

Lessons Learnt for Improving Communication at the Local Level

*Alana Potter (Training Specialist) &
Kate Skinner (Information and Liaison Manager)*

The Mvula Trust, Johannesburg, South Africa

Paper presented at the 11th ITN Africa Conference, Harare, Zimbabwe

11-15 October 1999

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Findings: Communication and Sustainability
- Lessons Learned
- Strategies to Improve Communication
- References
- Appendix

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1993, the Mvula Trust has promoted a demand-responsive approach to community water supply and sanitation. In keeping with this approach, Mvula's policies and guidelines for project implementation attempt to ensure that the philosophy of community-based management is realised.

Over the past year, Mvula has been responsible for managing a national programme to re-evaluate some 68 completed water projects for sustainability. This "revisiting initiative" was funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and conducted in partnership with the South African Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWA).

The evaluated projects were selected because they had sustainability problems. The field-based evaluations focussed on issues such as operations and maintenance (O&M), cost recovery, affordability, technical design, water quality, health improvements and water use. The evaluations were conducted by a team of social and technical practitioners using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Checklists, group and individual interviews and participatory exercises and activities such as PHAST and water quality testing were used in combination in order to glean and learn accurate and meaningful lessons from these evaluations.

The evaluations highlighted four factors that were critical to project sustainability. These are:

- Effective cost-recovery/ financial management;
- Effective operations and maintenance;
- The importance of the water project contributing to economic growth in the community as well as improved health; and

- Effective communication systems.

It stands to reason that effective communication is fundamental to the success of any project or process, and that complicated institutional arrangements often contribute to increased confusion. This is particularly relevant in South Africa's rapidly changing institutional environment. The sustainability evaluations have found that poor communication at local level is leading to distrust and anxiety, and undermining project viability.

This paper will distil the findings and lessons learned in regard to communication and sustainability and present tools and strategies developed by the Mvula Trust to address communication problems at project level. Case studies and examples are cited.

2. FINDINGS: COMMUNICATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

In general, the evaluations found that communication is weak throughout the project cycle. In most of the projects evaluated, communication-related problems had arisen. In many, communication problems had developed between the water committee and the wider community specifically. Given that community management is the cornerstone of the Mvula approach, poor communication at this level is particularly problematic for sustainability.

The village water committee (VWC) is elected by the community to represent its interests. While the VWC is mandated to take day-to-day decisions on the project, the community should be involved in all decisions that effect project planning, design and implementation. In particular, it is critical that community members have a stake in decisions such as technology choice, level of service, location of tap-stands, rules for O&M, mechanisms for tariff collection, dealing with defaulters, and so on.

It has been left to the representative structure (i.e. the VWC) to create a forum for household input to decisions that affect them. The forum most commonly used has been a community or mass meeting. Discussions at these meetings are meant to keep households informed and to ensure 'buy-in' to the project. This 'buy-in' is critical to the project's long term sustainability. Given that the committee may ultimately take over as the mandated Water Services Provider, it is critical that communication and relationships between the committee and the wider community are trusting, clear and effective.

The evaluations strongly suggest that ad hoc community/ mass meetings are both ineffective and inappropriate for consultative decision making and information dissemination. "Mass" meetings are often not well attended, throwing community representivity into question. Attendance at mass meetings is often effected by political schisms within communities and the dynamics between structures through which the meeting is called. For example, if the VWC calls a meeting through the tribal leadership, the attendees will be a different set from those who would attend a meeting called by the civic organisations or Rural Council. Meetings of this nature are also not conducive to participants - especially women - expressing their views. If these views suggest major changes to project direction or management, they are even less likely to be heard. The evaluations also suggest that the information presented at these meetings was rarely, if ever, passed on to households not represented at these meetings.

Communication problems often lead to loss of faith in the water committee. In the Khunwana Water Project in the North West Province, for example, poor communications have exacerbated existing problems. The water system frequently breaks down, has high operation

and maintenance costs and yields weak water supplies. Cost recovery is very low although affordability difficulties do not seem to be the major issue. Evaluators claim that there has been a major break down of trust between the committee and the community. This has led to distrust in the committee's ability to solve the technical difficulties that have arisen in the project. The problems have become so acute that there have been calls for the committee to be reconstituted. Similar problems were found in a Northern Province project, Phiring, where the water committee was accused of corruption and mismanagement of community funds. Project sustainability has been undermined and, as in many of the projects evaluated, cost recovery is very low.

Alternative communication strategies are clearly required. At the very least, other communication strategies should be used to augment mass meetings. Some ideas for facilitating this are explored in the final section of this paper.

There are essentially two layers in communication at project level. The one exists between the VWC and the wider community, as elaborated above, and the other between the VWC, the community and 'outsiders' or other role-players. Other role-players here refers primarily to project agents and, in the South African context, local government. In terms of the Constitution (1996), the responsibility for the provision of basic services, including water supply and sanitation, rests with local government. As the legal Water Services Authority, local government has a crucial role in providing an enabling environment for sustainable services, representing the interests of its constituency, as well as monitoring and ensuring water services provision. Communication between local government, communities and Water Services Providers is an essential component of good governance where all role players participate in decision making and take appropriate responsibility for water services.

Again, communication in this layer was found to be problematic. Under the new political dispensation, new legislative and policy frameworks are being established for water services in South Africa, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities and rapidly shifting institutional arrangements. This has undoubtedly played a major part in communication difficulties, as was found in the Sandile Regional Water Supply Scheme in Eastern Cape. In most projects, in fact, there was a lack of clarity and even trust concerning the role of various institutions in water services - including local government.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

In order to assess the kinds of information required by communities, the evaluators explored a few simple questions. These questions included:

- What do community members really want to know from the managers of their water project?
- How often do they want to know it?
- In what format do they want it provided?
- Who should provide the information?

3.1. Types of Information needed

Surprisingly, the views of community members across the country were consistent in regard to the kinds of information they wanted. Three major areas were important: technical, financial and water quality information.

Technical information

If water stopped flowing, community members wanted to know why. They wanted to know what was being done to sort out the problem and how long it would take to be fixed, and they wanted this information as soon as the problem arose.

One example comes from Grootdrink, a relatively small community in the Northern Cape, where communication regarding system design and usage in the planning phase was poor and issues of water conservation were not discussed. As a result, certain community members had access to water and others did not. Householders who had easy access to water used large quantities of water for gardening and other economic activities, while households in other parts of the village had little or no access to the scheme. This resulted in tensions within the community. It was agreed that improved communication would help address the problem. The first step involved developing a relationship with the engineer so that community members could get detailed information on the system's capacity and the best ways to use it to get maximum benefit. It was agreed that all members of the community needed to have access to this information and as soon as possible.

The initiative of the Grootdrink community also points to lessons concerning the importance of communication between the project agents and the community.

Financial information

As regards financial information, community members wanted complete transparency. They wanted to know how much money was required to pay the bills in a given month, and they wanted this information monthly. They wanted to know how much money was collected to meet these bills. Again this information was needed monthly for the previous month. Finally, they wanted a detailed monthly financial breakdown of how the money was spent.

Lack of financial information has led to enormous problems. Again in Grootdrink, cost recovery is extremely low. It appears that the financial implications of the community's new system and purification plant were not work-shopped in the village prior to project completion. People resent the amount of money they are paying. Further, problems have been created because a flat rate has been charged despite variable water usage at household level. The rate is R 55 and includes water, refuse removal and lighting. A person commented that when people do not pay for their electricity and refuse removal these services continue - but their water is turned off. He asked whether the R 55 was for water only.

The community said that they needed detailed accounts so that they could tell what the money was used for. They needed to know what they paid for water, refuse removal and lighting separately. As regards water they needed a detailed break down of costs. Community members believed that this information could significantly improve cost recovery.

In Emayelisweni, a small village of approximately 90 households in KwaZulu Natal Province, problems arose from a lack of financial transparency. The fee structure was not clear. There was concern within the village that residents were paying a higher rate than a neighbouring village for the same level of service from the same source. These factors were contributing to poor cost recovery. Community members again called for clear, simple accounts for their village and for the neighbouring village. They claimed that this would quell the rumour that they were paying more. And if in fact they were paying more, the problem could be more easily resolved. They said that this information should be released as soon as possible and then account details should be released on a monthly basis.

Water Quality information

In regard to water quality, many communities stressed that this was a sensitive issue and that they needed to be armed with clear and detailed information regarding both the extent of water quality issues and potential solutions to address contamination at household level.

3.2 New formats for information

Innovative formats for information dissemination was discussed in some detail in the evaluations. A number of options were put forward, including the idea of “visual accounts” for financial information.

They said the design should be simple and colourful. So, for example, if there was a R 10 tariff they wanted a diagram/ graph that clearly indicated that R 5 was used for water, R 2 for O&M, R 1 for repairs and R 2 for the salary of the O&M operator. They said different colours could be used to distinguish between these amounts. Possibly drawings could be used to assist illiterate members of the community. The visual accounts should be posted prominently on community notice boards or taken from household to household when tariffs were collected. It was agreed that more creative ways could be found to disseminate general project information. Suggestions included billboards, posters and community radio.

One example of innovative communication at project level comes from Operation Hunger (also a South African NGO). Billboards were used in Klipfontein in the Northern Cape to increase community awareness of nutrition problems in the village, and to monitor progress in addressing nutritional problems as they emerged. The result was a well-informed community who reacted to emergent problems, and a reduction in growth faltering over time. The information was colour-coded and designed by a local (illiterate) resident. Evaluations demonstrated that the billboards increased local awareness considerably. This model could be replicated by the water and sanitation sectors. Issues such as finance and O&M could be graphically illustrated.

In short, a few clear lessons have emerged about communication at project level. The first is that Mvula’s assumption that working with VWC’s as a centralised community representative structure that will disseminate the necessary information and obtain community input to decision making is, quite simply, wrong. Where communication and decision making has been decentralised, it has been far more effective. Project agents, both social and technical, will have to work directly with community members to ensure proper input to decision making and information dissemination. A related lesson is that decentralised communication structures must be established from the start as a project activity and not assumed to emerge spontaneously through social goodwill. Another is that the use of indigenous communication mechanisms should be maximised. Strategies for implementing these lessons are elaborated in the next section.

4. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

4.1 Decentralised information sharing

Throughout the sustainability evaluations, the notion of decentralisation has emerged as a strategy to enhance sustainability. Decentralised communication, O&M and tariff collection have been cited as far more effective mechanisms than those currently used. Where O&M was

happening on projects, it had been decentralised to tap level. In fact, a lot of the innovation discovered at local level involved decentralised management in one form or another.

Tjakastad in the Mpumalanga Province and Umtebe in the Eastern Cape provide good examples. In Tjakastad, “block committees” were formed to address O&M problems and manage the extension of the water supply network to household taps. The block committees were responsible for water point hygiene and to replace broken taps as required. Block committee members were mostly women, and reacted timeously to problems at tap level. In Umtebe, the water committee decentralised the responsibility for purchasing diesel through a household rotating system. This has allowed for significant peer pressure on defaulters.

It is argued that communication should be no different, particularly given that the three key areas of information required by community members pertain to functions that could be fulfilled at tap or block level. They are undoubtedly best placed to disseminate technical and financial information as well as issues around water quality. It is also far more viable to ensure household input to decision making through decentralised structures.

Implementing this strategy will be a key challenge in an environment where the limited capacity of Water Services Authorities will lend itself to the selection of large organisations as Water Services Providers. Decentralised water services provision and communication will have to be piloted and proved to be manageable, sustainable and cost effective. Clear institutional arrangements will have to be established, particularly in regard to the proposed multi-tiered tap/block committees and Water Services Providers.

This strategy will also require direct facilitation of decentralised communication, O&M and tariff collection as a management option at local level.

4.2 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Mvula Trust is engaged in efforts to develop effective, outcomes oriented, responsive M&E systems, both within the organisation and for DWAF. Such M&E should flag and address communication problems long before they undermine project sustainability. Key sustainability issues and indicators to be monitored have been identified. This will enable project implementers to identify and respond to communication problems on both levels discussed earlier, between community members and the VWC and between the VWC and project agents and other role-players.

Communication at both these levels is vital to all of the critical sustainability factors identified through these evaluations, namely; cost recovery, O&M, health and other development spin-offs, and community buy-in and acceptance of the scheme. Monitoring these issues will necessarily involve monitoring the efficacy of communication at project level.

Communities and community management structures should be empowered to be actively involved in monitoring their own expectations and indicators. Efforts to facilitate this process have also begun within Mvula.

4.3 Participatory tools & methodologies

Finally, the development of participatory tools for establishing and improving communication systems, as well as for monitoring the effectiveness of existing communication systems and

relationships, has also begun. They have been piloted, field tested and disseminated through a series of workshops. One example, a tool called “Communication and relationships between role-players”, will be presented at the Conference. Please see Appendix A for the procedures for facilitating this tool.

CONCLUSION

Communication at local level and sustainability are inextricably linked. This has been highlighted as a key finding of the sustainability revisiting initiative. A number of innovative ideas and strategies have been unearthed at community level for addressing problems with communication.

As a learning organisation, Mvula is committed to piloting and testing these ideas on new and existing water projects, paying particular attention to participatory facilitation of communication options and strategies at the start of a project and monitoring the effectiveness of the system throughout.

5. REFERENCES

Breslin, ED & Netshiswinzhe, RB (1999) Promoting Sustainability in South Africa - Broadening Options, STRAP Paper, The Mvula Trust, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Breslin, ED (1999) Lessons from the Field: Rethinking Community Management for Sustainability, Paper Presented at the Appropriate Practices Conference, East London, South Africa.

DWAF (1997) Evaluation of the Community Water Supply and Sanitation Programme: Workshop Document, DWAF, Pretoria, South Africa.

DWAF (1999) Final Report and Project Evaluations for DWAF Revisiting of Water Service Projects - Sustainability Processes, Unpublished Report, DWAF, Pretoria, South Africa.

Harvey, E & Breslin, ED (1999) SODIS in South Africa, SODIS News, Synthesis Paper, EAWAG / SANDEC.

Netshiswinzhe, RB (1999) Monitoring and Evaluation Guide for Water Projects (Version 1), The Mvula Trust, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Potter, A, Bos, A, Netshiswinzhe, RB, Wilson, I & Dau, S (1999) New PHAST Tools: Procedures Manual, The Mvula Trust, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Notes

1. The Mvula Trust is a large South African NGO concerned with the developmental implementation of rural water supply and environmental sanitation.
2. See Breslin (1999) and Breslin & Netshiswinzhe (1999) for detailed descriptions of these findings and processes
3. In terms of the Water Services Act (108 of 1997), the Water Services Provider is the legal body contracted by the Water Services Authority and responsible for O&M, customer relations and cost recovery.

It should be noted that although the lessons captured here focus on the information dissemination aspect of communication, it is clear from the evaluations that community involvement in decision making is a vital aspect of communication and sustainability.