

ICLD Teaching Case

Youth participation in local government¹

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Learning objectives

This scenario relates to the right of youth to participate in local government and introduces a case of land and water pollution in the Municipality of Lower Valley, which intersects with a variety of rights – (1) right to participate, (2) right of access to food and (3) right to a safe environment. The Municipality is in a dilemma and unsure of whether to continue to use only ward committees for the purposes of consulting the public or to explore alternatives that may help bring youth's voices on board. If the Municipality continues to use ward committees as public participation for soliciting citizens' views, it risks excluding the youth, given that these structures often do not 'talk' to them or their needs. The Municipality is also facing the difficult task of whether to reprioritise money that was allocated to developing sports and youth centres to fund cleaning and rehabilitating polluted land and rivers.

The Teaching Case encourages practitioners to approach a complex and urgent environmental health issue on the basis of a human rights-based approach. The main lesson from this case is that while the right to a safe environment and the right to access food are important, they should not be pursued at the expense of the right of residents of the municipality, in particular the youth, to participate in municipal affairs. A path forward will lie in establishing mechanisms to involve the youth in municipal affairs in ways that are more creative and responsive than the standardised public participation mechanisms.

¹ This case study is fictional but informed by real life practice. It is adapted in order to apply to different contexts.

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Case description

The Municipality of Lower Valley is one of many local authorities that govern both urban and rural areas. It has a population of about 110 000, 40% of whom are youth between the ages of 15 and 34. The majority of the youth may vote given that the minimum voting age stands at 18 years old. Sixty percent of the population resides in urban areas, where the built environment is denser and residents rely more on basic services provided by the municipality. The remaining 40% of the population reside in the municipality's rural areas, where agriculture is the most dominant economic activity. The main market for the farmers is in town, in the denser part of the municipality.

The municipality has many challenges, one of which is land and water pollution. The pollution is attributed to three main factors: (1) raw sewage flowing into the rivers due to dilapidated sewer removal infrastructure (2) illegal waste dumping and (3) littering in public places, such as recreational parks and roads.

This pollution threatens environmental sustainability. It particularly threatens the rivers and underground water systems. The contaminated rivers that run through the municipality provide the main source of water for farmers in the rural parts of the Municipality. Farmers lost hundreds of livestock from 2005 to 2020 mainly as a result of the contamination. Figure 2³ below shows that, in year 1, farmers in Lower Valley had a combined herd of 200 000 cattle, 150 000 sheep and 181 000 goats. By year 15, the herd had almost halved, with cattle at 100 000, sheep at 66 000 and goats at 95 000.



Land and water pollution. Photo: www.pexels.com

The contaminated water is also no longer suitable for irrigating crops, including wheat and vegetables. This has adversely affected agricultural production and the harvest has particularly been below par over the last five years partially due to pollution. For instance, farmers in Lower Valley previously produced 10000 metric tons of winter wheat, but in each of the last five years, they only managed to produce an average of 6000 metric tons.

As a result, there was a strong possibility that farmers would soon not be able to supply those living in the urban part of the Municipality with fresh vegetables, meat and wheat. This would directly affect the food system in the Municipality, and it would mostly affect the urban poor who relied heavily on reasonably priced farm produce for food and who were not able to afford food imported from elsewhere. Thus, food insecurity in the Municipality was a real threat. Furthermore, the inadequate supply of safe water to irrigate crops would threaten farming activity, and as a result, farmers feared loss of income.

The farmers asked a respected councillor representing one of the rural wards, Alderman Moyo, who was a farmer himself, and who was also aligned with the ruling Liberation Party, to lobby the Municipality to urgently adopt measures to stop this pollution.

³ Please note that the numbers are fictional.

In the next council meeting, Alderman Moyo tabled a motion regarding the problem of pollution for deliberation. He asked the Council to reconsider budget allocations for what he called “non-essential things” e.g., the development of recreational facilities (youth and sports centres). He suggested allocating these funds to managing, maintaining and developing sewerage infrastructure and for cleaning and rehabilitating polluted land and rivers. He argued:

“Our laws allow us to adjust our budget in line with emerging service delivery, financial and development needs. The sooner we make money available for the repair of sewage pipes and sewer ponds the better. We cannot just continue to discharge raw sewage into our rivers. We need to clean polluted land and rehabilitate our rivers urgently”.

Alderman Moyo was also an ardent supporter of a draft policy on pollution management submitted by the municipal administration to the Council of Lower Valley for consideration. He wanted the Council to adopt this policy to stop the pollution and revive the ailing rivers. He argued:

“The right to an environment that is safe and access to food should not be compromised no matter the circumstance. In the interest of time, I propose that the budget reprioritisation and policy be discussed at the upcoming meetings of ward committees to consult the public on the policy. Our ward committees are representative and enable our councillors to solicit feedback from our people on matters such as this before us today. The committees meet bi-weekly which means that inputs from the public on the budget reprioritisation and policy can be solicited in time for our next meeting of the Council”.

Most of the councillors representing rural wards supported the policy and were in agreement with the idea of reprioritising the budget and using only the usual public consultation platforms, i.e., ward committees, in the interest of time.

A young councillor from the opposition, representing an urban ward, was against the idea of reallocating money meant for the development of youth and sports centres to fund pollution management related activities. He was also against the established practice of using only ward committees for the purposes of consulting the public. He argued:

“Ward committees are mostly made up of older people, ruling party sympathisers who often sideline the youth. The Municipality of Lower Valley has been neglecting the youth for too long and this must stop. Otherwise, we are going to mobilise the youth to demonstrate at the municipal office”.

The younger councillor received support from a number of women councillors who accused the Municipality of failing to consult or involve the youth in a manner and “language” they understand. One of them remarked: “This is about the environment, but our Council wants to sideline our children, our future”. Alderman Moyo disputed this and stated:

“The Council should not waste its precious time on a generation that is on social media 24/7. They should come to meetings organised by ward committees or otherwise accept the outcome. There is just no alternative. In our areas, the network connection is bad due to the absence of adequate IT infrastructure. Many of our people make a lot of sacrifices. They walk long distances to attend ward committee meetings. And if the grandmothers and fathers of our land can do this, why should young people be treated differently? What is so special about them anyway?”

The local government was in a dilemma and unsure how to proceed.

Discussion questions

The way in which the municipality chooses to solve this dilemma has consequences for the realisation of human rights, service delivery and peace in Lower Valley. Below is a list of questions to guide your discussion about the consequences of choosing a specific approach to the dilemma:

1. Which human rights are at issue in this scenario? How would you list them in order of priority?
2. If you were Alderman Moyo, or one of the young councillors how could you have handled this matter differently?
3. Should the right to a safe environment and the right to access food be pursued at the expense of the right of the youths to participate in municipal affairs?
4. Should young people be treated differently from the rest of the community, when it comes to participation in local government?
5. In what way are the different and often competing interests managed in your local authority?
6. How does your local authority promote or hinder the realisation of the right of young people in local government?
7. If you had the authority, what would you do differently in your local authority to enhance the participation of the youth in local government?

Case reflections

The Municipality of Lower Valley faces a common challenge in local government: how to balance different interests in a way that promotes service delivery and human rights. Pollution and its effects require urgent attention, without which, the realisation of other rights (access to food and right to a safe environment) are compromised. The proposal to reprioritise the budget to fix the pollution problem was sensible, just like the proposal to adopt a policy to manage waste dumping and public littering. However, how should the Municipality consult its citizens about the difficult choices that it must make?

The municipality could make use of only ward committees, as is normally the case, to consult the public on this matter. This would save time and money because the ward committees are already operational. But this approach would sideline young people who do not often participate in ward committee meetings. If the municipality chooses to use only ward committees, tabling the reprioritised budget may be marred by disturbances, because the youth have made it very clear that they want the Council to hear their plea. They may even picket at the council chambers and make it difficult for council proceedings to continue. The municipality should thus rethink its approach to community participation – that enhances the right of residents, including the youth, to participate in local government. However, a delay in decision making does mean that the problem of pollution may remain unaddressed in the interim.

The municipality could abandon ward committees and develop new public participation methods. However, the ward committees are a trusted method of public participation in the rural parts of the municipality, particularly given the absence of information and communication technology infrastructure. Without ward committees, the municipality may not be able to reach its rural communities.

The municipality could make use of ward committees together with other mechanisms of consulting the community, such as online and social media platforms, as increasingly been done by other municipalities. For instance, the Municipality of Grassland developed a mobile application which enables its residents to provide feedback on its policies, decisions etc while the Municipality of Riverside has active twitter and facebook pages for interaction with its residents. But the development of these online platforms comes at a cost that may be difficult to accommodate in the current budget of the Municipality of Lower Valley. Moreover, developing online tools could take time, while the problem of pollution and its effects would remain uncontrolled.

On the reprioritisation of the budget, the municipality could pursue a number options. The municipality could reallocate funds from developing sports and youth centres to repairing and maintaining sewer infrastructure and cleaning and rehabilitating land and rivers. It could also keep the current budget and postpone the repair and maintenance of sewer infrastructure as well as the cleaning and rehabilitation of land and rivers. It could also source funds for repair and maintenance as well as the cleaning and rehabilitation of land and rivers from other revenue sources (e.g. borrowing). Alternatively, the funds could be reallocated from other budget line items other than sports and youth centres.

If funds for pollution control do become available, the Municipality could consider inclusive approaches. For example, it could contract private service providers to rehabilitate the polluted land and rivers as done by the nearby rich urban Municipality of Riverside. Or it could employ young people in the area on a temporary basis, to clean and rehabilitate polluted land and rivers. That way, young people would not only be involved in environmental awareness programmes, but they would also be given an opportunity to earn a living.