

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM), as both the Water Service Authority (WSA) and the Water Service Provider (WSP) for the greater Mangaung, works in collaboration with Bloem Water¹, which is the WSP to a part of Mangaung. Bloem Water is a state-owned entity and a national government enterprise that was established in terms of the Water Services Act (No. 108 of 1997) and the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) (No. 1 of 1999) (Bloem Water, 2023). Communication and collaboration between the MMM and Bloem Water are of the utmost importance to ensure the constant provision of quality water to the consumers of the greater MMM area.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

According to the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS, 2011), the MMM is one of eight Category A municipalities in the country, which means that it is a “municipality that has exclusive municipal executive and legislative authority in its area” (South African Local Government Association [SALGA], 2011). “Metropolitan municipalities” are large cities with over 500 000 voters (Thekiso, 2016). The MMM includes the cities and towns of Bloemfontein, the greater Mangaung, Botshabelo, Dewetsdorp, Soutpan, Thaba Nchu, Van Stadensrus, and Wepener.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) states in Chapter 7 that “the municipality has the right to govern, on its own initiative, the local government affairs of its community, subject to national and provincial legislation, as provided for in the Constitution” and that “the national or a provincial government may not compromise or impede a municipality’s ability or right to exercise its powers or perform its functions” (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). According to the Constitution, municipalities must encourage social and financial growth in the areas under their

¹ Bloem Water’s name changed to the Vaal Central Water Board on 13 July 2023 (Greengazette, 2023). As this study was conducted before July 2023, the name Bloem Water was retained in this thesis.

jurisdiction. Municipalities' developmental responsibilities are to structure and manage their administration and budget, to prioritise the basic requests of the community, and to encourage the social and financial developments of the area (Thekiso, 2016).

Mayekiso, Taylor and Maphazi (2013) stated that municipalities are expected to create favourable environments, attract investment, guarantee that infrastructure is of a suitable and acceptable standard, make available mechanisms to support and train communities, and to improve communities economically through the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) or cooperatives. According to the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000), the regulations of a municipality should be open to the requirements of the community and it is the obligation of the local government to encourage entrepreneurship and micro and medium enterprise development in order to raise the standard of living of its citizens (RSA, 2000).

The MMM is responsible for the provision of quality water to the citizens of the metro. The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) plays an important role in water services in South Africa, and in the Mangaung area. The DWS has developed strategies and objectives in accordance with the established legal frameworks, along with the National Water Services Regulation Strategy of the previous Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (SALGA, 2011). The objectives of the DWS, as indicated by SALGA (2011), include access to basic services such as water and sanitation services, environmental safety (including the treatment of water), the economic sustainability of water services delivery, efficient water services infrastructure, and fee effectiveness (ensuring that the customer is respected, that resources and money are not wasted, and that customers do not pay more than they should for water).

According to SALGA (2011), the strategy and structure for water services are also set out in the regulatory framework for WSAs. A WSA is expected to manage all water services delivery problems at the municipal level. In a situation where the WSA is also the WPS, as in the case of the MMM, the self-operating principle applies, namely that the municipality is both the regulator and provider of water services. SALGA (2011) states that the distinction between the role of the WSA and the WSP is unclear; the MMM has therefore been conducting the WSP and WSA roles in its own way. In general, it is accepted that the MMM is both the WSA and the WSP, while Bloem Water is the WSP to a part of Mangaung.

The National Water Act (No. 36 of 1998) of South Africa describes the MMM as a WSA, as it is a municipality. According to SALGA (2011), the roles of a WSA, such as those of the MMM, are to decide on policies concerning tariffs, subsidies, and service standards; to established tariffs; to execute and apply water services by-laws; to plan the supply of water services; and to monitor potable water standards and used wastewater discharge. In its role as both a WSA and a WSP, the MMM should work hand in hand with Bloem Water.

Bloem Water was established in 1991 with the responsibility to provide quality water in bulk to the community (Bloem Water, 2023). In terms of the Water Services Act (RSA, 1997), it provides water to 12 municipalities (including the MMM), 26 mines, and six solar power-generation plants. In September 2019, a dispute between the MMM and Bloem Water regarding an agreement signed by both parties for the provision of bulk water and claims of non-payment for water supply services went to the Bloemfontein High Court (Mtebele, 2019). The agreement stated that the MMM would buy at least 70% of the bulk water provided by Bloem Water. The conflict arose when the MMM failed to pay the minimum percentage to Bloem Water as agreed (SALGA, 2011). Bloem Water planned to restrict water supply to the MMM but was ordered by the High Court to restore water to all affected areas (Mtebele, 2019). According to SALGA (2011), the DWS was contracted to help solve the disagreement as it seemed that there was a lack of communication between the parties.

In addition to the influence of this dispute on water delivery, since early 2016, the inhabitants of the MMM have experienced serious water shortages, sometimes for extended periods of time (Water for Africa, 2017). The Minister of Water and Sanitation of South Africa at that time, Nomvula Mokonyane, blamed the lack of water resources on drought (South African Government News Agency, 2015). The then Chairperson of Bloem Water, Tefesto Phistane, also blamed the “severe drought” for the problems with the water supply (Coetzee & Semenokane, 2016). Green Overall (2018), however, wrote that Mangaung was challenged with interrupted water supply as a result of poor infrastructure and maintenance. Water for Africa (2017) also mentioned the ageing infrastructure and the deteriorating water treatment works of the MMM area. Green Overall (2018) stated that the water quality in the MMM is poor and that it is sometimes impossible to drink tap water.

Motse (2018) mentioned that in 2018, the residents of the MMM raised concerns over the city's water quality but the MMM rejected this. Motse (2018), however, referred to tests that indicated significantly high levels of *Escherichia coli* and coliform bacteria in the water. The tests also showed that the water supplied to Soutpan was not safe for human consumption. Former Free State Health Department spokesperson, Mondli Mwambi, told OFM News that the Department of Health was not aware of the large volumes of people with stomach-related illnesses as a result of the poor quality of water (Motse, 2018). As a result, the MMM suggested that the population in affected areas should boil the water before consumption (Green Overall, 2018).

According to South Africa's Constitution, it is the government's obligation to provide water of good quality to communities. This, however, does not appear to be the case in the MMM (Coetzee & Semenokane, 2016). As a consequence of the provision of water of poor quality, the communities developed a negative perception of the management of the MMM and the DWS. The community expects the MMM to provide them with high-quality services and to inform them at the correct time of any challenges or difficulties that may affect them in any way.

Both Bloem Water and the MMM, as representatives of the DWS, are responsible for potable water provision to the community. Bloem Water treats the water and supplies it to the MMM, which then distributes the water to the community. The MMM, as a metropolitan municipality, has a mandate to also treat and supply its own water to the community. Both are therefore responsible for water infrastructure maintenance. The MMM, however, is the link between the communities, the broader government structure of the Free State, and the WSPs; whenever there is an issue concerning service delivery, the municipality therefore has the obligation to inform communities and to manage the problem.

Horak (2006) stated that if the local government implemented better communication, the reputation of the municipality and the relationship with the community would not be compromised when crises occur. Alberts (2011) indicated that municipalities use several communication structures that are tactically established in communities to achieve their mandates and to build relations, and which are necessary for service delivery and feedback. Alberts (2011) further stated that government mandates demand that national, provincial, and local government communication on issues of

services delivery should increase access to information that allows the public to participate in the country's future and in the improvement of their own livelihoods. According to Alberts (2011), the administration of communication by a municipality, such as the MMM, is a critical factor in ensuring better communication with the communities in the municipal area.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

From the literature and the discussion above, it is clear that both the MMM and Bloem Water have problems with communication and forward planning, and that they do not understand their roles in the water services sector. Water provisioning and quality challenges seem to emanate from both these organisations, which can be traced to communication issues that affect water quality, water quantity, and overall water services delivery to the community.

The literature review also indicated that no research has been conducted on the mode of communication between the WSAs (MMM and DWS), the WSPs (MMM and Bloem Water), and the communities of Mangaung.

These aspects, as well as uncertainties regarding the communication between the MMM and Bloem Water, and between these two entities and the community, informed the research problem:

- The National Water Act of 1998 indicates that a WSA, a WSP, and a municipality together are responsible for the provision of potable water to communities (RSA, 1998a).
- Bloem Water and the MMM, as the representatives of the DWS, are both responsible for supplying good-quality water to the community via well-maintained infrastructure at an affordable price.
- The MMM must buy at least 70% of the water available from Bloem Water and pay for it with the funds earned from the community. Previous disputes between these entities emanated from accusations of non-payment of the 70% of water.
- The mode of communication between Bloem Water and the MMM negatively influences the goals set in Bloem Water's annual report for 2017/2018 regarding sustainable water services delivery.

- The community is not always informed of, or prepared for, problems with water supply, poor-quality water, or interruptions in water delivery.

The problems listed above motivated the need to conduct this research in order to explore the existing mode of communication between the MMM, the representative(s) of the water sector (which includes Bloem Water), and the communities of the cities and towns in MMM regarding the delivery of quality water.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The problems listed above led to the following primary research question of this study:

What would be the most effective communication strategy that MMM and Bloem Water can implement to improve communication between themselves and the community, ultimately benefiting the delivery of water services to the MMM community?

The following secondary research questions were set to assist in answering the primary research question:

- What is the existing mode of communication between Bloem Water and the MMM?
- What are the communication challenges between Bloem Water and the MMM?
- How have the mode of communication and the communication challenges between Bloem Water and MMM impacted water services delivery to the community?
- What is the opinion of members of the community regarding the quality of water services delivery in the MMM?
- What solutions can be implemented to solve the communication challenges between the MMM and Bloem Water, and between the MMM and the community?

1.5 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study was to investigate the communication methods employed by Bloem Water and MMM to enhance the provision of services to the communities in Mangaung. Additionally, the study aimed to assess their progress in

achieving the goals outlined in Bloem Water's annual report for 2017/2018. These goals include developing, operating, and maintaining infrastructure, ensuring sustainable water service delivery, managing financial affairs, securing the supply and quality of raw water resources, and optimizing business processes and systems through strategic partnerships with stakeholders.

This study also investigated whether the two organisations worked together towards these goals and whether they worked to maintain a positive reputation in their communities through their partnership. The study thus explored the mode of existing communication between the different stakeholders. The focus of this research is unique as such a study has not been conducted in Mangaung before.

The main research aim of this study was:

To investigate what the most successful communication strategy is for the MMM and Bloem Water to implement in order to improve communication between them and between them and the community to the benefit of water services delivery to the community of the MMM.

To achieve the main research aim, the following research objectives were formulated:

- To investigate the existing channels of communication between the MMM and Bloem Water.
- To explore the existing communication framework within each entity operating in the MMM water sector; e.g., Bloem Water, the MMM, and the DWS.
- To explore the existing mode of communication between the MMM, the water supplier, and the communities.
- To advise on an improved communication strategy for water services delivery.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

This study, conducted within the discipline of Communication Science, employed the qualitative research approach with an interpretivist perspective to address the research questions and objectives. The study focused on understanding and interpreting various aspects of communication among the stakeholders who are the focus of this case study. The systems theory perspective on communication was adopted to elucidate the interconnections between individuals or groups. Data

collection involved the use of open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which enabled the respondents to freely express their views and thoughts. The collected data were subjected to content analysis.

1.6.1 Research approach

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding individuals or groups regarding a social or human challenge. Since the qualitative approach deals with research that requires exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or a group to social or human difficulties, this approach was deemed the ideal research approach for this study. The study explored the lack of appropriate communication between the stakeholders; this approach was therefore considered as the best suited for the study and the data-collection methods used.

1.6.2 Research paradigm

The study was conducted from the disciplinary context of Communication Science. An interpretivist perspective was used to identify, understand, and interpret various aspects of the mode of communication between the stakeholders. Edirisingha (2012) argued that the goal of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the meaning of human behaviour rather than to generalise and predict the causes and impacts thereof. Lapan, Quartaroli and Riemer (2012) argued that every qualitative research study has an interpretive element that focuses on uncovering participant views. Human behaviour was a significant component of this study since the study intended to interpret the mode of communication between the various stakeholders. Because this study was purely qualitative, with the objective to explore the modes of communication that exist between the stakeholders, the interpretivist paradigm was ideal to use.

1.6.3 Research design

This research used the systems theory perspective on communication. According to Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the systems theory perspective on communication is characterised by understanding the interconnection that exists between two or more people or groups of people (Hammond, 2010). The systems theory assisted the researcher with analysing and understanding of the cause of the ineffectiveness of

communication between the water stakeholders, namely the MMM, Bloem Water, and the communities involved.

1.6.4 Data collection

Data were collected via open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. An open-ended questionnaire allows respondents to express their views without being influenced by the researcher (Sincero, 2012). Using an open-ended questionnaire in this study allowed the respondents ample time to think analytically and critically about the questions and to provide honest answers. The questionnaire was used for the first part of the research.

A semi-structured interview was selected as the data-collection method for the second part of this study. A semi-structured interview allows interviewees flexibility and freedom in deciding what needs to be described, argued, and explained and how much detail to include in their answers (Pathak & Intratat, 2012). Respondents can therefore freely express their views concerning the existing mode of communication this study sought to investigate.

The reason for using open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was that some participants might not be comfortable expressing their views verbally, while others may not prefer questionnaires. It was also more suitable to collect data from citizens using questionnaires, while the semi-structured interviews were effective when collecting data from the WSP representatives.

1.6.5 Sample and sampling procedure

This research was based on an unbiased, honest search for answers to the research problem. The study intended to use a sample of two participants from the MMM and 110 respondents from the MMM community. The sample size of 110 participants in total was chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. This research used both purposive sampling and basic random sampling to select respondents (Crossman, 2019). Purposive sampling (used to select the two participants from the MMM) is characterised by deliberate targeting of respondents. This method was used to select participants from the community. This was done by conducting a survey via a Google Forms, where people were asked to nominate and

invite other people to also complete the questionnaire. Ultimately, 110 people responded.

1.6.6 Data analysis

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed by using content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique that helps to analyse the actual content of data involved (Obaid, 2011). The data were recorded, transcribed, organised, and then segmented, and each segment was labelled with a code. Thereafter the codes were collapsed into themes and each theme was discussed in detail to find meaning in the data. To find meaningful patterns in the data, sub-group analysis was used, while enumeration of certain aspects from the questionnaires supported the analysis of the demographic data (Tharyan, 1998). Qualitative data analysis was used to analyse the closed-ended questions of the questionnaire, which were mostly related to the respondents' demographic information. The aim of data analysis is to find corresponding topics and to explore how these topics relate to each other (Maree, 2007).

1.6.7 Quality assurance of the study

The trustworthiness of this study was ensured by adherence to acknowledged standards of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

Validity refers to the quality of the research process and the objectivity of the researcher in collecting and analysing the required data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were collected using interviews and questionnaires in order to enhance the validity of the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Reliability is defined as the precision and accuracy of the research procedure and the stability of the data (Guba, 1981:86). In order to increase the reliability of this study, each step followed was described in sufficient detail to enable another researcher to repeat the research and, if using the same procedures and criteria, to obtain similar results.

Objectivity refers to the impartiality of the data that were collected and the analysis procedures followed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:9). The researcher personally

transcribed and analysed the raw data to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

Quality assurance was also achieved by adhering to all ethical standards.

1.6.8 Ethical considerations

All possible measures were taken to ensure that the study complied with ethical standards (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Ethical considerations were observed as follows:

- Ethical clearance was obtained from the university before the study commenced.
- Before collecting data, a clear explanation of the focus and the purpose of the study was provided to all participants.
- All participants were requested to read and sign informed consent forms prior to participating in the study.
- Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants were free to withdraw at any point in time.

Possible limitations of the study, as well as the significance of the study, are discussed in Chapter 6 (see Sections 6.2 and 6.3).

1.7 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research sought to contribute to effective communication between corporates and their customers, which in this case is between the MMM, Bloem Water, and the community. This work therefore:

- provides an opportunity to the MMM to learn the opinions of its customers regarding communication around water services delivery;
- assists the MMM to identify some of its communication issues with the community regarding water services; and
- provides an opportunity for the MMM and Bloem Water to work on a strategy to rebuild their image among the community through effective communication.

