

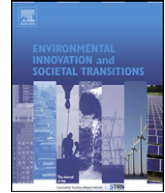


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# Transition in South African water governance: Insights from a perspective on power

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### ABSTRACT

After apartheid, South Africa has stepped up to the challenge of reforming an inequitable water service delivery system to meet the needs of all citizens. We frame this systematic societal change as a transition in water governance. We argue that when evaluating this pathway of transition, we should not only look at the changes in water legislation and number with improved access, but also analyze the quality of the water service delivery in terms of different payment schemes, participation by local citizens and conflicts around equality of water provision. By analyzing power in transition studies, we explore the power dynamics at play in two regions of Johannesburg, namely Alexandra and Soweto. The paper highlights the need to explicate the politics of water service delivery and suggests opportunities to break the negative patterns in order to achieve equitable and sustainable water service delivery in South Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

Following apartheid, South Africa was faced with the challenge of redressing the social and environmental imbalances of the past. As a water-stressed country, allocation of water has been tied to development and the changing political landscape of the country. The evolution of water service delivery and the political history of South Africa are inalienably related (Tewari, 2005). In the democratic

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dispensation starting in 1994, particular attention was paid to sectors such as water service delivery where services were previously distributed in a systematically inequitable manner across racial groups, with a specific focus on meeting the needs of whites and excluding Africans (Tewari, 2005).

The new water laws sought to address the social inequities and environmental concerns of the earlier political periods. The National Water Act of 1998 repealed over 100 water acts and related amendments and extinguished all previous public and private rights to water (s. 4 and Schedule 7, RSA, 1998). The significant change brought about by the new legislation was the recognition that water is a scarce and unevenly distributed resource, belonging to all people and no discriminatory law should be established to prevent water access and that sustainability should be the aim in distribution through which all users could derive benefits (RSA, 1997). In 1994, the new government thus had the responsibility to sustainably manage the water resources for the benefit of all people according to the constitutional mandate (s. 3, RSA, 1998).

We conceptualize the overall dynamic patterns of change in water governance in South Africa since 1994 as a transition toward sustainable and equitable water service delivery. Transitions are systematic, complex and long-term societal changes comprising multiple actors at different scales and levels (Geels, 2011; Loorbach et al., 2011). We approach the distributional effects of the water service delivery reform by analyzing the payments for water services and the mechanisms of service delivery provided in two former townships<sup>2</sup> in the City of Johannesburg, namely Alexandra and Soweto. In these two cases, we particularly examine the exercise of power in the processes of social and legal mobilizations with the aim of providing a contribution to the analysis of power in transition processes.

The paper is organized to provide a brief introduction to the methodology of the research in Section 2. This is followed in Section 3 by a discussion of transition heuristic including different conceptualizations and criticisms of the transition framework. The latter part of the section focuses on the role of power analysis in transition heuristic. Section 4 first traces the transition in water service delivery in South Africa and then addresses whether the transition is in lock-in or acceleration phase by examining the power of agents in shaping water service delivery. Section 5 provides reflections from the case studied and discusses opportunities to strengthen the power dimension in transition studies.

## 2. Methodology

The analytical framework to study power relations in connection with the water service delivery reform in South Africa was drawn from a literature review of transition studies, and academic writing on the transition framework. This analytical framework is tested through a study of water service delivery reform in the city of Johannesburg. This process offers useful material to study a social change as there has been an explicit transition from the pre- to post-apartheid system of water service delivery. The examination on water service delivery within two former townships of Alexandra and Soweto in the City of Johannesburg represent cases of previously disadvantaged areas, characterized by the inequalities that are the focus of reform process. The main data sources for this study consisted of water policy documents for the Republic of South Africa and reports and papers on the payments for water services in the city of Johannesburg. The mechanisms of water service delivery (i.e., the way water is accessed by households either through standpipes, shared taps or taps in houses) were investigated via interviews and field observations.

Since Alexandra, in comparison to Soweto, is less studied, and limited data is available, we carried out more primary data collection in this case. We had five in-depth interviews in three different parts of Alexandra (namely Tsutsumani, East Bank and Old Alex) over two weeks of fieldwork. The respondents were identified through a stratified sampling approach where we first identified the different water service areas in Alexandra. A random sample was selected within these stratified areas based on people's availability and willingness to talk to the researchers. Some of these interviews were conducted through a translator who was fluent in Zulu and English. In addition, we carried out five in-depth interviews with experts in the field including a manager from the city of Johannesburg, a water

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<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, the term township usually refers to the (often) underdeveloped urban living areas that, from the late 19th century until the end of Apartheid, were reserved for non-whites (black Africans, Colored and Indians).

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