

Executive Summary

Background and objectives

South Africa has developed progressive, far-reaching and technically sophisticated water policy, which reflects an advanced understanding of the principle of sustainable development. However, without appropriate capacity to implement the policy in the long term, little is likely to change for the better on the ground. Effective policy implementation depends on a mix of technical knowledge, social skills, and experience of how things work in the real world. The enormous need for developing the capacity of people in order to effectively respond to the implementation challenge is frequently expressed. This need essentially translates to a need for increasing our capacity to learn. We argue that the water institution will either have to improve its learning capability or yield to sub-critical capacity and inability to master the challenge of sustainable development.

The cycle within which policy undergoes major revision and reform, followed by implementation and review, could be as long as 20-30. Few people that are working in a particular field (such as water) of the policy arena are exposed to more than one substantial review during their working lives. Also in terms of the shorter cycles of monitoring and review, continuity is often lost through people shifting their professional focus, moving to other organisations or sectors, or retiring. The natural tendency for knowledge gained through involvement in policy processes is to dissipate to the extent that it is unavailable as a resource for the next generation of policy makers.

The overall aim of this project was to reflect on policy developments that took place over the past 10 years (1994 to 2003) in the water field, and to consolidate and package at least some of the learning in an explicit form for wider sharing or communication as well as retention of such knowledge in the institutional memory. In essence, it was endeavoured to extend the “paper trail” by capturing the insights, anecdotes and stories related to the policy process that would normally have a small chance of being documented. The formal objectives of the project were to:

- capture and consolidate knowledge and experience gained in several recent policy developments and R&D processes related to sustainable water resources management
- provide guidance for future leaders in how to establish and manage policy development and implementation processes
- provide guidelines for training and enhancing the capacity of people who are or will be responsible for policy development and implementation.

The outputs agreed to before commencement of the project were:

- a consolidated report (this report)
- a series of issues papers
- a core group of South Africans who have had their own capacity enhanced
- guidelines and a framework for training and enhancing the capacity of people in middle and senior management who are involved in policy development and implementation.

Project approach

The project focused on two primary activities to achieve its objectives. First, a number of issues papers were selected to capture lessons from various policy development and implementation experiences to date. The idea was to contribute to an explicit as well as peer-reviewed record or archive of lessons, to enable wider sharing of lessons amongst current practitioners as well as to ensure that these lessons are available to future generations of practitioners. Through a series of workshops with various specialists and policy practitioners, three priority areas were identified to guide the selection of issues papers (see Chapter 2), namely:

- analysis of the water policy development process in the context of the generic public policy cycle and principles
- development and dissemination of technologies and programmes that would enable policy implementation and realisation of policy intent
- capacity and institutional aspects, including kinds of capacity required to manage policy processes.

Second, a training course, later referred to as a professional seminar, was developed and presented to facilitate knowledge sharing in an interactive setting. Four main themes were addressed in these seminars, namely:

- generic frameworks for public sector policy development, implementation and evaluation
- application of generic frameworks to water policy
- effective implementation of policies and programmes: planning, monitoring and evaluation, institutional capabilities, and logistics
- options for continuous revision and improvement.

Series of issues papers

Six issues papers were produced (see Chapter 3) as part of this project, namely:

- MacKay, HM, Rogers, KH and Roux, DJ (2003) Implementing the South African water policy: Holding the vision while exploring an uncharted mountain. *Water SA* 29 (4): 353-358.
- MacKay, HM and Ashton, PJ (2004) Towards co-operative governance in the development and implementation of cross-sectoral policy: Water policy as an example. *Water SA* 30 (1): 1-8.
- Roux, DJ (2004) From Monitoring Design to Operational Program: Facilitating the Transition under Resource-Limited Conditions. In: Wiersma, G. B. (Editor). *Environmental Monitoring*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, pp 631-648. (ISBN: 1-56670-641-6).
- Roux, DJ, Biggs, HC, Rogers, KH, Sergeant, A and Mercier, JR (Submitted) Bridging the science-management divide: Moving from so-called knowledge transfer to collaborative learning. Manuscript submitted to *Ecology and Society*, September 2004 (see <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/>).
- De Coning, CB and Sherwill, T (2004) An Assessment of the Water Policy Process in South Africa (1994-2003). WRC Report No Report No TT 232/04. Water Research Commission, Pretoria. A shortened version will be submitted to *Journal of Water Policy*.
- De Coning, CB (In Prep) Policy implementation in the South African public sector: Towards lessons of experience for the water sector. This paper is being completed for submission by the end of 2004 to a journal such as *Administratio Publico*.

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A strong message from these papers is that sustained leadership, sound technical knowledge, the ability to plan (and re-plan) and facilitate a participatory process, good, clear communications and an adaptive, learning culture supported by continuous evaluation and adaptation are the key ingredients which have helped South Africa successfully adapt its water policy to meet the demands of our new democracy. Neglecting any one of these elements will jeopardise success.

Training course/ seminar

The development and presentation of a training course (later referred to as a professional seminar) was seen as a primary vehicle for achieving knowledge transfer and capacity building regarding policy development and implementation. The seminar was developed jointly between the WRC, CSIR Environmentek, Wits University (School of Public Development Management) and the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. Two seminars, each running over three days, were presented during the course of the project.

A total of 57 people participated in the seminars that were presented for free. The overall feedback from participants (see Appendix B) indicates that the objectives of the seminar were achieved to a high degree. Detailed synthesis of the lessons learned and guidelines for the continuation of such a policy forum are presented in Chapter 4 and Appendix B.

Building a learning capability

The term “capacity building” is somewhat over-used in South Africa today, yet the importance of ensuring the capacity for implementation of new policy is readily recognised. In Chapter 5 we provide several definitions related to the concepts of capacity, capacity building, institutional capacity and organisational capability. In the context of policy development, implementation and review, we view capacity building as a total (structural, functional and cultural) transformation of government in order to mobilise all available resources to achieve policy objectives. We emphasise the importance of the human element in overall capacity, as it is ultimately humans that make decisions, build new relationships and change behaviour. A key outcome of successful capacity improvement is to enhance people’s “capacity for informed action. This human capacity [for informed action] comes about through the integration of information derived from data, plus theory that puts the information in the proper context, plus experience of how things work in the real world. The process of integration is also called learning; hence the need for a strong focus on our ability to learn – we essentially have to learn how to learn as an institution.

Chapter 5 suggests an approach to instituting a learning capability specifically related to policy development, implementation and review. A major intervention is required to cumulatively build a sustainable capability, as opposed to having sporadic surges and subsequent losses of capabilities as we go through cycles of higher and lower priority. In practice, these considerations can be given affect to in a properly constituted and managed R&D programme, with the aim of developing and maintaining a core capability for policy development and implementation in the water sector. By following a learning-by-doing approach, such a programme should facilitate a partnership between those involved with the development of a theoretical discourse and a community of strategic as well as operational practitioners.

General recommendations and conclusions

It is recommended that two parallel interventions be initiated and maintained within the professional water sector:

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- Firstly, an ongoing programme of training and capacity building in generic public policy management, aimed at developing capacity in people entering the water sector in early or mid-career. This should be designed within a framework which addresses the different knowledge needs of line managers, strategic policy centres and specialists. This intervention would be focused more on improving generic policy processes.
- Secondly, a vehicle for stimulating high-level debate and action related to the content and impact of water policy. The institutional “home” for such a vehicle needs to be identified: there are advantages and disadvantages to locating this either within a government agency or as a less formal network outside an agency. This intervention would be focused on examining policy content, initiating critical review as and when necessary, and generating and analysing appropriate policy options.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the reflective linking of practical experiences with tested theories and the documentation of associated lessons, that were made possible by this project, would be of benefit to the wider policy and water resource management fraternities of the current as well as future generations.