

How relevant are the Vaal Barrage's catchment forums?

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In November 2020 the Vaal River Barrage's catchment management forums commemorate their twentieth anniversary. Most residents of Emfuleni and those resident on the banks of the Barrage's tributaries, are unaware of these discussion platforms.

Therefore, it is useful to ask: what is the relevance of water catchment management forums of the Vaal River Barrage area?

The National Water Act of 1998 provided for 19 catchment management agencies (CMAs). These organisations are said to be important for the effective integrated water resource management (IWRM) in South Africa's river catchments.

Local catchment forums are part of a future countrywide system of CMAs. At regular forum meetings representatives of civil society, industries, local and provincial authorities, as well as the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) report on water quality in river sub-catchments.

Thus far only two CMAs have been established – the Incomati-Usuthu in Mpumalanga and the Breede-Gouritz (and Olifants) in the Western Cape. They play a key role in managing strategic regional river catchment areas. The Vaal River has no CMA.

According to Dr Victor Munnik, a University of the Witwatersrand researcher who has extensively written on catchment forums, these are the spaces where we the public, who own the water, take note of how government performs as custodian of our water resources.

The Vaal Barrage's sub-catchment forums keep an eye on industrial and municipal wastewater emission in Gauteng and the Free State, below the Vaal Dam.

In 2000 the Vaal catchment management forums, dating back to the 1980s were revitalised. Prospects were good for establishing a CMA in the Upper

Vaal. Alas, nothing happened. The official reasons were: the lack of skilled human resources; and the lack of funding for starting up a CMA that would finance itself.

Despite delays in CMA formation, officials of the DWS, Rand Water, Gauteng Province, local authorities and industrial water consumers have for 20 years held regular meetings three to four times a year in the Vaal River Barrage catchment.

Usually water monitoring specialists report on the quality of the sections of the Vaal River Barrage catchment they study. The presence of DWS and Rand Water keeps large wastewater emitters on their toes.

According to Munnik, the forums present civil society with a learning

opportunity on the complexity of water quality. The forums provide locals with valuable insights.

Water licences issued by DWS, are subject to a reliable record of wastewater releases into the sub-catchments of the Klip River, as well as the spruits of the Blesbok, Riet and Leeu-Taabosch. Careless bulk wastewater emitters know they may face prosecution and even lose their water licences.

In the Barrage catchment NGOs such as SAVE, VEJA and the FSE play an important role. At meetings they take note of the river's health and the measures to prevent toxic spills of acid mine drainage, industrial effluents and raw sewage that threaten the Vaal River Barrage's health.

Rand Water's oversight is important. Its officials are vigilant. Rand Water created

the Barrage way back in the 1920s and managed it until the 1990s. The utility no longer uses Barrage water for purification.

Since the relaxation of the Covid shutdown measures, I have been studying the Vaal River Barrage catchment management forums* and also attended some meetings.

Evidence of toxic biochemical wastewater spills come under intense scrutiny, in the Barrage's sub-catchments. It is here where NGOs and environmentally sensitive industries play a dynamic role. They strengthen the hand of governance authorities who want to work to the book.

However, there are lapses in the regular attendance of stakeholders. Representatives of the Department of Mineral Resources seldom attend. Even some municipalities do not always have representatives in attendance. Some industries tend to stay away – especially if they under-perform.

Are the forums relevant? Judging from the deliberations and depth of dedicated technical knowledge shared amongst experts and civil society, the forums are important. It is here where the Vaal River Barrage's environmental-health is foregrounded. Stakeholders also form local knowledge networks, according to Munnik.

Moreover, there is a growing digital database system on water quality in the Barrage catchment. It is bound to become more valuable and reliable once advanced real-time digital water quality monitoring comes on-line 24 hours a day.

There are rumours that DWS intends to create a total of six catchment management agencies. An Upper Vaal River CMA is said to be one. Local sub-catchment forums will remain in place to play an important role.

Who knows? Maybe in 20 years' time forum members will refer to the 'bad old days' when chronic toxic pollution wreaked havoc with the environmental health of the Vaal River Barrage.

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The Vaal River.
Photo: Louise van der Merwe.