

## **Rights, Responsibilities and Needs: Ethical and Practical Issues of Water Services in Urban and Rural Areas with Examples from South Africa**

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This article discusses rights, responsibilities and needs with regard to water supply services in developing countries. It juxtaposes the challenges of water supply in urban versus rural areas, to highlight the nature of provision in each context. Drawing on an extensive literature review and empirical examples from South Africa, it takes as its point of departure the notion of water as not only a service, but as means of enhancing human capabilities, and argues that the implications of such a view implies a need to open up the debate of water services from a narrow focus on the cost recovery of a supply service to individuals and communities, to a societal necessity. It explores the nature of state-society relations in urban versus rural settings, and charts out the boundaries of rights and responsibilities in each context. It argues that, rather than an ‘either-or’ approach, new constellations of governance arrangements need to be sought in urban and rural settings, that acknowledge the differential needs of people and communities in these areas. Whilst water is a public, justiciable socio-economic good the provision of which should lie ultimately with the government, there are myriad constellations across the spectrum of public to private provision that can meet the challenges. It is not so much the service provider, but *how* the service is provided that matters. And the ideas of ‘public’ and ‘private’ are only useful to a limited extent, as there are many ‘publics’ and many ‘privates’. In a rural setting, communities or individuals may be ‘private’ (i. e. non-public) providers in liaison with local government. The question is not so much who offers the service, but how it is offered, to what extent needs are met, and how clear lines of accountability can be established.