

# Community Participation in Water and Sanitation Service Delivery: An Empirical Case of Mantsopa Municipality, South Africa

Prosper Bazaanah<sup>1\*</sup>, and Nthama Mathews Litabe<sup>2</sup>

\*(ORCID: 0000-0002-9948-2147)

1. Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR-Water Research Institute), Ghana and Future Africa Institute, University of Pretoria, Hillcrest Campus, Pretoria, 0186, South Africa
2. Management College of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa

## Abstract:

Water and sanitation access is recognized to be essential for the development of the South African economy. Despite decades of independence, the participation of citizens in water and sanitation service delivery is still constrained at the local level. This study utilized the qualitative methods approach, including interviews with community representatives and municipal officials, to assess the effects of community participation on water and sanitation services at the Mantsopa Municipality. Participants were chosen based on expertise and experience, while data was analyzed using a thematic approach. The study found that community involvement can lead to improved service delivery and increased resident satisfaction. However, the participants are generally dissatisfied with the quality of water and sanitation services due to delays and inefficient services arising from decades of use of facilities without maintenance. Existing barriers to decision-making include funding, lack of awareness and education about water and sanitation delivery, limited access to information and communication channels, cultural and social norms that discourage participation, and political and economic factors that hinder community involvement. Overcoming these barriers requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities working together to promote public participation in water and sanitation delivery. Effective solutions should be tailored to the specific cultural, social, political, and economic factors at play in each context. The municipal authorities should consider redesigning the water supply and sanitation systems to accommodate the growing population while increasing the number of water tanks, and implementing more efficient municipal distribution systems.

*Keywords: Community participation, Water and Sanitation, Service Delivery, Mantsopa Local Municipality, South Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the transition into democracy in 1994, the South African government has formulated various legislations to improve service water and sanitation services, particularly among previously marginalized communities (Goldin & Kgomotso, 2005). In 2002, an apartheid-governance structure, composed of the state, provinces, and municipal governments, was established to ensure a comprehensive approach to a developing state (Nealer & Raga, 2007). As a semi-arid country, about 5 million South Africans, particularly rural residents, lack access to drinking water and improved sanitation (Hove et al., 2019; WHO & UNICEF, 2022). While policies and legislation exist to promote citizen participation in service delivery, such as the 1996 Constitution, Water Services Act of 1997 and the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 (Masiya et al.,

2019; South African Government, 1998), little is known about the extent to which citizens are actively engaged in decision-making processes around water and sanitation. This means that decision-making is dominated by a small group of people with political and economic power, rather than involving a wider range of stakeholders, such as community members, civil society organizations, and independent experts. This could lead to decisions being made to primarily benefit the interests of the elite, rather than the needs of the broader population (Mintrom, 2020). For example, municipalities may prioritize investing in infrastructure in affluent neighborhoods, rather than prioritizing areas with greater need. Studies suggest that although there has been some progress in providing water and sanitation infrastructure in South Africa, challenges remain in ensuring that these services reach all residents, particularly those living in informal settlements and rural areas (Monyepao & Uwizeyimana, 2018; Douglas & Fredendall, 2019). Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in decision-making processes around the allocation of resources for water and sanitation, and citizens are often not adequately consulted or informed about service delivery plans. The practice of excluding diverse voices and perspectives can limit innovation and creativity in the sector (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2020). In addition, excluding community participation in decision-making can undermine trust and legitimacy in the water and sanitation sector. Communities may feel that their needs and concerns are not being considered, leading to frustration and potentially even resistance to government policies (Osborne & Plastrik, 2019).

These gaps are particularly prevalent in rural and marginalized communities where access to information, education, and resources is often limited. As a result, citizens may feel excluded from the planning, implementation, and monitoring of water and sanitation projects, leading to a mismatch between their needs and the priorities set by local government and service providers. Bridging these gaps requires a concerted effort to raise awareness, build capacity, and foster meaningful dialogue and collaboration between citizens, government, civil society, and private sector actors (Turnhout et al., 2010). Community participation is a practice that empowers citizens to have a say in municipal affairs through information sharing, consultation and mobilization aimed at informing and persuading a municipality and its policies (Shannon & O'leary, 2020). Including a broad range of stakeholders in decision-making can bring new ideas and approaches to the table, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions (Gargano, 2021). Given the enormous service delivery disparities that were brought with independence (Reddy, 2016), it is crucial that the South African government prioritize increasing community engagement and participation in the management of water and sanitation services, which up until now have been managed using "top-down" strategies (Smith et al., 2011) that have not been effective in meeting the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations. This can be done by establishing community water and sanitation committees, soliciting public feedback on policy proposals, and creating opportunities for civil society and independent experts to participate in decision-making processes. Given the importance of citizen participation in ensuring equitable and sustainable delivery of water and sanitation services, further research is needed to understand the barriers to citizen engagement and to identify effective strategies for promoting meaningful participation. The experiences from Mantsopa Municipality offer an illustrative case for assessing barriers to community participation, how these affect water and sanitation service delivery, and strategies for sustainable redress among rural communities of South Africa.

## EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL LITERATURE

In South Africa, social and ecological changes are taking place. The challenge of improving and transforming water service delivery towards a more socially and ecologically just position is well illustrated by the notion of a complex social-ecological system (C-SES), which is pertinent when seeking a fair transition. Water security problems related to water access and service delivery constraints are often intractable, multi-scaled and composed of different actors with different interests. Systemic approaches to addressing such complex challenges are on the rise globally and not only in South Africa. Despite this, government interventions have often taken top-down approaches and have rarely been effective in addressing rural challenges. The participation of the public in the administration of services means self-governance or participatory governance. In relation to this study, public participation is viewed as a continuous interaction between government and the public, ranging from informing and listening at one end, to implementing jointly agreed solutions at the other; and in between there is dialogue, debate, and analysis (Crescenzi & Rodriguez-Posee, 2011). Community participation in this regard is described as a community-based deliberative process by which interested or affected citizens, civil society organizations, and government actors are involved in policy-making before a decision is taken (Sigenu et al., 2019). The intention of community participation is primarily to influence decision-making processes that reflect 'the will of the people' (Mehta & Fugelsnes, 2003). Through community participation, the government can solicit the citizens' input, and effectively respond to their needs and common interests. South African local governments generally have legal frameworks which favour community participation in service delivery (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003). However, the consultative and participatory processes at the municipal levels continue to experience setbacks. To a considerable degree, there seem to be adverse factors that have the potential to paralyze efforts of rendering water and sanitation services. Furthermore, top-down and elitist approaches have proved less fruitful and there seems to be a need for more robust approaches to getting communities involved in issues related to service delivery at all levels of society (Smith et al., 2011). As stakeholders, community participation entails open, two-way communication or dialogue with diverse groups with the objective of understanding and solving issues of mutual concern (Government of South Africa, 1998; Smith et al., 2011). At the municipal level, it is important to consider community participation when planning and executing projects. This requires identifying potential stakeholders, understanding the social, economic, and political context, and developing strategies to engage and communicate with local communities. Without these elements, even the best approach may fail to achieve its desired impact (Fairbanks et al., 2007; Hove et al., 2019). Engaging communities requires participatory forums that are inclusive and interactive (Dawkins, 2021; Kaptein & van Tulder, 2003). Participants can build trust and ownership through active engagement, leading to more effective decision-making and implementation of solutions (Hove et al., 2019).

At the Mantsopa Municipality, it is important to be open to diverse community initiatives, even if they differ from official government views (Leduka, 2009). This can lead to more effective policies and programs that better serve the area, ultimately resulting in stronger and more resilient communities. This approach can help to foster a more inclusive society, where everyone's voices are heard and valued. It also demonstrates a commitment to respecting the autonomy and agency of local communities. Engagement can lead to more effective and inclusive decision-making by involving a diverse range of stakeholders (Hove et al., 2019). Dawkins (2020) suggests that effective stakeholder engagement should aim to create a level playing field for all parties involved, ensuring that each stakeholder has an equal opportunity to influence the outcome of the dispute. This can be achieved by promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in

decision-making processes. Since water and sanitation projects are not islands but meant for humans, it is essential to engage all actors to deliver value to all involved parties. This involves understanding the needs and expectations of stakeholders, communicating effectively with them, and incorporating their feedback throughout the project lifecycle. By doing so, projects can be more successful in achieving their objectives and creating positive outcomes for everyone involved (Dawkins, 2021; Naidoo, 2005). When groups are involved in decision-making, it ensures that the needs and concerns of all stakeholders are considered, leading to more effective and sustainable water and sanitation services. This approach also promotes transparency and accountability in service delivery. (Fairbanks et al., 2007; Hove et al., 2019). This study draws on empirical evidence from the Mantsopa Municipality to investigate the effectiveness of residents' participation in water and sanitation service delivery in the area.

### STUDY AREA AND METHODS

The study was conducted at the Mantsopa Local Municipality (Figure 1). The Municipality was selected because the South African constitution mandates local municipalities to ensure social services are extended to everyone without exception (Government of South Africa, 1996). However, the current conditions at Mantsopa reveal that the rural areas are poorly served in terms of water and sanitation. Farm workers and domestic water users walk long distances to water sources. Bulk water supply in the Municipality is, in most areas insufficient, and supply systems are not adequate. Meanwhile, facilities for water and sanitation services are rudimentary and standards are not guaranteed. Access to water and hygiene remains a dream to residents due to inefficiencies of the municipal water and sanitation systems (Leduka, 2009).



**Figure 1: Location of Mantsopa local Municipality**

Source: South African Government (1998)

Water-borne infections have become rampant, causing ill-health and death among the most vulnerable population such as women and children (Pretorius & Schurink, 2007). To permit an in-depth investigation into the prevailing conditions, the study adopted the qualitative approach. This enables us have direct personal contact with the participants and to examine their choices, behaviour and perceptions about water and sanitation service delivery in the municipality (Taherdoost, 2020). The study was less concerned with generalizability but rather focused on a

deeper understanding of the problem in its natural context (Dooly et al., 2017). The qualitative approach was used to obtain an insider perspective and be able to discover meaning embedded in the participants' daily experiences. This was helpful in condensing extensive and varied textual data into a brief/ summarized format. The sample was determined using the purposive technique. The purposive approach allows researchers to select participants based on their experiences, unique qualities or knowledge on the subject under study (Etikan et al., 2018). In applying this technique, we were able to identify and select different stakeholders who possessed requisite knowledge about the water and sanitation service delivery conditions in Mantsopa municipality. A total of 10 research participants were utilized in the study, including a municipal ward councillor, a town planner, an environmentalist, four household heads, a municipal engineer, a municipal development manager, and a representative from the local traditional council. These participants were chosen so that the study might benefit from their expertise, knowledge, and life experiences connected to the issue of investigation (Lakens, 2022; Lelissa, 2018). The participants' real names were substituted with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and anonymize their comments (Creswell, 2019). The inclusion criterion in the sample required the participants to have been a resident in the municipality and be actively involved in water and sanitation matters for at least the past five years. With the aid of a key informant, reconnaissance trip was initially made to the Municipality. This was followed by a pilot study with two participants from the Mantsopa community (Saunders et al., 2019). In the field exercise, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The instrument collected data on the lived experiences, practices, opinions and expert knowledge of the participants on water and sanitation situation in the municipality. The interview procedure involved face-face interactions where questions were posed to elicit verbal responses from the participants (Fleming & Karsten, 2019). The data analysis followed a thematic approach. Typically, thematic analysis is used for a collection of texts, such as an interview or transcripts (Lakens, 2022). The researchers carefully reviewed the data to uncover common themes - subjects, concepts, and meaning patterns that repeatedly appeared from the views expressed by the participants.

## RESULTS

### **Community Residents' Perceptions on Water and Sanitation Services**

The findings showed that the participants were dissatisfied with the quality of services they received from the municipality. To express her satisfaction, Ms M. Tshabalala, said "I have never participated in decisions, but I have never experienced water scarcity. My family has never experienced any sewerage blockage and the quality of water is clean and suitable to be used for all purposes". This is perhaps, the participant resides in an urban area of Ladybrand, where the population is not congested and with a relatively better water and sewage system. Even though some individuals have been fortunate enough not to experience these water and sanitation-related constraints, we should be mindful of our privilege and work toward advocating for those who do not have access to these basic necessities. For instance, M. Legoa indicated that "we have obsolete infrastructure and that affects our water quality and sanitation systems. Sewage systems are choked". This situation can pose threat to public health and the environment, as untreated sewage can contaminate water sources and cause the spread of diseases. Urgent action is needed to upgrade and modernize infrastructure to ensure water safety for people in the area. Similarly, M. Mabalani, indicated that "Our water infrastructure is too old. Due to poor service delivery by the municipal water supply system, I have to build a borehole facility to avoid disappointment, because the cut of water give rise to bad odour". The lack of municipal investment in upgrading the water infrastructure has resulted in an inadequate and unreliable water supply, which is a major concern for public health and safety. The government has to

prioritize the maintenance and improvement of the water infrastructure to ensure access to safe and clean water for all citizens. For M. Mcawada, “the municipality supply water through water tankers to the JoJo tanks. However, the water is unhealthy due to lack of hygiene practices, and inefficiencies of the municipal workers (tank fillers)”. M. Mcwada further noted that the reason behind the erratic water supply is due to “the growth of our population and size of our geographical area is disproportionate to available water tanks”. Thus, the municipality is unable to meet the high demand for water and better sanitation. The authorities should consider redesigning the water supply system to accommodate the growing population, increasing the number of water tanks, and implementing a more efficient distribution system. The use of Jojo tanks leads to affluent community members receiving quality water while depriving the poor. This was stressed by M. Ncheka who said: “the poor rely on unclean water. I am well aware of the ill infrastructure, failure of pump station and aging of pipes. The water we receive is sometimes brownish and has a funny taste and smell. I experience sewerage blockage but municipality in fixing them”. The dissatisfaction of the participant lies on the poor state of water and sewage systems as a result of obsolete infrastructure. Access to clean water is a basic human right, and it is unacceptable that the poor have to rely on unclean water. It is crucial for governments and organizations to prioritize the improvement of water infrastructure in impoverished areas to ensure that everyone has access to safe drinking water. For M. Mabalane, there are instances when she experiences unavailability of water, and “sometimes water is brownish with alkaline and smell funny. She explained that during drought seasons, the community dam gets depleted, leading to water scarcity. This means that as a result of water scarcity, households could be negatively affected especially during latrine usage. Again, water scarcity can have serious consequences on the health and livelihoods of the local population, especially for those who rely on agriculture and livestock for their income. Therefore, it is important to implement sustainable water management practices and invest in alternative sources, like rain harvesting and storage of water, to mitigate the effects of drought. When asked about her evaluation of the quality of water from her household’s main source, M. Mabalane said “I don’t trust water from our main source, so I don’t evaluate it. I only use it to bath and for washing, I buy water for cooking and drinking”. Thus, for Mabalane, obsolete infrastructure, ineffective management, and use of surface water contribute to the dissatisfaction with the quality of water used and sanitation services received from the Municipality.

### **Barriers to Public Participation in Water and Sanitation Delivery**

In the view of P. Majara, households are discouraged from participating in water and sanitation decisions due to a lack of information. The Municipality does not involve them in decisions. For instance, Majara said: “the municipality does not have proper communication and information channels to adequately inform us of imminent supply-cut and educate us about water and sanitation matters. The municipality does not procure quality chemicals for purifying or cleaning water. The water is dirty”. This lack of information can lead to a situation where households are not fully aware of the potential benefits and risks associated with different water and sanitation options, and may therefore be hesitant to participate in decision-making processes. Providing residents with more information about these issues can help to increase their engagement and ensure that their voices are heard in the decision-making process. The municipality needs to ensure that the residents are kept abreast with the information while also empowering the local people and involving them at all levels of planning and decision-making regarding water and sanitation delivery. For S. Moeti, the local residents are not motivated to engage with the municipal officials because they receive “Very bad services. We cannot cook, do laundry and even struggle getting water to bath”. Perhaps, a commitment to operation and maintenance and

ensuring that the local people participate in the delivery of safe and clean water will improve and protect the health of the communities. This will lead to an increase in the quality of life for residents and boost economic development for the region, creating a more vibrant and sustainable municipality. For instance, T. Nkhoke said there have been “many unfulfilled promises of infrastructural improvement due to lack of funds by the Municipality. I’ve never been satisfied with this water it’s just that I don’t have any other choice”. This demonstrates that the participants are deeply concerned about the community’s well-being, yet the municipality appears to be lacking financially to address those concerns. Since they do laundry, drink, and cook from the dam water source and their kids swim there, their health could be at risk. In addition, delays in responding to complaints of households and water users constitute a barrier to fruitful participation in service delivery. The lack of funds by the Municipality has also affected the quality of water supply, which is a basic necessity. It is unfortunate that residents have to settle for unsatisfactory services due to the unfulfilled promises of infrastructure improvement. For instance, Thebe said; “sometimes I experience sewerage blockage and complain about it, but the Municipal workers delay in responding to have it fixed. Water and sanitation service delivery was hindered by a lack of public awareness of meetings. Low attendance rates and inflexible meeting schedules”. Thus, an effective municipal-stakeholder relationship could be important for enabling community participation in the delivery of social services. Similarly, T. Nkhoke expressed frustration over the lack of transparency and accountability by the municipality in the delivery of social services. Specifically, Nkhoke said “there are no transparent structures in terms of communication and getting feedback from the municipality”. Such practice makes government agencies less accountable in the distribution of resources to citizens, and hence, could demotivate local participation. This lack of transparency can lead to frustration and mistrust among community members, as they may feel excluded from important decision-making processes and unable to voice their concerns effectively. To increase transparency, it is crucial for the municipality to prioritize open communication channels and actively seek feedback from their constituents in order to foster a sense of trust and collaboration within the community.

### **Measures to Sustainably Address Participatory Barriers in Service Delivery**

In the view of T. Nkhoke, “frequent communication between the municipality and the people is needed”. This could be possible where the Municipality establishes open forums for stakeholder engagement and interaction. M.E Ncwada adds that the municipality should ensure; “...cultural, social norms, political and economic factors hinder our involvement and participation decisions on water and sanitation. Women are sometimes excluded due to funding constraints and prevailing patriarchal social arrangements which gives males power over decision-making in our households...”. These factors vary greatly across different regions and communities and addressing them requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and power dynamics. Effective solutions to water and sanitation challenges must therefore be tailored to the specific cultural, social, political, and economic factors at play in each context. Similar to these sentiments, Majara suggests “private sector involvement is vital for addressing water and sanitation problems in our community”. Since the municipality does not have adequate funds to maintain facilities, there will be the need to involve the private sector in areas of funding, metering, revenue collection and water distribution. Again, Leboea adds there is a “need to improve communication channels to accommodate various social groups. This will ensure improved sanitation service and sustain the quality of water in the community”. The public requires education and awareness creation. Among the communication channels which could be used by the municipality include both print and electronic media such as radio, television, newspapers, and events like public durbars in the community. Through such engagement, the

municipality will have access to data and obtain public input on municipal initiatives pertaining to water and sanitation delivery. From service users, staff, senior managers, councillors, other council services, partner organizations and suppliers, it is important to participate in decisions on water and sanitation service provision. For Thabane, there is the need to “improve operational effectiveness and invest in water and sanitation infrastructure to lighten and shorten the provision of water and sanitation services”. Again, Moeti considered the need to “enforce the FBW policy and the National Water Act (NWA) in the municipality to bridge access gaps to resources of the state”. Though it’s ideal to equally share resources and services among people, Nkhoke perceived that “there is the need for the Municipality to understand the social, economic, environmental and geographical factors which affect the quality-of-service provision”. This is important because the municipality comprises people from different social and cultural groups. Any measure taken by government officials in terms of services to the people should be a holistic approach that adequately addresses the socio-economic constraints of society. For Moeti, “availability of funds from the national sphere of government to the provincial sphere is vital for improved service delivery to meet demands of the growing population”. The municipality has a growing population, yet the decades of use of social amenities without repairs/ rehabilitation appear to be affecting its capacity to meet the current needs of the people. The central government should ensure the municipality have adequate funding for operational, administrative and service delivery. Water boards should be established in order to provide bulk potable and wastewater to water service institutions within their respective service areas. Water boards are established in terms of the Water Services Act of 1997 to provide bulk potable water to users within their respective service areas. In addition, strategic partnerships between local water service providers and water service authorities as well as the private sector, should be developed. There is a need for policies and programs that promote community engagement and empowerment in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of water and sanitation projects. This will ensure that the users and suppliers are aware of their respective duties/ expectations. The establishment of Water Services Authorities could facilitate lobbying of national government and development partners for strategic investment and partnership in the water and sanitation sectors of the municipality.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings highlight that despite decades of independence, water and sanitation access is still a minority privilege. It is important to recognize that access to clean water and sanitation is not universal and many people worldwide still face these challenges daily (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Again, the water and sanitation facilities are in deplorable conditions. Similar to Goldin and Kgomo, (2005), the situation is worst in the informal and marginalized settlements of Mantsopa, where inefficient services and decades of facility use without maintenance have continued to persist (Douglas & Fredendall, 2019). The lack of access to basic services in these areas not only affects the health and well-being of the residents (Pretorius & Schurink, 2007), but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty and inequality (Mehta, 2003; Reddy, 2016). Urgent actions are needed to address these issues and improve the living conditions of those living in marginalized settlements. Water scarcity in the Municipality is a humanly induced phenomenon (Hove et al., 2019) arising from overuse, mismanagement, and pollution of freshwater resources. It is a growing problem worldwide, affecting people and ecosystems (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). The residents in the municipality have to settle for substandard or poor water and sanitation facilities due to socio-economic, cultural, and physical barriers (Osborne & Plastrik, 2019) which tend to hinder active involvement and participation in policymaking and planning for service delivery (Shannon & O’leary, 2020). Funding constraints, lack of awareness, and limited access to



information and communication are key barriers to decision-making in the municipality. Meanwhile, elitist, and top-down decision approaches (Mintrom, 2020; Smith et al., 2011) appear to have failed to deliver optimal services in the area. It is important that duty-bearers recognize these context-dependent barriers in developing mitigation actions. Similar to Gargano (2021) and Hove et al. (2019), more collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches may be necessary to address the needs of the local population. This could involve working closely with the government, civil society, municipality, and vulnerable communities by involving them in decision-making processes. Without adequate infrastructure and capacities, access to clean water and basic sanitation becomes a challenge, particularly for marginalized communities (Monyepao & Uwizeyimana, 2018). Therefore, the government must allocate sufficient resources towards infrastructure development and build capacities of the municipality to mitigate challenges in the water and sanitation sector.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Water and sanitation access is recognized to be essential for the development of the South African economy. Despite the taunted benefits associated with public participation in the water and sanitation sector, there are still challenges that hinder the effective implementation of such initiatives. The findings of this study highlight that the participants are generally dissatisfied with the quality of water and sanitation services due to delays, lack of communication, and inefficient services arising from decades of use of facilities without maintenance. The existing barriers to decision-making in the water and sanitation sector include funding constraints, lack of awareness and education about the importance of water and sanitation, limited access to information and communication channels, cultural and social norms that discourage participation, and political and economic factors that hinder community involvement. Initiatives that do not recognize the context dependency of these constraints are not likely to be effective because these barriers tend to perpetuate inefficiencies and reproduce humanly induced water scarcity and unsanitary conditions in the municipality. Overcoming these barriers requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities working together to promote public participation in water and sanitation delivery. This will expand engagement beyond the government to include multi-actors like civil society and community actors who represent different interests in policy-making processes. In addition, providing the local people with more information about water and sanitation conditions can help to increase their engagement and ensure that their voices are heard in the decision-making process. The government must prioritize the maintenance and improvement of infrastructure to ensure access to clean water and basic sanitation for all citizens. Future research and initiatives of the municipal authorities should consider redesigning the water supply system to accommodate the growing population, increasing the number of water tanks, and implementing a more efficient distribution system to achieve a more inclusive and sustainable water and sanitation management in the municipality.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This publication was made possible (in part) by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors. The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Future Africa Research Leader Fellowship (FAR-LeaF) Programme at the University of Pretoria.

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