

Women and Water: How is Gender Policy Working on the Ground?

by Robert Berold
Photographs by Ella van Tonder

Women are cooking, washing, watering gardens. They are the people using water, not the men.



The gender policy of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF), formulated in 1997, was designed to promote gender equality both within DWAF itself and in its activities at community level. The policy required a quota of at least 30% (since increased to 50%) of women in all decision-making committees as well as adequate participation and technical training.

How does the policy work out in the rural areas, far away from DWAF head office in Pretoria? The Water Research Commission (WRC) conducted a research study in the Peddie area to find out. Fort Hare lecturer Priscilla Monyai looked at four villages close to the town of Peddie in the densely populated former Ciskei, between Grahamstown and King Williams Town. About 4 000 people live in the villages of Cisira, Ncala, Nqwenerana and Mgwangqa. All get their water from the Peddie water supply scheme which began supplying clean drinking water in 1999.

I drove to the Peddie area one spring morning with Priscilla Monyai's research assistant Don Nyatela to revisit the research informants. The direct benefits of the scheme were obvious. As we drove the dusty village roads, we came across concrete standpipes on many of the street corners, at least every 200 m. The villagers buy prepaid tokens to use the standpipes, and the water is cheap, less than half a cent per litre.

In the municipal offices we met members of the original Project Steering Committee. Clearly the scheme had improved everybody's lives. Mrs Kota, who lives in Cisira village, used to collect water from the dams and rivers, carrying a bucket on her head like all village women. The quality of the water was not good in those days, she said, because goats and pigs shared the water source. In the town of Peddie itself, people used to rely on boreholes and windmills. The Peddie TRC and DWAF got together to remedy this situation, and in 1995 they started planning a water supply and treatment plant. The scheme was completed in 1999 at a total cost of R42 m., and was opened by President Mbeki.

WOMEN

DWAF gender policy was implemented from the outset. Besides requiring 30% of all decision-making bodies to be made up of women, the policy also required that women be trained for some of the jobs in construction and post-project service provision. The scheme allowed for the training of 'village water service providers', one per village. Their task was to ensure that all the services were running, the pipes were not leaking, the taps at the standpipes not broken.

"Women were deeply involved from the beginning" says Velile Kaulela, one of the original steering committee

members. "That's how it should be, because the issue of water is about women. They are the ones who are suffering to get water." He assures us that the steering committee exceeded the DWAF gender quota and that some of the committees were led by women.

Velile Kaulela is an unusual man. He works as a social facilitator for the Peddie Women Support Centre. He tells us that most of the workshops he runs are to sensitise men about domestic violence. "Because of unemployment and retrenchments, men find themselves inferior. The wife is working, the man is not working – the problem starts there. Men have this stereotype to be dominant in the family. We are sensitising people about what the constitution says – all people are equal. But there is a lot of work to be done in rural areas." He remains optimistic, though. He is proud of the fact that last year, on Human Rights day, 50 local men signed a pledge never to resort to violence in their families.

WRC REPORT

Before coming to Peddie I had read Priscilla Monyai's WRC research report (No 1021/1/02), in which she points out that a quota cannot be the sole cornerstone of a gender policy. Many other barriers need working on in order to change the stratification between men and women in traditional Xhosa society.

Monyai writes "Cultural norms restrict women from asserting themselves in the presence of men ... Culture does not allow women to interact with outsiders such as project implementing agents." Cultural activities such as traditional feasts are common in the Peddie area, and women are expected to do the preparations. "Women find themselves having to divide their time between domestic duties, cultural

activities in the villages, and community projects.

"Consequently, very few women are involved in different community projects, and they are thinly stretched ... Married women are not allowed to make decisions by themselves. They have to ask permission from their husbands or from male relatives to attend meetings... Married women are not allowed to say their name in public gatherings, that is, a married woman is not able to introduce herself and announce her surname lest she dishonours her husband."

How, I wondered, was any gender policy going to contend with these traditional practices? The project steering committee agreed it was tough. "In some of our villages, when we are having a meeting, women are scared to stand up." But, they said, "If you give women a chance to lead, they express themselves". Things have come a long way from Kaulela's father's time "when the meetings were attended by men only, there were no women to be seen."

BOTT SCHEME

The Peddie water scheme is a BOTT (Build Operate Train and Transfer) scheme, which means that the community is involved in the sustainability of the scheme, and to a certain extent the maintenance. The water services authority in charge of running the scheme is the Amatole District Municipality, based 150km away in East London. They carry out routine inspections and hold monthly meetings with the community based organisation (CBO) to discuss problems.

The CBO 'village water service providers', who work on contract, call in the Amatole District Municipality when they meet problems they cannot cope with. Most of their job is to monitor the social use of the scheme,

and to sell the pre-paid tokens. Velile Kaulela thinks they should be given more responsibility for the maintenance. "If the pipe breaks, they cannot repair it. The BOTT ends with O – operations," he says.

Cindy Minkley, deputy director of Operations and Maintenance at Amatole District Municipality says the issue of more technical training and responsibility is not closed. It will be considered when the municipality undertakes its next major assessment of work functions.

CECILIA KAULELA

After meeting the steering committee we drove up and down the rutted roads to Cisiga village, 8 km out of town, and spoke to Cecilia Kaulela, mother-in-law of Velile, who is the water service provider in her village. It was pension payout day and many people were gathered round the trading store, buying bags of provisions with their pension money. She called a number of women together and we sat in the shade of a huge old tree.

"It's true that the scheme has improved our lives, because we have clean running water" said Mrs Kaulela, "but women were not much involved in the meetings where the decisions were made. The decisions were made mainly by men. The scheme is not how we want it as women."

I asked her what she meant. "We want water inside the yard. Some of the standpipes are 200 m away, and that is too far, especially for an old woman living alone. Right from the start we asked Amatole District Municipality to provide the standpipes in the yards, but they said it was too expensive. We told them we were prepared to pay those costs. You can do nothing without water – that's why we want water in our yards. We



Nonzaliseko Mombengu of Mgwangqa village does her washing at one of the pay-as-you-go standpipes in the village

need it for growing food." The other women all nodded in agreement. They said they were not going to let it end there. They have taken their demands to the ANC and SANCO and the Peddie Municipality.

When I spoke to Cindy Minkley, she knew about the requests for water lines to houses. "We are sympathetic to the need for household connections" she said "but the government's first commitment is to eradicate the water services backlog to at least a basic 200m walking distance. We are currently developing policies which will meet this need, and we have communicated this in our monthly meetings with the CBO. As soon as the policy is clear, we will be able to offer households water in their yards where this is technically feasible". She thought that the villagers were being optimistic about being able to afford the extra water.

I came back a few days later with Ella van Tonder, my photographer friend. The veld around the villages looked

very dry. We visited the water treatment plant, a neat up-to-date treatment unit with settling and chlorination tanks. We drove around the four villages with Mrs Kaulela, photographing women washing clothes, collecting water at the standpipes, watering their parched gardens, making mud bricks. Some of them were still walking one or two kilometres to the streams and dams to carry water, because they couldn't afford the prepaid tokens.

GENDER POLICY

As far as I could see, the water scheme at Peddie was working relatively well, despite the complaints. It was not clear to me, though, how this reflected gender policy in practice. At the University of Fort Hare I asked researcher Priscilla Monyai. In her view, lots could have been done better. For example, she said, the social consultation in the Peddie project had been far too rushed. The contractors hired social consultants to do some gender capacity building

"but the time they were given was too limiting – just a few weeks. The project was all about providing water, and the gender aspect was just an afterthought."

Mr Jako, the Peddie steering committee chairperson agreed, but added "You see, when the project started, it was after a long battle. You found that people were so excited to get water. When these other issues like gender were raised, you found that people were impatient."

PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

According to Priscilla Monyai, the problem goes deeper than what happened on this particular project. "The whole problem lies in how DWAF policy is conceptualised. What does DWAF want to achieve, and how does it want to achieve it?" If policy is not formulated properly, says Monyai, projects will continue to fall short of the needs of people. After all, she says, a project is only a manifestation of policy. "To what extent have the intended beneficiaries had any input? You ask them. They will just say, We were called to a meeting."

She continues, "If the community has no feeling of ownership, it is because they are treated as passive recipients. This is what happens when government gives projects to private contractors, who are driven by the profit motive. Usually they are engineers who want to get the job done as quickly as possible. But there are always alternatives" she says. "In each social context there will be different experiences. You just need to take the policy framework to the beneficiaries and you will find they will come up with solutions."

Monyai believes that the problem has to be tackled in DWAF's top management. When she did her research, the Gender Unit was housed in the

Directorate of Special Programmes, which had relatively low status in the organisation. She wrote in her report that the responsibility for gender policy should be moved to the office of the Director General to give it the necessary authority.

DWAF

It is a few years since Monyai's research for the WRC was carried out. Perhaps things at DWAF had changed. I phoned Rossetta Simelane, deputy director in the Directorate of Water Services Support, who is closely involved with gender policy on the ground. At the time of the WRC research report the gender policy was relatively new, she said, but in any case "The quota was never meant to be an end in itself, it was a starting point, a means to an end. We wanted to create an environment in which a more active gender policy could follow. What has changed since the 90s are the responsibilities now given to local government. Municipalities have taken over a lot of the work formerly done by private companies, and they engage directly with DWAF." DWAF now runs gender training programmes especially in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, KZN and North West provinces. In the Eastern Cape, there is a water sector gender forum.

TRANSFORMATION

The gender unit has been moved, not to the Director-General's office but to the new Directorate of Transformation — which includes gender, equity, and HIV. Every year progress around transformation is discussed in a meeting chaired by the minister, and every Directorate in the department has to include transformation issues in its workplan. There are now specific performance indicators for gender in the monitoring and evaluation stage of all water projects.

"We are moving from quantity to quality, beyond the numbers game, we

are looking deeper into how we can enhance real participation by women," says David Mahlobo, Director of Transformation. "In order to do this, we have to build capacity. We have started a programme giving priority to women's bursaries – the majority of those getting bursaries are now women. We have also started a developmental programme for managers and supervisors, with an emphasis on gender equity". He added that the Office of the President, through its Office of the Status of Women, regularly calls for progress reports from DWAF, and from all government departments. So does the Commission for Gender Equity.

I asked Rossetta Simelane whether there is sufficient commitment to Gender Equity in DWAF. "It varies" she said. "Looking at our history, it's still an uphill battle. But most of us are behind it. There are still some components of DWAF who think this is all a waste of time, but we in Water Services have moved, and Water Resources is definitely moving." Her concern is the monitoring and evaluation of Gender Equity. How to measure it accurately? How to come up with good key performance indicators?

Changing the gender balance of South African society is clearly a long term process, which will have varying degrees of success at the community level. As Barbara Schreiner, Deputy Director-General at DWAF put it: "It is easier to write good policy than to turn it into reality. The gender policy of DWAF is excellent, but implementing it carries a number of challenges. Meeting the required 50% quota of women on all structures has been difficult. While there is general awareness of the quota system, exercising control by and participation of women is still an uphill battle in many areas. This is a battle that we will continue to fight for many years to come." 