



Government has poured millions of Rands into smallholder irrigation schemes in the hope that they will contribute to economic growth, employment and poverty alleviation in rural areas. Yet many of these schemes remain in ruin. Now a new set of Water Research Commission (WRC) guidelines hopes to provide the map to the rocky road of smallholder irrigation scheme recovery.

There are more than 300 smallholder irrigation schemes in South Africa, covering about 50 000 ha. Most of these are located in the former homelands. Despite ongoing annual government investment, many of these schemes have collapsed or remain under-utilised. The reasons for failure are diverse and the debate on possible solutions for the challenges faced by these schemes continues unabated.

As the authors of the WRC Irrigation Revitalisation guidelines, Jonathan Denison and Siyabu Manona, point out, there is no simplified answer. "Hard experience of programmes across the country since 1994 shows clearly that unlocking potential through revitalisation initiatives is far more difficult, time consuming and costly than many professionals and politicians have realised."

Still there is clear and committed political intent to finance irrigation revitalisation initiatives and expansion at national, provincial and municipal levels. Thus the funding of these schemes is likely to continue and even increase.

The WRC guidelines, presented in two volumes, are based on three years of research and document best South African and international practice. They are specifically intended for government decision makers, technical and extension staff, consultants, development practitioners and scheme leadership.

'Volume 1 – The Rough Guide', is a quick reference guide that covers policy implications and revitalisation objectives as well as recommended principles, approaches and methodologies for scheme diagnosis,

participative planning, feasibility evaluation and formulation of farmer support programmes. 'Volume 2 – Concepts and Cases', contains the theoretical rationale for the guidelines.

Four major South African revitalisation initiatives are compared with international initiatives and success factors are identified. Eight farmer support approaches are documented, providing lessons of best practice as well as alternatives for programme design. A number of new approaches are put forward, including a tailored consultative planning approach, a land-leasing strategy for irrigation schemes and the formulation of four basic farming styles to guide planning.

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The central theme of the guidelines, according to Denison and Manona, is the critical need to appreciate and address the complexity of these schemes. They note that infrastructure development alone or as a dominant part of an intervention is highly unlikely to succeed. Rather, comprehensive strategies which consider all the activities that make up the irrigation enterprise are needed for success. These include markets, finance, inputs, infrastructure, institution-building and crop-production information.

Major investment in human capital development is critical, say the

authors. “While capacity and skills development is one of the primary areas of engagement in revitalisation, it has rarely been afforded the appropriate funding by decision-makers. It is also a complex and uncertain arena in which to be investing major funding compared with the relatively concise and low-risk engineering and agricultural hardware components.”

It is advised that total project cost in revitalisation relating to the infrastructure component must be no more than 60% of the total project cost. The costs attributed to human capital development (farmer training, institution building, negotiation skills development, marketing, support, mentoring and planning) must be a major budget item amounting to



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Meaningful involvement and information exchange between farmers, plottolders and technical experts are crucial elements of success.



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at least 40% of the total budget for success.

Plotholders need to be at the centre of the planning and implementation process which demands substantial two-way information transfer

so that the implications of their decisions can be fully appreciated. Gender-power imbalances must be constructively addressed so as to avoid the exclusion of large numbers of key players (i.e. the women) from the process with subsequent


failure of the interventions. Women are responsible for some 65% of farming activity in the smallholder irrigation sector. Yet most of the decisions in meetings are still made by men.

Challenges regarding land tenure and irrigation holding size are also discussed in the guidelines. It is noted that farmers who work small plots are forced to pursue a number of income and livelihood endeavours of which irrigation may be a small part and therefore with a negative impact on commitment and interest.

The guidelines have set out to achieve what many argue cannot be done and some suggest is a fundamentally flawed concept, i.e. smallholder irrigation in the South African financing, procurement and political context.



The guidelines present alternative pathways to constructive change in schemes, with full appreciation of the complexity and adversity on and between the schemes. They are based on meaningful involvement and information exchange between farmers, plottolders and technical experts, thus ensuring co-constructed plans for land tenure, agricultural, technical, institutional, marketing and financial aspects.

- To obtain *Participatory Revitalisation of Smallholder Irrigation Schemes Volume 1* (Report No TT 308/07) and/or *Volume 2* (Report No TT 309/07), contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340 or E-mail: orders@wrc.org.za 



The WRC research reports argue that smallholder irrigation schemes can be successful.



For smallholder revitalisation to be successful, significant resources need to be poured into human capital development.