

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 Tivaouane-Peulh 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 issues facing towns in Senegal," said Tivaouane-Peulh's mayor Momar Sokhna Diop.

So Diop partnered with a lab at the University of Dakar to implement a survey process asking citizens what they need most. Part of the Resilient Africa Network (RAN), the regional lab is 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 was ranked 9.7.

"The problem (of water access) is much more serious than we had thought," said Mayor Diop at an event in Dakar last week where he was presented with 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."

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 1980s 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 improve education by replacing small local schools with larger, centralized ones, Fishkin said. But parents stopped sending their daughters because they were afraid for their safety on the trip.

"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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Tamale residents faced a trade-off. With people suffering from both food insecurity and disease, they had to decide whether to use untreated wastewater for farming to grow more crops, or prohibit it to protect public health.

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They voted overwhelmingly to ban the use of wastewater for farming, and were strongly in favor of other disease control methods such as handwashing campaigns in schools.

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

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

Mayor Diop 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."

(Reporting by Nellie Peyton; editing by Megan Rowling. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, climate change, resilience, women's rights, trafficking and property rights. Visit news.trust.org/)