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Community participation: Umgeni Water's approach



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Introduction

The widespread failure of development projects in Africa in the 1960's and 70's led to a re-assessment of the approach needed and of the critical success factors for implementation of such projects. A number of reasons were postulated for this phenomenon, perhaps the most important one being that the communities which these projects should have been serving had not been sufficiently involved in the planning, implementation and administration phases. This led to a lack of ownership and hence ultimately, sustainability of the projects. This perception has certainly been felt in South Africa although the trend has if anything been slower to reach these shores than for other countries.

This change of emphasis had undoubtedly resulted in a paradigm shift for those involved in development projects. It necessitates a new approach which many agencies and actors have been struggling to come to grips with. One of the reasons for this is that the skills required to facilitate effective community participation are quite different from those historically associated with the implementation of projects. Nevertheless, the principle of community involvement is now widely accepted but it is more the practical aspects of how to most effectively achieve this that people are wrestling with. In many ways the old autocratic approach of implementing projects is more intuitively appealing to people with a hard technical background, even though the long term results of this are often disastrous. It is fair to say that "technocrats" are often not great communicators and thus they struggle with many of the concepts and practicalities of community participation.

Most of the material outlined in this paper is as a result of the experiences that Umgeni Water has had in the planning, implementation and administration of schemes in rural, peri-urban and informal settlement areas. This paper thus unashamedly has an emphasis towards water and sanitation schemes. Nevertheless, it is believed that a lot of the principles and philosophies embodied in this paper have generic application to other development projects. Umgeni Water has now had approximately 12 years experience in this work which has been particularly concentrated in the last five years. This is as a result of the implementation of Umgeni Water's Rural Areas Water and Sanitation Plan (RAWSP).

The emphasis of this paper is intended to be primarily towards the practical aspects of how to facilitate commu-

nity participation and this is reflected in the main body of the report.

Why community participation?

The primary objective for community participation has already been mentioned as being that of sustainability of projects. This has an obviously very pragmatic motivation from any implementing agency's point of view. However, within this overall framework and objective are a series of other reasons and motivations for adopting this sort of approach. Ten reasons advanced for community participation by White (1981:11) are as follows:

1. With participation, more will be accomplished.
2. With participation, services can be provided more cheaply.
3. Participation has an intrinsic value for participants.
4. Participation is a catalyst for further development.
5. Participation encourages a sense of responsibility.
6. Participation guarantees that a felt need is involved.
7. Participation ensures things are done in the right way.
8. Participation uses valuable indigenous knowledge.
9. Participation frees people from dependence on other skills.
10. Participation makes people more conscious of the causes of their poverty and what they can do about it.

The above list clearly indicates that one is trying to address the issues of building ownership in the community, utilising local resources, and developing appropriate and hence efficient solutions.

In the South African context there are also additional motivations for community participation in that one is looking (as is common with many other countries) to transfer skills to the community and to develop institutional capacity. There is also a need to build goodwill with communities which have often experienced decades of poor treatment and frustration. The lack of a democratic process in South Africa also emphasises the need for properly conducted community participation which will enable some sort of democratic input to occur in the development process. Lastly, one must say that in the current mood prevailing in the country the community

participation option is ultimately politically much more acceptable and more likely to facilitate reconciliation.

How does one achieve community participation?

Groundwork

The experience in Umgeni Water has been that one needs to do a lot of homework on and with communities before one can proceed to the implementation stage. This involves a process of getting to know the community and of the dynamics that operate within it. In this regard it is particularly important to identify potential stakeholders and power groups that operate within a community. This is made more difficult by the fact that one cannot always take for granted a claim by an individual that he or she represents the community.

Community liaison

One has to set up some form of channel of communication between the agency and the community. An important technique for achieving this is by the medium of public meetings. These can be frustrating and difficult forums but are nevertheless essential in terms of ensuring some sort of reasonably democratic contact with the community. They are not a practical means for detailed community participation but are nevertheless extremely useful for feedback to the community when key points in a project are reached and very important decisions need to be made.

For the detailed process of consultation and involvement in decision making, one has to work through some sort of community structure. If there is such a structure in place within the community then this can be used but it is important initially to carry out some discreet enquiries to try and establish the credibility, and support, of such structures. The structure involved could take the form of a Water Committee, Development Committee, Tribal Authority, Civic, Residents Association or indeed any other committee that can be seen to have support in the community. If no suitable structure exists then it is necessary to try and encourage the community to elect a committee to serve as the liaison body between the agency and the community. Again, the most appropriate mechanism for facilitating this is the public meeting.

Regular meetings will need to be held with the community committee throughout the project but the frequency will vary depending on the project phase and needs.

Throughout all the above phases the committee should continually be acting as a channel of communication between the community and the agency. This is clearly ideally a two way communication process though committees tend to have to be reminded of this, particularly with regard to their duty towards the community side.

Agency representatives

There is a need to devote a great deal of time and patience to the community liaison process. It is one of those things that is very difficult to rush but time invested in the early stages will be worthwhile in the final analysis. One therefore needs to have people available who can spend a significant amount of time in the community and who can communicate effectively. One needs to have people involved who have the right sort of outlook and attitude for this sort of work, not everybody is disposed or "cut out" for it.

The ideal background for third world development projects is a mixture of technical and social skills. This is an unusual combination and thus it is sometimes necessary to make use of teams of people who have the different skills in combination working closely together.

Key skills for facilitating community participation were identified in the RAWSP (Institute of Natural Resource (INR), 1991: 60-61) as follows:

- Communication skills
- Educational skills
- Development skills
- Facilitation skills
- Evaluation skills

The pursuit of empowerment

If one is to achieve empowerment within the community then often the agency has to be involved in a process of skills transfer and institution building throughout the community participation process. The latter in particular is a severe constraint in many communities due to the political legacy of the past. Of course it goes without saying that the community have to wish to be part of the process if it is to be successful, after all, one of the ultimate indicators of empowerment is the ability of the community to make choices even if these are sometimes not particularly liked by the agency with which they are interacting.

It should also be emphasized that the building of capacity within the community is a two way process whereby both parties have certain well defined responsibilities and tasks to undertake. Empowerment cannot be achieved by the community sitting back and letting the agency do everything for them. Problem solving is an important part of the learning process (Flanagan, 1988:16-17). One should also be aware that a lot of the participation process involves negotiation with the community and it is submitted that this is a very healthy situation. It is apparent that a situation where the community just blindly agrees to everything often results in an end product which is ultimately not sustainable.

Some practical suggestions

Attitudes

When trying to establish a relationship between the community and the agency, which is essential in the process of community participation, the attitude of both parties are key variables of which one needs to be aware. As mentioned previously one must accept the fact that the agency's efforts are often viewed initially with mistrust and hostility and one has to have patience at the early stages in order to be able to work through this. Community attitudes in this regard can certainly be changed over time but one needs to develop a climate of trust and establish a track record before this can be achieved. Only then can a healthy relationship and partnership develop.

Agency representatives must therefore be prepared to invest a lot of time and must have an empathising approach and genuine interest in the welfare of the community. In the words of Van Wijk-Sijbesma (1989: 12) "more time is needed to decide things with others than for others". Another important aspect to mention is the concept of who is the client. It would appear obvious that the community must be the ultimate client yet some bodies and agencies appear to become confused about this issue, even though it is fundamental to the concept of providing a service and ensuring the recipient is happy with the end product.

Political

There are exceptions and sometimes hidden agendas but generally speaking a need for development is accepted by most communities and political groupings. The more tricky issue however is the question of the divisions within the communities which is particularly common in the Natal situation. There is no easy solution to this problem and it must be recognised that a development project has the potential for both unifying and splitting any community. In an ideal world one would hope that a development project could bridge gaps and bring people together and Umgeni Water has had some successes in this regard.

In other cases however, one sometimes has to adopt a strategy of "divide and rule" in order to be able to achieve any success in a particular area. This would involve setting up separate committees representing different areas within the overall development area. Discussions and negotiations can then occur with the various groupings on an individual basis. It must be stated that this is not ideal and certainly inefficient but is sometimes the only way to make progress. A critical success factor in this process is to maintain an apolitical stance as far as possible. You must have the freedom to be able to talk to all parties at all times.

In many areas, particularly the more rural, traditional structures are in place and these should be involved at an early stage in the participation process as they often retain considerable authority in the community. It is interesting

to note this is a factor in many parts of Africa (White, 1981: 134-5). Traditional structures vary a lot in their management style, some adopt a hands off policy once they have given a project their initial blessing, others like to be heavily involved throughout. The former is often preferable since it appears to improve the speed of decision making.

Communication

Communication with any community is difficult and something at which one has to work very hard. Because of the problems with illiteracy in underdeveloped communities one has to recognise that the spoken word counts for a tremendous amount. In this regard public meetings are particularly useful but also the radio is a very important means of communication in developing communities, although it can be expensive. The youth can play an important role as the literacy among the young people tends to be much higher than amongst the older people. Umgeni Water have found that communication via the schools appears to be a very effective means of getting things back to the parents and the community as a whole.

Another thing that one has to accept in view of the fact that key decision makers are absent during the week is that a lot of crucial work has to occur over weekends both in the case of public meetings and also committee meetings. Public meetings are one of those "necessary evils" of community participation. They can be extremely difficult to manage but are nevertheless an essential tool. A good rule for public meetings is "expect the unexpected". As a result, cool heads are needed for agency representatives, who must be able to think quickly and make decisions where appropriate.

Negotiation

It has been mentioned that throughout the whole participation process one is ideally looking at developing capacity within the community. In this regard one has to be realistic and realise that there are many issues which are negotiated throughout the process of the project. This means that the normal principles of negotiation apply such as knowing what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable, recognising differences, whilst emphasising commonalities etc. etc. Another principle of negotiation is that one should not underestimate or overestimate the capacity of those parties one is negotiating with. We have found that there are often some very shrewd and able negotiators active within communities.

Another important principle of negotiation is to recognise that every community is different and a flexible approach is thus required (see for example Shandu and Wilson, 1992). Solutions that work in some areas are not successful in others. An innovative and lateral approach is needed in some cases as "canned" solutions may not be appropriate.

Opportunities

In spite of the multitude of problems that present themselves in working with communities there are also many opportunities which can be capitalised upon. A good example of this is the low employment in many areas and usually there is tremendous excitement and demand for any employment opportunities. The principle of employment of local labour wherever possible, and as a minimum for the unskilled work, should thus be widely accepted by development agencies. This creates the potential to develop tremendous goodwill amongst the community whilst also adding considerably to the potential for ownership of the project. There is often a surprising amount of local skills that are potentially available within communities. One should look at opportunities for promoting entrepreneurship within the community by strategies such as labour only contracts and labour based construction. There are also often ongoing roles in administration and maintenance that can be very effectively "picked up" by local community members after the projects have been implemented. This ensures continuity and again facilitates ownership.

The liaison structure that one works through in the community participation process has the potential to become a tremendous ally in the development of the project and also as a catalyst for further development in the area. The water committee of today could become the local authority of tomorrow. To promote this one has to try and look at means whereby one can emphasise the status of the committee wherever possible. This could involve things such as encouraging other development agencies to work through the committee and also ensuring that all important decisions go through the committee. One does also however need to almost set the committee certain tests and check on these to try and determine whether the committee is doing its job and playing the correct role.

Conclusion

To Umgeni Water, community participation has become an accepted and natural part of project planning, design and implementation, maintenance and administration. We believe that it is such a useful process with so many potential benefits and spin-offs that it almost becomes an end in itself. Some of these that immediately spring to mind are the potential to develop good will, empowerment and real improvement in the quality of people's lives. All these benefits can accrue to any agency or body adopting the community participation and partnership approach. It is not however an easy panacea and considerable time and effort must be devoted to achieve success. A real commitment is needed by the development agency and its representatives as there will be many setbacks and frustrations along the way. This paper has attempted to give some practical suggestions to assist those interested in following the community participation approach. In the final analysis,

it is the only route to follow if South Africa's vast development challenges and targets are to be achieved.

References

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* Recommended for further reading.