



## Establishing rural water management

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*“TO DEVELOP AN organisational structure for the provision of community water supply in the Bushbuckridge area, such that people would receive 20-35 litres of water of acceptable quality within 200 metres of their homes within a relatively short time, and to ensure that O&M costs will not be a burden to Central Government.”*

The Bushbuckridge Institutional Development Project (BIDP) was initiated in September 1994 as a Presidential Lead Project under the Reconstruction and Development Programme. It was the first institutional development project, and an ongoing attempt at forming community driven management systems for the operations and maintenance of water supply. Three years later it has proven to have had a checkered history.

### Background

The project was initiated as a pilot scheme, given that the new Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) had only just assumed responsibility for rural water supply in the former ‘homelands’ areas. The area was chosen as the project could be linked to the construction of a large earth-fill dam. In this regard, there was little knowledge of the area and no baseline study was prepared, but there was an urgent desire to be seen to be quickly implementing delivery. The area itself is located on the boundaries of two provinces, in the north-east portion of the country, and comprises over one million people. Population densities suggest peri-urban, but infrastructure and social conditions are predominantly rural.

### Conflicts

From the outset, there was confusion amongst the community steering committee as to its role and function. In a situation where a plethora of organisations already existed - some statutory, many not, some viewed as democratic and others as remnants of the old system - there was an attempt to establish a new institution over the top, and to some extent in negation, of a complex and dynamic situation. Where the project was initiated as a many pronged institutional development, it quickly became focused on the formation of a regional water board. At the same time, the steering committee attempted to bring all initiatives under its umbrella, and its endeavour to be an all-compassing body inhibited its ability to perform.

Disputes within the steering committee over representation, and demands of stakeholders to be included in the process, led to a steering committee of over forty representatives, which made the structure unwieldy and incapable of proper decision making. A dispute over which province Bushbuckridge belongs to, which hit national headlines in 1997, was also divisive with neither province prepared to commit financial or human resources to the area.

The appointed Implementing Agent was new to the area and rural development, and required time to understand the social dynamics and the status of existing infrastructure. Disagreement between the Implementing Agent and steering committee has occurred, with the Implementing Agent frustrated by the slow pace of decision making and the steering committee feeling that decisions are being thrust upon them. The conflicts have, to some extent, forced the implementing agent to retreat to their urban base and run the project, in a top down fashion, from there.

### Achievements

Given that the project began in a vacuum, with unclear objectives and guidelines, and became embroiled in a number of conflicts, the list of achievements is impressive.

A baseline study was undertaken which included: demographics, human resources, social data, mapping of existing village water supplies, infrastructure inventory and water management.

Members of the steering committee have undergone certificated training courses, which has improved their ability to perform their duties. The understanding of steering committee members about the objectives of the project has also increased. A campaign to inform the community of the project has also been successful.

Most importantly, in a period of transition, the existing water supply network has been maintained and has not declined in operational level (although no improvements have been noted).

Significantly, the steering committee will dissolve into a properly constituted board with a workable number of members.

### Key lessons

Given that institutional projects deal with the human factor they are by nature unpredictable and subjective. When a project is initiated during a period of rapid socio-

political change, without clear policy guidelines or objectives, then it is inevitable that problems will be encountered. The Bushbuckridge project has assisted national DWAF in formulating policy around institutional roles and functions, but in so doing has probably fallen behind initiatives elsewhere in the country.

It has now become apparent that from the outset communities need to be clarified as to the type of institution/s required and their responsibility in forming these. Due to the problems experienced in Bushbuckridge there has been a retreat towards a lower level of community involvement, with key decisions being made elsewhere. In these circumstances it is more appropriate to the 'decentralise' further, from regional structures to village based ones, where the urgent need for potable water mitigates against political manoeuvring.

Communities must be engaged in the planning process for infrastructure. There remains a tendency to leave this to the 'technocrats' who continue to design systems that are technically inappropriate. Alternatively, population distribution patterns, or economic land uses change but are not incorporated into long-term supply designs. Local government housing schemes can falter as water supplies or sanitation services have not been included. Integrated economic planning is a local government competency, and when the sustainable provision of water is regarded as the engine behind any growth strategy, it is crucial that an integrated planning strategy is formulated.

It is also necessary to make a distinction between a bulk supply authority and a catchment management authority. In relation to this, linkages between those that take untreated water direct from rivers or other sources (for example: commercial agriculture and forestry, the tourism industry and nature reserves) and those that utilise potable water need to be formalised, an agreement on appropriate tariffing levels established.

It is inaccurate to assume that new institutions can simply replace existing ones. Entrenched structures are extremely difficult to shift, even when they are seen as being unrepresentative remnants of an antiquated system. Failure to engage with and involve these structures leads to resistance and confusion. Communities who are willing to pay for water supply become confused about who they should pay.

In the same regard, communities willingness to pay is heightened when there is a consistency of water supply. High expectation expects any 'water' project to solve problems almost immediately. By their nature, institutional projects take time. Communities should be clarified on this issue, rather than those involved in the process turning to top-down methods for quick solutions.

The training of committees or others involved in the process of water supply needs to relate to the functions those people will be expected to perform. Often there is a tendency for 'training in a vacuum', which is not

experiential and is quickly forgotten. Experienced local structures, such as NGOs, should be engaged with.

Some of these lessons may seem self-evident, yet the obvious is often the last considered.

### **Future directions**

The project itself has now been divided into three distinct interventions:

#### **Formation of a water board**

First is the formation of a water board. At the time of writing (May 1997) this is occurring. The board will comprise approximately fourteen members and will be tasked with the purification and bulk supply of water. At this stage it will exist in name only, with no resources or staff. However, being a member of a board that will be responsible for the allocation of water is perceived as a prestigious position, and is being hotly contested.

#### **Upgrading existing staff and infrastructure**

The second intervention is dealing with locally employed DWAF staff and the existing infrastructure. A survey has shown DWAF employs about eight hundred people, with estimates indicating only one hundred are actually required. The vast majority of staff are inadequately skilled and there is a serious lack of management capacity. Indications are that many of the functional problems with the existing infrastructure, relate more to managerial inadequacies than to technical problems. At the end of the two year time scale it is intended that existing staff will be transferred to the water board or under local government competency. Surplus staff will be relocated or offered redundancy packages. Finally, infrastructure development projects fall under the ambit of this intervention, even though eventual ownership will belong to a water board (in the case of bulk supply) or local government (with reticulation).

#### **Building local capacity**

The third intervention orients to the newly elected local government, and to community water committees, in forming a functional and sustainable system for the reticulation and tariffing of water supplies. A commercially run operation (resting between a privatised water company which has no inherent interest in providing to the poorest sectors, and a government bureaucracy that is not driven to be financially self-sustaining), owned by local government, has been mooted as the most viable option.

Dividing the process into three separate interventions has helped to clarify the objectives of each and to address past confusion about the role of the project, although some overlap between the interventions is inevitable. The speed with which each intervention becomes functional is also not uniform.

**Broader implications**

Consideration has been given to the formation of broader structures, such as an environmentally-based Catchment Management Authority and a Water Resource Consultative Fora comprised of the major stakeholders, although to date there has been no advances in this arena.

The level of decision making power, and how all the institutions would inter-relate remains unclear.

**Conclusion**

Where programmes are lacking in clear objectives it is easy to become disoriented. When dealing with control

of a basic resource, such as water, competition for positions on the allocation authority become intense leading to internal conflict. The formation of management institutions cannot be forced to fit the same time schedule as technical infrastructure projects.

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