

Personal Stories of Change

Jessica Wilson: A perspective from an environmental NGO representative

“At national level, the strong relationships built within the National Working Group, as well as a shared commitment to improving service delivery, mean that members can support each other in new initiatives and draw on each other’s expertise as necessary.”



Jessica Wilson works with the Environmental Monitoring Group, a Cape Town based NGO. Its water-related work includes piloting innovative community-led initiatives to tackle unaccounted for water and poor service delivery and support for civil society organisations seeking to influence and engage with national water policy. Jessica writes:

International beginnings

“Phantsi Privatisation!” reverberates from streets across the world. Inside closed rooms, promises are made allowing private companies to provide water, in exchange for financial loans to national governments. The people in the street and the people in the rooms do not talk – never mind listen – to each other. And service delivery suffers. This was presented as the problem when I first got involved in The Water Dialogues. It was February 2004, at Chartfield Guest House, and an international scoping study had just been completed by Penny Urquhart and Deborah Moore.

Activists, bureaucrats, policymakers, service providers, workers and others involved in water supply and sanitation in many different countries agreed that a multistakeholder review of the private sector’s participation in water and sanitation services would be beneficial. The underlying assumption was that water services would improve if the controversy was lessened. A big meeting, with all views represented, was held in Berlin in June 2004 to confirm this and decide on a way forward.

Some of us in civil society were sceptical. Wasn’t controversy a good thing? It is, after all, one of civil society’s tactics to ask difficult questions and to get people to see that there is more than one side to a story. Would sitting round the table with profiteers really help realise each person’s right to water? We decided to caucus the day before the Berlin meeting. This in itself was controversial. If we were involved in a multistakeholder process, how could we meet separately? And there was the age-old question: who constituted civil society? A brief attempt was made to exclude trade unions but in the end we all gathered and thrashed out our concerns. We agreed that it was critical for us to be involved. There were many reasons why, not least of which was to make our voices heard.

At the Berlin multistakeholder meeting it was decided that the review would go ahead through national processes that feed into an international process. Two concerns of particular interest to civil society were incorporated – the human right to water; and the need to look at public sector reforms (not just the private sector). As civil society participants, we issued a statement in support of participation, which also said:

Jessica Wilson: A perspective from an environmental NGO representative *cont.*

It was crucial to have a review that will not serve as a mechanism to legitimise the role of the major global water companies in providing water services. It was crucial to ensure that the human right to water was recognised as a key point and in order to undertake a purposeful review we expected commitments by participants from all private, public sector and development policy to give full access to information, data, calculations, contracts etc. We attended, keeping in mind that the problem of access to water is only part of the overall crisis in the sector, which involves serious ecological threats and lack of sustainable water policies.

The framework for the international process was defined. Civil society was in support. It was time to see if South Africa wanted to be involved.

South Africa establishes a national process

The South African Water Caucus (SAWC) held its Biannual General Meeting at Salt Rock, KwaZulu Natal, in November 2004. Liane Greeff (EMG) introduced The Water Dialogues (at the time called the PSP Review) to the SAWC and at a public meeting at the Centre for Civil Society, University of KZN. After a healthy discussion, the SAWC decided to participate. We were not yet sure to what process.

During this time, Penny Urquhart and I talked to other key players to see whether they would participate in a South African process. Most had been interviewed for the scoping study and a handful had attended the Berlin meeting. This helped people feel it was their process from the very start, and most were keen to get involved.

In February 2005, at the national Regulation Conference, I cornered the Director General of DWAF. “Does DWAF support South Africa being one of the case study countries?” I asked, “and if yes, would they host a meeting of all stakeholders?” “Yes” and “yes,” he said, and then introduced me to a DWAF person who would arrange all. (She did not look that impressed!) With this political support, we were able to organise what was to become our first National Working Group meeting. It was held on 10 March 2005. And the diversity of views represented was fantastic.*

The next year and a half can perhaps best be described as a trust building exercise. The National Working Group met every two to three months. There was enormous commitment, despite the slowness and lack of substance in our discussions. No one took the lead and this ensured that all participants felt equal and were not being used to promote someone else’s agenda. Instead – across different stakeholder groups, including the trade unions, NGOs, private sector, national and local government, water utilities and research institutions – we collectively shaped the process. We developed a code of conduct to guide our participation, a problem statement to focus our research, a set of questions that we would like the research to answer and a project proposal. All of these took some negotiation. The process helped us to better understand each other’s concerns. Disagreements were not always between traditional “enemies”; agreements not always between traditional “allies”.

* Participants were from Anti-Privatisation Forum, City of Johannesburg, DWAF, EMG, Johannesburg Water Management, Mvula Trust, SA Water Caucus, SAMWU, and Water and Sanitation Services – South Africa (WSSA). Since then, APF and City of Johannesburg have decided not to participate in the Working Group. Additional members are: Bloem Water, eThekweni Municipality, SALGA, Water Research Commission, and Water Information Network.

Jessica Wilson: A perspective from an environmental NGO representative *cont.*

By October 2006, we had funds from Irish Aid and a full time paid Ccoordinator (Mary Galvin). We breathed a collective sigh of relief. The project could begin in earnest. It would be a combination of dialogue and research. Dialogue we were beginning to understand – albeit on process not substantive issues; research was yet to begin. Mary led the way. She took our agreed problem statement and questions and put together a research framework. The research would be based on case studies. This was debated in the working group and at a broader multistakeholder forum. We met as civil society the day before the forum to discuss how The Water Dialogues could be most useful to us, and what we could offer. Again, as civil society, we concluded it was a process worth participating in.

Going local – and back to global

By August 2007, data had been collected in three pilot case study areas – Ilembe (aka Dolphin Coast), Ugu and Bushbuck-Ridge. The Working Group met and had its first dialogue based on substantive issues. It became clear there was a lot to talk about. It also became clear that things could be improved at a local level. The Water Dialogues had enough credibility through its membership and process to be taken seriously. This meant it was possible for problems that had been deadlocked for some time to be addressed.

Around the time of the local case studies, I started worrying. (I'd been worrying all along, but I had a new worry!) How was the work we were doing in South Africa going to influence (or be influenced by) the “international consensus”? I use the word “consensus” to describe the mind-frame within which most influential people make decisions about water services delivery. In 2001, when the need for The Water Dialogues was first articulated, the “Washington Consensus” dominated. The Washington Consensus is not much liked by activists the world over because it tries to rationalise decisions through a narrow economic mindset that ignores human beings and the environment in favour of financial efficiency. It creates a comfortable world for business. By 2007, the “consensus” was shifting. Not only that, but the nature and operations of multi-national water companies was changing.

I raised my worry with our National Working Group and took it to a meeting of the International Working Group in August 2007. We were fortunate to have the support of an excellent academic panel. They updated us on international trends and we had some useful discussions. But the question remains a difficult one to answer: How does what we are learning from Ilembe, Ugu and Bushbuck Ridge and other places where we will do research, influence macro decisions on participation, financing, trade and technology? And how does a person's experience of poor service delivery influence the way a trade negotiator thinks?

What impact has WD-SA had?

Essentially, the changes emerging from the process sit at two levels – local and national. At a local level, where the case studies were conducted, there is the opportunity to influence specific aspects of service delivery that are not working. This was evident in Ilembe where the responsibility for servicing “full-up” pit-latrines was denied by all, and our research helped

Jessica Wilson: A perspective from an environmental NGO representative *cont.*

move things forward. In Cape Town, the multistakeholder backing of our research was crucial in engaging the local government who were initially outraged at the findings presented.

At national level, the strong relationships built within the National Working Group, as well as a shared commitment to improving service delivery, mean that members can support each other in new initiatives and draw on each other's expertise as necessary. They also operate as a background resource and support at all times to its members, who can call upon other members at any time and trust them to be operating for the same principles of wanting to solve and make better, rather than discredit and embarrass simply for the sake of doing so. Our research has shown that nationally the problems around service delivery tend to be issues of governance rather than only around water directly.

There is a proposal by a core of the Working Group to engage with those already considering the best way to foster ongoing dialogue around local government, to ensure that the reality on the ground reflects the good intentions of policy and ensure that policy or implementation strategies are based on what is actually happening.

There have been process-based and research-based highlights. One of the main ones for me emerged when we analysed the Ugu case study. Ugu is seen as a success story – it is one of the best municipalities in terms of the rate of progress made in addressing backlogs, and scored well in the national benchmarking study. Nevertheless, it still has major backlogs. Because most people in Ugu are relatively poor, there will never be enough money locally to finance roll-out and maintenance of services. Thus, even though there are competent staff and the municipality is determined to do the right thing, there is a fundamental divide between the policy objectives and available finance, which will effectively stop them from providing water for all at the level that is promised and expected. There is a clear disconnect being ignored and no one wishes to hear otherwise. The Water Dialogues helped articulate the reality – that current financing mechanisms are not sufficient to get water to all at the levels expected. Either we must find more money or drop our expectations of service levels; this is the debate. (And we shouldn't forget that money is only part of the picture, many other things need to be in place as well.)

I believe it is time to face reality – to face up to the fact that in poor municipalities it is not enough to expect that people can pay for services. This is an issue for public debate and for open dialogue involving those who do and do not get water.

Without doubt, The Water Dialogues has taught me that if I want someone to understand my point of view, I have to understand theirs. If I want someone to know why I think pre-paid water metres are unacceptable, I have to understand why they think they are a good idea. And through this conversation, subtle shifts take place that make me believe environmental justice, ecological integrity, sustainable development and participatory democracy are possible when providing each of us with the water that we need.