



Capacity building and ownership in decentralized project management

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DECENTRALIZING THE MANAGEMENT of water and sanitation projects to Rural District Council (RDC) level is now a central part of the implementation of the Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme approach being adopted in Zimbabwe. Community based management (CBM) is the guiding philosophy where the management and ownership of the installations is in the hands of the end users and the aim of the programme is to instil this. Ownership however also plays a role in the success of decentralized management, as elected councillors and local government staff develop a pride and capacity in their work.

The problems of the past in Zimbabwe, of running district level projects with multiple budget lines passed through the provincial offices of separate government ministries to their district offices for implementation, lead to many inefficiencies and a lack of transparency. The move to decentralise project management was as much to do away with these administrative difficulties as the desire to downsize central government. The advantage of decentralizing the management of integrated projects to RDCs has become evident in practice as the result of their increasing capacity, generated by experience in project implementation.

Bikita in South Eastern Zimbabwe is one of the Districts implementing a decentralized integrated rural water supply and sanitation project, as part of the National Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (IRWSSP). The project, started in 1996, has suffered many delays in funding and still has a year to run. Project achievements however have kept pace with, and in many cases exceeded, project spending and completion of all major targets is on line. From the experience of working with Bikita RDC for five years I would summarize the advantages of decentralized management of water supply and sanitation projects as follows:

1. Purely in management terms, making the RDC the management unit allows decision making to be done in a timely fashion and delays to be minimized. Local ownership and vision of the project promoting commitment helps to ensure that the best use is made of limited resources. Flexibility of approach is possible as the evaluation of progress is ongoing and this can be fed back into decision making.
2. In terms of good governance, Rural District Councils (RDCs) are the representative bodies of local government at district level. As such they can be more relevant,

sympathetic and responsive to their local communities than distant central government. RDCs are made up of the elected representatives (councillors) and the appointed executive. Councillors rely on the votes of the public and they are usually aware on a daily basis of the situation in their wards, as they live there and often hold responsible jobs within the community as teachers, businessmen and farmers. For the executive, who administer the work of the RDC, the same is also true. Not only are they and their families often from the area, their performance is observed and monitored by the councillors, who in their turn select the Chief Executive Officer and influence staff appointments and management. Furthermore by allowing a council to make its own decisions and policy, it becomes more mature and capable. For example policy decided by vote, binds all Council members to the principles adopted and helps to prevent maverick promises being made by individual councillors, to gain short-term, vote-buying popularity.

3. On sustainability; projects implemented by RDC's can be more sustainable as the institution and all its new found capacity remain after the end of the project. The issues of sustainability are more widely discussed during implementation, because the implications of possible future failure are more pertinent to those who remain, than they are to outsiders. Support mechanisms for communities, such as know-how, the availability of spare parts and the maintenance of tool stocks, can be handled and fine tuned by those who are going to continue to be involved with them way after project funding has come to an end, while the project itself is still running.

Threats to successful decentralized management have existed and continue to exist, the project for example suffered several attempts by powerful individuals from province level, early on in its life, to subjugate it to their control, probably because of the desire to have a piece of the not inconsiderable project pie. By withstanding these attempts, the district was in effect able to prove its metal. Paradoxically this may have assisted the RDC develop a stronger sense of purpose and resolve, that has helped it stay focussed on its project objectives.

Initial lack of capacity to implement project work is common and hardly surprising, as RDCs without experience in project implementation may well not know where to start. It is not uncommon to find under-resourced institutions with low morale and un-motivated staff in

rural areas because these institutions have been sidelined and disempowered. However turn this around and a water and sanitation (WandS) project can become not only the catalyst for community development, it can fundamentally change the institutions tasked with its implementation for the better. This can come about not just because of the increased resources which come with a project; finance, transport, equipment, etc., but because of a change in the spirit and vision of the Council itself, its own self image, dedicated anew to the betterment of its population. Phil Bartle in his article on developing capacity (1) says “One of the important principles in the empowerment methodology is that an organism, whether biological or social, becomes stronger when it engages in some exercise or struggle, and becomes weaker when it is given things, or things are done for it, that it could get or do for itself”.

The requirement is not just “learning by doing”, but it is first wanting to achieve. The old aphorism “where there’s a will there’s a way” is very true and always worth remembering. Once trying becomes succeeding, self-confidence, pride and ownership of the work is not far behind. Advice and training clearly have a role in this sort of capacity building, but they have to be tempered so that the achievement of success is fully felt, appreciated and owned by the staff of the organization and at most only shared by the trainer or adviser.

More difficult to overcome is lack of personnel to undertake the work, and this can prove to be a killer assumption if not taken care of. In Bikita this was dealt with by taking on contract support staff to provide backup for the executive during the intense period of project implementation.

Capacity building in Bikita District covered specialist training in participatory methodologies as well as advice on financial management, data handling and transport management. Use was made of correspondence training courses for senior RDC management, supporting some to reach chartered status and others to understand and take on new management roles. On-the-job training has the advantage of keeping key individuals in post while challenging them intellectually on subjects directly related to their work. Other selected staff attended a 3 month water supply and sanitation course in Harare, this generally being awarded on the basis of merit for good work undertaken.

The existence of the project gave the RDC new challenges; how for example to run competitive tenders? how to keep contractors to their contracts? The transport available to the RDC increased several times over, and this led to the creation of a transport department. All departments paid for the mileage used and transport funds were “ring fenced” to ensure that funds remained earmarked and committed to covering running and replacement costs only.

The first use of computers was brought to the RDC by the project. Financial accountability and planning could now be done rapidly and management accounting became possible, allowing spending on project work to be carefully monitored and adjustments made to financial projections before it became an issue.

Another IT advance that the project brought, was the use of a database for all village and water point records, this being incorporated eventually into a Geographical Information System. The ability to rapidly compare settlement patterns and their populations with water point distribution, further streamlined data processing and made needs analysis for planning simpler and quicker to do.

Specialist training in methodologies and technologies included:

- Participative Assessment, including village mapping, and a whole host of PHAST, PROWESS and other techniques.
- Participatory health education through the “health club” system.
- “4 bag model” Blair latrine construction including hand washing facility and experimental work with low cost alternatives.
- Participatory training for water point user committees including role plays, games and songs to help with future situations of conflict resolution, fund raising, opening and running post office bank accounts, environmental protection and problem solving.
- Participatory and technical training for village pump mechanics including training with both the extractable and non-extractable versions of the Zimbabwe Bush pump.
- Development of participatory and technical techniques to establish pilot water point gardens, as part of a move to incorporate the wider issue of sustainable livelihoods.

In conclusion I would outline the four main areas required for capacity building a rural district council with a decentralized water and sanitation project to be:

- Finance
- Planning
- Implementation skills
- Transport

With control of all these factors, an RDC has a good chance of success.

Decentralization gives the chance, capacity building the means and ownership the motivation needed for sustainable development. Once achieved with the entry point of water and sanitation, this capacity is readily transferable to all other activities, promoting broader development into whatever line the RDC wishes to take, with whatever opportunities arise. A not much recognized, but very useful added value of decentralized WandS projects.

N.B. A recent video film of the project in Bikita called the “Bikita Experience” has been distributed widely in Zimbabwe and the region, and is available from DFID (running time 38 minutes).

References and related reading

(1)PHIL BARTLE 2001 Developing Capacity, Community Empowerment and Capacity <http://www.scn.org/cmp/cap-int.htm>.

IAN GOLDMAN, 1998, Decentralisation and Sustainable Rural Livelihoods. Sustainable Rural Livelihoods what contribution can we make? Ed. Dianna Carney, DFID, pp39-51.

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