

Implementing the South African water policy: Holding the vision while exploring an uncharted mountain

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Abstract

This paper discusses the long-term implementation of the South African National Water Policy of 1997, and addresses some of the difficult issues of the management and leadership of large change processes. Although the vision established by the water policy is clear, actually achieving that vision on the ground will require a robust, flexible, long-term implementation plan that is supported by all the role players responsible for water management in South Africa: Government, water services authorities, water services providers such as water boards, catchment management agencies (CMAs), water user associations, research organisations and the private sector. In this paper, we advocate a strategic, adaptive approach to policy implementation, which equates to "learn-by-doing", to meet the challenge of maintaining sufficient forward momentum in policy implementation, while still making sound decisions that take account of technical, environmental, economic, social and political factors.

Keywords: water policy, South Africa, adaptive management

Introduction

The South African water policy (DWAF, 1997) sets out a far-reaching vision, making provision for the use of quite sophisticated policy tools for working towards sustainable, equitable and efficient water resources management. The vision for water management in South Africa is the product of radical changes in the social, political and water policy environments. It is considered internationally to be progressive, forward-thinking and ambitious. The vision is challenging, but has engendered considerable pride in those who helped develop it and those who are working to implement it.

Achieving this vision will require dramatic changes in the way in which water resource managers conduct their everyday business. We will need new institutions, new tools, a new mindset and a robust implementation plan to implement the water policy over the next 20 years and achieve its fully mature form. The implementation plan needs to set out the necessary steps, schedule and resources to be deployed. A wish list itemising all the nice things we wish to have or to be in so many years' time is not the same thing and will not achieve the desired outcomes.

The challenge facing the water sector in South Africa is daunting in its magnitude, and we have only just begun to take the first few steps of implementation. While the vision itself is explicit and attractive, clearly showing us what we would like to achieve, the big question remains: how are we going to achieve this vision? With limited human resources, limited finances, limited expertise and most of all, limited water resources, how will we move from the old to the new over the decades to come? What kind of implementation process will generate the necessary change and take us closer to the vision set out in the 1997 water policy, which has been paraphrased as "Some, for all, forever"?

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The change cycle

The degree of change that is required to move from previous water policy to this new policy is significant. Change is always difficult - for a major change initiative to succeed it has to be carefully managed and strongly led. Change initiatives tend to pass through a typical cycle (Fig. 1): the early stages are characterised by doubt, fear and resistance, which need to be overcome by strong, visionary leadership and a careful, stepwise approach to implementation. At some point in the cycle, if the change initiative is to succeed, the promoters of the change have to ensure that the danger zone is passed; that a critical mass of people becomes positive and enthusiastic about the change and wholly espouses the new vision, in order for sufficient momentum to be built to carry the change through. Failure to build this critical mass and pass through the danger zone will result in reversal and a fall-back into old ways of doing business. Although a group is strongly influenced, negatively or positively, by the position of the group's leader or leadership, the position of an organisation or group in the change cycle tends to be the average of the individual positions within the organisation or group. This makes it imperative to deal with people as individuals, and to recognise the need to effect behavioural changes in individuals in order to advance the organisation's position.

In the case of water policy implementation, the group which will implement the policy includes the lead agent, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF), as well as several supporting organisations and institutions, including catchment management agencies (CMAs), water user associations, water services institutions and the private sector. This collaboration amongst many organisations to form the institutional framework for water policy implementation makes managing the change cycle even more complex, since one is no longer dealing with the issue of change within a single organisation.

An adaptive approach to policy implementation

Implementation of any major change initiative, such as the new water policy, is best effected by a stepwise, adaptive process which