THE DEVELOPMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF CATCHMENT FORA
THROUGH THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Background

Catchment management for the integrated management of water resources is an important cornerstone of the present national policy on water resource management, as promulgated under the National Water Act (36 of 1998). As noted by WISA Divisions of River Basin Management, and Management and Institutional Affairs (2000), “Catchment management in South Africa aims at a situation in which stakeholders in a catchment will themselves be able to identify the critical issues and the best strategies to address them.” Statutory Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) are to be established to assist in the management of water resources at the scale of the Water Management Area (WMA), an area which may include one or more primary drainage area. At the more local level of, for example, the tertiary catchment, the formation of non-statutory Catchment Fora (CF) is being encouraged as a platform for local involvement in resource management. At the same time, irrigation boards are being transformed into more inclusive Water User Associations (WUA), bodies with a Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF) approved constitution responsible for managing the water resources of a particular area.

While models for catchment management practices are available from countries such as Australia, Great Britain and the United States (Department of Water Affairs & Forestry, 1996), South Africa is faced with the situation where some 60% of the rural population can be considered as being marginalised in terms of access to both the water resource and decision making fora. A major challenge therefore is to find effective ways to empower this group so that they have a meaningful voice in the management of the catchment resources on which they and others depend for their livelihoods. This report describes the outcomes of research into methods for empowering such communities. The work was carried out in the Kat River Valley, in the Eastern Cape.

Research into community empowerment in the Kat Valley had been ongoing for five years prior to the start of the current Water Research Commission (WRC) project. The focus had been on raising environmental awareness and building capacity to manage the water resource at the local scale of two villages (Fairbairn and Hertzog). By the end of 1998, events had progressed to the point where the desire had been expressed by the villagers to become part of the broader water management structure of the whole catchment. The ensuing WRC project, the subject of this report, focussed on facilitating the effective participation of these and other village communities in the Kat River in both the transformation of the Kat River Irrigation Board into the Kat River Water Users Association, and the development of a Catchment Forum in which broader issues relating to catchment management could be tackled in a more informal structure. While both these bodies have a catchment wide constituency, bringing together a wide range of social and
economic groups, the Catchment Forum has been village inspired and has been an invaluable platform for empowering participating communities to a point where they are able to take the lead in certain areas. One example is the development of a proposal for a Landcare programme to tackle land degradation, an important factor affecting both land and water quality in the catchment.

This report does not document in detail the many activities that took place in order to achieve the present outcomes. Neither does it provide a manual presenting the protocol to be followed in order to bring disempowered communities into a catchment management forum. Rather it provides a personal reflection by the project researcher on the processes that unravelled themselves during the course of the project. These processes do not relate so much to the setting up of catchment management structures, but rather to the development of human relationships which lead to capacity building and empowerment amongst all those involved in the process.

2. PROJECT AIMS

2.1 To facilitate the development and coordination of a Catchment Forum in the Kat River Valley (Mpofu District, Eastern Cape) through awareness building, learning and empowerment, so as to enable the people of the Kat River Valley to take a positive role in the management of their catchment.

2.2 To ensure that the empowerment process already initiated by Motteux (1996-97), and now driven by the community of Fairbairn, will be positively channelled into a Catchment Forum. This will enable the process to be sustainable and ensure that their new ‘power’ does not make the community of Fairbairn worse off through despondency.

2.3 To identify differences of interest and priorities among the different users, especially those who are disadvantaged, and to give them collectively awareness and confidence to confront others and argue their case. (In effect, identification of common ground proved to be a more effective way forward.)

2.4 To transfer the policy, principles and goals of ‘integrated catchment management’ to ground level and bridge the gaps between the Department of Water Affairs and the Kat River Communities.

2.5 To hand over the process to Kat River Valley communities (Mpofu District), with the insiders determining the agenda, categories and details.
2.6 To be critically aware of the facilitator’s behaviour as a joint learner in the process and to welcome and embrace error so as to initiate a process of accountability.

2.7 To share ideas and experiences concerning principles, approaches and methods in the establishment of a catchment Forum with outsiders and help to facilitate other national water user projects.

3. RESEARCH PRODUCTS

3.1 Effective management of the Kat River through participation, partnership, integration and empowerment between and amongst Mpofu communities. These include the rural communities, ex-Ulimcor Citrus farmers and the Kat River Valley Citrus Co-op.


4. PROCESSES FOR CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

4.1 Capacity building

Capacity building necessitates practitioners being able to see and appreciate participants as equal human beings. It is a process embedded in self-reflection, for both the practitioner and the stakeholders. It is about creatively enabling collective learning and creating a place of representation that enables stakeholders to observe, to perceive what they are, discover what they are not, and imagine outcomes and possible actions. It should encourage the role playing of different perspectives in order to imagine varying actions and to explore alternatives. Capacity building is centred on the stakeholder, and it is the stakeholder who enters into negotiations and discussions concerning catchment management. Capacity building has got nothing to do with fancy technology and meeting rooms - it is concerned with the stakeholders’ needs. Capacity building liberates ideas, emotions and sensations, in the encouragement of self-growth. It works with human concepts (feelings, emotions, life experiences, fears and strengths), stimulating learning, knowledge exchange and internalising of information. In so doing, it inspires (Boal, 1995).
4.2 Methods and methodology

The Kat River Valley Project (KRVP) was rooted in participatory methods and methodology. Thus the work is nurtured within the stakeholders, not imposed by outsiders. The outsiders are only guides for a limited period of time. Working in participatory methods and methodology is not as simple as ‘bringing stakeholders together to talk’. It is work that is deeply rooted in philosophy and ethics. In this, it is crucial that practitioners constantly reflect on their work and methods, to ensure a healthy self-critical mode that promotes accountability. This report does not provide a recipe book of guidelines for developing CF and WUA, because to do so implies that ‘fail-safe methods’ exist and that they work. They do not, for it is in the slow process of building capacity and engendering empowerment that stakeholders come to claim catchment management concepts as their own. The moment that they do marks the birth of sustainable CF and WUA.

4.3 Conflict resolution

Conflict is an inescapable reality. This is not a negative fact, since conflict is a catalyst for negotiation that brings participants to a platform upon which needs can be recognised as overlapping. However, in order to reap these benefits, the stakeholders have to be able to articulate their needs confidently and the practitioner needs to be supportive, neutral and open. Conflict is resolved through an inclusive process of negotiation. It is important to note that negotiation is not a once-off event: as stakeholders evolve, conflicts will arise and will need to be addressed. Given the historical, social and cultural context in which negotiation takes place, it is vital to have skilled, professional interpreters who can affirm the stakeholders’ grasp of necessary information. The practitioner needs to be aware that, on occasion, it may be more productive (and more constructive for the stakeholders) to engage the services of a neutral, external facilitator. Practitioners also need to be very well prepared so that the manifestation of conflict is properly facilitated.

4.4 Articulation of stakeholder needs

Stakeholder’s needs form the basis for catchment management practices, including the establishment of WUA and CF. At the outset, stakeholders may struggle to know and to formulate their needs. Thus, a process of capacity building is essential. Once stakeholders have been empowered to articulate their needs, all parties (including institutions) must come together to negotiate common needs. These identified needs enable the creation of a platform upon which the structures of CF and WUA can rest. These needs, however, are not a fixed entity and require constant negotiation and re-evaluation. Therefore the practitioner must be open, flexible and patient throughout the process.
4.5 Evolution

Catchment management is necessarily a long, carefully considered process, which involves awareness building, group development, and maturation to enable co-investment. The practitioner is not excluded from the evolutionary process: opportunities for learning and growth abound. The end result of evolution must always be action. The stakeholders must be able to celebrate tangible outcomes of the capacity building process. A lack of any change will cause stakeholders to become despondent and reluctant to participate further.

4.6 Staff needs

Catchment Management Projects (CMPs) have to be understood holistically: staff needs, project needs and grassroots workers' needs all have to be considered. It is also necessary that each of these is accountable to the other. This requires openness, a sense of responsibility, communication, cooperation and commitment from all those involved.

4.7 Management

In CMPs, the style of management is crucial to the project's success. An open, flexible, democratic, decentralised, participatory style is necessary in order to allow all staff to take ownership of the project. Professionalism must be high on the agenda: the stakeholders deserve nothing less. CMPs necessitate strong leadership in order to realise innovations, guide the process and inspire stakeholders towards agreed goals. Such leadership, however, cannot and should not be authoritarian or hierarchical. In fact, the complexity and volume of work characteristic of a CMP prohibits attempts to manage people in this way.

Budgeting in CMPs is also not conventional and fixed. For example, people may provide their services at cheaper rates than usual. However, this does not mean that budgeting can be lax or irresponsible. In fact, it should be quite the opposite, as a great deal needs to be done on a limited amount of money. Also, when services have been provided at a lower rate, it is vital to negotiate a means by which the worker can find a sense of fulfilment in the work. If this is not done, the chances are high that the worker will become unmotivated and resentful.

Finances to support grassroots workers need to be built into the systems of the CMA. This is vital because, in South Africa, there is so little capacity at this level that the workers need to be supported. If a process is built up and then simply dropped, stakeholders become despondent and fearful.
5. PUTTING PARTICIPATION INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

5.1 Starting point

5.1.1 Formulate the principles on which catchment management is to be based, identify indices of accountability.

5.1.2 Build the core and specialist advisors team: project coordinator/facilitator/practitioner, core grass-roots facilitating team, advisors, office support.

The grass roots facilitating team are a key element in ensuring the success of the project. They must be adaptable, self-motivated, self-reliant and capable of creative thinking. Drama and other workshop skills will need to be developed. Interpretation and report writing in both English and a vernacular language are key skills which must be available in the team.

5.2 Creating an investment plan with the communities

An investment plan may be defined as a timetable of events, roles and responsibilities and evaluation indicators. An investment cycle in catchment management projects is a useful tool with which to construct well thought-out programmes, ensuring that they are not developed in an ad hoc manner. An investment cycle must be created with the stakeholders to ensure that the investment is owned, wanted and cared for by the stakeholders, both currently and in the future.

5.3 Field work

The objective of field work is to bring marginalised groups into an active participation in CF and WUA. The efforts are realised through capacity building, which is a flexible and fluid process with a concrete goal in mind. Thus methods (of field work) should be shaped by the end goal, rather than the methods dictating the process.

The methods that bring about the above outputs are: awareness-raising programmes; background research; action planning with the stakeholders; regular feedback; continuity between activities; task allocation; employing diverse methods to reinforce concepts; being adaptive and creative; networking.
5.4 Action planning workshops

A logical framework enables stakeholders to work together in establishing the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and the goal of the project. Within this collaborative effort, short-term activities form the building blocks for the project’s overall plan.

There must be action and that action must involve all stakeholders including, if necessary, other government departments such as Land Affairs and Environmental Affairs.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This report demonstrates the author’s firm belief that there are no ‘recipe book’ methods which can be applied to developing CF and WUA in a participatory manner. There are, however, guiding principles which will help the practitioner to avoid falling into traps which weaken the sustainability of the project. These traps include using extractive methods, imposing external beliefs and systems to the detriment of local ownership, not appreciating the centrality of local stakeholders’ needs, and avoiding dual accountability.

Sustainability of a project is only achieved over time and is the result of engendering a process of capacity building, networking and conflict resolution. In order to allow stakeholders to take on responsibility, responsibility must be given to them. Capacity building is vital in this regard. The practitioner must be expendable, and must sooner or later be able to leave the project.

Conflict will inevitably occur on the journey towards CF and WUA. Through its resolution, conflict can be used in a positive manner to provide opportunities for growth, reconciliation and change. Outside assistance should be called in to resolve conflict where the facilitator feels this is advantageous.

Professionalism is non-negotiable in CMPs. Negotiation of all work needs to occur with all stakeholders and agreed indicators of accountability need to be put into place.

Every CMP needs to have a long-term goal and cannot be driven by haphazard planning. It is important that stakeholders are included as designers of both long-term and short-term plans.

In the National Water Act, responsibility for water resource management is closely tied to DWAF and the CMA. Currently, DWAF sees CF as structures which enable communication with stakeholders and as valuable tools for facilitating the consultation process. It is crucial, however,
to appreciate that sustainable resource management will not be realized if CF are merely seen as consultative bodies. CF have the potential to be fora for decision making and action at a local level. These actions should be prepared within a framework defined by the strategic catchment plan prepared by the CMA and endorsed by DWAF.

Ultimately, the integrity and efficacy of CMPs depends on their adherence to ethics, participatory principles, self awareness and honesty. Without these traits, CMPs cannot be built within communities, with stakeholders. It is only when CMPs are built within communities, with the stakeholders, that they are sustainable.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research is necessary to balance the rapidly rising demand for socio-economic tools that support water resource management with the limited supply of South African experience in this area. This research complements the focus on technical research outputs for water resource management in the country.

The National Water Act presents a real opportunity for a totally new way of managing water resources in South Africa. Participatory processes, capacity building and empowerment of formerly disadvantaged communities is central to the sustainable resource management philosophy of the National Water Act.

Some specific recommendations for further research include:

- It is necessary for future work to investigate how practitioners can co-create evaluation and monitoring systems with stakeholders, in accordance with the National Water Act.

- To develop approaches that allow stakeholders to participate in determining the Reserve and setting environmental objectives.

- Strategies need to be developed which will ensure that information sharing becomes more accessible: including the preparation of booklets and information leaflets.

- Practitioners in this field often work in isolation from other projects. There is a need to encourage practitioners to come together and share their experiences in order to provide a coherent, less ad hoc body of knowledge. Each project will have varying experiences to offer, but the global picture created by sharing all the knowledge could assist DWAF and
governmental bodies to assess the efficacy of their policies at the place where they impact most or not at all: grassroots.

- Aspirant or inexperienced practitioners need to be trained through on-site training; that is, the trainee practitioner and experienced practitioner work together in the field.

- Any further research should actively seek to encourage DWAF personnel into the field, where they are able to take part in the work and learn more, much faster.