Rural local government in Kwazulu-Natal

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ACCORDING TO THE new constitution of South Africa - clause 152 (i) (b) - Local Government has a responsibility to provide, operate and maintain local services such as local water supply. Prior to the 1994 general elections, and subsequent local government elections of 1996 in Kwazulu-Natal, the responsibility of providing services in rural areas rested either with government departments such as Development Aid, Agriculture and Health; government instituted agencies such as Joint Services Boards (JSBs) and Water Boards, or with other associations such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Non-government organizations, together with other service providers such as JSBs and Water Boards, worked closely with various local committees, in an effort to deliver services to rural communities. In the majority of cases, committee members were elected into these committees on the basis of their commitment and interest in community development. The association of service providers/NGOs and local committees resulted in the transfer of skills to local committees, an act which in turn improved the capacity (and therefore empowered) local committees greatly.

As a result of the election of local government and the subsequent setting up of local government institutions, which has been carried out in accordance with the new constitution, some (if not all) service providers and NGOs have to re-evaluate the way in which they conduct their business and consequently to re-direct their capacity building efforts. This action by service providers/NGOs may either be beneficial or detrimental to rural communities.

An attempt is made in this paper to highlight the lack of capacity of rural local government representatives (Regional Councillors) to oversee the development process in rural Kwazulu-Natal; and to suggest ways that may be adopted to improve the situation thereby enhancing the ability of local government representatives to fulfil their constitutional obligations. This discussion relates in particular to water projects.

Introduction

Democratic rural local governments were elected for the first time in Kwazulu-Natal in June 1996. According to the new constitution for South Africa the responsibility for the delivery of services, such as water supply at local level, lies with the newly elected local governments. The majority of the newly elected Regional Councillors originate from previously disadvantaged communities

(i.e. those communities that were previously excluded from government structures). Many Regional Councillors have never been members of local development committees and hence they lack skills and capacity to manage the delivery of services to rural communities.

The lack of governance skills on the part of Regional Councillors, the large service backlog evident in most rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal, and the high community expectations for speedy delivery of services aroused by the dawn of the new South Africa in 1994, have the potential to create disillusionment and despondency among rural communities.

This paper outlines the scenario through various political development phases which took place in this country and that have led to the present state of affairs. Ways and means of ensuring sustainable development of rural areas for the benefit of rural communities are then suggested.

Historical background

Historically, the Kwazulu-Natal rural areas (excluding farmlands) fell under the jurisdiction of indigenous Tribal Authorities headed by the Amakhosi (Chiefs) who inherit power to rule. Under the Amakhosi are Izinduna (headmen) and Tribal Councillors all of whom are appointed by the Amakhosi. According to McIntosh (1995), functions of the Tribal Authorities have often tended to be limited to land allocations and tribal judicial duties.

Many rural communities, on recognizing the need for development projects in their areas and lack of leadership in this regard from their Amakhosi, took initiatives to form development (and other) committees. This was often done with the blessing of the respective Tribal Authorities. As a result of this arrangement, many service providers, NGOs, and development agencies worked with these community elected representative committees in the planning, construction and general delivery of services to rural communities. In the process, the said groups directed all their training and capacity building efforts to these committees thereby ensuring their empowerment with the necessary skills to be able to manage and sustain their projects.

Transitional phase

This is the local government pre-election phase which was characterised by confusion and uncertainties in all spheres of rural life, more so in the Kwazulu-Natal

province. Local government elections took place seven months later in this province in comparison to other provinces of South Africa. This was a result of considerable delays in the finalization of models for rural local government (McIntosh, 1995).

During this phase, communities and development committees who had initiated and had been in control of development at rural local levels, were confused about their future role in the planning, construction and management of these projects. According to McIntosh (1995), the lack of clarity on expected future roles was not only apparent in communities and development committees, but also in the Traditional Authority circles.

Post-election phase

This is the phase where rural communities found themselves with a number of stakeholders, all purporting to have the interest of rural community development at heart. Firstly, there were the old Tribal Authority structures with Tribal Councillors; secondly, the local development committees; thirdly, the service providers wishing to continue as usual; and fourthly the newly elected Regional Councillors. The latter, mainly because their election is according to a proportional representation party list and is not constituency based, have split loyalties between the party and the community.

This situation has led to some conflict among some rural stakeholders. The conflict has arisen as a result of:

- development committees realizing their achievements in community development projects and the capacity which they already have to manage these projects;
- the development committees' unwillingness, perhaps rightly so, to give up their responsibility to perceived 'political' councillors;
- a strong desire for recognition and political power on the part of the elected local government councillors.

Many Regional Councillors are reluctant to join existing development committees in the process of delivering projects. Instead they choose to stop the current projects with the view to taking them over and leading the way. This approach is a potential source of conflict, and tends to hold up the delivery of services.

The new philosophy was sharply illustrated at a consultants briefing called by the iNdlovu Regional Council in Pietermaritzburg on May 28 1997. The new chairman of the council explained the new role of Regional Councillors in local projects as:

- to provide all community liaison services as required;
- define projects;
- to produce budgets for selected projects;
- to prioritize projects;
- to recommend consultants for each project;
- in the case of small community based projects, to recommend local contractors for appointment on each project.

Consultants were specifically asked not to become involved with assisting development committees until requested to do so by the council or councillors. When asked who would bear the responsibility for the success of the project in the short and long term, the meeting was informed that those responsibilities lay with the appointed engineer and the development committee (which has been the case up till now). The role of the councillors seems thus to have been shifted from the role of lobbying for funds for their areas, deciding on policy and auditing progress, to one of liaison and control.

Many questions are raised by this new role that the councillors have assumed. For example, consultants are regularly asked by development committees to assist them with drawing up project proposals and budgets. These are then submitted to various potential funding agents (e.g. for a water project applications could be made to the Department of Water Affairs, Umgeni Water, the Regional Council and the Mvula Trust). Most consultants consider it unethical to solicit such appeals for assistance from communities, but do assist when requested. According to the new roles, the councillors will both define the projects and draw up the budgets for them - consultants were asked not to get involved. But the councillors will need professional assistance to come up with budgets that match project definitions. Who will provide it?

A second example of the new roles was provided recently in the area of the iLembe Regional Council, which operates in the coastal hinterland around Durban. A committee of councillors are managing a programme for the upgrading of water and sanitation facilities at schools, and wished to appoint a company to go ahead with the work. In discussions with these councillors about how the programme should be managed, it was stressed to potential programme managers that the key point of contact would be the councillors' committee, and not the individual schools committees.

A third example is provided by the Ozwathini Water Project (in which both authors have been involved) which is scheduled for implementation in 1998. The chairman of the regional council regularly chairs meetings of the elected development committee responsible for the planning of that project, making the committee chairman (who is a capable person who has been involved in the project since 1992) then wonder what his own role is.

All these highlighted situations illustrate the danger that KwaZulu Natal may be slipping into a top-down style of development, ignoring those actually responsible for the ownership of the work. This would be a retrogressive step.

Suggested way forward

Communication between all stakeholders, in the form of meetings and workshops, is fundamental to shaping the way to a commonly identified goal. The following roles are suggested for the various stakeholders:

- *Local communities*, who usually have reasonably clear views about their development needs, should elect or strengthen their development committees at local (Tribal Authority) level. Such development committees should be at liberty to seek funding for community identified projects from funders including Regional Councils, with co-operation and endorsement from Tribal Authorities and their regional councillors. Local development committees should, where possible, interact and network with other development committees from adjacent or adjoining areas. The view here would be to form sub-regional/district development forums whose main objective would be to solve common problems and encourage joint developmental projects if this will benefit their respective communities. This networking should again be subject to approval by the respective Tribal Authorities as well as being subject to ratification by local government representatives. It is at this sub-regional/district level, where representatives of local government could and should play a meaningful developmental role by being full members of such development forums. Regional Councillors operating at Regional Council level do not have the capacity to plan, operate, maintain and manage all projects at the local level, and this is not their function.

- *Regional Councillors* should prioritize projects within their areas, decide on implementation policies and monitor progress. They should also use their positions to lobby for further financial support and other resources from other government tiers so that their capacity to engage in forums and networking bodies can be enhanced.

  As members of district/sub-regional development committees or forums, they will have the opportunity to learn and obtain skills from colleagues in the development committees thereby improving their own skill base. Such interactions and networking will lead to mutual understanding of strengths and weaknesses and this can only be beneficial to the development process.

  In an attempt to further enhance and improve the capacity of Regional Councillors to engage in developmental projects, resources (mainly financial) should be mobilized to train Regional Councillors in basics of project cycles and management.

- *Service providers* and other stakeholders should interact with communities and development committees at local level. The benefit of such interactions will be the transfer of valuable skills from service providers to the local development committees. Service providers should also interact with development committees and forums at sub-regional or district level. Service providers and other stakeholders should also enter into discussions with Regional Councillors (at the latter's request) to share ideas and to learn from one another.

Conclusion

Enhanced interaction and communication between rural local government representatives and all stakeholders involved in the development of rural communities, will not only be beneficial to the local government representatives but also to the rural communities and development processes. It is essential however that Regional Councillors, who are elected on party political lines to decide policy at the third tier of government, should not confuse their role with that of elected local development committee members. The latter are responsible for the long term success of their projects, and need to be supported, not dictated to, by their regional representatives.

References

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