



Vulindlela water supply project

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UMGENI WATER IS a water utility company operating in an area of 24 000 km² in southern Kwa-Zulu Natal, one of the nine provinces of South Africa.

Umgeni Water's main consumers are the major industrial centres of Pietermaritzburg and Durban to whom bulk potable water is supplied.

Included in this area are many rural settlements which in general have been neglected on all sectors of service provision. In 1990 Umgeni Water commissioned a study to investigate and offer recommendations to supply water services to these rural settlements within its area of operation. (Then 7000 km²).

To date some 800 000 rural consumers have been supplied with access to potable water and this programme is on going.

Background to Vulindlela

One of the largest rural settlements is Vulindlela, situated to the immediate south west of the city of Pietermaritzburg. The present population is estimated at 185 000 people, living in an area of 260 km². Five Traditional Chiefs represent the people living in the five tribal areas of Vulindlela. Lifestyle is generally traditional but is influenced by close proximity to a city.

The traditional water sources for Vulindlela were natural springs and a limited number of boreholes with hand pumps. Some areas have adequate supplies but serious problems are experienced during periods of low rainfall.

Umgeni Water had been working with the Vulindlela community and other stakeholders to improve the quality and reliability of local water supplies but in relation to the overall population these efforts fell short of major benefit to the community as a whole.

Implementation of bulk water supply project

The preliminary feasibility study for Vulindlela recommended that a water supply be sourced from Umgeni Water bulk reticulation.

In 1995 this bulk project was commenced by Umgeni Water and was subsequently selected as one of the 12 Presidential Lead Project within the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The partnership formed allowed for the programme of implementation to be reduced from an original programme of 7 years to a programme of 3 years. This was strongly supported by the community representatives.

To ensure full participation in the Project Team a committee of 15 people was elected. Members of this committee representing the five Tribal areas were known as the Vulindlela Executive Water Committee (EXCO). The process of forming this EXCO out of a population of 185 000 people within the limited time available and ensuring that it was representative of the community presented many challenges. It was fortunate that traditional structures were functional in most areas and that some form of development committee was also in existence.

Capacity exchange

The reduction in implementation programme period put greater pressure on the liaison structures for the project. Exchange of capacity with the EXCO and ensuring that required information was transferred between all relevant parties on the Project Team demanded extensive meetings and training sessions prior to implementation commencing.

To ensure that the EXCO participated fully in all decision making, the technicalities behind civil engineering constructing procedures needed to be understood. The employment of the community members was to be maximized by all contractors. The EXCO developed a recruitment system to ensure that a fair and practical system was instituted.

To date, during the implementation phase, 19 Branch Office Committees have been formed. Their function will be to operate and manage these Branch Offices which offer all water services within the community. Extensive training needs to be carried out for these committees and Branch Offices to be fully operational. Some progress has been achieved but this programme has also experienced some interruptions in favour of the implementation programmes demands. The selection of potential trainee plumbers from the local labour has also taken place. Once trained they will offer technical support to these Branch Office Committees.

Channels of communication

Early in the implementation programme the challenges of first world contracting companies working within a community started to present some problems. The community, seen as then "client", and therefore participating in all decisions could influence matters onsite, which at times lead to conflict with the contractors condition of contract.

The threat of claims by the contractor did not assist in improving communication and understanding. Additional

training sessions and workshops assisted in clarifying roles and responsibilities. The various stakeholders began to understand each others roles and responsibilities and how they each had great value to contribute to the success of the project. Where individual personalities could not accept this partnership and their attitudes where detrimental to the projects progress, their participation was terminated. This drastic measure was only implemented on rare occasions as generally people were focused on the main purpose of the project.

The challenges

The demands of this intensive implementation programme have resulted in an inbalanced capacity building programme. The EXCO are well trained on technical aspects of the project. The ideal programme for training on the social aspects of the project though, have tended to take "second place". It would have been of great benefit to delay the implementation program while building social capacity within the EXCO and also the other technical stakeholders. For all stakeholders to gain information and understanding of each others cultures would have alleviated many clashes. The EXCO members need more motivation and support to report back to their constituents and are not all at the same level of ability which leads to some members not participating fully and others being overworked.

During the implementation phase, local political structures gained official recognition and local representatives were elected. The organogram representing the various political, developmental and traditional structures and the

lines of communication and roles and responsibilities had been workshopped on many occasions. Great progress has been made but the finer details and some very delicate matters are still pending resolution.

This will all need to be resolved so the umbrella structure that will co-ordinate the operation and maintenance phase of the project can function successfully. Involvement of structures beyond the influence of the stakeholders of the project takes careful planning and lengthy channels of communication. Therefore it is not possible to impress on all the participants the urgency to resolve matters.

As with many situations in the past, interim measures will have to be sought to ensure the technical programme is not interrupted and the supply of water to potential consumers is not delayed.

In addition, to gain some return on the capital invested in the project necessitates that water consumption be promoted urgently. This places additional pressure on the Project Team when moving into the operation and maintenance phase.

Conclusion

These challenge can appear daunting but the Project Team has proven their ability to rise to all challenges in the past and on this record should be capable of ensuring that good progress is achieved in the future.

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