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Social challenges in the Working for Water programme: findings from a study of selected projects

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Abstract

The Working for Water Programme's willingness to take on the inter-sectoral, multi-disciplinary, and partnerships co-ordination role in its invasive alien plant clearing activities has moulded it into a leading example of possible ways to successfully run a public works programme. The social development objectives within the programme present some of the most profound challenges for this multi-focus initiative. Although essentially the programme addresses the problem of invasive alien vegetation, it has grown to take on the challenge of high unemployment levels and general socio-economic uplift in communities where it operates. This means that it has to address not just the training component of its workers, contractors and management, but also the workers' health, employment conditions, and general social well being. These additional challenges have resulted in the formation of partnerships with government departments responsible for these sectors (such as Health and Welfare, Agriculture, Land Affairs and others), and with other organisations at the local level. This paper discusses research findings from a study on the socio-economic impacts of the programme on the lives of workers. It also provides an analysis of the different views of the type of employment (short vs. long term) preferred by workers and contractors.

South Africa's social and poverty context

A legacy of discrimination

South Africa's social and economic inequality problems have been well documented and publicised worldwide. What is not known are the details of ordinary people's daily struggles for survival in poor and remote rural areas where unemployment figures sometimes reach over 40% of the population. Discrimination, as in many other parts of the world, takes many forms and the worst victims are the rural poor, women and the disabled members of these communities.

Commenting on the Employment Equity Bill, the former Minister of Labour, Tito Mboweni, said: "*Black people, women and people with disabilities face significant disadvantages in employment. These include occupational*

segregation, inequalities in pay, lack of access to training and development opportunities, and high levels of unemployment. Black people, in particular, have suffered severe disadvantages as a result of job reservation and lack of access to skills and education under the 'apartheid' regime. This discrimination sometimes takes the form of direct and conscious decisions, based on prejudice or stereotypes, to exclude certain groups from jobs or promotions. For instance, some employers, believing that women are not assertive enough to manage or supervise other employees, will not consider employing a woman in any senior position".

In a similar vein, while describing the vision of the Employment Equity Bill, former President Nelson Mandela argued that: "*The primary aims of affirmative action must be to redress the imbalances created by apartheid. We are not . . . asking for handouts, nor are we saying that just as*

a white skin was a passport to privilege in the past, so a black skin should be the basis of privilege in the future. Nor . . . is it our aim to do away with qualifications. What we are against is not the upholding of standards, but the sustaining of barriers to the attainment of standards. The special measures that we envisage in order to overcome the legacy of past discrimination are not intended to ensure the advancement of unqualified persons. They are meant to see to it that those who have been denied access to qualifications in the past can become qualified now, and that those who have been qualified all along, but overlooked because of past discrimination, are at last given their due. The first point to be made is that affirmative action must be rooted in principles of justice and equality.” (October, 1991).

Since 1994, the Government has put in place legislation and other tools that seek to dislodge the legacy of unfair discrimination across the board, and to support the creation of an environment that promotes equal opportunities. The Working for Water programme goes a step further towards achieving these ideals by targeting for employment the poorest of the poor and rural women, especially single mothers.

The South African population

There are just over 43 million people in South Africa. The total population comprises more women than men (52% of the total population is female). Both urban and rural South Africa are historically patriarchal societies. Religious and traditional beliefs and practices combine to reinforce the male-dominant gender stereotypes found across the country. This has resulted in women being generally marginalised in all sectors, being the poorest, and carrying the burden of fending for their families under conditions of shrinking incomes and limited livelihood opportunities.

Of the total South African population, 77% are African, 9% coloured, 10% white, 3% Indian/Asian, and 1% unspecified. The average annual population growth rate was 2% in 1996. While this growth rate has undoubtedly been rising since then, this growth may soon be checked by the rapidly increasing and devastating impact of AIDS-related deaths on the total population. The social and poverty challenges are worst among rural African populations living in the former homelands and in farms around the country. There are limited employment or income generating opportunities in these areas, making WfW projects leading employers in some of these areas.

Unemployment

The picture of unemployment in SA is not a pretty one. Statistics South Africa reported that in 1997, the rate of unemployment was 33% in urban areas, and up to 50% in non-urban areas. Of these figures 56% of the youth between the ages of 15–30 years are unemployed. In the 31 to 45 year category, up to 35% are unemployed. Estimates indicate that 53% of Africans in rural areas are unemployed, compared to 42% in urban areas. Eight percent (8%) of white people are unemployed in rural areas compared to 7% in urban areas (SA Survey 1999/2000 – Millennium Edition, 1999).

The above figures tell a story of some of the root causes of social strife and spiralling crime in South Africa, especially for the young. There are several job creation initiatives that both government and the private sector have embarked on through public works and other programmes. The WfW

programme, although essentially an environmental initiative, is one of the leading examples.

Working for Water’s social objectives

The Working for Water (WfW) programme is a labour-intensive alien vegetation-clearing programme with a strong focus on poverty alleviation. Its social objectives include the development and economic uplift of local communities through the creation of short-term employment, training opportunities and skills development, as well as through the development of mutually beneficial community and business partnerships that recognise social and economic empowerment and conservation objectives.

The programme is ideally positioned to advance the objectives of, and institutionalise, equity by targeting the many previously disadvantaged South Africans for employment and capacity building opportunities. The target group of the programme comprises women (especially rural and disabled women), the youth and disabled people, especially among generically black South Africans. The programme is in partnership with an NGO called NICRO to re-integrate ex-offenders through employment opportunities in the WfW projects throughout the country.

The primary aim of the Programme is to remove alien invasive plants through integrated mechanical, chemical and biological control on state and private land to increase water supply to communities, dams and rivers.

The Working for Water programme is unique in that it combines conservation initiatives with a social development component. The Programme has recognised the gender characteristics of poverty around the country, and gives preference to poor women in female-headed households, such as single mothers in rural areas and informal settlements, to earn an income through working in the alien clearing projects.

Partnerships with other government departments have the potential to yield greater results in efforts to address unemployment and poverty challenges. The programme works with the Departments of Health and Welfare, Land Affairs, Agriculture, Public Works, Environmental Affairs, Education, and others.

Among the social objectives of the WfW programme is the attempt to employ as many poor people as possible. Another social development objective is to assist the development of emerging contractors/entrepreneurs, or the Small and Micro-Enterprises (SMMEs).

Some of the questions we keep asking ourselves at WfW include the following:

- How successful have we been in achieving these social objectives?
- What mistakes have been made and how can we correct them?
- What do workers and non-workers think of the programme?
- What scope of bigger successes do we have?
- What partnerships do we have to develop to achieve our goals?

The following social development findings try to answer some of the above questions:

The social development study findings

The studies from which the following findings are taken were carried out in selected projects around the country. The idea was to have a representative sample of different types of projects. The teams of consultants who were commissioned to do the work came from different backgrounds, ranging from private consulting firms to university research teams.

Data Research Africa (DRA) worked on Study One, which focused on WfW's changing contracting system. One of their main objectives was to find out what workers, contractors and project managers felt about the contracting models now being used in the programme. They would then recommend the best method for engaging with workers and communities, that is, whether there was one specific contracting model suitable for the programme or not. The Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) dealt with the issue of types of employment. The main question here was whether it was appropriate for the programme to have short term work for more people, or long term employment for a few members of the community.

The team from the University of the Western Cape, jointly with Goldin Impact (a private consulting company), looked at Study Three. This component involved an assessment of the social and economic impact of the programme on communities from where workers come.

Study One: Contracting models

Main findings

Among the main findings from this study was that there is tension between two of the broad objectives of the programme, namely the need to maximise social benefits for poor communities on the one hand, and the aim of developing entrepreneurs within these communities on the other (poverty alleviation vs. demand-driven business).

Workers and contractors expressed concern about the long delays they had to endure waiting for their payment after completing allocated tasks. The delays had a negative impact on morale among workers and did not augur well for social investments. There is also lack of clarity as to how contractors and workers share their profits.

The way the system operates is that the WfW programme enters into contract with a contractor, normally a prominent member of the community with adequate resources to run a small business. The contractor then hires specially selected members of the community who are poor but able to work in the project to clear invasive alien plants. The contractor, together with WfW project management, provides training for workers and supplies equipment to them, over and above paying their wages.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on these findings were that there is need to keep the programme flexible per project area and community dynamics. WfW also needs to improve communications between project managers and contractors, between contractors and workers, and between local level

structures and DWAF regional offices that process payments.

The researchers' findings suggest that WfW needs to address the tension between demand-driven business systems and poverty targeting. The programme needs concrete strategies to support contractor development, and not just words of encouragement. There also must be clarity on how teams share profits with the contractors, since the lack of clarity leaves room for manipulation of the system.

Study Two: Employment: short- vs. long-term (more vs. fewer people)

Main findings

Participants from Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga province said that they thought it was preferable for WfW to employ fewer people on a full-time basis than a larger team of people working part-time. The rationale for this decision was that people would earn enough to assist people in the community who are unemployed. Participants said "we can get help from that full-time worker. Otherwise she will tell you that she is only working part-time so she cannot help you" (community member, Bushbuckridge).

Participants from the focus group in Zwelethemba, Mpumalanga Province, were divided as to whether it was preferable to employ fewer people full-time or more people on a part-time basis. Some felt that part-time was preferable, whilst others chose full-time employment. One participant argued that if people were employed full-time they would be fully occupied, and therefore less likely to get involved in criminal activities. Others disagreed with this opinion, saying that if people were predisposed to crime, their employment status would not influence their involvement in crime. However, these sentiments reflected general concerns among participants from Zwelethemba and Bushbuckridge that people who were not occupied would eventually become involved in anti-social behaviour.

Some participants from this group argued that it is better to have someone working in the household even if they are employed part-time and therefore earning less money. The idea of employment, being hired to do work and getting paid for it was, in its own right, very appealing to many participants.

Facilitators explained to participants that WfW was faced with a difficult challenge because of the shortage of funds, but while some participants maintained that it would be better to employ fewer workers on a part-time basis others disagreed. One participant from Zwelethemba criticised his colleagues for being too preoccupied with wages, at the expense of considering the potential benefits projects could bring to their communities. The participant said "what is important is that whenever there is a project in the community people should stop focusing on the salary. What draws us back is that people will focus on the amount they will be paid before they even know what the project is about".

Coloured participants from Worcester in the Western Cape said they would prefer more people to be employed on a part-time basis. One participant explained why they preferred this option. "If they employ more part-time people, more people will get jobs. The person who never had a job or any form of regular income can now at least have something to provide for his/her family and continue with life. It does not help if some of us are employed full-time

and others have nothing” (community member, Worcester). Another added: “If more people have jobs I would be satisfied because nowadays we all struggle, we really do”. Another participant from the same group summed it up by saying: “If more people work, everyone will prosper”.

It should be noted here that the latter responses may have been influenced by the fact that most of these participants were unemployed themselves. This was an opportunity for them to motivate for more people to be employed in the programme so that they would stand a chance of at least temporary employment to earn a wage to help their families.

Recommendations

- Workers and contractors felt that WfW should handle recruitment issues with care and ensure that project managers and/or contractors responsible for recruiting workers do so in an open and transparent manner.
- Communication among WfW management, workers, project implementers and communities appears to be poor. Residents from communities where WfW projects operate were ignorant of WfW objectives and the potential value of projects. This has implications for the maintenance and sustainability of WfW projects in these areas, and is a serious indictment of the WfW alien clearing process as a whole, especially in terms of its sustainability over time. Project implementers should formalise communication with WfW workers, and become more accountable to the communities where WfW projects operate.
- Workers felt that WfW has made a positive impact on their lives. They spoke about the monetary gains from the project, saying that they now have money to buy food and clothes, improve their homes and educate their children for longer. These comments suggested that on the whole WfW projects were well targeted and reached some of the poorest people in the participating communities.
- Results from the survey indicated that workers from Worcester (Western Cape Province) would prefer WfW to employ fewer people on a full-time basis, whereas workers from Bushbuckridge (Mpumalanga province) felt it was preferable to employ a larger team of part-time workers. Workers may have made decisions on the basis of their own employment status, because most of the workers from Bushbuckridge seemed to be employed part-time, whereas those from Worcester were employed full-time.
- Project implementers said it was preferable to employ a smaller team of full-time workers than more part-time staff. The reasons for this choice tended to focus on the negative consequences of part-time employment, saying worker morale, confidence and incomes would suffer if workers became part-time employees. They also said that it would be more difficult to meet WfW objectives with a larger team of part-time workers.
- In-depth interviews with project implementers revealed

a rather narrow definition of part-time. Most of them spoke about part-time employment in terms of employing workers on a full-time basis and then suspending work for extended periods before re-employing workers. A suggestion put forward here was that WfW should consider running workshops with project implementers to brainstorm different types of employment options. Chances were that these would differ from place to place.

- There were mixed reactions to employment preferences among residents from communities where WfW projects operated, from people who are not employed by WfW. Some non-worker residents from Bushbuckridge said WfW should employ fewer people full-time to enable these people to earn more and make real changes in their standards of living. Residents from Worcester argued that it was more important to distribute the income more fairly among people in the community.

Study Three: Socio-economic impact

Main findings

On the issue of the general social and economic impact of WfW employment in poor communities, the research team found that there was no detailed and focused training for WfW workers in the projects on issues such as plant identification, HIV/AIDS, First Aid and financial management.

They found that the programme empowers people, especially women, through providing income and opportunities for self-advancement.

The economic benefits of income and a livelihood, however temporary, were appreciated by most workers in the programme. Some of them pointed out that after getting employment in the WfW projects, they could now afford three meals per day for their children, and enjoyed a better life.

Some of the workers expressed a need for further training in specific areas that would earn them more money, such as being able to use a chainsaw, or getting a driver's license.

Recommendations

There is need for task-focused training for workers. Regional offices should be more accountable to their workers and contractors, and consult with them more frequently and more closely. Workers should also be consulted on wage issues, especially when rates of payment and amounts are going to change. There must be improved communications across the board. Additionally, pregnant women workers must be protected from hard menial tasks and from herbicides. There must also be a programme to work through workers' social problems such as substance abuse in some areas.

The programme's partnerships with organisations such as the Homeless People's Federation (HPF) and People's Dialogue (PD) have potential to yield more meaningful social development benefits to the poor communities. The partnership helps them collectively save the few wages that they earn (see Mthintso, February, 2000, on the Federation's

operations and work with the poorest of the poor, helping them build houses from small savings contributions).

A disabled worker's views on the WfW programme: Frida Nkosi's story

Forty-three-year old Frida Nkosi is a disabled single mother of four children who are dependent on her for food, shelter and clothing. She lost her husband in 1972. During the same year she injured her hipbone because of a bone-related disease. While working for a contractor building a small dam (reservoir) near her home in 1995, the scaffolding fell on her and crushed her left leg. She has never fully recovered. She walks with an awkward limp. There was no compensation or assistance with medical care from the contractor.

She joined the WfW Masoyi Disabled Team in 1998. She described her experiences and expectations since working in this team as follows:

"Working is good. It can be tough sometimes when we get to places that we cannot easily access, but we have members of the team who are not disabled, and they help us get through. The job is wonderful for us because we are now able to buy good food, buy clothes and send our children to school. Since I started working here, I have not gone through a day with only one meal for my family.

I was a member of the Disabled Centre before, and James asked me to join the working team. My life has improved greatly since then.

One thing that I would like to change in this job is the payment system. I would prefer to be paid every month. Now we only get paid after completing the allocated task. This takes about two months to get the claims through.

I would like to work full-time and permanently. Sonke sithand'ukuthi sisebente waya waya" ('We would all like to work on a permanent basis').

One advantage with this job is that it is physical and hard. Physically disabled people need regular exercise, and this job is perfect for that. We are now able to keep our bodies busy and active. Before I joined this team, I would sit at home and my body would feel weak and painful. Now I am stronger and feel better. A person who wakes up and sits all day becomes weak. As a team, we prefer to work longer-term, with fewer people that the team can manage".

Conclusions

There is need for clearer communications across the board within WfW. This will help especially to reach all workers, contractors and project managers, and ensure that all parties understand the processes. The programme has unwavering support for workers' and communities' interests, and this came out in workers' statements about the benefits accruing from their engagement with it.

The Contractor Development Programme (CDP) that WfW is pursuing has received the support of all regional programme leaders and most contractors. The benefits that are expected from this development are already evident, and ways to benefit more people can be explored within the context of the region and the project area.

The flexibility of the programme in implementing its operations may be maintained as long as there are no loopholes to deprive it of its limited resources to relieve poor communities of the burden of poverty that they face everyday.

Administratively, the programme is still growing, and there are more expectations for it to deliver on activities that programme staff are only beginning to engage with. The alien threat is a huge one, and the programme's potential needs to be exploited fully to achieve the environmental and scientific objectives of controlling invasive alien vegetation and helping poor communities to sustain themselves.

On the whole, unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS, crime and invasive alien plants, are our common challenges. We will only win by working together across sectoral and disciplinary boundaries.

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