Water as a social and political tool

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THIS PAPER TRIES to demonstrate how water as a scarce resource is being used as a political and social tool by politicians and tribal leaders to strengthen their power base. The issue is further complicated by the tribal leader versus democratically elected councillors' conflict, a conflict that is very big.

The new legislation that establishes local government structures does not allow traditional leaders to be responsible for the provision of services. Traditional leaders are currently dissatisfied and see the legislation as a threat to their authority. Those working at project level therefore have to try their best to create peaceful working relations for all the relevant stakeholders. This could be in the form of all encompassing communication strategies and institutional arrangements, which will create an enabling environment for all, involved or affected.

This paper will focus on relationships between local chiefs, communities, programme implementers and Transitional Rural Councils (TRCs) and the impact of those relations on project sustainability. Case studies of some projects implemented by The Mvula Trust in the Eastern Cape will be used as examples.

Background

In 1994 South Africa held its first democratic elections. In terms of the new constitution there are three tiers of government. The recent establishment of the formal third tier local government has created the foundation for accountable, constitutional structures to eventually assume responsibility for the function of provision of services. Local government structures, the TRCs are beginning to take over the responsibility for the delivery of basic water services from central government.

On behalf of the national Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) the Mvula Trust has been implementing water and sanitation projects. In most rural areas of the country prior to the local government elections, there were no local government structures. In the absence of local government up until recently, the Mvula Trust worked through democratically elected village water committees and development forums whose primary function was to operate and maintain services especially in the provision of water.

Provision of water has now been given to local government as one of its responsibilities. However, most of these structures have few resources and lack the capacity to perform this function. DWAF is currently developing a local government support programme for water supply and sanitation to build the capacity of local government as well as promoting good relations between communities and the local government.

Some TRC councillors have used the provision of water to rural communities as a tool for election or re-election into high offices. As South Africa is preparing for the local government elections which are going to be held in November 2000, TRC councillors are using the village water committee meetings with Mvula as a platform to campaign for re-election into the new local government structures which will come into effect after the elections. There is mistrust in some communities of the objectives of some councillors with regard to basic delivery of services and this has an impact on work, which is being carried out by Mvula and DWAF to promote good relations between communities and the local government.

The role of TRCs versus traditional leaders

Before the advent of democracy in South Africa, traditional leaders such as headmen and chiefs enjoyed full support of their respective subjects. Whether that support was coerced or otherwise is a matter for debate. The first democratic local government elections in South Africa were held in November 1995. This brought a lot of challenges in some areas specifically the former "homelands" created by the apartheid government. In these homelands there were no local government structures in the rural areas. The headmen and chiefs assumed the role of governing structures and were supported by the apartheid government. The traditional leaders were responsible for laying down rules and laws and anyone disobeying those rules was seen as a social outcast and would be severely punished.

On early projects communities, sometimes with the help of consulting engineers, initiated Mvula Trust project applications. Traditional leaders would always be consulted as key role-players before an application could be approved. The elected village water committee (VWC) would have to report back to the community at the headman/chief's place (Komkhulu) and any money to be contributed towards the project had to be paid at the headman's place. This system instilled a sense of respect towards the headmen/chiefs by their subjects. People who misbehave during project construction were brought before the headman and would be punished accordingly. Local government is now tasked with the responsibility of providing water services. This resulted

in the deployment of elected TRC representatives at village levels. This meant in reality that TRC representatives had more power to approve projects.

Local government structures

The local government is made up of TRCs at magisterial level and District Councils at district level. TRC councillors are elected by proportional representation, with the number of councillors being dependent on the population in the area. Depending on the TRC size, one or two TRC representatives then sit on the higher tier of local government, the DC. There are six District Councils in the Eastern Cape Province.

Local government is legally responsible for services and will eventually take over the provision of water as well as implementation of water projects. The dilemma is that at community level other structures also play a role in the implementation of water projects. These include the civic associations, development forums and traditional or tribal authorities. It should be borne in mind that in some rural areas traditional/tribal authorities still yield considerable power and are influential regarding the implementation of water projects. Some traditional leaders are resisting the new changes which they see as threat to their power base and this brings about conflict between the elected councillors and traditional leaders. The conflicts tend to seriously affect the implementation and sustainability of the water projects and the casualties are the ordinary rural people. The conflict is brought about by the uncertainties regarding the future roles of traditional leaders versus elected councillors in connection with the delivery, implementation and managing of water projects.

The conflict is further complicated by some traditional leaders encouraging their constituents not to pay for water as they see it as a free commodity. The culture of payment in some areas of South Africa has not yet been achieved and this leads to some individuals and communities resisting payment for services or maintenance of the water schemes in their areas.

Socio-political conflicts in communities

In Khayelitsha, a village situated in the former homeland of Ciskei in the Eastern Cape, a newly approved project experienced some problems even before money was disbursed into the community's account. There were early indications that this project may be encountering social problems from a community that does not appear entirely united behind the project. The initial divisions appear to be caused by an old police case that was brought against a previous development project. Certain individuals alleged to be aligned to the headman laid a charge of fraud against the village water committee. After thorough investigation by Mvula it transpired that the case was laid because of a bitter struggle between the village headman and the South African Civic Association (SANCO) which is aligned to the

TRC. The problem became so intense that a meeting of all stakeholders had to be called in order to resolve the existing differences. This had an impact on the starting of the project because it could not go ahead until the conflict was resolved. It is not in itself a cause for stopping the project; but as experienced development practitioners, we have learned to treat these early indications seriously, as they have the potential to erupt into larger problems at a later stage. In other words the conflict had the potential to derail the project even before the first advance was transferred to the community account.

The above case study reveals the lack of consultation of the relevant stakeholders during the planning stages of the project. Proper planning should amongst other things allow for stakeholder analysis, and then decide on the roles and responsibilities of each party involved. The proper planning should identify the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the stakeholders in order to build their capacity for them to carry out their roles and responsibilities in an effective and efficient manner.

The second village where socio-political conflict nearly derailed or threw the project in disarray was in Qaqeni. The selection of Qaqeni village by the Glen Grey TRC is an example of the problem of lack of appropriate consultation. Qaqeni was selected by the TRC without any consultation whatsoever but due to poor communication, word reached Umhlanga that the whole area was to be supplied with water. When it was explained by the TRC with the help of Mvula Trust that the funding was just for the village of Qaqeni, the local African National Congress branch used the issue to fuel a long standing dispute with the Glen Grey TRC under which the whole Umhlanga area falls. Eventually after a long dispute, including roadblock demonstrations and much "toyi-toyi-ing" (form of protest) the issue was resolved. All parties finally signed a written agreement following mediation. The episode highlights the importance of consulting all the relevant parties and ensuring that all relevant stakeholders from the lowest level fully understand the process and should confirm any decision taken in writing. It also illustrates the importance of ensuring wide and transparent consultation before implementation of any project.

Conclusion

In concluding this brief paper it is important that any new legislation to be introduced should be thoroughly workshopped with all interested and relevant parties. Roles and responsibilities of all involved should be clarified before implementation of any development project be it water or sanitation. Consultation of all relevant stakeholders even at the lowest level to ensure buy-in and promoting good relations.

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