Deciding water services provider institutional arrangements

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In terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, (Act 108 of 1996) and the Water Services Act, (Act 108 of 1997), municipalities have the executive authority over the provision of water services (defined as water supply and sanitation services) within their areas of jurisdiction. The Water Services Act sets out the institutional framework which outlines the roles and responsibilities of local government as a Water Services Authority. One of these responsibilities is to ensure effective and efficient Water Services Provider (WSP) institutional arrangements.

The institutional decision-making challenge
A key challenge facing local government is how to operationalise the institutional framework as set out in the Water Services Act within its jurisdictional area. This requires informed decision-making concerning Water Services Provider arrangements.

In many cases rural local government does not have the capacity to fulfil the functions of a Water Services Provider. Consequently they are required to investigate options where they enter into municipal service partnerships (MSP) with service providers. The service providers may be another public authority (for example another municipality or a Water Board), a private company, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), or community-based organisation (CBO).

The Water Services Provider Decision Tree below summarises some of the issues that local government needs to address when making decisions concerning Water Services Provider institutional arrangements. These issues are often complex and require thorough and careful processes to ensure that the most appropriate Water Services Provider institutional arrangements are developed and established for sustainable water services.

The Bushbuckridge institutional arrangements experience
Towards providing support to local government councillors in the Bushbuckridge Water Board Service Area, the Retail Water Distribution and Capacity Building Project (RWD)1 initiated a process “to help local government determine an appropriate model for Water Services Provision”. The areas that are serviced by the seven Councils in the Bushbuckridge area are predominantly rural and peri-urban areas with economically disadvantaged communities.
The process which involved workshops, information collection, and mini decision making workshops within each Council, was carefully planned to ensure that:

- councillors had access to the necessary information
- real decision making processes could take place
- application of new knowledge and skills took place

The table below outlines the overall support process to local government in deciding Water Services Providers.

Participatory methodologies were used throughout the workshop sessions, including plenary brainstorm sessions, small group and dyadic sessions, role plays, individual and group exercises. In addition content input was provided through slide presentations with plenary interaction.

**Successes**

**Addressing real decision-making needs**

The proposed objectives of the support process were ambitious in that they required councillors to reach a point where they are able to make informed decisions concerning Water Services Provider arrangements. This required a good understanding of:

- a whole range of policies and legislation related to both water services and local government;
- what is entailed in ensuring sustainable water services,
- different types of institutional arrangements for water services,

### Table 1. Workshops, objectives and content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop 1: Legislative and Policy Framework</th>
<th>Information Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain an understanding of key aspects of the Water Services Act and other related legislation</td>
<td>Participants with the support of the RWD were requested to provide the following information about their Council area:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain clarity on the roles, structures and functions of a WSP</td>
<td>- Role and functions of a Water Services Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry’s (DWAF) transfer policy</td>
<td>- WSP management options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain an understanding of setting tariffs and explore the implications of non-payment for services</td>
<td>- Factors that influence WSP decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 2: Examining Institutional Options for WSPs</td>
<td>Workshop 3: WSP Resolutions, Assessment and Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To identify Water Services Provider options for various communities within each Council area</td>
<td>- Critical sustainability factors and criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To identify issues that need to be addressed when selecting a Water Services Provider option</td>
<td>- Advantages and disadvantages of various models</td>
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<tr>
<td>To provide facilitators with 'preferred' WSP institutional arrangements that can be interrogated in Workshop 3</td>
<td>- Assessing different WSP options for each Council area of jurisdiction, within the specific contexts and given existing institutional capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini Workshops: Selecting WSP Options</td>
<td>- Rating different WSP options against sustainability criteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The table below outlines the overall support process to local government in deciding Water Services Providers. Participatory methodologies were used throughout the workshop sessions, including plenary brainstorm sessions, small group and dyadic sessions, role plays, individual and group exercises. In addition content input was provided through slide presentations with plenary interaction.*
In addition, councillors needed a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the communities to be served, including demographic, technical, financial, legal, geographic, institutional and other information relevant to ensuring sustainable water services provision. Given these challenges, and the fact that water services is a specialised area of work (which is the portfolio of only a few of the 80 or so councillors that participated in the process), the level of commitment to and understanding of water services that was illustrated in the workshops was very high. One of the key reasons for the high level of commitment was that the councillors were already faced with institutional decisions for water services. This was brought about by the need to take transfer of both new and existing infrastructure as well as the need to identify Water Services Providers in their jurisdictional areas. At the beginning of the workshop process, some councillors viewed the ‘WSP role’ as something that “everyone will be competing to get” because “water is a source of income”. However, once councillors realised the challenges related to cost recovery and the costs and resources required to provide services to remote and economically disadvantaged communities, they recognised that in order to attract potential WSPs, their municipalities may need to carry some of the risks associated with water services delivery. Thus the WSP function was no longer viewed as the “big prize with vast income producing potential” that is allo- cated to one or other partner, but rather as an institutional arrangement that reflect the dominant political and ideological perspectives of the councillors. However, a fundamental shift in thinking took place during the workshops whereby institutional decisions became based on sustainability criteria (good governance, community acceptance and participation, customer relations, efficient management, access to specialist support, optimised employment arrangements, affordability, cost efficient, accountability and transparency, addressing customer needs, location in relation to community, and so on.) and, institutional capacity issues, rather than on ideological or political perspectives. This was achieved through constantly focussing on what is required to ensure sustainability rather than on ‘who should fulfil the functions’. WSP options thus broadened to include CBO and private sector models for certain areas.

Understanding WSP challenges
Another shift that took place during the workshops was the realisation that in certain circumstances (particularly remote rural villages) it may be extremely difficult to find a partner willing to fulfil the Water Services Provider role. At the beginning of the workshop process, some councillors viewed the ‘WSP role’ as something that “everyone will be competing to get” because “water is a source of income”. However, once councillors realised the challenges related to cost recovery and the costs and resources required to provide services to remote and economically disadvantaged communities, they recognised that in order to attract potential WSPs, their municipalities may need to carry some of the risks associated with water services delivery. Thus the WSP function was no longer viewed as the “big prize with vast income producing potential” that is allocated to one or other partner, but rather as an institutional challenge in terms of ensuring sustainable water services.

Weaknesses

Insufficient information
The workshop process provided for activities to take place between the three major workshops, namely (i) information gathering and (ii) mini-workshops within each Council to select WSP options. These activities were not sufficiently addressed, and this impacted on the outcomes of the process. Since the workshop designers and facilitators did not receive the necessary information required for workshop 2, they were unable to prepare exercises based on the...
realities of each community where Water Services Provider decisions were required. In addition, without critical technological, demographic, economic, social and institutional information it was difficult to assess the proposed WSP options against sustainability criteria. For example, without knowing the capacity of certain institutions, it is difficult to determine whether they can feasibly extend their activities to provide water services to remote communities.

**Problems in decision making processes**

The mini-workshops to select WSP options were intended to provide the workshop designers and facilitators with the various preferred WSP options selected by each Council. These options would form the basis of Workshop 3 whereby participants would assess the options in detail and identify actions to be taken in addressing any gaps in the chosen options. Since the mini-workshops did not take place, councillors did not have the benefit of a comprehensive decision making process, however in order to fulfil the requirements for workshop 3, each Council submitted resolutions or letters indicating their preferred WSP options. It transpired that in some cases the option had been chosen by the Chief Executive Officer without consultation, and in other cases options were chosen by councillors who had not been present at the RWP workshops.

**Decisions (resolutions) seen as cast in stone**

Since some of the options were presented as Council resolutions, councillors were reluctant to go through a process of evaluation a decision that had resolution status. This resulted in debates and time delays until it was agreed that the WSP options should be viewed as learning examples.

At the end of the options assessment process, many councillors indicated that the resolutions would have to be reviewed, as it was clear that the options would not meet all the requirements necessary for sustainability. This recognition of the need to review their WSP decisions, was viewed by the workshop facilitators as an indicator of success of the workshop process, since councillors were now in a position to identify feasible, effective and efficient institutional arrangements for water services provision.

**Some key lessons**

- The learning processes in the three workshops are iterative and incremental and thus maximum benefit was gained by those participants who attended all three workshops.
- The participatory sessions within the workshops were the sessions where the most learning took place, particularly those sessions where participants were provided with tools to assess their own decisions (these tools included checklists and questionnaires).
- Building and developing understanding of institutional issues for water services provision requires more than ‘workshop’ processes. It requires access to information (technical, socio-economic, financial, demographic, institutional, etc.) as well as ongoing support to councillors so that they are able to make informed decisions.
- Institutional decision making for water services cannot be addressed as a political or ideological decision. The decision must be based on sustainability criteria and capacity to fulfil the necessary Water Services Provider functions.

**Replicability**

The workshop process and the objectives it aimed to achieve were unique and experimental in the South African context. Based on the Bushbuckridge experience, a Water Services Provider institutional arrangements presentation pack has been developed for the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry which consists of a workshop design, a facilitators manual, a set of overhead transparencies with speaker notes, a participants manual and various workshop aids and materials. Detailed reports of the Bushbuckridge experience are available from the Retail Water Distribution Capacity Building Project: trwd@mweb.co.za

**References**

Department of Provincial and Local Government, 1999: Municipal Services Partnerships Policy, South Africa
Retail Water Distribution Capacity Building Project, The Mvula Trust, 1999 - 2000: Water Services Provider Workshop Reports (1-3), Hazyview, South Africa

1 Under the direction of the Nzikasi Bushbuckridge Water Forum, the Retail Water Distribution (RWD) project is designed to assist local government in determining and establishing appropriate Water Services Providers.
2 Notes taken at Workshop 2: Water Services Providers Institutional Options, 17 September 1999, Protea Hotel, Hazyview, Mpumalanga
3 Notes taken at Workshop 2

JEAN DE LA HARPE, Director: Network Community Development Services, P. O. Box 27810, Yeoville, 2143, Johannesburg, South Africa. delaharpe@icon.co.za
ALANA POTTER, Training Specialist, The Mvula Trust, Alana@Mvula.co.za