

The Makopung Solar-Powered Water Project

Introduction

The village of Makopung is situated approximately 40km from the town of Ohrigstad, in the old Lebowa homeland (Limpopo Province). It has a population of about 1000 people in 143 households. The Makopung water project dates back to 1994 when a Water Committee was elected and charged with the task of improving the water situation in the village. In 1996, the Water Committee signed a contract with The Mvula Trust, and in March 1998 the scheme became fully operational.

From the beginning, the community and committee have been very committed to and involved in the project. The project was started under the old Mvula procedure where the community contributed 8% (Appr. R20,000) of the capital costs. This meant that each household paid R65 towards this. Furthermore, all construction, including building the 2 reservoirs, digging the trenches, etc. etc. was done by the community members. The relationship between the community / committee and the project agents was exceptionally good and has remained so. The project has been running successfully since 1996, and in November 2000 received The Mvula Trust Incentive Bonus for successful management of the scheme and full recovery of the O&M costs.

Solar Power

Being part of a European Union (EU) funded solar power programme, the project consists of a single borehole driven by a solar system with 72 solar panels, with a diesel unit for backup. The solar system has been adapted to allow problems to be easily picked up by the operator. Water is then pumped from the borehole through 2km of supply pipes to two 60 kl brick reservoirs constructed by the community, then reticulated through a further



5.6 km pipes and delivered to 29 standpipes. Although in the first few months of operation minor problems were experienced, of operation minor problems were experienced, such as wind damage to the solar panels and faulty voltmeters, no problems related to the solar power as such were recorded.

Operation, maintenance and management

Each household pays R10 for O&M per month. Originally, the operator was responsible for the collection of the tariff. His failure to collect could mean that he did not get his salary, and he was therefore quite successful. The money collected was then paid over to the bookkeeper for recording and banking. Now people pay directly to the bookkeeper. She does not get paid for her work but she does not have to pay the R10 tariff.

About 10 households out of 143 do not pay regularly. These people are reported to the Induna (traditional leader) who writes them a letter. If they still do not pay he theoretically decides what should be done. The committee has recently installed locks on the standpipes. The households who use the tap have to pay for the lock and the key stays with the regular payers in this group. Where these locks have been installed, defaulters are already beginning to pay.

The operator carries out maintenance. If a pipe bursts the people who live around it collect money to pay for the repairs. The R10 is used for fuel, transport, maintenance of the engine and the operator's salary.

Reasons for success

When asked why their project was so successful, and whether they had tips for other communities in similar circumstances, community members, amongst others, stated that "the people must take responsibility for the process and must not think that the government or donors will do it for them. They must be committed to the project and take ownership of it. People must work hard and persevere. Transparency and fairness are important. During construction everyone earned R15 a day, including the committee. They changed labourers every 14 days so that all could have a chance to earn something. Furthermore, the committee regularly reports to the community members, who have access to the books. Budgeting is done very carefully so as to spend only what one has. The Induna's role is taken very seriously. The committee works with him all the time."

Free Basic Water:

In September 2001, the committee members were asked if they had heard of free basic water, and if so what they understood by it. The reply was that they had heard about the policy but that this had been last year at election time. Their attitude was that they had heard many promises from politicians in the past and they very few of them had materialised. They regarded the promise of free basic water as a

political promise, and did not expect it to become a reality. Therefore, community members continue to pay their fees.

Also, the Greater Tubatse municipality, under which Makopung falls, has not yet started to implement the policy, because of a limited budget and many demands. The municipality has a water services backlog of several thousands of people, and intends to first resolve this backlog before actively implementing the free basic water policy.

Makopung: village of hope and glory

On Sunday 5 August 2001 *The Sunday Times* carried a feature about this "village of hope and glory". One of the community leaders quoted in the article said, "It's important for everyone to keep this project running. If it fails, we'll go back to the years when washing laundry was a luxury and cholera was common."

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