Tracking the flow of information in public health: A water quality case study in three African countries

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ABSTRACT (250-300 words)

What makes for effective public health communication? How should environmental researchers, health officials, and policymakers communicate public health recommendations to the community? We propose a multidisciplinary analysis of this flow of information in a particular sphere of applied environmental research—water quality and diarrheal disease in sub-Saharan Africa—with the aim of evaluating success and producing guidelines for effective public health policy.

The project will compare a set of detailed case studies of rural water quality and diarrheal disease in three African countries: Mozambique, Botswana, and South Africa. We will apply qualitative as well as quantitative methods, interviewing and observing researchers, policymakers, and community members. The goal would be to study the flow of information from researchers to policy makers to the community, investigating whether different communication approaches (in the three countries) are more or less effective at improving public health. We would look for strong “predictors” in the flow of data—particular approaches to high-level policy, dissemination of information, public warnings, media coverage (if applicable), community meetings, etc., which correlate strongly with public health success in terms of preventing water-borne disease. A successful model of this flow of information could inform public health strategies and suggest improvements to existing policies.