Local governance and community-managed O&M

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IN SOUTH AFRICA, District Municipalities are the designated Water Services Authorities (WSAs). They are responsible for **ensuring** the provision of water and sanitation services. They either may perform the function of Water Services Provider (WSP), or contract a WSP. The WSP is responsible for the actual **provision** of the services. This includes responsibility for implementing, managing, operating and maintaining schemes in terms of new projects, or taking responsibility for the management, operation and maintenance (O&M) of existing schemes. WSPs may be local municipalities, water utilities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector companies, or community-based organisations (CBOs).

The Mvula Trust believes that rural development is most sustainable when it is driven by the beneficiaries, and therefore advocates the community-based WSP option. This option is particularly valid for towns that became responsible for remote rural areas previously outside their boundaries, following the South African Municipal Demarcation process in December 2000. These towns do not always have sufficient expertise, capacity, and resources to attend to their rural areas. In many cases, this has led to gaps and problems with service delivery, and entire rural areas remaining unserviced. In these areas, The Mvula Trust advocates the establishment of community-based WSPs.

Successful operation and maintenance

Over the past two years, a group of researchers led by The Mvula Trust, conducted a study of successful community-managed rural water supply projects in South Africa. The objective was to identify the success factors, in order to develop guidelines for local government on the establishment of community-managed operation and maintenance (O&M) of rural water supply systems. The study showed that there were a number of factors common to these projects, including: cohesive community structures; trust, respect and open communication between role players; support from traditional leadership; stable Village Water Committees (VWCs); strong sense of ownership of schemes; strict enforcement of payment by the VWCs; accountability to communities and *vice versa;* and adequate support structures to the community.

Based on these findings, the researchers set out to develop guidelines. However, this turned out to be rather complex. Although it can be seen as non-contentious that successful community management needs all the above factors, these are not easily influenced by external agencies. Further,

steps required to set them in place are not easily integrated into a local government context, where limited time and capacity are an everyday reality. For municipalities to have any chance in ensuring these factors – thus establishing successful community-managed projects – communities need to be involved in all steps of the process.

What follows is an exploration of some of the success factors, where possible linked to the local government reality. The exploration is based on two case studies where local government chose to co-operate with CBOs in order to establish community management of water supply schemes.

The Alfred Nzo District Municipality

The Alfred Nzo District Municipality is located in the Eastern Cape Province (former Transkei homeland). About two years ago, the District Municipality approached The Mvula Trust to take care of operation and maintenance of the rural schemes and projects under its care, after becoming the Water Services Authority for the District.

The District Municipality had a total of 132 projects (in 150 villages) implemented or upgraded by themselves in the preceding two and a half years. Although during construction use had been made of community Project Steering Committees, no attention had been paid to the development of institutions and social processes essential for managing water schemes. Thirty-three villages required immediate institutional and social development (especially O&M) input. The District Municipality appointed The Mvula Trust as a Support Services Agent to assist in establishing suitable community-based Water Services Providers for each of the 33 communities, starting with a group of 17 villages.

The Uthukela District Municipality

The Uthukela District Municipality in KwaZulu Natal is not only the Water Services Authority for its district, but has also entered into a partnership with a number of surrounding District Municipalities to become the Water Services Providers for these districts. However, having such a large area under its responsibility, the Water Services Providers will subcontract more localised structures to carry out some of the provider functions. These local organisations will be chosen very much along the lines of political and traditional structures.

The Local Municipalities in the district are subdivided in wards, and each ward has a number of villages, or izigodi's, within its borders. Development functions, including water and sanitation provision, will be carried out mainly at ward level (lowest official level of government), through so-called Ward Development Committees. Where possible, the existing Village Water Committees (VWCs) in the villages will feed into / become part of these Ward Development Committees. However, at an individual level this means that those VWC members who want to play a role in the Ward Development Committees, will have to be politically acceptable and represent their village or area. In many cases, existing and functioning VWCs might fall apart, with possible implications for the success of the schemes.

Cohesiveness and trust

Where a community is cohesive, and trust is placed in the CBO, cost recovery and accountability are more easily achieved. However, cohesiveness is hard to install from the outside. In establishing community-based WSPs, the initiative may in some cases come from the WSA / municipality, in which case it is hard to establish whether the WSA is dealing with a cohesive community.

Where a community shows no real signs of cohesiveness, this does not necessarily mean that it will not be able to manage a water project. The facilitator of the process will, however, have to put extra effort into ensuring involvement of all community groups in the decision making process.

Support from traditional leadership

Chances for success and sustainability of a water supply project grow substantially when the project has the backing of the traditional authorities. Traditional leaders have been known to play a major role in addressing and, if necessary, punishing community members who do not pay their tariffs. The co-operation between the community-based WSP and traditional leadership around problematic and village-sensitive issues will strengthen the authority of the WSP as well as that of traditional leaders. This co-operation can be formalised by including it in the constitution of the WSP.

In the Alfred Nzo District Municipality, there were no official roles for the traditional authorities in the process of establishing the community-based WSPS. However, they were involved in all community processes and, in some cases, community meetings were even organised at the Induna's (traditional leader) house. It is important that the traditional leadership is kept informed on proceedings at all times, and is invited to attend (if not lead) all community meetings organised during the process.

CBOs and the issue of fair representation

Ideally, community management is based on the idea that CBOs / VWCs are representative of the community in which they are based. However, in practice, there is a sliding scale, with fair representation at the one end, and acceptability to the community at the other. The Mvula Trust's point of view in this is that it is up to the WSA and the community to decide upon a form of community representation satisfactory to all.

In the Alfred Nzo case, different groups from the community were asked to 'tender' for the job of WSP, after which the WSA selected the best candidate. Although this option might not be seen as community management in the sense of a CBO being 'representative of the community', they are 'representatives from the community', in that they come from and reside in the community. Most important is that the CBO is acceptable to, and acts in the interest of, the community.

Also, in a quickly changing, and often highly politicised climate, it is very important for the WSA to work within the appropriate political structures when selecting a WSP. As in any community management process, involvement of all stakeholders is crucial in identifying the community entity with whom to work. In the Uthukela District Municipality, it is essential to work through traditional (Zulu) political structures. In this highly politicised province, community members involved in water provision need to be acceptable in terms of the political context.

Ownership, responsibility and payment

Community contributions, one of the strongest factors leading to ownership and responsibility, are widely seen as a crucial part of community management. However, in light of the free basic water policy in South Africa[1,] community contributions and regular payment of fees are no longer common. Therefore, we will have to find other ways to ensure this sense of ownership and responsibility. The establishment of an official, government-endorsed body in the community, in the form of a community-managed WSP, will lay responsibility clearly at community level. However, this body will only contribute to a sense of ownership, and responsibility will only be taken by the community, where there has been a clear, open and participatory process towards the establishment of the community-managed WSP.

The issue of accountability

Community management requires that the community-based WSP, although contracted by the WSA, is accountable to the community. Systems and procedures should be set in place to ensure that community members are fully informed of what the WSP is doing, and can make the WSP accountable for problems arising. Ways of doing this might include a requirement in the WSP constitution concerning regular meetings, and reporting back to the community. Furthermore, the community should have an option to deal with non-delivery and ill-functioning WSPs, for instance by contacting the WSA who will then have to take action.

Where people pay for water, community members and the community-based WSP are accountable to each other, through the tariffs that are paid. Where, because of free basic water, users do not pay, it has to be clear that they are still accountable to the WSP, on issues such as vandalism, unauthorised connections and pollution control. It is important to establish rules and procedures to deal with community members engaged in such practices.

Lastly, accountability from the CBO WSP to the WSA can be easily established through the contract the two partners enter into. Methods of ensuring CBO accountability to the WSA include budget control, justification of spending, and regular progress meetings.

Adequate external support structures

One of the most critical aspects in establishing a successful community-managed water project, was found to be continued external support. Although at the time of a project opening a VWC can be properly functioning, well trained, and very committed; without continued support many committees eventually run into trouble. This can be, amongst others, because of loss of personnel, technical problems with the system that are not fixed, or unsatisfied users who refuse to pay.

Therefore, in establishing a community-based WSP, continued support must be built into the process. The Mvula Trust promotes the use of a Support Services Agent (SSA). In the Alfred Nzo case, The Mvula Trust was contracted as the SSA to lend support to both the WSA and the community-based WSPs in a variety of ways.

Preferably, support services should continue for the entire time that the CBO manages the scheme. It should also be clear to the community who will be responsible for these services, how to contact the SSA, what support they can expect from the SSA, and who will pay for these support services. This should be a very broad mandate, since it is highly likely that a situation will occur in which the community-based WSP will need support for an issue not anticipated.

Conclusion

In South Africa's young democracy, local government has no option but to involve other institutions in service provision. In terms of a rural context, the most cost effective and appropriate option is to work with CBOs. Local government, therefore, carries a responsibility to recognise and exploit the potential of the success factors discussed in this paper.

The real gains of community management can be found in the prolonged sustainability of schemes, the empowerment and increased self-respect of the people, and the fact that in many cases communities will take the skills and knowledge gained through the project, further into other developmental initiatives in their communities. That way, the provision of safe water can truly become the gateway towards improving the quality of life for rural people.

Footnotes

1 A national policy aiming to provide six kiloliters of water per month per household free of charge. Since in many rural schemes people rarely use more than this, in effect there will not longer be any cost recovery through collection of tariffs. Costs of the schemes will have to be fully covered by subsidies and other government funds.

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