The struggle for water: The river (Umngeni) we have lost to the dam (Inanda)

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abstract

This perspective is a personal account of how life in rural communities along the Umngeni river in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, has changed over the past few decades due to the ‘development’ of and around the Inanda Dam. The author draws from experiences of women of three rural areas affected by the development of the dam – Maqadini, KwaNgcolosi and Maphephetheni – and investigates what this has meant for access to clean water in these communities. Moreover, this perspective reviews the importance of people-centred development and how this strategy can support women in using their local knowledge for the development of their communities.

keywords

Water, Inanda Dam, people-centred development, access to information, rural areas

Introduction and overview

This paper is based on my personal observations and informal interviews when working closely with rural women from Maphephetheni, KwaNgcolosi and Maqadini, three rural areas on the periphery of South Africa’s east coast province Kwa-Zulu Natal. I examine how lack of access to information places limits on rural women in relation to getting clean running water for their households.

I argue that patriarchal social structures, lack of information and popular education have negatively affected rural women’s ability to secure and access clean running water for their dwellings, which further increases the burden on women, most of whom already struggle to ensure the well-being of all members of their households.

This is the story of how the families of the rural areas of Maphephetheni, KwaNgcolosi and Maqadini lost a river they had depended upon for many years, in fact many decades. The river was
lost in the name of ‘development’ and the people were left with less access to water.

The Umgeni River had always been an important resource of food and water for many residents of the adjacent rural areas. In 1936, a colonial observer, Thomas Green, described the river in its pre-dam state: ‘Everything was primitive, the hands of a man had not defaced it, it was like a sheet of silver, the home of white fowl that man had never frightened’.1

The river was a place where women went to fetch water, do their washing and gossip about their long-gone husbands working in the big cities. It was where young girls went after completing their household chores, especially on Saturday afternoons, where they met to talk about girl stuff. It was a place where young boys and grandfathers took the livestock to graze and drink after eating the grass and to cool themselves in the running water while boys taught each other stick fighting (ukungcweka).

Within the river there were areas where one did not go because it was said that there lived a big snake that made the river sacred. There were also places where one got the cleanest water, which ran through stones and which brought health and cleanliness to every door. It was a place where our grandfathers and grandmothers made us believe that the waters’ spirits united the living and the dead. They convinced us that the waters of the undisturbed river heal.

Ceremonies were conducted in this river several times a year, including umsenga (the reed dance of young girls), tributes to uNomkhubulwane (Goddess of Water) and weddings. Besides all this, the water was used for bathing, cleansing certain
spirits, washing, watering fields and gardens and for animals.

‘The chief knows we are here’
The above phrase indicates none or very little communication between outsiders, the municipality, tribal authorities and the people of the communities. In the case of the development of the Inanda Dam in the 1970s and 1980s, the community had very little – if no – opportunity to get involved. The only communication that took place was a top-down consultation by an inkosi (chief) whereby the chief called an imbizo (gathering) to which only the men of the community were invited. Women were excluded from consultations due to patriarchal rural politics.

Although the chief – who had been in talks with the municipality – communicated during imbizos with members of the community, true consultation did not take place. Imbizos solely fulfil the function of gathering support from indunas (headmen) and informing the community. There is no meaningful participation from the congregation or room for questioning or disagreement. It is my belief that the communities around the Inanda Dam would have had little or no complaints of being ‘sold out’ – as they claim nowadays – if they had been properly consulted on the matter.

They always gave her the same answer: ‘Do not worry, mama, the chief knows we are here’

Personally, I only heard about the plans to build a dam because, after the meeting, a male friend told me about the imbizos proceedings and noted that he was not happy about it but was unable to challenge the chief. When my mother later asked my father what happened during the meeting, he only answered ‘Akuyona indaba yabafazi le’ (‘This is not a woman’s business’). Yet, we knew that my father was very unhappy about the development, too.

My father’s statement is an indication of the strong patriarchal belief and dominance in rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal and other parts of the country, which led to important questions being ignored: What about our livestock? What about our houses? Where are we going to be moved to?

‘The chief knows’, ‘The people have spoken’ – these are often-used phrases in rural South African communities, and they always mean one and the same thing: agreements get signed without people exactly knowing what is going to happen to their lives. One example is the building of the Inanda Dam. When women asked what the white men with instruments were doing in the area, the answer was ‘the chief knows we are here’. This statement indicates that the community is not important since they have representation through inkosi who deals with the municipality and businesses directly, on behalf of the entire community.

A few years after the meeting, in the late 1970s, a group of white men was noticed carrying surveying instruments which we did not understand into the community. People were not aware of why this was the case but at first appreciated seeing whites in the area, thinking this would help the development of their community. I remember this incident because our house was built near the road and had many good shade trees under which the strangers used to relax, take their lunch breaks and socialise with young herd boys.

When the whites came to build the Inanda Dam, it was usually during the week when only the mothers were at home. The men were at work and returned only on weekends. My mother spoke a little bit of English, and when the white men asked for permission to sit under the tree that was in the family yard, she asked them what they were there for. They always gave her the same answer: ‘Do not worry, mama, the chief knows we are here.’

Since then, the Umngeni River has been under ‘development’ – and this development has brought us to where we are today, in a situation where
communities, unlike in the 1970s, have insufficient water supply. We used to have gardens near the river where we planted vegetables like cabbage, spinach, turnips, potatoes and amadumbe (root vegetable). We used to fish in the river.

Today, fishing in the river is not allowed, the natural vegetation of certain trees as died down and people have stopped to plant gardens because there is not enough water. The few gardens that have survived struggle to produce vegetables due to lack of water and depleted soils. We were dependent on this river to water our gardens.

Today, we are living in a state of poverty.

A large number of families were removed, especially those who were near the place where the dam was going to be built. Entire families were moved into one roomed tin houses. It did not matter how many members you have in your family, whether two or ten. This happened with little or no compensation for imfuyo (livestock) because there was an agreement between the inkosi, the big companies involved in building the dam and the apartheid government, which was in power at that time.

The families left behind were destitute. Some of them, who could not be relocated because they had larger herds of livestock, had to build new houses. But the water they needed for their animals started to shrink. When we lost the river, we lost it all. We had not paid for water then and were dependent solely upon the river for water supply.

These days, water and sanitation issues are high on both the international and the South African agendas. The South African constitution,
in section 27.1.b, guarantees all citizens access to water. Both in the national and international policy environment there is recognition of water being essential to human survival and, hence, policy stipulations on basic water include the adoption of the following principles:


c) An adequate amount of safe water is necessary to prevent death from de-hydration, reduce risk of water related diseases and provide for consumption cooking, personal and domestic hygienic requirements (United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ART 15 of 2002).

d) A minimum quantity of portable water of 20 litres per person per day or six kilolitres per household per month at minimum flow rate of not less than ten litres per minute within 200 meters of a household (South African Water Service Act, Reg 3 of 1997).

Although we have rights to water declared on paper, the reality looks very different for many South Africans.

**Challenging unequal development paradigms**

Many of the women from Maqadini, KwaNgcolosi and Maphephetheni I have been in conversation with have pointed out that information about the development of the Inanda Dam which has affected the Umgeni River was not shared with them. Most ‘development’ that has taken place around improving water infrastructure and facilitating community access to clean running water has been driven by state-owned businesses, in this case Umgeni Water, and choices made at municipal level have simply been communicated to communities as *faits accomplis*.

Most of the women are fully aware that the central drive for building the dam and installing service utilities was the aim to make profit out of water. The Durban eThekwini municipality, to which these rural areas belong, has, after apartheid, adopted a privatised and commercialised model for the delivery of municipal services, such as water and sanitation, as is now the case with most municipalities across the country.

In a recent report on South African’s access to clean water, Haffejee et al (2007) argue that ‘in a country where poverty is rife, where there is soaring unemployment, where there is a massive housing backlog and where hunger is a daily reality, it is unrealistic to expect poor people to purchase, in advance, a basic good such as water’. These facts seem not be taken into account by the municipality.

At some point in the process of building the dam, the Durban Metro Water Services (DMWS), now renamed eThekwini Water Services (EWS), suggested installing standpipes3 in people’s yards. The municipality explained to community members that they would not have to walk several kilometres to the river anymore – they would gain easy access to clean running water directly within their yards. Community members jumped at the idea without being made aware of or understanding the consequences of such an installation. No mention was made of costs involved.

When the municipality installed the 200 litre tanks in people’s yards we had to dig our own trenches to get it, otherwise your house would not have a tank in the yard. After the initial euphoria, many women were unhappy with the 200 litre water drums installed by EWS, which limit water usage per household to 200 litres per day.

Key to this is the observation that, prior to the installation of these drums, communities had
greater access to water through the river which they have been using for centuries as their main water source, and water usage was not limited to a certain amount. Back then, the community did not have to suffer water shortages, and many women of the community believed that God gave the river that has nurtured the plant and animal life of Maphephetheni, KwaNgcolosi and Maqadini as a gift to their communities.

Suddenly, after some months, the water was cut off and people did not understand why. Eventually the municipality’s water department communicated that people were cut off because they hadn’t paid for the water. After there were still no payments forthcoming from the communities – due to widespread poverty and unemployment, people did not have the funds to pay their water bills – the municipality decided to introduce a six kilolitre system, which provides households with six kilolitres of water per day free of charge.

This move was termed ‘community development’ in rural areas and was promoted as helping women who used to walk long distances to fetch water. As a trade-off, it became rural people’s reality to have only a limited amount of water available to them each day. Others, whose households are not part of the six kilolitre scheme, have to purchase water from their neighbours for 50 cents in 25 litre canisters or find another alternative.

There is a need for further reflection on the water situation in these rural areas. Firstly, I would like to highlight the fact that there were already standpipes along the gravel roads pre-1994, which had been installed during apartheid. These were especially used by families that lived far away from the river as well as by school children and some visitors (tourists) to these rural areas.

Now, in our new democratic South Africa, water seems to shrink. We are faced with regular cut-offs – a situation that remains without explanation.
from the side of the municipality. Basically, the municipality provides each household in the three rural areas around the Inanda Dam with six kilolitres of running water. When the six kilolitres are used up before the end of the day, the pipes will run empty and families will have to wait until the next day to access water again.

What also remains unclear (and unexplained) is what happens if a family does not use up its six kilolitres – the drums fill up the next day without the family being able to ‘safe’ the unused litres from the previous day. Another disturbing issue is that, when water is cut off for technical reasons, the amount of water that goes unused for this period is not being replaced to community members or added onto the next day’s supply.

It has been a tough realisation that ‘community development’ comes in many forms and, unfortunately, it is not left up to the communities to choose what kind of a ‘development’ they prefer. Initiatives are planned at the top, on municipal level, and implemented without giving community members the opportunity to voice their opinions and input into the planning.

Conclusion
In the history of human development, communication is one of the corner stones for collective human survival. In Africa, indigenous knowledge systems are usually transmitted through cultural and social relations of peoples and remain highly relevant to people living in the so-called rural areas.

Regrettably, in patriarchal rural societies, most contacts are made with men, while women, even if they are knowledgeable, are generally ignored. In the case of the development of the Inanda Dam, for instance, women were either too shy to speak, and those who were willing to speak were not allowed to voice their opinion nor to ask questions (‘the chief knows we are here’). Yet these are the same women who spend most of their time as heads of households, looking after children, tending to livestock and do the farming and gardening to provide for their families.

Generally speaking, women carry out most of the work in rural communities, despite the fact that most of them are not educated. Lack of education puts them at great disadvantage, however, as lack of access to information prevents many rural women from keeping in touch with a changing world. It is often the case that people who are not educated only receive selected and second-hand information. Yet information is a fundamental aspect of development. It allows people to gain knowledge about important issues that affect their lives.

Indigenous knowledge and information structures are highly relevant to people living in rural areas. It has also been argued that women should be involved from the outset in decisions concerning their communities and lives. Critical consciousness and self-consciousness must be encouraged to ensure that women value their own experiences and opinions in evaluating information and generating knowledge. Women must have confidence in themselves at their local knowledge systems if they are to participate in their development.

More than 20 years after the Inanda Dam was built, after many visits from water ministers and officials and after lobbying the World Commission on Dams⁴, the three communities have not been compensated for their losses occurred when the dam was built. This is called ‘development’. But it is, really, the loss of a river, a way of life, a source of survival and our very dignity.

Notes
1 More information on historical facts and descriptions of the Umgeni River are available from the South African River Health Programme at www.csir.co.za/hp/state_of_rivers/state_of_umgeni_02/history.html.
2 The Inanda Dam was completed in 1988, some 32 kilometres from the Umgeni river mouth.
3 Standpipes are a type of rigid water piping, which are built in a vertical position to a hose can be connected. The standpipe is filled with water and is pressurised at all times.
In response to a growing opposition to large dams, the World Commission on Dams (WCD) was established by the World Bank and The World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 1998. Its mandate was to review the development effectiveness of large dams and assess alternatives for water resources and energy development. The commission’s final report was released in November 2000.

References
The City Empties Itself

The city empties itself
of all those I love
until this place is strange again
and I a stranger in it

There is little else to do
but await my own departure
riding out these last days
on the sad buses
that moan through the streets
I will no longer need the names for

I unmap this country from myself
and soon I will be home.

Home
and from the air
this place is more beautiful
than any other I have seen
the plane dips over the sea
we’re landing
and a thousand thousand
tiny coloured houses
lurid green and pink and orange
seem to lift up into the air

down and down
I am returned
to the hungry and the sick

and the children in the street
and the children in the street
and the children in the street

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