's responsibility

Every person, business and industry should take responsibility for addressing water insecurity. Knowing how much one uses – whether an individual, a household, a business or an industry as a whole – is an important first step to becoming accountable. The bigger the impact, the greater one's responsibility should be; it is thus ironic that it is often indigent communities who are targeted with ‘water sensitive’ sanitation interventions when these are far from being the highest water users.

Similarly, it was suggested that big water users and water polluters, such as mining corporations should be required to put in place treatment infrastructure for pollution such as acid mining drainage and wetland construction, in order to protect environmental and ecological diversity as well as the health and water access of local communities. Mines should further have the responsibility of rehabilitating areas after closing down to mitigate the long-term negative impacts that they often have on communities and the environment. Similar steps should be taken by other industries such as manufacturing and agriculture.

Concluding remarks

The roundtables enabled lively, fruitful discussions that saw people from many fields engaging, brainstorming and thinking together through the challenges we currently face. This was a positive start to a long journey towards water security in South Africa. As was well articulated by one of the tables: *“Everyone should feel responsible and accountable in a water sensitive culture.”* Nothing should be taken for granted.