

Dr Kevin Onyenankeya

Indigenous Language  
Media in Africa,  
Department of  
Communication,  
North-West University,  
Mafikeng Campus,  
Mmabatho, South Africa  
[onyenankeyakevin@  
gmail.com](mailto:onyenankeyakevin@gmail.com)

Prof. Abiodun Salawu

Indigenous Language  
Media in Africa,  
Department of  
Communication,  
North-West University,  
Mafikeng Campus,  
Mmabatho, South Africa  
[Abiodun.salawu@nwu.  
ac.za](mailto:Abiodun.salawu@nwu.ac.za)

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# NEGOTIATING WATER CONSERVATION COMMUNICATION THROUGH INDIGENOUS MEDIA

## ABSTRACT

*Water conservation efforts have become increasingly important as spiralling population figures and snowballing economic development continue to pile pressure on fresh water resources across the world. In South Africa there are a number of water conservation initiatives to ensure optimal use of dwindling water resources. But not all citizens, particularly in rural communities, consider water conservation a social priority. The apathy has been attributed to the failure of current conservation communication to galvanise people in a way that they come to regard conserving water as a critical factor in achieving sustainable water use. The water conservation efforts rely heavily on persuasive communication, which encourages rural residents to take on new behaviours adjudged beneficial by the promoting agencies, often without seeking their commitment and understanding or appreciating the sociocultural dynamics underpinning their water use behaviour. This study used the participatory action approach to explore the effectiveness of indigenous media in engaging and mobilising rural residents on water conservation initiatives. Given its grassroots nature and interpersonal attributes, indigenous media provide a communication approach with the potential to negotiate the issues around water conservation.*

**Keywords:** indigenous media; development communication; mass communication; mass mediated messages; participatory action research; communication campaign; water conservation

## INTRODUCTION

Curbing the escalating water demand driven largely by accelerated economic and population growth remains a pressing challenge confronting water resource management in South Africa (DWA 2012). It has been projected that water consumption in South Africa could reach 30 billion cubic metres per year by 2030 (DWA 2013). With population and economic growth beginning to run headlong into limited renewable supplies of potable water, pressure on water resources is likely to become more acute especially in large urban municipalities where household water demand already constitutes a significant share of total water demand (Smith & Visser 2014). Many of the biggest municipalities, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria,

are already under intense water supply pressure as the reservoirs providing them with water cannot cope with the increasing domestic and industrial demand (Boccaletti *et al.* 2010). Recent droughts in parts of the country have compounded the nation's water stress.

In response, the government has introduced a variety of water demand management (WDM) initiatives to encourage the efficient use of water resources. Water demand management is arguably one of the most popular strategies deployed to tackle rising water consumption. According to Tsatsi *et al.* (2010: 24), water demand management represents “the adaptation and implementation of a strategy by a water institution or consumer to influence the water demand and the usage of water to meet any of the following objectives:

- ♦ economic efficiency,
- ♦ social development, social equity,
- ♦ environmental protection,
- ♦ sustainability of water supply and services, and
- ♦ political acceptability”.

An integral part of WDM is water conservation which, according to Tsatsi *et al.* (*ibid.*), encompasses “the minimization of loss or waste of water, the care and protection of water resources and the effective and efficient use of water”. Corral-Verdugo (2002: 1) regards water conservation as one of the most significant “pro-ecological activities to be modelled and developed” by man to ensure the prudent and sustainable use of water resources. The ultimate aim of WDM and water conservation is to persuade consumers to embrace sustainable water consumption behaviour (Willis *et al.* 2011).

However, communicating WDM objectives and galvanising South Africans to embrace water conservation initiatives have been fraught with difficulties. This is not peculiar to South Africa; in fact, promoting environmental issues such as water conservation is one of the biggest challenges confronting global, regional and national governments. This is because efforts at engendering a harmonious relationship between people and their natural surroundings is often seen as a “pipeline problem” in that it is difficult for people to realise that their actions impact on the environment (Gee 2002). Water conservation is normally a relatively non-salient issue, given that many people consider water to be a relatively inexpensive resource of unlimited availability. This is more so when there is no first-hand experience of water scarcity, shortage or drought that could result in collateral damage. The absence of short-term damaging effects gives a false sense of security, which means people are not likely to take environmental issues seriously until there is a crisis. Kempton and Holland (2003) argue that a first-hand experience of environmental damage can reinforce an “environmental identity and make it salient”, and eventually influence attitude. The task of educating people about water resource and water demand management issues poses an enormous challenge and will become increasingly more pronounced (Onyenankaya *et al.* 2017). South Africa, like many other countries, uses a combination of strategies, including public

communication campaigns, education, social marketing and entertainment education to promote environmental conservation, including water conservation.

## PUBLIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

A public communication campaign forms part of the strategic communication approach employed by the government to promote water conservation activities. Public communication is typically a deliberate and planned form of communication aimed at informing or influencing a large number of individuals, usually within a specific timeline. Public campaigns utilise a broad range of communication activities, including a collection of “mediated messages” on several channels (Rice & Atkin 2009; Rogers & Storey 1987). The definitive aim of public communication campaigns is to influence a change of behaviour in individuals, families or communities to an expected end (Weiss & Tschirhart 1994). In an attempt to ensure optimal success, public campaigns usually use a combination of interpersonal and community-based communication channels (Coffman 2002).

The Department of Water and Sanitation and some water utilities, for instance, use a mix of communication activities including high-visibility materials such as exhibitions, workshops, events, brochures, newsletters, or posters to reach out to water users (Onyenankeya *et al.* 2017). These promotional materials create an opportunity to expose the target audience to water conservation messages. For example, the National Water Week and the Women in Water Programme are some of the direct communication programmes that the Directorate of Water Conservation use to create awareness about water conservation. Although this form of direct public communication campaigns engender interactions and feedback, such interactions are often between individuals or small groups and communication is mainly formal (*ibid.*). Besides, information from public communication is top-down and rarely take into consideration the social dynamics of the receiver of that information. Some have argued that the impact of contemporary public communication campaigns is modest (Hornik, in Howarth & Butler 2004).

## EDUCATION

Environmental education is considered a key strategy in bringing about positive change with regards to how people relate to nature. This is because knowledge is generally regarded as an essential prerequisite for an individual’s behaviour. Having a well-informed citizenry who are generally aware of, and understand, the water situation is not only key to developing water conservation behaviour, but also necessary in ensuring social adaptability in the face of water scarcity (Onyenankeya *et al.* 2017). For instance, educating and arming people with the know-how for saving water is considered a basic and vital process in changing their behaviour toward a “conservation goal”.

Knowledge transfer takes prominence in most water conservation educational initiatives, especially those targeting children as change agents. This is consistent with several studies that suggest that education, especially when targeted at learners,

is a vital avenue of promoting water conservation. Middlestadt *et al.* (2001) posit that availing students in high school of “specific behavioural knowledge” concerning ways to conserve water can inspire water conservation behaviour. Young learners are also said to be particularly receptive to water conservation education and awareness as they would not yet have accumulated the inefficient habits practiced by adults over years of entrenchment (McKenzie 2014). Knowledge acquired from early education or information provides power that enables informed decision-making and, hopefully, better choices regarding the subject of information. By educating present or future water users about efficient water use, the established culture of bad practices gradually comes into contact with a new, more efficient culture which catalyses the process of migration from one culture to the next. For this reason, Mathipa and Le Roux (2009: 258) argue that schools must “provide learners with the opportunity to learn more about the environment and its natural resources and to cultivate pro-environmental behaviour and skills that can be carried through into adulthood”. This thinking seems to underpin the 2020 Vision for Water Education Programme, which is aimed at not only educating learners but making them change agents in their families and communities.

However, environmental education programmes for learners are often designed from outside the learners’ environment. According to Hart (2013: 3), “Too many children are naively parroting clichés from someone else’s environmental agenda about an environment entirely removed from their own experiences”. In order for children’s participation to be more impactful their involvement must emanate from their immediate environment and must be planned to recognise their competencies and unique strengths (*ibid.*). To achieve the global participation of citizens in solving environmental problems, Hart (2013:10) advocates environmental education that is not only fundamental but built from local knowledge and participation by the people. In other words, environmental educational programmes should not only relate to the local environment but should also be based on the problems the residents themselves have identified (*ibid.*). This highlights the imperative for conservation education developers to ascertain the specific kinds of “knowledge” that successfully stimulates behaviour.

## SOCIAL MARKETING

A social marketing campaign is a common method that governments and utilities in South Africa deploy to effect behavioural change among water users (McKenzie 2014). Social marketing is “the application of marketing principles to shape markets that are more effective, efficient, sustainable and just in advancing people’s well-being and social welfare” (Lefebvre 2012). The difference between social marketing and commercial marketing is that while the former is used mostly for promoting socially beneficial practices or non-profit programmes, the latter is intended to promote profitable interests (Meyer & Dearing 1996). The aim of social marketing is to influence individuals “to change their behaviour” (Servaes & Lie 2015: 130).

The application of social marketing techniques to conservation is intended primarily to create awareness about water scarcity issues and ultimately influence a change of attitude or other desirable social outcomes. Mass media, especially television

(which combines visual and auditory components), is considered a potent and effective tool for driving public participation as well as education and awareness. But, as Howarth and Butler (2004: 43) observe, using commercial marketing theory to promote environmental issues like water conservation does not always work because “marketing water conservation is very different animal to marketing shampoo”. In their study, which sought to ascertain the efficacy of marketing “campaigns on water-use attitudes and behaviour” of customers in Tilehurst, England, Howarth and Butler (*ibid.*) found that a commercial marketing campaign only succeeded in removing “some of the ignorance of the need to reduce water use and raising awareness”. However, it was unsuccessful in stimulating the actual desire to decrease water consumption and therefore did not trigger any real need to conserve water.

Although social marketing using mass media is effective in educating and creating awareness, the method has been criticised for its tendency to employ “any means necessary” to achieve its objectives including deceiving and manipulating people into certain behaviours (Buchanan *et al.* 1994). Moreover, it has been criticised for its non-participatory approach, which excludes stakeholders from articulating their own problems and defining the possible line of actions. Hart (2013) argues that social marketing has a “brazen tendency” to market and foist on individuals and communities a “universal environmental dicta and ecological good behaviour” determined from outside their milieu. This negates the aim of communication, which ought to be to support people to carefully assess their “social reality” in order to make the necessary behavioural modifications. Participatory approach theorists argue that adjustments or change can only come about when people are actively involved in development interventions and have a sense of ownership. Therefore, media and communication efforts must be sensitive to the problems and the situation at hand (Höivik & Luger 2009: 322). Also, the application of social marketing to conservation has been found to be limited in achieving behavioural change (Wilhelm-Rechmann *et al.* 2014).

## ENTERTAINMENT

The impact of entertainment education has long been established, especially in health communication where studies have demonstrated that people’s attitude and health behaviour can be changed through planned entertainment (Slater & Rouner 2002). Entertainment education has been defined as “the pro-social messages that are embedded into popular entertainment content” (Moyer-Gusé 2008: 408) and are purposely designed and implemented “to both entertain and educate in order to increase audience knowledge about an educational issue, create favourable attitudes, and change overt behaviour” (Singhal & Rogers 2004: 5). According to Moyer-Gusé (2008), entertainment education could bring individuals to a new level of knowledge where they would be able to adjust their attitude, beliefs, behavioural intentions and actual behaviour.

Entertainment education is premised on the social cognition theory (SCT), which assumes that individuals learn behaviour through observing and copying “role models”, particularly those promoted in mass media (Bandura 2009). Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) assert that media entertainment such as narratives can enable people to

also identify others' mistakes and eventually modify their own behaviour in order not to suffer the undesirable outcomes of such mistakes. Behaviour modelling and self-efficacy do not occur only at the individual level; in fact, Singhal and Rogers (2004: 9) posit that entertainment education can enable communal or group efficacy where community members come to believe that they are able to implement "courses of action required to achieve collective goals".

Entertainment education differs from marketing in that although it engages the community, it is not exclusively engaged in changing the behaviour of the individual. Servaes and Lie (2013: 11) argue that entertainment education "takes the social context into account while seeking diffusion and community ownership of ideas and innovations". Singhal and Rogers (2004) hold that purposefully designed entertainment can inform, educate and influence social change and at the same time be a commercial success. Educational communication channelled methodically through radio or television programmes are significantly more effective than when it is inserted as commercials or public service announcements that may encounter negative reception from the public (McGuire 2001). Moyer-Gusé (2008) attributes the relative efficacy of entertainment education in bringing about change to the fact that these messages are presented as narratives. The ultimate aim of entertainment education is to generate overt behavioural or "social change" (Greenberg *et al.* 2004). In South Africa, top sports personalities and television stars are frequently used to disseminate water conservation messages. For instance, the Rand Water-Wise water conservation and education campaign uses cartoons and comics to educate learners about water issues. But it remains unclear how entertainment efforts may affect beliefs and attitudes beyond modelling and vicarious reinforcement (Slater 2002).

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become an important vehicle for promoting awareness about water conservation, especially by utilities. The major attraction of social media as a promotional tool lies in its interactivity, tailoring and narrowcasting abilities (Rice & Atkin 2012). In terms of reach, immediacy, usability, durability and frequency, social media appears to have an edge over conventional media (Agichtein *et al.* 2008). Social media enables the design of tailor-made messages that reflect the individual's interests and capabilities (Noar *et al.* 2009). For instance, municipalities, water utilities or even non-governmental organisations can use social media to engage with their audiences in a more productive way by designing tailor-made and appropriate water conservation communication (O'Neill & Boykoff 2011). In contrast to the monologic transmission model of social marketing, social media functions in a two-way communication format that provides convergence for a plethora of sources and multiple receivers (Pavlik & MacIntoch 2015). For some utilities and municipalities, social and mobile technologies provide a platform for dialogic communication. One of South Africa's biggest water utilities, Rand Water, has been leveraging social media to create awareness among learners about the need to value water and use it wisely through its water-wise campaign.

However, experts have raised issues regarding the trustworthiness and reliability of information, as well as the disparity of information, which is presented on social media

(Flanigin & Metzger 2007). Some have argued that social media is only effective for those who are educated and financially capable of procuring social networking tools and gadgets. For the illiterate and poor in rural communities, the use of social media as an instrument for creating awareness or changing attitudes and thus behaviour to use water more wisely is still in its heuristic stage. Despite the intrusive nature of social media it remains an important tool to create awareness.

The overarching goal of current water conservation awareness and education campaigns in South Africa is to influence and change South Africans' attitude and behaviour towards water in order to promote more efficient water use. To achieve this goal, agencies and utilities have relied mostly on "traditional, long established and widely accepted and often qualitative, measurable methods and techniques such as communication campaigns, social marketing techniques, surveys, broadcast media methods and mass entertainment education techniques" (Servaes & Lie 2013). Clearly, using a media-centred model in engaging commercial and domestic water users to embrace water conservation practices has its advantages; especially in building salience around a particular issue or innovation in society and enabling people to be aware and understand the ramifications of those issues (Atkin & Wallack 1990). But, as highlighted in the Howarth and Butler study (2004), while promotional campaigns appear effective in reducing or removing ignorance regarding the need to reduce water use and raise awareness about water conservation, they do not appear strong enough to motivate individuals to actually walk the talk. For instance, television, even with its well-known "high appeal for entertainment and awareness raising on specific issues, is not equally effective in changing audience attitudes and behaviour, unless used in conjunction with other channels" (Mefalopolous 2008: 125). The same limitations apply to radio, apart from community radio, which allows for more participatory and development-oriented programming. It has been argued that the "technical" media has ceased to play the dominant role as "champions of innovation", especially in rural communities (Singhal & Rogers 2001). Mody (1991: 91) holds that "media-based communication attempts are effective to the extent that their process of message design approximates dialogue in interpersonal communication".

A study by Onyenankeya *et al.* (2017) that investigated the water conservation attitudes of rural and peri-urban residents in South Africa found that "rural and peri-urban residents are yet to develop a social ethic of water conservation essential in creating sustainability of resource use". This suggest that existing water conservation communication strategies are yet to "resonate with this very influential population" (Onyenankeya *et al.* 2015: 23).

No doubt concerted education and awareness campaigns around water issues are required to build community knowledge and support for water conservation. If everyone should be involved in achieving a sustainable, country-wide conservation practice, there is a need for a new approach that entails a basic grassroots public outreach – a methodology that is more qualitative and participatory in nature (Servaes & Lie 2013). This article argues that engaging the rural community to see the need to change in the face of scarce water supplies and increasing demand requires not just communication to inform and persuade but communication to foster mutual understanding and collective action.

## THE NEED FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNICATION

Before the advent of contemporary mass media, many societies relied on a traditional or indigenous communication system. In Africa there exists a variety of communication modes, including folk drama, storytelling, music and dance, which are used for information dissemination and entertainment. Indigenous media is defined as “any form of endogenous communication system which by virtue of its origin from, and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of values, symbols, institutions, and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes” (Panford *et al.* 2001: 15601).

While indigenous media is described in a number of ways, including “Oramedia” (Ugboajah 1985) or “folk media” (Panford *et al.* 2001), experts agree that indigenous media are endogenous or rooted in the culture of the communities where they are “produced and consumed” and help in reinforcing the values of such societies (Ugboajah 1985: 166). Melkote and Steeve (2001: 252) describe folk media as “products of local culture, rich in cultural symbols, and highly participatory”. They are “visible cultural features often quite strictly conventional, by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined” (Ugboajah 1985: 233).

Indigenous communication has a much wider audience as it can reach those who do not read or write (Oyesomi *et al.* 2017). Indigenous media uses interpersonal communication, which attempts to talk to the people, solicit their support and partnership, and encourage them to voluntarily embrace expected behaviours. Indigenous media does not compel individuals to take on new behaviour adjudged “beneficial” by the promoting agencies and governments but instead people are encouraged to participate in constructing what is beneficial to them. Calhoun (2002) insists citizens must freely participate in arriving at decisions on issues of mutual importance. For citizens to participate in such deliberations, however, they must have equal capacities (Shabani 2003: 49). This presupposes that the structure for deliberation must take into account the conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed (Freire 1972: 61). Traditional media often communicates messages to audiences using the local dialect with entertainment. Ugboajah (1985, in Nyamnjoh 1996: 10) holds that indigenous media as oral media in local languages not only “speak to the common man in his language, and idioms, dealing with problems that are directly relevant to his situation”, but can also provide a codification of reality which can be used by participants in analysing their situation (*ibid.*).

Because traditional media easily connect with the lived experiences of the general population it is a potent platform for disseminating messages around conservation issues. Chari (2016: 221) posits, “Indigenous media have the ability to integrate the socio-economic and linguistic milieu of indigenous communities and their historical locus in searching for indigenous solutions to indigenous problems”. The use of local dialect helps to mitigate semantic noise, which is inevitable in communication (Wood 2016: 22). In India, indigenous media has been found to be effective in fast-tracking rural development (Kumar 2006). It has been argued that indigenous media promotes two-way communication essential in cultivating a conscious conservation ethic.

This is more so as indigenous knowledge on conservation already exists. According to Struwig (2010: 199), “Traditional conservation practices suggest that African agricultural, harvesting, forestry and hunting practices were designed in a way to conserve”.

One of the indigenous communication platforms that has demonstrated huge potential for natural resource conservation is folk theatre. Chari (2016) writes that folk theatre was effective in galvanising the people of Zimbabwe into action for the National Tree Planting campaign. In Cameroon, participatory theatre was used to dissuade residents in the Korup and Banyang-Mbo area from taking part in the environmentally harmful practice of using pesticides and dynamite to kill fish (Inyang 2016). Similar conservation behaviour change was achieved in Papua New Guinea using folk theatre (*ibid.*).

From the above, it is evident that indigenous media modes such as folk theatre, song and dance can offer a cost-effective vehicle to communicate messages about water issues and stimulate the desired conservation action. According to Servaes and Lie (2013: 130), “Techniques such as storytelling and drama provide platforms to communicate the change process”. Storytelling is becoming an increasingly meaningful tool in development interventions (Bell 2010; Fog *et al.* 2010) because “stories challenge our linear ways of thinking and can have real enabling power” (Servaes & Lie 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the participatory action research (PAR) approach. PAR takes place in a native setting, uses indigenous knowledge, and seeks “shared ownership” of the research project in order to analyse social problems and jump-start a collective community action. Mefalopolous (2008) notes that human beings naturally want to maintain the status quo and are typically apprehensive of any suggestions demanding adjustment of deep-rooted beliefs, habits or practices. Therefore, to bring about sustainable change people must “see the need and the related benefits, and take an active part in that change”. As pointed out by Höivik and Luger (2009: 322), “Even the best-intentioned campaigns will fail if the local population is unwilling or unconvinced if the aim is to bring about fundamental change in deep-rooted cultural habits”.

In this study, PAR was utilised to determine the role of and assess indigenous communication strategies such as dialogue, dance and traditional drama in advocating attitude and behavioural change among rural dwellers in Gaga, a rural community in South Africa’s Eastern Cape Province. First, in order to extract a more nuanced perspective on participants’ perception of and attitude to water conservation and water issues, a focus group session was conducted involving seven purposively selected residents (four females and three males aged between 16 and 65). The sampling frame focused on families who have a shower and bathing basin installed in their homes. Thereafter, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with five female and five male participants. The interviews enabled the researchers to identify entrenched social, contextual and cultural dynamics underlining residents’ water beliefs and attitude to conservation. Both focus group interviews were conducted in IsiXhosa, the language commonly used in the community.

Following the interviews, a door-to-door survey was conducted involving 51 randomly selected households in the community. The survey was administered using four trained Xhosa-speaking assistants, and only one respondent in each household could answer the questions.

Thereafter, 45 people who participated in the earlier survey were invited to a “water day” at the Gaga community hall. In attendance were the ward counsellor and the manager in charge of water services in the local municipality, who presented a 30-minute talk on water generation, purification and distribution. Thereafter, he fielded questions from participants. This was followed by a dance and folk theatre production. The drama was written and performed by locals who worked with the thematised water problems, including the misconceptions around water scarcity and conservation. The drama was in isiXhosa and made use of local songs, motifs and values associated with responsible behaviour and etiquette. At the end of the presentations, the same questionnaire administered during the initial survey was distributed to the participants to fill in with the assistance of four research assistants.

## RESULTS

Eleven percent of the participants who completed the second survey were of the view that South Africa has sufficient water resources. This indicates a significant shift in position from the previous survey, where 57% of participants held this view. According to one of the participants, what he took away from the drama was when one of the actors said, “Eish! Even our water is captured by our neighbours”. Similarly, the proportion of those who were of the view that city dwellers consume more water and should conserve more water declined from 58% to 11%. This suggests that the dialogue with water officials and the theatre presentation, which focused on the need for everyone to save water, may have influenced the belief that water conservation is the responsibility of urban residents. There was also a significant decline in the percentage of those who held the view that water scarcity was as a result of mismanagement or incompetence on the part of municipal managers. Ten percent agreed with the statement, “Water scarcity is as a result of mismanagement and incompetence of municipal managers”. This is in contrast to 45% in the earlier survey.

Interestingly, more than half of the participants (52%) disagreed with the statement that South Africa will face a water scarcity crisis in future. One explanation for this view could be the belief that South Africa has an abundance of water. Many participants were of the view that the available water resources were sufficient to meet future needs, if the resources are competently and judiciously managed. When asked to describe the impact of the folk theatre with regards to their understanding of the water situation in South Africa, many of the participants stated that they were now better informed on water issues. With regards to what they felt was the important lessons from the event, the three overarching responses that emerged were “water costs money to produce” (46%); “saving water is everybody’s business” (33%); and “we should use water wisely” (20%). The majority of the participants expressed a willingness to save water and be water-saving champions in their households.

## DISCUSSION

As evidenced from the findings, the participants stated that their understanding of water issues was enhanced by the dialogic and theatrical engagement. Listening to the talk by the water officials on the challenges in providing water, and watching the dance and drama, which emphasised the need for individuals to help conserve water, the participants indicated that they had arrived at a new level of knowledge where they were able to take voluntary actions. Bamberg and Möser (2007) hold that the ability of individuals to behave responsibly towards the environment is largely influenced by the amount of knowledge the individual has about environmental problems. The folk drama used the language and idiomatic expressions that the people are familiar with, which helped to break down abstract concepts to something real and present, thus enhancing clarity and understanding.

Prior to the application of the indigenous media strategies of dance, traditional drama and dialogue, more than half of the participants held the belief that South Africa has infinite water resources and 58% also believed the onus to conserve more water lies with city dwellers. But, with the crucial facts emanating from the drama and dialogue, the participants were able to change their opinions. For instance, almost all the participants were unaware that South Africa was sourcing fresh water from neighbouring countries. The folk theatre was able to connect participants emotionally to their “broader socioecological systems” (Heras & Tàbara 2016).

As indicated by the findings, the majority of the participants now knew that water was not only limited in supply but also cost money to provide; thus, everyone should participate in conserving this scarce resource. The dramatisation of the water issues using familiar motifs and symbols not only enhanced sense-making but stimulated actions. Because dance and traditional drama is familiar to the participants and the message speaks to the problem identified by and reflective of the participants’ social context, they were able to arrive at what Moyer-Gusé (2008) describes as a new level of knowledge that convinced them of the need to bring about a change in their water conservation habits. This is regarded as transformational participation (Abdulla 2016: 462).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggests that indigenous media, dance and folk theatre, in particular, are not only effective in raising awareness and educating rural people about water issues but they are also a potent tool in breaking down misconceptions and the complicated issues around water conservation. This study foregrounds the social and psychological dynamics that underpin water conservation practices but, more importantly, it highlights the need for water conservation communication programmes to be tailored to address not only the needs of the people but also to take cognisance of diverse contextual issues. Water conservation should be seen as a joint responsibility and people should freely and voluntarily accept and commit themselves to conservation. As Höivik and Luger (2009) point out, only when people willingly adopt and implement a “conservation ethic” and embrace water conservation as a way of life, the long-term supply goals of water conservation will be met. To bring

about a change in behaviour, where the individual comes to regard water conservation as a lifestyle, will involve active participation. Much as the conventional, top-down centralised mass media system remains relevant and is useful in disseminating information to people, the horizontal, two-way or dialogic approach, which consults and encourages grassroots interaction and participation, is key in unlocking people's attitude and perceptions and stimulating the desired change. Water conservation programmes could be more effective and sustainable if a genuine attempt is made to gain widespread support from stakeholders by making them partners and providing approaches that encourage people to willingly and easily embrace water-saving behaviour. Given its grassroots nature and interpersonal attributes, indigenous media provide a communication approach that has the potential to negotiate the issues around water conservation.

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