



Balancing delivery and participation

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THIS PAPER WILL focus on the tension between delivery and participation, in development generally and in water and sanitation projects specifically.

The provision of skills and technologies to rural communities to assist them to access potable water and to practice effective sanitation is arguably one of the most basic and urgent development needs in South Africa today.

Whatever the policy formulation and implementation outcomes in this field, a significant expansion in the skills base and organisational strength at a local level is needed.

It is evident from international research that the chances of water and sanitation provision projects being sustained and impacting positively on further development in rural communities are enhanced when the process of this service provision extends beyond technical service to include community participation, capacity building, training and institutional development.

It should, however, not be assumed that all stakeholders, such as the beneficiaries, the funders and the implementing agencies, in the rural water and sanitation sector are committed to common objectives. Very often different and sometimes conflicting agendas become apparent during both the planning and implementation stages of projects. This is typical of our current situation in South Africa where the political imperative dictates fast-track delivery, while development objectives dictate community participation at all levels in order to ensure long-term sustainability of water and sanitation systems. The fundamental difference between a participatory and a non-participatory approach, lies in the perception of the development process itself and may thus serve several purposes. For the purpose of this discussion, the concept of participation is used in the context of "empowerment" of the intended beneficiaries. In this context, the approach, is to move beyond a welfare or aid approach, towards engagement in longer term rural development sustainability. The indicators for success are thus seen to be broader than the installation of pipes and taps and focus rather on institutional development as a crucial factor in long-term sustainability.

The expectations of rural communities regarding their access to basic services have grown tremendously since the 1994 elections in this country. However government policy regarding the acquisition of these services now requires community participation and "ownership" as a prerequisite for "delivery" of services: In order to meet this requirement extensive work is needed with local level organisations and institutions in terms of skills training,

capacity building, technical support, planning and facilitation of project implementation, where communities are expected to plan, manage, implement and maintain their own systems. It should be recognised that this process has led to very real tensions both at grass roots level and at national government levels. People want water and they want it now, but the process of community participation will inevitably slow down the rate of delivery. On the other hand, the government needs to be seen to be meeting the expectations of people, while at the same time trying to ensure community participation which in turn will impact positively on the long-term sustainability of water systems.

Delivery mechanisms

Given that community ownership, participation and management of rural water supply and sanitation projects is the only way to ensure (even partly) the long-term sustainability of these projects, the way that delivery and implementation occurs is of vital importance:

- The key problems of management, operation and maintenance in the rural water sector have tended to be neglected, given that often the incentive to move money is in conflict with professed aims of involving beneficiaries in all aspects of the project.
- In order to address this problem, long-term commitments from funders and policy makers are required in which both the magnitude and duration of assistance would be difficult to predict in advance. It would also require broad-based assistance to programmes and institutions rather than control-oriented project support.
- Training and capacity building initiatives around water and sanitation are currently fragmented, often dictated by the needs of the funders or the implementing agencies rather than the communities and in some cases simply ill-conceived. Great care should be taken to ensure that the planning and delivery of this training and capacity building is guided by the needs of the beneficiary communities and water management authorities. Should these factors not be taken into account it is likely that we will see a proliferation of water projects in the short-term that cannot be locally managed or maintained in the medium to long-term. This then results in non-functioning systems with people once again not having access to water and a concurrent loss of faith in the "service provider" (i.e. Government).

Given the Dept. Of Water Affairs and Forestry's stated objectives in terms of service provision and the time frame in which to provide these services, we are faced with a huge dilemma. How do we move from a control-oriented non-participatory approach towards an effective, truly participatory, community-based approach, which will ensure local responsibility and thus sustainability? While at the same time bearing in mind that millions of South Africans do not have access to safe water and sanitation services and who are now entitled to these services as a "basic human right".

In my opinion, our only choice is to move towards the practical implementation of local level management through

community participation in all aspects of projects, regardless of the inevitable difficulties that may arise. Our responsibility is to assist communities to develop themselves and not to provide services that may or may not be sustainable in the future. It is ultimately in the best interests of the country and its citizens to rather do the job correctly and thus ensure sustainability than to meet short-term objectives with the consequent possibility of failure.

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