



Why Leadership Matters in Water and Climate Governance

By Catherine Sutherland with contributions from Debra Roberts¹



Much has been written about the multiple scales of governance and the multiple actors that shape water and climate management in cities in the south. This literature presents a complex story of international bodies, state actors, the private sector (including consultants), NGOs, CSOs and ordinary citizens engaging with each other and with the material reality of water and climate challenges to find more sustainable ways of using and sharing water and mitigating and adapting to climate change. This engagement takes place within the frame of three dominant discourses that shape water governance internationally and in South Africa. These are 'water as an economic good', 'water as a social good' and 'water as a socio-ecological good'. The first two discourses are well established in the water governance arena in South Africa and the third is starting to emerge as the value of environmental services, or ecological infrastructure, in addressing climate adaptation; water scarcity and quality; and poverty is increasingly recognised at a local and regional scale.

The emergence of a new partnership in 2013² around water and climate governance in the uMngeni Catchment, which contains both rural and urban municipalities, including the large urban municipality of eThekweni (Durban), reflects a significant shift in thinking towards adopting a socio-ecological systems approach to managing water and climate challenges. Although multiple actors, particularly eThekweni Municipality's Environmental Planning and Climate Protection Department (EPCPD),

environmental NGOs, and those engaged in research and innovative consulting projects had been promoting the concept of sustaining and enhancing environmental services within a socio-ecological systems framework to address water, climate and poverty challenges within this region of South Africa for a number of years, it required the leadership of the Head of eThekweni Water and Sanitation Unit (EWS), Neil Macleod, to place this approach firmly on the political and bureaucratic agenda of the water governance arena.

The EPCPD, under the leadership of Dr Debra Roberts with her strong global connections and constructive relationships with innovative consultants, had been promoting the concept of enhancing environmental services as part of their climate adaptation strategy. Up until the end of 2012, it was evident that although EWS officials tentatively engaged with the climate change debate, they did not support it as a critical issue to be addressed in the Municipality. They had a representative on the committee that met to discuss climate issues, but they were not committed to a climate change programme, doubting the science and relevance of climate change.

However, the increasing demand for water in eThekweni Municipality, which is well beyond the available supply, has led to a significant shift in thinking as eThekweni officials and researchers search for alternative solutions to address the 'water crisis'. There is an extensive body of literature which argues that "ecological infrastructure can enhance the efficiency of water service delivery through improving water quality, reducing sediment loads, reducing flood risk and increasing yield through increased winter base flows and improve the efficiency of engineering investments (www.grasslands.org.za/umngeni-ecological-infrastructure-partnershipsummary, accessed 9 July, 2014). Drawing on this knowledge, and in response to a presentation done by an

- 1 Debra Roberts is the Head of the Environmental Planning and Climate Protection Department in eThekweni Municipality.
- 2 The UEIP partnership was officially launched in November 2013. The first discussions around the partnership began to take place in 2012.

environmental consultant on behalf of the South African Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) which contained strategic input from Dr Debra Roberts, EWS shifted their focus towards protecting and enhancing environmental services to secure water for the Municipality, thereby aligning themselves with the approach being adopted by the EPCPD for climate adaptation. The value of ecological infrastructure to both climate mitigation and adaptation and water security thus converged, creating the possibility of forming a new integrated 'knowledge' partnership for addressing these critical issues in the Municipality.

The development of the uMngeni Ecological Infrastructure Partnership (UEIP), which represents a significant 'moment of change', was championed by EWS's Neil Macleod, with support from SANBI. They called on and collaborated with the KwaZulu-Natal Regional Office of the Department of Water Affairs, Umgeni Water (a state entity responsible for supplying water to municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal), and the water service authorities of the uMgungundlovu District and Msunduzi Local Municipalities to create a partnership of 36 government and civil society organisations to support learning, knowledge production and innovative governance for the enhancement of the ecological infrastructure of the uMngeni Catchment. This partnership has since attracted both national and international research funding, with research programmes being embedded within the work of the local municipalities in the region, as well as within projects conducted by the Water Research Commission (WRC) and WWF. The UEIP is now considered to be a flagship project for the WRC and it will be used to develop knowledge and governance approaches that can be transferred to other catchments in South Africa in the future. The South African national government currently has 18 Strategic Infrastructure Projects (SIPs) that support the new growth path for the country, with a newly proposed 19th SIP possibly focusing on ecological infrastructure. This national initiative further elevates the importance of the UEIP for producing knowledge to re-shape water and climate governance in the country, within an environmental services approach.

Moments such as this, where a strategic partnership has been formed using the progressive and integrative approach of socio-ecological systems that connects water and climate governance, reflect a paradigmatic shift. Just like the great scientific revolutions that are captured in the history of science, such as Descartes dream, the introduction of the calculus by Newton and Leibniz, or the theory of relativity by Einstein, these moments require sustained effort by a large number of innovative thinkers and researchers and the decisive and powerful action of true leaders. eThekweni Municipality's response to water and climate issues and its influence both nationally and internationally around these issues has been shaped by a multitude of knowledge producers (researchers, officials, consultants and communities) and two powerful leaders. These leaders adopt different approaches, but they both engage in knowledge production on the global stage, subscribe to the concept of 'learning by doing', actively engage with researchers and intellectual game changers, develop well capacitated officials within their departments and strategically understand the importance of politics. EPCPD and EWS had shared a mutual respect for each other's work, but they had not engaged in an integrated approach to climate and water governance. However, in February 2013 this changed as these two leaders found common ground and converged on the concept of ecological infrastructure, with SANBI and innovative environmental consultants creating the support for this new platform. This convergence represents an exciting and important opportunity for catchment management and it is hoped that the wide range of actors who will engage in this partnership, using grounded case studies to guide their knowledge production, will find innovative and participatory approaches that enhance and support sustainability, and the discourse of 'water as a socio-ecological good', both in this significant catchment and others in South Africa. However, with the immanent retirement of Neil Macleod in September 2014, it is critical that new leaders and champions emerge to carry this important process forward in to the future.

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