

## **The Water Dialogues' genesis and aim**

Worldwide, more than one billion people lack a safe water supply, while two and a half billion have no access to sanitation. To remedy this situation some actors have promoted the involvement of the private sector in service delivery, while others have opposed this, maintaining that public delivery is preferable, and that no profit should be made from water services. Internationally, this conflict is having a significant negative impact on progress in delivering services.

During the 2001 International Conference on Freshwater in Bonn, a multi-stakeholder working group was established to oversee an international scoping process on water and the private sector. This was born out of fundamental disagreements by water sector stakeholders on the value and effects of private sector participation in water service delivery. In 2004, the German Government sponsored an international stakeholder workshop in Berlin to further discuss the potential for a review. The majority of the participants agreed that a multi-stakeholder review of water supply and sanitation was needed, stating:

*The overarching goal of a multi-stakeholder review is to contribute to making progress towards achieving for the poor the human right of affordable and sustainable access to water and sanitation, and to attain the long-term goals of universal access and poverty eradication.*

The interest of South Africans at this meeting was sparked, and they returned to South Africa to organise a meeting, convened by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) in March 2005. A Working Group was formed and The Water Dialogues-South Africa began. It turned around the question asked by the International Working Group to consider what was required to make the public sector work effectively. Within this broader question, it then set out to explore what role, if any, the private sector could play to facilitate more effective service delivery.

Its first steps were to formulate and agree on a Code of Conduct (see inside front cover) and the following problem statement:

***Municipalities in South Africa face many challenges in meeting the constitutional requirements to ensure effective, equitable and sustainable delivery of water supply and sanitation provided affordably to all. This is taking into account the highly skewed distribution of wealth, service provision and water resources. In the efforts to address these challenges a number of different approaches to service delivery, including commercial approaches and private sector participation, have been used.***

***The Water Dialogues-South Africa provides the opportunity to create a constructive dialogue to identify, critically analyse and evaluate these approaches, leading to greater understanding of service delivery models. It is envisaged that this understanding will lead to more effective service delivery models to contribute to universal supply of safe water and sanitation.***

WD-SA was unique for a few reasons: It explored this problem statement, in a context much wider than direct policy or implementation questions, and deepened stakeholders' understanding of issues through in-depth research in eight case study areas. It also created a space for the involvement of a range of key players, notably including both municipal and private sector water service providers (WSPs) and unions, as well as advocacy civil society organisations (CSOs). Furthermore, WD-SA was not driven by any one player nor led by any one grouping.



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Through The Water Dialogues-South Africa, a wide range of stakeholders in the water sector embarked on research in eight local areas of the country as a basis for their engagement in “confrontative dialogue”.

Confrontative dialogue is a “transformative oriented method for improved understanding between partners whose relationship is asymmetric and characterised by important conceptual gaps and strong mistrust” (Abrahamsson, 2004). It requires that all parties are aware of the aim of the dialogue: to make diverging values and interests visible and understandable, and to illuminate political alternatives.

This report synthesizes findings from the WD-SA case studies and proposes actions to address the key challenges identified. WD-SA’s full research reports and DVD can be viewed on its website.