



THE EQUALITY COLLECTIVE

## Improving rural water services - building municipal functionality and accountability in Amathole

What does constructive advocacy look like in the context of dysfunctional municipalities responsible for basic service delivery in communities? This question is front of mind in many social justice organisations, and crisis committees particularly those working closely with municipalities, as we continue to see Auditor-General reports repeatedly spell out the lack of capacity, skills, funding, wasteful expenditure and corruption in local government.

[The Equality Collective](#) is an activist, community-embedded lawyering organisation based in the rural Eastern Cape, working to strengthen active citizenry and improve basic services in former homeland municipalities like Amathole District Municipality (Amathole DM) and Mbhashe Local Municipality.

In light of the unique challenges facing these municipalities, both current and historical, we adopt an unconventional [constructive advocacy approach](#) where we build an understanding of the problem; take time to engage our communities around what approach should be taken; bolster and support existing democratic structures; build consensus around well-researched solutions; and as far as possible problem-solve solutions together with government. Living and operating in a remote rural village is unique, endemic to our theory of change and central to our approach.

In January 2021, Amathole DM was placed under [financial administration](#). In April 2021, the municipality declared to the Portfolio Committee on Co-operative Governance that it was bankrupt and unable to pay salaries. Since 2019, the Auditor General's [audit outcomes](#) in Amathole DM have been adverse or disclaimed, meaning her office was unable to obtain supporting documents and found the municipality to be in non-compliance with legislation. These issues are deep-seated and eerily familiar - only 13% of municipalities obtained clean audits in 2024. We knew that simply litigating against Amathole DM would not yield the service delivery improvements needed in our communities.

To engage strategically to improve the reliability of water from the Mncwasa Water Scheme (the Scheme), we sat in the problem to properly understand the driving forces, both historical and current, that contributed to Amathole DM's dysfunction.

The Scheme was built by Amathole DM in 2010 and became operational in 2015, promising to supply water to about 30 000 residents across 40 villages. Close to ten years later, however, communities are still using water from streams and rivers because the water supply from the Scheme is inconsistent, and in some villages, non-existent.

We started by conducting a door-to-door [survey](#) with close to 300 residents to hear their experiences. 82% of the communal standpipes did not have water every day and 41% of the community had no water since the previous year. Together with our traditional leadership, Jalamba Traditional Council, we engaged the municipality to investigate the challenges.

Two things became apparent; there was a lack of funds and capacity within Amathole DM to monitor and maintain the Scheme and, there was a lack of funds to embark on a necessary refurbishment of the Scheme to restore some of its functionality. Both of these stumbling blocks were crucial to ensuring consistent and reliable water to communities.

Amathole DM suggested The Equality Collective explore a community monitoring system, now known as [Amanzi Kumntu Wonke](#) (Water For All), to assist with monitoring and operations of the Scheme, and it was agreed that the Equality Collective and Viva con Agua—another organisation working in Nqileni Village—would engage engineering support to prepare an application (a Business Plan) for a Water Services Infrastructure Grant (WSIG) to refurbish the Scheme.

In 2022, we were successful in assisting Amathole DM to secure a WSIG of about R8 million, which leveraged an additional R21.5 million in WSIG funds over the coming four years.

Since 2022, Amanzi Kumntu Wonke has supported community members (Water Ambassadors) in 40 villages to collect water availability data in reservoirs and leaks or damage to infrastructure on a daily basis, with 100% data completeness. We collate this data into daily, weekly and monthly reports which we share with Amathole DM via a WhatsApp group and email. The monitoring data supports Amathole's technical management of the Scheme and empowers community members with evidence for accountability.

In [August 2022](#), 41% of reservoirs had water. In [July](#) this year, 70% had water. In [September 2024](#), we achieved 92% water reliability. This kind of impact called for expansion.

In keeping with our approach to strengthen the capability of the municipality to deliver on its constitutional mandate, we engaged Amathole DM to identify areas for expansion to two more schemes and, on 24 June 2024, submitted a formal letter for the Municipal Manager's approval.

Over the next three-four months we followed up regularly with our contacts in the municipality, taking advice on best strategies to obtain their approval. We submitted a credentials letter and obtained a letter of recommendation on 8 October from the Mayor of Mbhashe Local Municipality, Sam Janda, based on our collaboration around our roads budget work with Mbhashe. On 16 October, we received formal notice from the Municipal Manager of Amathole DM's approval for our potential expansion areas, a significant milestone. We are currently engaging the municipality and potential community partners and look forward to testing the replicability of this model to other schemes in the region.

Our commitment to constructive advocacy and building strong relationships with the municipality has paid off. We remained steadfast in honouring our ongoing partnership with Amathole DM and kept the ultimate objective—and the pathway to achieving it—at the forefront of our minds. Our ultimate objective in this advocacy is to see functioning local governments and active citizens working together to ensure communities live dignified lives.

In a nation where millions of poor and vulnerable people still bear the weight of an unequal and violent past, it is essential for all sectors of society to commit to fostering a state that can fulfill its constitutional mandate. Our experience in Amathole DM shows that this requires innovation, courage, and perseverance from both communities and government, as well as patience and flexibility from funders as we work from within to bolster local government capacity. A holistic approach that combines invented and invited strategies for participation is essential to generate the groundswell of change needed, including rethinking the municipal fiscal framework and improving intergovernmental support for municipal service delivery.

While we remain committed to constructive advocacy, we also remain prepared to take firm, adversarial actions when necessary to address entrenched structural issues, as evidenced by our campaigns against the [re-appointment of Mr Mnyimba](#), unqualified for the role of Municipal Manager, and the [appointment of a CFO](#) who was out on bail for corruption at the time of their selection.

Our ultimate aim is clear: to achieve a functioning local government where active, engaged citizens work in tandem with improved and capable municipal institutions to ensure that every community member can lead a dignified life.



