West African urban polls find clean water top priority

By Nellie Peyton

DAKAR (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Rapid urbanization has caused so many problems in the Senegalese town of Touba-Poish that the government and aid providers don't know where to direct their limited resources.

The population of the formerly rural commune near the capital Dakar has roughly doubled in the last decade to reach 80,000 people. Only 13 percent of residents are connected to the power grid and 30 percent have running water. People who used to make their living by farming and herding are out of work.

"There are many challenges linked to urbanization. I think it is representative of the lesser known towns in Senegal," said Touba-Poish's mayor Soumaila Dicko. Dicko went door to door with a team of experts from the University of Dakar to implement a survey process asking citizens what they need most. That of the Resilient Africa Network (RAN), the regional lab was one of four across Africa funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The poll found that people value water access above all else, including transport, waste collection and income-generating activities. On a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 being "very important," asking the government for more household water connections ranked 9.7.

"The problem of water access is much more serious than we had thought," said Mayor Dicko at an event in Dakar last week where he presented the results.

Politicians tend to implement projects with quick outcomes that can help them get re-elected, but these do not always correspond to the community's long-term needs, he added.

"This poll allows us to see if we are on the right track," he said.

LOCAL SUPPORT

The polling method, known as "deliberative," is different from other kinds of surveys because it allows people to discuss the policy proposals the poll contains before they vote, ensuring they are well-informed about all the options.

The technique was developed in the 1990s by Stanford University professor James Fishkin and has been used all over the world, but not until recently in sub-Saharan Africa.

RAN has used it in Uganda and Ghana to assess resilience-building options since 2014. "People told me it wouldn't work in developing countries, that the people must be highly educated," Fishkin told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "But it does work very well here."

There is an understanding today that development projects need local support and engagement to be successful, and this is one way to obtain it, Fishkin said. The method was adapted for illiterate people using voice and video materials, he added.

In one part of Uganda where the poll was conducted, the local government had tried to implement projects by replacing small local schools with larger, centralized ones.

"Then politicians started sending their daughters because they were afraid for their safety on the trip," Fishkin said.

"The district officials hadn't even thought of this, but they heard from the people and decided to reverse the policy," he said.

WATER OVER FOOD

People in Tamale, Ghana, one of the fastest-growing cities in West Africa, prioritized clean water and sanitation in a poll conducted there in 2015 by the same lab.

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They voted overwhelmingly to ban the use of wastewater for farming to grow more crops, or prohibit it to protect public health.

"This showed that non-literate populations, when provided with the right information and right conditions for decision-making, (can) make well-grounded and informed decisions," said Dennis Chirawurah, director of the West Africa lab.

But persuading government agencies to adopt their policies in line with the poll remains a challenge, Chirawurah said.

Mayor Dicko said he was deeply affected by the results and was in discussions with the Ministry of Sanitation and the state water utility to improve the water situation, although lack of money remains the primary obstacle.

In the meantime, he plans to work on putting outdoor water fountains in neighborhoods with no household plumbing.

"After the poll, we identify pathways to building resilience," said Chirawurah. "Then we put out the call for help."