

The implications of neoliberal economic discourse in the Namibian water supply and sanitation policy for the City of Windhoek

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FUTURE RESILIENCE FOR AFRICAN CITIES AND LANDS

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The Future Resilience for African Cities and Lands (FRACTAL) project aims to address the challenge of providing accessible, timely, applicable and defensible climate information that is needed by decision makers operating at the city-region scale in southern Africa. FRACTAL has been running since June 2015. It is part of the Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) multi-consortia programme. FCFA's major objective is to generate fundamentally new climate science focused on Africa, and to ensure that this science has an impact on human development across the continent. FCFA is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

These knowledge products have been developed to share findings from the research in the hope of fostering dialogue and eliciting feedback to strengthen the research. The opinions expressed are therefore those of the author(s) and are not necessarily shared by DFID, NERC or other programme partners.



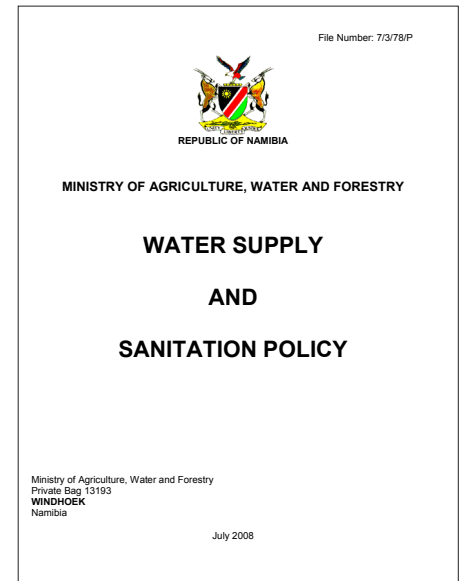


Introduction

This study is part of the FRACTAL¹ project which seeks to contribute to addressing the ‘burning development issues’ related to water and energy in cities in southern Africa by inserting climate information into city decision-making. The purpose is to both reduce disruption and damage from climate change, as well as increase equitable access and sustainable usage of these resources in light of climate change².

What is this study about?

As part of the FRACTAL project, this study aims to analyse the discourses (languages, or arguments used in discussing a particular issue) present in Namibia’s Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (WSASP) of 2008 published by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry (MAWF)³. The analysis also aims to inform future project implementation, particularly in the capital city Windhoek.



Above: Namibia’s Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (WSASP) of 2008

Background

Namibia is an arid country, and Windhoek is no exception. Windhoek gets 300-350mm of precipitation annually with unpredictable rainfall patterns. These conditions pose challenges to Windhoek’s water supply, and the city has responded with various strategies to cope with the scarce water resources. One of the efforts is water reclamation, which accounts for one-fifth of Windhoek’s water supply in a typical year, and educational programmes to encourage water conservation. However, rapid urbanisation and climate change will add pressure to the city’s ability to supply water (Koujo, 2017).

What is the current status of Windhoek’s water supply?

Currently 20% comes from water reclamation, and another 20% comes from groundwater. The remaining 60% of Windhoek’s water supply in a typical year comes from NamWater, a parastatal that supplies bulk water. Once NamWater supplies water to Windhoek, the City of Windhoek (COW) is responsible for the distribution of that water in the city (Koujo, 2017). The Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (WSASP) of 2008 plays a critical role in guiding the supply and distribution of water in urban and rural areas of Namibia.

1. www.fractal.org.za

2. In Windhoek, lack of access to water in the informal areas of the city, and within the larger system, have been identified as burning issues at the 1st Windhoek Learning Lab held in February 2017.

3. See: Iwai, S (2017) The Influence of Neoliberal Discourse in Namibia’s Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (WSASP) of 2008. Research Project, Globalization, Environment and Society Macalester-Pomona-Swarthmore Consortium Programme, Environmental and Geographical Sciences Department, University of Cape Town.



How was this analysis approached?

There are three main components of the analysis. First, the discourses in the WSAP document were identified. Then, the dominance of each discourse was determined. Finally, the implications of the level of dominance of each discourse were considered. Before discussing the results, it is important to take note of and understand the conceptual framework, the geographical context and the methodology of the study.

Important concepts

There are three main concepts that this study drew upon: **discourse**, **neoliberalism** and **Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM)**. These form the analytical framework for the study.

Discourse, or the language used to argue for a certain issue, particularly in policy documents, therefore has the power to influence policy outcomes by emphasising and/or obscuring certain perspectives (Fischer & Forester, 1993).

Neoliberalism emphasises the promotion of individualism, free markets, minimum state intervention, and private property rights (Harvey, 2007). Seven main ways neoliberalism can manifest in the real world according to Castree (2010) are: privatisation, marketisation, state roll back or deregulation, market-friendly reregulation, use of market proxies in the residual governmental sector, the strong encouragement of 'flanking mechanisms' in civil society (such as NGOs and SMEs), and the promotion of 'self-sufficient' individuals and communities. This approach is particularly relevant to uplifting the poor.

Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) is a water management discourse that the WSASP uses to formulate its policy recommendations. It has been the global standard for water resource management since the 1990s, even though in recent years the water security approach has gained popularity (Bakker & Morinville, 2013; Mukhtarov & Cherp, 2014). Various aspects of water are considered in IWRM, such as stakeholder participation and long-term sustainability, and it emphasises the trade-off between the environment and economic development (Savenije & van der Zaag, 2002; Bakker & Morinville, 2013).

Methods used to analyse the WSASP document

The main method of analysis used was 'argumentative discourse analysis' (Fischer & Gottweiss, 2012). This method was used to analyse texts in the WSASP document to provide evidence of the discourses embedded in it. This allows for a deeper understanding of the framings of water in the policy. To complement argumentative discourse analysis, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) was used. NPF claims that policies can be analysed as a narrative (story), and that they also have characters (heroes, villains and victims), a setting and a plot (initial situation, complication, reaction, resolution and final situation) (Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017). These methods were used to inform the results, which will be discussed in the next section.



Results: Discourses in the WSASP and their influences on policy recommendations

An analysis of the WSASP revealed three discourses: **neoliberal economic**, **social development** and **environmental**.

The neoliberal economic discourse prioritises economic rationality and market-based principles. Examples of the neoliberal economic discourse in the WSASP document were ‘cost recovery’ and ‘privatisation’.

The social development discourse emphasises water’s ability to ‘uplift communities’ and the ‘promotion of equitable access to water’. ‘Stakeholder participation’ and the ‘progressive tariff structure’, where consumers who use less water pay less per unit of water, were instances of the social development discourse that were present in the document.

Lastly, the environmental discourse, perhaps obvious by the name, privileges environmental well-being and concerns. ‘Conservation of water’ and ‘preventing water pollution’ were themes that could be identified as being part of the environmental discourse in the WSASP.

The prevalence of discourses was identified by the number of sentences that could be identified as containing discursive phrases. As shown in Table 1 below, the neoliberal economic discourse was the most dominant discourse with 60 sentences including related terms. However, the social development discourse is not far behind with 53 occurrences. Lastly, the environmental discourse is less prominent in the document with only 13 instances. This may, in part, be explained by the policy’s focus on human activities (water supply and sanitation) rather than human-environment interactions or conservation, but the number is still very low compared to the other two discourses.

Table 1: Discourse in the WSASP

DISCOURSES	EXAMPLES IN THE WSASP	NUMBER OF SENTENCES
Neoliberal Economic Discourse	Cost recovery Privatisation of services	60
Social Development Discourse	Stakeholder participation Structure of proposed tariffs (progressive tariffs)	53
Environmental Discourse	Conservation of water Prevention of water pollution	13

The complementary Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) analysis

In the narrative analysis of the WSASP, the heroes are identified to be the MAWF and the City of Windhoek. The MAWF wrote the policy, and the COW would be the body to implement the changes in Windhoek and deliver the services of water and sanitation. At the same time, the MAWF is also the villain because it was under the previous Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (WASP) of 1993 that various problems arose within the sector such as backlog of sanitation provision and lack of a water regulator (MAWF, 2008).



The victims that are most negatively influenced by the events described in the policy are residents in informal urban settlements in Windhoek's case and those living in rural areas, since the WSASP identifies these people as being affected by the various issues that the WSASP aims to solve.

Turning to the five stages of the narrative, the analysis of the 'story' of water and sanitation, the initial situation of water and sanitation provision in urban areas, including Windhoek, was identified to be the WASP of 1993, which governed the water supply and sanitation sector, but did not provide adequate solutions. The complication was the various issues that the water sector was experiencing before the 2008 policy was enacted. The reaction to this was the creation of a new water supply and sanitation policy which is the WSASP. Then, the resolution can be identified as the implementation of the policy recommendations which will lead Namibia and Windhoek to the final situation, where the water issues could be addressed through the new WSASP of 2008 Act.

The setting, Namibia, is obvious because the document comes from a national ministry. With this information, the NPF allows for the construction of a narrative that lies under the policy. The MAWF seeks to improve issues in the water supply and sanitation sector by the predominantly neoliberal solutions (while catering for the needs of disadvantaged communities) outlined in the WSASP. These recommendations will lead to the alleviations of issues and 'save' the 'victims' in the document. This denotes the ethical dimension of the policy, its addressing of issues for rural people and poor residents in informal settlements of Windhoek. The short study did not examine to what extent the WSASP has been able to address the 'complications' or problems in the water sector in Windhoek.

What does this mean for the residents of Windhoek?

The focus of this study is on neoliberal discourse, so this section discusses the implications of the neoliberal solutions recommended in the WSASP. The two main recommendations that were identified to be neoliberal were 'cost recovery' and 'privatisation'.

The WSASP's vision of cost recovery includes progressive tariffs, which are relatively poor-friendly because the poor, who tend to use less water than the wealthy, pay less per unit of water than the wealthy. However, implementation of the tariffs needs to take into consideration that the poor must still be able to afford to pay for the water that they need albeit at a lower tariff. Another concern regarding the water tariffs is the effect on industries since there is no indication of financial assistance except for in the agricultural sector (MAWF, 2008). Different industries will be affected in different ways, but water-intensive industries will suffer as a result.

In the WSASP, privatisation mainly refers to collaborating with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to improve the provision of services. SMEs and NGOs each have strengths and weaknesses and the MAWF must determine if the chosen private sector organisation is appropriate for each project. SMEs are efficient because businesses tend to maximise profit, but overly aggressive profit-seeking behaviour may be detrimental to consumers. NGOs have the advantage of not pursuing profit, but may lack local knowledge especially if they are a part of an international NGO.

Other concerns include the lack of environmental discourse and the simplicity of the narrative.



The lack of environmental discourse in the WSASP may result in people ignoring environmental concerns when implementing projects. The simplicity of the narrative may give the illusion that solving problems is as simple as following the recommendations in the WSASP. However, there are local contexts and details regarding the implementation process that are not mentioned in the policy which need to be taken into consideration.

Contribution to FRACTAL

The WSASP is a water and sanitation policy that governs Namibia. Therefore, it will affect Windhoek as an urban area as well. For instance, water provision will be affected since 60% of Windhoek's water supply in a typical year comes from NamWater, a parastatal which is governed by the WSASP (Koujo, 2017). Through NamWater, Windhoek's water provision schemes will be indirectly influenced by the change in policies from the old WASP to the new WSASP.

The aim of this study was to identify the ways in which the WSASP may transform water supply and sanitation provision in Namibia and specifically Windhoek. This study contributes to the FRACTAL project by illustrating how discourses in overarching policies which govern actual implementation of projects can have far-reaching effects on different communities. By recognising the importance of discourse in policies, the decision-makers will be able to consider more carefully what effects the implementation of various projects may produce. Therefore, the recognition of the impact of discourses, and particularly the neoliberal economic discourse, on project implementation will enable more informed decision-making, which is one of the aims of the FRACTAL project.

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