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Laying foundations for involving local government

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Laying foundations for involving local government



Julia Cain and Cindy Illing, South Africa

IN THE NEW South Africa, providing rural local government with the education and skills to effectively assume responsibility for the development and maintenance of community water supply is essential in order to assist local government to assume their constitutional responsibilities. However, while the need for such local government training and education is clear, the exact processes governing such education, as well as the specific responsibilities to be assumed by Transitional Rural Councils and District Councils are yet to be defined. Our paper, with its distinct emphasis on a "grass-roots" approach, gives weight to the direct, hands-on experience we have had working with and educating rural communities about water supply systems.

One of the first and most important things we have come to realize over the last several years is that training for adult learners which is removed from any practical, real-life context yields poor results, especially over a long-term basis. The people with whom we have worked respond best to concrete goals and practical activities that address their specific needs. It is this kind of a hands-on, contextually specific approach to training and education that will give, we believe, optimum results for those Transitional Rural Councils and District Councils working towards assuming responsibility for long-term maintenance of community water supply.

Please note that while the general principles put forth in this paper may be applied to both levels of local government, our focus, as reflecting our experience, is to address the specific needs of TRCs with low capacity. Following this, we have translated these objectives into a practical three-phase curriculum with each phase designating tasks and responsibilities to be assumed by the local government in regards to water supply.

To summarise then, to simply apply one generic training model for community water supply as the only model for all Transitional Rural Councils or District Councils is not advisable. However, in looking to concrete examples and the specific needs of individual communities and local government councils such as those we have encountered working in the Maluti District of the Wild Coast District Council area, we do think it is possible to take advantage of certain insights and observations, looking to them for their potential application to community water supply education for local government across rural South Africa.

Before going on to describe specifically the three-phase approach and training program we have developed, it is important that we review the historical relationship between rural populations and national government. Under-

standing this historical relationship and the historically specific contexts in which the rural communities are situated is pivotal to providing effective education and support to the present-day Transitional Rural and District Councils.

Background

History of rural populations and government

The Transkei, of which the Maluti District was a part, was one of several bantustan homelands situated within South Africa. The Transkei has now been incorporated into the Eastern Cape Province. During the apartheid era, the Tribal Authorities formed the primary governing structure in the rural areas of the bantustan homelands. Their primary influence was felt in conflict resolution carried out through institutionalized Tribal Courts. So, although Tribal Authorities exercised some political power through the Tribal Courts, they generally had little to do with development activities. Development activities and service delivery to rural areas, rather, was controlled by central government line departments, such as the Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

As regards development activities and projects for water supply, these were largely consultant-driven, with negotiations taking place between consultants and government. During construction of water projects, consultants usually hired in contractors rather than employing local residents. As regards the allocation of resources, there was absolutely no consultation with rural communities, nor were communities involved at all in implementation and management. In fact, any notion of community ownership of completed projects was virtually non-existent, with many rural people, for example, understanding that it was illegal for them to even touch that which was considered to be government infrastructure.

Once water projects were installed, the responsibility of maintenance and repair rested with the relevant government line departments, with specific tasks to be carried out by the government department's local staff and offices. Poor management, little financial support, and few resources led to most of the monies going to salaries, with little left over for actual operating budgets. Overall, the system in place for development activities and services to rural areas was a system that was riddled with corruption and nepotism, a system that was notoriously inefficient and ineffectual.

In 1995, with the coalition government of National Unity in place, forty-two District Councils were estab-

lished nation-wide as part of the institutional restructuring of the new South Africa. Then from November 1996 to March 1997, the first all-inclusive local elections were held in South Africa across the country. Out of this process, the Transitional Rural Councils emerged for the first time in the rural areas of the former bantustan homelands. In the new South Africa, local government in the rural areas now consisted of a two-tiered system, made up of both the District Councils as well as the Transitional Rural Councils (TRCs). As well, according to the new South African constitution just ratified in early 1997, local government bodies are now to be responsible for the provision of rural services, including the provision of water services.

Local situation

Rural water supply

As stated in the introduction, this paper is based on the experience we have gained through working with rural communities and the local Transitional Rural Council of the Maluti District. We believe that using this area as a case study offers a concrete example of the formidable challenges with which many Transitional Rural Councils in isolated and resource-poor areas are now faced. It is our intention that this case study should offer an appropriate guideline to the way forward for such TRCs as related to water services.

Our case study is located within the Wild Coast District Council (WCDC) area which covers the north eastern section of the Eastern Cape Province and consists of 9 magisterial districts located entirely within the borders of the former Transkei. The WCDC has thus not inherited any developed local authority systems or infrastructure from the previous apartheid South Africa and has been identified by present policy-makers as a District Council of 'least capacity'. The Maluti TRC represents one of the 9 areas that make up the Wild Coast District Council. The Maluti TRC presently consists of 16 councillors who each directly represent an area of communities within the magisterial district of Maluti. As each of the Maluti TRC representatives stood unopposed during local elections in November 1995, actual voting by the people of the district did not take place. Soon after its inception, the TRC nominated certain of its members to head up portfolios such as water.

Since early 1995 several water supply schemes have been completed in the Maluti District: the largest scheme, funded under Phase 1 of the new government's Reconstruction and Development Programme, is a gravity-fed weir system which supplies 14 500 people in 12 villages; several smaller projects, also gravity-fed systems, were funded by the South African NGO Mvula Trust, which is closely associated to the Department of Water and Forestry. All these projects were driven by active local village water committees from each of the project areas. Local government councillors were never elected to these committees as most of the projects were approved before local

elections had taken place. These village water committees played a committed and proactive role during the implementation of their projects and are now responsible for the maintenance of their projects. To varying degrees between the different projects, tariffs are being collected and local technical operators are being paid to operate and maintain these newly completed schemes. These projects are thus presently being operated and maintained independently of local government. This heavy involvement of village water committees grew out of earlier emerging guidelines being developed in 1995 to 1996 that suggested Statutory Water Committees be created at every project to assume responsibility for the operation and maintenance of these community-owned projects. As the idea of Statutory Water Committees has since been scrapped in favour of constitutional responsibility being given to Local Government, local councillors are now represented on the Project Steering Committees of recently approved RDP projects in the Maluti District in accordance with the up-dated policy of the Department of Water Affairs. As these projects are not yet being implemented, however, local councillors are still lacking experience in actual rural water supply projects.

The Maluti TRC councillors, and particularly Mr. Vuyo Lupindo, the head of the water portfolio, are aware that local government is now responsible for water services as stated in the new South African constitution. Yet while this responsibility has been assigned to local government, the guidelines and the policies governing local government's role have not yet been developed. In the meantime, Maluti TRC councillors representing the water portfolio have been working closely with a local development structure which has named itself the Maluti Water Board to assist communities with the submission of applications to DWAF. Open meetings for all communities of the district as well as other role-players involved in water are held monthly in a Maluti township church. This forum has helped raise the profile of local government in the district and has allowed Mr. Lupindo to hear first hand reports from community people on water needs. The Maluti TRC has already successfully lobbied for emergency water relief assistance for a local village badly affected by a cholera outbreak. Such achievements are a credit to the councillors of the Maluti TRC particularly when considering their lack of resources and experience in government as well as the severe logistical constraints of the district in terms of poor transport over bad roads and lack of infrastructure such as electricity and telephone lines.

So while the councillors of the Maluti TRC know they are somehow responsible for water services, they still lack knowledge and experience related to the processes of initiating, implementing and maintaining rural water supply schemes. At the same time, as completed projects are being operated and maintained (with various levels of success) in the area, the Wild Coast District Council is starting to talk about collecting those tariffs as a source of revenue for local government. Not surprisingly, village water committees of completed projects have expressed

great reluctance to forward any tariffs collected at community level to local government. This can be attributed to several reasons:

- The village water committees feel that tariffs collected should be used to create employment opportunities within their communities;
- There is concern that local government is less able to operate and maintain the systems than the local village water committees (It must be noted that these projects are simple gravity-fed schemes with low maintenance requirements);
- Village water committees have expressed concern about losing ownership of the projects for which they worked so hard to get off the ground;
- There is still a great deal of confusion about the role of the TRC amongst rural people as well as suspicion about the TRC's ability to deliver.

Local dynamics such as these must be taken into consideration before planning a training programme that will be both effective and appropriate.

Developing the training programme

Defining goals

Once we had gained a fairly thorough understanding of what was actually happening on the ground in rural water supply in the Maluti District, our next step was to further define what the Maluti TRC is meant to be doing now and in the future. We wanted our training objectives to meet the real needs of the target trainees and to be based on realistic and attainable goals. These were important considerations as Transitional Rural Councils are still new and systems are still developing. Based on our understanding of the roles Transitional Rural Councils with low capacity have to play in rural water supply now, and with consideration to the long-term goal of TRCs being involved in the management of completed projects, we identified a number of objectives. These objectives are meant to form the building blocks of TRC involvement in rural water supply and are as follows:

- To enable the Maluti TRC to compile an accurate account of the water supply conditions in the district and put it into an accessible database.
- To empower the local Maluti TRC to play a proactive role in the planning of rural water supply to the district based on their up-to-date data base.
- To broaden the knowledge of councillors on the application and implementation procedures for DWAF and Mvula Trust water projects.
- To improve councillors' understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various role-players during implementation phase and operation and maintenance phase community driven water projects.
- To further develop councillors' communication abilities, specifically public speaking and meeting skills.
- To develop linkages between local government and village water committees;

- To strengthen the concept of community driven and managed water projects;
- To apply the lessons we have gained from previous capacity-building training programmes for community water supply to the local government context, specifically the Maluti TRC.

Based on these realistic and obtainable objectives, we further developed our ideas and came to see the involvement of the Maluti TRC in rural water supply developing through a phased approach with specific goals and objectives being set out for the short-term, medium-term and long-term. We thus developed a training programme to facilitate the Maluti TRC to initially identify and clarify its role and capacities, and then to engage in a process of proactive involvement in the supply of water services to the District.

Phase 1: planning and initiating rural water supply projects

Currently the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry's emphasis is on the delivery of water supply. The immediate role of local government must therefore be to support this process. In order for the Maluti TRC to fulfil this role, the training objectives for this stage are to enable the TRC to carry out the following activities:

- To plan and prioritise rural water supply development in the Maluti District.
- To lobby for support to address these needs.
- To actively assist Project Steering Committees (of which they are now a part) with pre-implementation responsibilities.

An important task for the TRC in working towards these objectives is for the councillors to develop a database on the existing water supply situation in the district. Once this has been done, the TRC must then be assisted to develop a system for prioritising needs and to develop a strategic plan to address these needs. The training objectives for this phase should assist the TRC to achieve the following valuable and realistic goals:

- To ensure that each community within the Maluti District has lodged an application for assistance.
- To assist communities to follow up on applications submitted to funding institutions.

The structured activities that will be carried out by the TRC as part of this first phase will serve to greatly increase local government's profile and credibility within its constituencies. The Maluti TRC needs to develop this basis of community support as a precondition for effectively broadening its rural water supply activities and responsibilities in the district.

Phase 2: assisting the implementation of rural water supply

The training objectives for this phase revolve around the actual implementation of rural water supply schemes in the District. The objectives are the following:

- To create TRC awareness and understanding of the responsibilities of various role-players during project implementation.
- To give the TRC members first hand knowledge of sample rural water supply schemes in various stages of implementation and to interact with village water committees.
- To prepare the TRC about the future operation and maintenance considerations of projects with an emphasis on payment for water services.

The Maluti TRC will need to build upon this training through its long-term active involvement on Project Steering Committees of all new and future water supply schemes in the district. In order to gain community support for future service fees being paid to local government structures, local government must be at least as knowledgeable and experienced as are many village water committee members already.

Phase 3: operating and maintaining rural water supply

Currently research is being undertaken to investigate possible future institutional arrangements for the operation and maintenance of community water supply. The specific roles of Transitional Rural Councils, District Councils and village water committees, as well as their relationship to each other, has not yet been defined in government guidelines or policy. In addition, local government in the Maluti District needs time to develop its capacity and resources before it could start to develop or adapt appropriate operation and maintenance systems to its local context. The Maluti TRC must also build community support and awareness of local government over time through demonstrating its commitment to service provision in the area. Only once the national guidelines on institutional arrangements for the future management of rural water supply have been finalised can a training curriculum for this phase be developed. In the meantime, the role that the Maluti TRC can play in the operation and maintenance of water services in the district is to make contact with the various active village water committees and support their management activities, particularly encouraging communities to pay for water services.

The implementation of this phased training programme would be based on adult education and participatory techniques. Training activities in the classroom would

focus on group discussions and exercises such as role-plays and participatory video exercises. Classroom learning would be supplemented with a field trip to actual projects in various stages of completion as well as a meeting with a working village water committee. In addition to learning about the different phases of rural water supply, councillors would be taught about the importance of public speaking and gain practice in effective communication and meeting techniques as these are skills necessary to carrying out their roles in community water supply. The programme focuses on the practical application of skills rather than general capacity-building. The course content is kept at a basic level so that the target trainees, who have a range of literacy and formal education levels, can readily apply the knowledge to real life situations and thereby increase learning through shared experiences.

Please see Table 1: Proposed Curriculum for a summary of the aims as well as the detailed activities and topics for each section of the training programme.

Conclusion

In order to start to take up its constitutional responsibilities, local government needs to be assisted to become knowledgeably involved in the various aspects of rural water supply as soon as possible. While it is unrealistic as well as unfair to expect Transitional Rural Councils with low capacity to immediately become involved in operation and management activities such as the collection of community water tariffs, it is a realistic long-term goal. Policy-makers need to recognise the complexities of local dynamics, particularly the active role village water committees have played and continue to play in many rural areas, as well as the confusion that still exists around local government in these areas.

Local government structures need training that addresses their particular needs and local context, but they also need time, and support over time, to gradually build their confidence, knowledge and abilities.

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Table 1. Proposed curriculum

