



Cost recovery initiatives and local management: Justicia

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THE MVULA TRUST'S mission is to promote sustainable access to poor rural communities to safe and improved water and sanitation services. The Trust's approach is to achieve this by promoting good practice in the sector both by demonstrating successful models of service delivery and management, as well as by feeding this practice into policy development, and lobbying those responsible for policy development.

The Mvula Trust, which was established in 1993 just before the first democratic elections in South Africa, was mandated to deal with water and sanitation in rural and peri-urban areas of the country. In 1995 its mandate was strengthened by an agreement that was signed between Mvula and Department Of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF). The government focused on the provision of bulk supply and Mvula on the small-scale village type project.

Prior to 1994 elections, there was no national government rural water supply and sanitation strategy. Rural community services had been the responsibility of the former "homeland" governments. The Trust started by developing a set of policies and project rules, based on experience and current thinking elsewhere in the world, centered around the principles of "demand responsiveness"¹, or the "bottom up" approach, in which community-based management is crucial for project sustainability.

Justicia water project

Justicia is a community of about 11 000 people (including about 2 500 Mozambican refugees). Like many other rural communities in South Africa, Justicia is characterised by high levels of unemployment, a low skills base and people relying mainly on the surrounding farms, hotels, game lodges and the Kruger National Park for employment.

Prior to the Mvula Trust's water project, the community was using water from three boreholes in the area. This was a project implemented under the former homeland government. Maintenance and operation of the scheme was their responsibility, and after the democratic elections, DWAF continued to be responsible for operation and maintenance (O&M) arrangements. This mainly involved employing the operator, providing free diesel and taking care of repairs. For all intense and purposes, this meant that the community was getting "free" water from the government.

There were a number of problems with the water supply system at the time. The main one being insufficient yields from the boreholes, with demand exceeding supply by more than 50 per cent. In mid 1994, the community

approached Mvula Trust to assist with funds to start a new project. Mvula Trust approved the project to upgrade the system to an acceptable level.

The implementation process

As in many other Mvula funded projects, Justicia water project had a number of role players, and the Trust believes that co-operation of all of these is critical for the long-term sustainability of projects. The Trust works mainly through an elected village water committee. However households are also expected to play an active role in the decision making around the project. Traditional leaders are expected to support the water project.

Implementation is done through technical and social consultants. They provide project management and support, technical design and supervision, training and facilitation.

Project implementation processes seldom run smoothly. As with most projects the Justicia project had its fair share of difficulties. Problems encountered and strategies used by the committee to overcome the problems are discussed below:

Community contributions to project capital cost

The Trust expected the communities to contribute to the capital cost of projects. This was to ensure community commitment and build community ownership of the project. The contributions expected were 8 per cent of the capital costs. In Justicia the community had to contribute a total of R 89 000.00 i.e. R75.00 per household - a significant sum of money.

Collecting community contributions in Justicia was not an easy task. Some people compared themselves to other communities, where projects being implemented through DWAF, did not expect users to have to pay towards capital costs, and others genuinely did not have the money to pay. The refugees complicated the situation. It was not clear whether they should pay - particularly if there was a possibility that they could be evicted.

Community contributions for operation and maintenance

A further contribution expected from the users was a monthly payment towards the operation and maintenance of the water system, which include the operator's wages, fuel bills and minor repairs. However very few households made these payments.

This problem was further complicated by the fact that the DWAF kept changing its position regarding the provision of 'free' fuel. At one stage DWAF informed the committee that they were going to stop providing free fuel, the committee then informed the community that they needed to pay or their services provided by these boreholes would be cut off. Two months later however DWAF was still providing free diesel. Community members began to wonder why the committee was lying to them!

The problem then became even more complicated. Despite the fact that payments were not being made, the new electric pumps kept running and the water committee accumulated an electricity bill amounting to R21 000. The community then received a warning letter from electricity supplier threatening to shut down the electricity supply. This would have affected the two boreholes acting as the primary water supply for Justicia.

Community solutions

The problems identified above, are but some of the key issues threatening the sustainability of the project. Other problems were poor communication between the committee and the community and poor area coverage. These problems are not unique to Justicia. However, what is interesting in Justicia is how the community went about solving these difficulties.

The Mvula Trust field worker told the committee about another Mvula funded project at Makopung where there are successful cost recovery initiatives. Singita, is one of the game lodges near Justicia which has a community outreach arm which seeks to assist neighbouring communities. The water committee brought them on board through their other initiatives in Justicia, and they agreed to fund a trip to Makopung.

The two committees met to exchange ideas. This was an eye opener for the Justicia committee, especially because they soon realized how small and poor the Makopung community was - far poorer than Justicia - and yet despite this the committee had managed to implement a successful project with almost a 100 per cent cost recovery.

The Message that came from the Makopung committee about the success of their project was that the entire community was behind them. The chief and his councilors did not leave the task to the committee to deal with alone but were actively involved through out. More importantly women are taking the lead in this community and feel that the project has made their life easier. Strong punitive measures are in place. The defaulters are all referred to the Chief who in turn fines them an extra amount on top of the tariff they are supposed to pay. The support from the Project Agent who went the extra mile to support the community through difficult conditions was outstanding. There are no informal connections. Presently the users are paying R10 – 00 per month for O & M.

After the Makopung visit, the Justicia Water Committee, approached their local headman (Induna) and sought his assistance and support in introducing some drastic meas-

ures to get people to pay. Fortunately the headman was part of the delegation that went to Makopung. The committee's first step was to consult the community, and together they established standpipe committees. Each standpipe committee was responsible for 'policing' one standpipe. These committees made sure that at all times there was someone at the tap, to demand proof of payment. Without a receipt people could not collect water. This led to a dramatic increase in the rate of payment. Within 3 months the committee collected the R21 000 owed for electricity.

Although involvement of the local authority was minimal at the beginning of the project, they got involved towards the end - particularly during the period of enforcement of payment. Local government's involvement and support gave a boost to the project and showed local government's strong political will in terms of taking unpopular decisions.

Lessons learnt from the justicia experience

Local level management is critical

The Justicia Water committee played an important and leading role in making the community's dream come true. They managed the project from the beginning to project completion despite the problems they experienced and the unpopular decisions they were forced to take. The drastic steps adopted by the committee were tolerated and supported because outsiders did not introduce them.

Political will and support desirable

The fact that traditional leaders and councilors in the area, publicly supported the water committee's strategies, made local people realize that their leaders were taking the issue of payment for services seriously. Community members were then encouraged to take this seriously too.

Consistency between different role players is vital

The contradictions around the free fuel issue between DWAF and the water committee confused the community, and ultimately undermined the initiatives taken by the committee in trying to get people to pay for their services. Justicia illustrates the point that it is critical that the different role players support each other and use similar approaches (or at least should not contradict each other).

Challenges posed by the new legislative and policy framework

In terms of new legislation local government is responsible to provide access to water and sanitation services in their areas of jurisdiction. It may delegate the actual provision of these services to another organisation. It should put in place an institutional arrangement that will ensure sustainable and affordable service to the customer.

Since its inception Mvula Trust has been dealing directly with village water committees, with Local Authorities

providing support when necessary. These water committees have been trained in various aspects of project management and implementation. The Trust believes that these community-based organisations would be the most sustainable, cost-effective and efficient means of delivery in rural areas. In fact we believe that rural local government can not afford to ignore this option! The presented case study illustrates that, there is a lot to learn from water committees and they do have a lot to offer.

References

The White Paper on Local Government (1998)
The Water Services Act (108 of 1997)
Demand Responsive Approach to Community Water Supply. Water and Sanitation Forum, December 1997

¹ “a strategy that empowers a community to initiate, choose and implement a water supply system that it is willing and able to sustain and that elicits the appropriate response from the sector actors and stakeholders” (Water and Sanitation Forum, December 1997)

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