



Community decisions on Mvula Trust projects

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COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF rural water supply projects is increasingly common in the new South Africa. This management role requires decisions by the community that can have a major bearing on the ultimate success and sustainability of a project. Since 1993, the Mvula Trust has developed a comprehensive set of procedures that maximise the involvement of the community in decision making. Using the experience of Mvula rural water projects in the Eastern Cape, this paper focuses on the key decisions taken by communities during the project implementation cycle.

The aim of this paper is to examine the influences on, reasoning behind and effectiveness of, these key community decisions. Research in the form of a thorough committee interview was undertaken at eight projects underway or nearing completion. The ultimate objective is to identify the key decisions affecting project sustainability, and suggest measures that will improve the effectiveness of these decisions.

Why community management?

Before examining the community decisions, it is useful to briefly explore why communities in South Africa are being asked to shoulder the responsibility for management of their projects:

- The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) has made ambitious promises to the rural people. The target is to provide 25 lt./person/day of tapped water within 200m of every rural household. Although South Africa has, by Africa's standards, a strong private sector, numerous NGOs and an efficient civil service; they do not have the required resources to manage a programme of this scale. The untapped resources of the communities are vital.
- Failure of projects implemented using a prescriptive "top-down" management approach.
- Political desire to empower previously disadvantaged communities and involve them in the decision making process.
- It is also promoted by organisations like the Mvula Trust as a means of improving the long term sustainability of water supply projects. If communities are to operate and maintain the schemes successfully then they must have the necessary capacity and skills. This capacity is best built by intensive participation during the implementation phase. This participation not only increases community capacity, but also increases motivation through a heightened sense of ownership.

The Mvula Trust project cycle

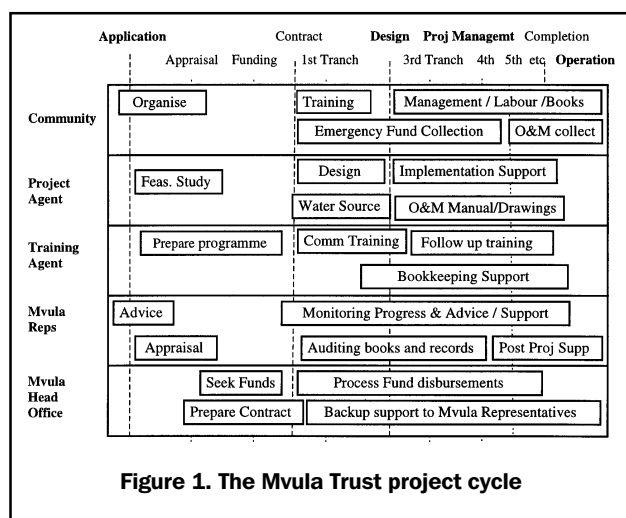
The Mvula Trust has pioneered policies and procedures that make the village water committee the central role player in project implementation. Funds are channelled through the community bank account and they have responsibility for all financial decisions taken on their project. To support them, the Mvula Representatives (MR) hold regular meetings and ensure that the necessary training to take decisions is received. During implementation, the community has to contribute an emergency fund, which will act as a 'safety net' for any major repair. The schedule of contributions is agreed soon after contract signing, and is typically R2 - 5 per household per month. During the project cycle, the following are some of the decisions taken by the community:

- Formation of the water committee.
- Adoption of constitution.
- Election of committee.
- Application to Mvula Trust.
- Selection of project and training agent.
- Input into feasibility study.
- Labour rates (skilled and unskilled).
- Community cash contribution rate (into emergency fund).
- Selection of skilled labour (bookkeeper, storekeeper and supervisors).
- Approval of designs and implementation plan (i.e.: technology choice, pipe layout).
- Hiring unskilled labour, composition and rotation of work teams.
- Selection of suppliers and contractors.
- Expenditure decisions.
- Monitoring progress against budgetary expenditure.
- Reporting procedure with community.
- Operation and maintenance arrangements (including water tariff rate).

A typical project cycle lasts around 12-18 months, and the roles of the key players are illustrated in Figure 1. From the above decisions, the research identified four key milestones when major community decisions are taken that can impact on the eventual sustainability of the project:

Application

The decision to apply to the Trust requires the establishment of a water committee, the completion of an application form and the selection of a Project Agent (PA), who is usually a Consulting Engineer or NGO. Before the project



can be appraised by the Trust, the PA must complete a feasibility study, which includes at least two costed technical alternatives. The community will make a preliminary decision between competing technical alternatives (e.g. borehole/gravity supply or diesel/wind pump), so that an initial budget can be prepared. The Trust will appraise the project to ensure that it is socially, technically and financially sound.

Design adoption

The second key decision is to adopt the detailed designs and implementation plan prepared in collaboration with the PA. This information is included in a Project Planing Report that specifies exactly how the project will be implemented. If adopted, the second tranch of funds is disbursed and construction starts.

Project management

During construction, the committee is involved in the day-to-day management decisions and in the longer term strategic planning. This role involves the organisation of labour, financial control and the monitoring of progress. The MR makes regular site visits to monitor progress of the work and to audit the books.

Completion

Upon completion the committee is faced with decisions regarding the operation and maintenance of the system, including how to raise the funds to pay for the sustainability of the project.

Research methodology

A portfolio of projects was selected, reflecting the various stages of the Mvula Trust project cycle. These included projects at the villages of Nkunzaneni, Goodhope, Crossroads, Preston, Tshapile, Lower Gungululu, Lujecweni and Newtown. A questionnaire was prepared which avoided the use of a Yes/No format, and entrusted the interviewer with considerable latitude in assessing and commenting on each decision. The following broad questions were used to explore the committee decisions:

- Why was a water committee established in your village?

- Why did you apply to the Mvula Trust ?
- How did you select your engineer?
- How much input did you have in the project design?
- Who decided on the location of the taps?
- What was your day to day involvement in the management of the project?
- Who planned and scheduled the progress of the work over the longer term?
- Who decided on the selection and hiring of contractors or suppliers?
- How many people are aware of each decision to write a cheque?
- How is the cash contribution collected from the community ?
- Has there been any disagreement between the engineer and committee ?
- Are there any regretted decisions that would be changed if the project was run again with hindsight?

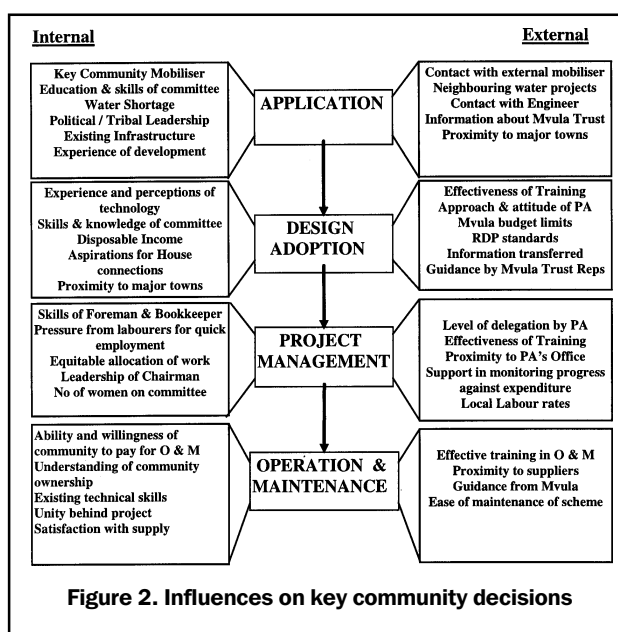
A percentage ranking on the level of external or internal (community) influence was allocated for each decision. The intention was to obtain statistical data, however the sample was too small and the figures too subjective to be used. Nonetheless, the exercise proved a useful tool in focusing the discussion.

Survey results

The survey findings for the four key decision milestones are illustrated in Figure 2.

Application

The initial response to the question of why an application was made was almost always "We are suffering without water etc."; but further probing often reveals the real reason to be the active involvement of a key community member or external agent. These individuals are usually articulate, educated and respected in the community. For example, in Tshapile, the prime mover is a former Transkei



Govt Minister and in Nkunzaneni, an extension worker from the Transkei Development Cooperative.

The application usually prompts the formation of the water committee, and not the other way round. The new committee is often a spin-off from an existing village committee, responsible for wider community and development interests.

The project agent is rarely selected against any sort of competition. Usually the committee selects the first engineer or NGO that they come into contact with. Often contact is made through a neighbouring project, or by the key community mobiliser. At the time of application, committees rarely have much information about Mvula and usually apply because it is the only funder that they are aware of; or because of a perception that delivery will be quicker. Increased community participation is rarely given as a reason for applying to Mvula.

Design adoption

- An encouraging aspect of the survey is the finding that most committees feel they are consulted during the selection of project design. The choice of pumping technology is almost always made by the committee, albeit heavily influenced by the recommendation of the engineer. Sometimes the community decision is influenced by other factors and perceptions such as a desire to bring electricity close to the village or previous bad experiences with a particular technology (e.g. windpumps).
- Reliability of the supply and ease of maintenance are often the key factors in design selection, with long term affordability given less weight. (The new Mvula policy of linking the level of community payments into an emergency fund to the technology chosen should increase the attention paid to affordability in future). While communities are able to take the design decision, a common response is that not enough information is supplied to help them. The ability to take an informed decision is also affected by the level and content of training. Although in Nkunzaneni, a problem was encountered because the training had been too effective! The committee were told during training at a College that all components of their design had to conform to SABS standards. Subsequently they could not be convinced by the engineer that rural conditions do not always require such tight standards, so the design was changed. The extra expense of a few over engineered components is a small price to pay for real community management!
- The positioning of taps is a decision that is left largely up to the community, subject to constraints imposed by the engineer regarding the pipe layout and by RDP standards regarding the tap spacing.

Project management

The level of community involvement in project implementation decisions varies greatly between communities and between project agents. On most projects the committee

has major control over the allocation and monitoring of tasks, while the engineer has a larger input over long term strategic planning. The community usually takes the lead role in deciding the composition of work teams. Labour is frequently rotated to achieve an equitable distribution of opportunity to the poorest community members. Labour rates are decided in conjunction with the PA and the MR, and are influenced by the available budget and rates on neighbouring projects. The committee is usually aware that, as all funds are channelled through their bank account, regular reporting to the wider community is required. Partly this is to avoid rumours regarding misuse of funds. Some of the greatest challenges facing committees during implementation are decisions regarding the monitoring of progress against expenditure. Committees often have difficulty in assessing if work is on schedule and so this strategic role is often left to the engineer. The selection of contractors and suppliers is largely decided by the committees, although they are dependent on the engineer to shortlist appropriate contractors. Often communities place a premium on speedy delivery, although there are interesting exceptions. In Preston, the community are prepared to wait for at least a year (and probably more) to be connected up to a bulk supply, and want nothing to do with a temporary borehole supply. But while in this case, the community are prepared to wait for water; in all communities there is considerable pressure for construction and employment to start.

Operation and maintenance (O&M)

Decisions regarding operation and maintenance centre around the need to establish an efficient means of collecting funds, the employment of a reliable pump operator and the establishment of structures for the committee to efficiently monitor O&M. The major source of income in most communities is pensions, so most collections are scheduled to coincide with pension day. Most communities have experience of fundraising and so are able to set up procedures for collection that involve accurate records and the distribution of receipts. Mvula projects have been designed to be affordable, so communities usually have the ability, if not always the willingness, to pay. This willingness to pay regularly is influenced by a number of factors such as the appreciation of ownership, the sense of community spirit encouraged by the project, the satisfaction with the level of supply delivered and the respect for the committee and its fundraising procedure. External factors affecting the effectiveness of the O&M are the guidance received from Mvula, the effectiveness of training received and the level of support (e.g. O&M manual) provided by the PA.

Lessons

- During appraisal and implementation of projects, there has to be an awareness that projects are often pushed by one individual. A dominant individual can be advantageous in moving a project forward, but it does

have dangers if the community and committee do not feel sufficiently involved in the decision making process. Increasing the number of women on the committee can also help in the decision making process by focusing the committee on the need to deliver water as opposed to a desire to maximise employment. Decisions taken regarding the constitution of the committee are also important during the initial stage. The Trust should take more interest in the committee formation, and provide additional guidance on advisable constitutions.

- A key decision event is the adoption of the designs and implementation plans that have been produced by the engineer. There is usually urgency to 'rubber stamp' plans and proceed with construction; but experience on some projects nearing completion is that the committee benefit from greater explanation of the plans prior to implementation. On current projects, the Mvula Representatives now ask the committee to make a presentation of the plans without the help of the PA. The reasoning being that only if the committee understand the fundamentals of the design, can they explain it adequately to the Mvula Representative.
- While committees are often involved in the day-to-day running of the project, they have little input into strategic planning decisions. Greater effort has to be made on future projects to involve committees in this planning process through, for example, the preparation of critical path analyses, budgets and implementation plans; and the monitoring of progress against expenditure.
- The ability of a community to establish an efficient cash collection procedure is central to the long term sustainability of a project. Despite efforts to encourage regular payments, many communities still tend to use a "make a plan" approach to fund raising. This may work for regular operation and minor repairs, but it can run into trouble with major repairs. The new Mvula policy of making communities contribute regularly during implementation into an emergency fund of at least R10,000 will address this issue by entrenching the payment habit. Once a culture of regular payment is established, the collection of operation and maintenance funds should be less troublesome. It is clear, however, that Mvula Representatives will have to be strict in enforcing collection deadlines, for this policy to work. Another factor affecting the establishment of efficient tariff collection is the satisfaction that the community feels with its project. Many communities expressed an aspiration for house connections. This confirms the findings of the independent evaluation of the Mvula Trust (5), that the sustainability of projects is threatened by delivery of the minimum RDP stand-

ard of supply. The Mvula Trust is addressing this issue by ensuring that future projects are designed as the first phase of upgradable schemes that have the potential to support house connections.

- Effective community decision making is dependent on the ability and willingness of the committee to take responsibility for ownership, and upon the success of the project agent in transferring the required skills and information. The necessary committee responsibility can never be guaranteed, but it can be stimulated by guidance and regular communication with Mvula representatives. A greater impact is achieved through skills and knowledge transfer; and the Mvula Trust has to ensure that the training given to committees is effective, responsive and tailored towards the specific needs of each committee. This requires more emphasis on a thorough training needs assessment prior to the commencement of training, and on the preparation of training programmes geared more tightly to Mvula project requirements.

Sustainability of rural water supplies projects requires a sense of ownership by the community, which can best be stimulated if the community has been fully involved in project *decision making*.

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- \$1 = R4.46 May 1997
MR - Mvula Representative
NGO - Non Governmental Organisation
O&M - Operation and Maintenance
PA - Project Agent
RDP - Reconstruction and Development Programme
SABS - South African Building Standards

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