

The Biopolitics of Water Services in eThekweni Municipality: Exploring Transformations of Urban Life in the New South Africa

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South Africa has undergone major shifts in water regulation and management since the democratic transition. The country has adopted new water legislation that acknowledges water's importance for social, economic and environmental purposes and the constitution grants every South African the right to basic water. However, the country faces challenges in rolling out water services for all its citizens and is moving towards water scarcity at a time when acid mine drainage and other sources of pollution threaten the resources.

In this context, the metropolitan municipality of eThekweni (incorporating the city of Durban) has in innovative ways been looking to find solutions in order to service all its citizens - many of whom lived without any or with severely underdeveloped systems for water access in disadvantaged areas during the apartheid period. Different levels of services and technological solutions have been developed to suit areas with different infrastructural conditions and in order to provide users with water services that they are eligible to or that they can pay for. The municipality has been praised for its achievements in providing water for the poor and is seen as a pioneer in sustainable service provision. But how do the local water users experience these services and technologies?

Based on narrative interviews about water and water services, conducted in different parts of the municipality - including rural, peri-urban and suburban areas - the paper explores different ways of accessing water throughout the municipality and the effects on the lives, lifestyles and subjectivities of eThekweni citizens. Through a biopolitical lens the paper studies the intimate connection between how people access and use water and their ways of lives and how transformations of water services can involve social and political transformations, and further, highlights the water users' active participation in governing themselves in the context of these hydropolitical power relations. The paper critically analyses how water management become part of a strategy of governance that is promoting and protecting certain ways of lives (and not others) as well as construct ideas about the good life and the proper way of accessing and using water in one of South Africa's metropolitan municipalities.