

## Personal Stories of Change

### Hameda Deedat: A perspective from an NGO representative

*“No matter how staunch the two positions are, when you bring them together in a space which allows both parties to express themselves – a space that is trusting, respectful and confidential – then learning and thorough engaging as a result of the dialogue happens.”*



**Hameda became involved in the South Africa Water Dialogues through her participation in the SAWC (which Jessica Wilson, a founding member of The Water Dialogues, is also a member) and approached the initiative as a way of addressing the issue of universal water provision.**

The SAWC is a loose network, established in 2002, just before the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The focus of the SAWC is water and sanitation services and water resources, including climate change, dam-affected-communities and forestry. The approach of the members of the SAWC, which is open to both organisations and individuals, is informed by the SAWC’s eight guiding principles.\*

“The invitation [to join the South Africa Water Dialogues] came at a time when the South African municipal or local government sector was embracing the dominant economic paradigm of neoliberalism,” Hameda says, “which ironically incorporated the phrase ‘sustainable development’. The Water Dialogues, as a process, if South Africa agreed, would create a valuable space to discuss this process. Since 2003, the SAWC has managed to establish good relations with the Minister of Water Affairs.

“Subsequently, a budget was put aside by the various ministers of the department to meet caucus members at least four times a year. The caucus had not managed to do this over the previous four years due to the unwillingness of the previous water minister. Nevertheless, the opportunity to meet and discuss critical issues with the minister and senior officials from the Department of Water provided the space to dialogue and raise serious issues affecting communities on the ground nationally.”

\* The Caucus manifesto:

1. Water and sanitation are human rights. All people are entitled to have access to water to meet their basic human needs, and rural communities are entitled to water for productive use to sustain their livelihoods.
2. Water management must be accountable to communities at a local level.
3. We respect the integrity of ecosystems as the basis for all life – both human and nature – with an emphasis on maintaining river ecosystems and groundwater resources.
4. We reject the commodification and privatisation of water services and sanitation, and water resources.
5. Further, we reject the role of the USA, the other G8 countries and Trans-National Corporations for their role in pushing privatisation and commodification.
6. We reject the UN WSSD process and outcomes so far, as nothing more than structural adjustment of the South. We therefore resolve to work together with social movements to realise an alternative vision.
7. We reject NEPAD and the plans for water in NEPAD as not being sustainable. It is structural adjustment by Africa for Africa. In particular we reject the privatisation of water and the hydropower focus. We commit ourselves to building a mass movement for the reconstruction and sustainable development of Africa.
8. We undertake to educate and raise awareness and to mobilise communities towards the WSSD

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For Hameda, the concept of dialogue as an important tool for advocacy to advance the rights of the poor had already been established and the idea of doing this in a more comprehensive manner, with all stakeholders, required no motivation.

As a researcher whose focus was on local government services, The Water Dialogues could not have come at a more opportune moment for Hameda. “The timing, being at the height of the deeply polarised public-privatisation debate, was perfect. At this time, the middle ground appeared never to be explored between the two sides. The possibilities of actual dialoguing with a range of stakeholders with conflicting ideologies, within a long-term process, was not even conceived. South Africa is still largely run by local government, with a few examples of management contracts or concessions. Most of the outsourcing contracts are to either public institutions or local private entities, which include service providers from communities that operate like private companies. Evidence of the commercialisation and commodification of service are thus evident everywhere regardless of whether foreign corporations are present or not.

“For South Africa, mere discussion or dialogue about private versus public was not as critical as the discussion of the institutional arrangements, which in itself, allowed the plethora of options used in South Africa for service delivery to be explored.”

As far as Hameda is concerned, her expectations of the Dialogue were shaped by the existence of its two divergent ideological positions. “If they remain separate, then the existence or possibility of shift or learning is non-existent. No matter how staunch the two positions are, when you bring them together in a space which allows both parties to express themselves – a space that is trusting, respectful and confidential – then learning and thorough engaging as a result of the dialogue happens.

“My minimalist expectation was that an exchange of these ideologies and a process of learning from each other would happen. A more high level expectation was that through the discussion and engagement, I would be prompted to review my position [and] develop varying degrees of tolerance for the different views, to the point where I might be open to accepting that other institutional arrangements [in the interim ensuring effective and efficient service delivery by the public sector] be given consideration”.

Overall, the Water Dialogues experience has been extremely positive for Hameda. “It has been an amazing three and a half year process. I did research for the municipal services project funded by IDRC, David McDonald and Greg Ruiters, being directors, and SAMWU being a major partner, as well as PSI and CUPE. The MSP research is known to be controversial and several debates between senior DWAF officials and McDonald – around the findings of some research – ended up in newspapers. So it moved from an arena of debate to dialogue – through the SA-WD.”

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Hameda describes some of the highlights of the Water Dialogue process and experience:

- *Penny and Jessica were instrumental in ensuring that the Code of Conduct was developed and signed. In fact, participation was subject to signing the Code of Conduct. Now some Working Group members might not share this view, but for me, having this really augmented relations and peoples' commitment and created the ethos of trust and openness that is required if one is to have or attain true and meaningful dialogue.*
- *I would also like to express appreciation to and acknowledge our Coordinator Mary Galvin who created the space that enabled individuals to articulate opposing positions, allowing contradictory perspectives to be aired... pushing boundaries. Her openness and willingness to bring in outside facilitators for both the process stuff as well as the content adds to her credit. Also, as a Coordinator, Mary managed the different positions and created spaces when they were needed, pushed individuals if and when needed, and in doing so, ensured engagements were cordial and respectful. This meant that all views, minority and majority were expressed and noted. The combination of all of this really brought the dialogues together.*
- *Another highlight was when members from different sectors and stand-points agreed that it is ineffective to do cost recovery for households using 20kl or less. This is a position I had come to in 2000; and to hear them say it (even though it was in the context of a WD discussion) seven years later, was both refreshing and indeed well worth the wait.*
- *A major learning for me as part of the dialogues is that as activists and researchers, and those delivering the service, the issue is public versus private; but for the people on the ground who have been without a tap for 10 years, the issue is the tap and they don't see beyond that. I have learnt to nuance my discussions in a way that will bring the tap closer and sooner without compromising my position – once again, as a result of the dialogue.*
- *Another realisation is the extent to which government processes are clouded by political agenda – sometimes even the Water Service Authority has their hands tied.*