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Participatory project planning - a case study

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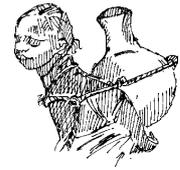
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Participatory project planning — A case study

Patrick Mbanjwa and Ilse Wilson, South Africa

IF FACILITATION IS done timeously and well and is followed by proper project planning, the chances for project sustainability are greatly increased.

The belief in this assumption led to the Mvula Trust, a South African NGO, to pilot a new approach in the implementation of its projects. The Trust was asked by the Local Government Council to implement a project in the two communities of Xolobe and Qutsa, in the Eastern Cape. The Lumanyano (Unity) Water Project was born, in which the Trust is piloting this new approach. In the past Mvula responded to requests from communities to provide water and sanitation schemes. However as the new democratic government has been able to take responsibility for these services the Trust has had to implement projects identified by government structures. The Trust like most progressive development agencies believes in a demand responsive approach, and is endeavoring to implement according to the principles contained in this way of doing things.

The new approach is to emphasise awareness creation and participation especially during the planning phase of the project. In the past the Trust relied on the communities to communicate with consultants to produce a feasibility study for the proposed project. On receipt of this and of proof of an established water committee Mvula staff would visit the community to appraise the viability of the project. In practice this phase tended to be driven by the technical consultant, with little real participation by the water committee and even less by the other community members. As there was no genuine participation in decision making, no informed choices about levels of service were made. The outside "experts" were in control.

Some of the problems associated with the old approach were that often there was information contained in the feasibility report that was not known to the project beneficiaries. There was also important information left out at times. This meant that much time had to be spent at a later stage correcting the report. Often a negative relationship developed between the technical consultant and the other role players as a result of the initial dominant role assumed by this consultant. Roles of stakeholders were not clear.

Desired outcomes

The desired outcomes of the new planning phase intervention in this pilot are that there should be a feeling of partnership between role players, and a better understanding of their different roles and responsibilities and an acceptance of the importance of communication between

them. There should be an increased level of community participation in decision making, project design and hence an increased feeling of project ownership. This increased ownership of the project by the local people, will hopefully increase the levels of financial contributions to the operation and maintenance of the project. Local government structures, which are new and inexperienced and which are constitutionally responsible for the delivery of services should be supported and capacitated and should be part of the project all the way through it, so that they may successfully fulfil their roles.

The villages

To an outsider the two villages appear to be one community. A road, which marks the boundary between two tribal authorities, divides them. They straddle a ridge running between two hills and the current source of water is a stream a long way down hill about a kilometre away. Those who can afford it, use donkey carts to transport the water to their houses, others carry themselves.

The total population to be served by the scheme is between 2500 and 3000. As with most rural areas in this part of the country, the population is largely made up of pensioners, women and children. The rate of unemployment is very high.

Two noticeable features of this community are the large number of people with leadership qualities and initiative in it and the prominent position of women in the decision-making structures. One of the two chiefs in the villages is a woman. There was no water committee in either village prior to the application to the local council. However a joint committee with 8 members from each village was elected in order to make the application.

Activities

The first exercise in the community was attended by the Lumanyano water committee, local councilors the local woman chief, some members of the community and several Mvula staff. As this is a pilot project a very experienced facilitator (Patrick Mbanjwa) was employed by the Trust to do the planning stage facilitation. The objectives of the first exercise were broadly to introduce the pilot to all stakeholders and hope to get their acceptance of it. It was also used to establish relationships between all the role players.

The PHAST tools of flexi-flans were used to do a mapping exercise of the project area. As is usual with this tool, a lot of interest was created and at the end of much

discussion, with information and experiences being shared, it was agreed that the map was a true reflection of the area. This immediately helped the outsiders to understand the area. The two villages were identified and the water sources described. The reason for the villages being combined became clear as the most reliable water source is located on the land of the smaller village. A heated discussion was entered into about why some of the water sources run dry while others are perennial. The people came to the conclusion that they needed to identify a technical person who could assist them. A later session on roles and responsibilities could pick up on this theme.

A second PHAST tool which was used, was the water ladder. This was used to identify what the current water supply was and what the choice for improved services would be. The exercise also generated a great deal of discussion. The information produced by this exercise confirmed some of that gathered in the work with the flexiflans. There was agreement on some very important issues. There was agreement on the level of service preferred. Some people had wanted stand pipes in their yards but after discussion, without outside input, it was decided that communal tap stands were the preferred option at the current time as the costs of the higher level of service would be too expensive.

There was an understanding that services will be paid for, and people accept that they will need support from outsiders. As usual with PHAST tools, the participants reach their own practical and implementable solutions.

Experience has taught that often there is a gap between community expectations and the reality of the time taken to complete a project. So that there would not be unfounded expectations of very fast delivery, the facilitator dealt with project phases at an early stage. He had already been completely accepted by the community and with various participatory methods could ensure that there was a clear understanding concerning the fact that phases follow one another and that the second phase will not take place unless the first phase has been completed satisfactorily.

The operation and maintenance phase was discussed at length. It is government policy that the capital costs of a water scheme to RDP standards¹ will be paid for by the state, and that operation and maintenance costs are to be borne by the consumers. The lack of understanding of this and there being no systems to ensure it have been the downfall of many water projects in the country. In the past what poor services there were, were paid for by the government of the time. There has also been a culture of non-payment for services in the country for many years. It was a legitimate part of the struggle against apartheid. Habits like these are difficult to break. Even projects implemented since the election of a democratic government are floundering in relation to cost recovery. However, in this project a stage was reached in this planning phase where there appeared to be a real understanding of the need to pay for services. Time was spent on the need to establish a system of payment which will be acceptable to most people and

which will be administerable.

During later coming together of the facilitator and the committee, the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in the project were analysed. This was all done in a participatory manner. After the facilitator had been working with the committee for several days they decided that they should involve the wider community. The committee decided on the structure that a presentation to various community groups should take. Two days were spent planning for these consultations, with one day being given to rehearsals and role-playing. Committee members grouped themselves into small groups and each chose a topic to present to the community meeting.

This was one of the most exciting parts of the process. The committee members produced their own drawings of the role players. The engineer and the training agent were easily identified as they were drawn much more formally than the local people. With these pictures the committee discussed with a wide community group what the project was about and what different role player's responsibilities are, including those of the consumers.

A decision was taken that the Mvula Trust should contract both the engineer and the training agent. This is a break from the Trust's former way of working. In the past it believed that in order for empowerment to happen, all funds should be paid over to community organisations, usually water committees, who were then responsible for the hiring of services of both labourers and of consultants, for the procurements of goods and for project management. This committee felt comfortable to run the day to day, on site parts of the project, but did not feel capable of employing consultants. In this decision they had the full backing of the community.

A village walk was carried out by three Mvula staff members and the facilitator at the time when the water project's feasibility was to be appraised. The purpose was to establish what understanding people had of the water project, and how they came by this knowledge. All those spoken to knew about the project and most of them were aware that there is a need to pay for water services. Those who had not attended community meetings, had got their information by word of mouth. It was however accurate. The levels of understanding in this community were much higher than has been observed in other communities.

Local Government

One of the objectives of this project is to strengthen local government structures and to assist them with their new responsibilities in the water sector. The liaison and the contact person between the community and the outsiders has been the chairman of the local council. He attended meetings at the earlier stages of the project. Later he delegated others to attend. Other councilors also sometimes attended even when he was there. It needs to be understood that at the time of writing, South Africa is a month away from general elections and politicians are busy with other things.

Conclusions

It is still too early to write about conclusive results. However there are positive outcomes of this process. The most important lesson learned so far from this pilot is the great value of ensuring community participation right from the start of the planning stage of a project. The consultants both reported that there was much more real decision making in the project than is usual in village water projects. This was also clear to the Mvula staff involved. The latter also found a high level of understanding of the responsibilities of all stakeholders by ordinary community members. The possible friction that could have been experienced by the joining of two villages, each with their own chief, has so far been avoided. This is due to the skills of the facilitator in getting the committee, consisting of members from each village, to work together harmoniously.

In the past the Trust insisted that the water committee should manage the whole project implementation process, including procuring services and goods. This requires a high level of financial management skills. Too often the committee, the engineer and the training agent would concentrate on these complicated financial procedures and the important work of ensuring that the community participated in and understood the project was lost. There are community leaders in the Lumanyano project who are strong and capable but they have taken a decision on the amount of responsibility that they can manage. They are no

less respected by the rest of the community for this decision and are comfortable that they will be able to manage what they have taken on. The old Mvula policy often led to friction between the committee and the creditors, be they labourers or the engineer. If the committee had not anticipated the demand correctly (which is difficult to do) or had not requisitioned payment on time, it was blamed for non-payments.

The training agent and the engineer for this project had been seen as part of some of the facilitation workshops so were seen as part of the team. They found that when they went into the community, they could build on the groundwork that had already been done. Both found that their work was much easier in these villages than on previous projects.

In the past Trust projects employed training agents on its projects but not facilitators. This project has showed that it is facilitation skills that are the more important. Mvula is looking to skilling its own staff so that they may play this vital role on future projects.

¹The government's Reconstruction and Development Programme standard are 25lts per person per day at no more than 200m walking distance.

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