

Women Take the Lead in Nhlungwane Water Project

The Nhlungwane community lives in one of the most arid parts of KwaZulu-Natal. About one hour's drive away, Greytown is a well watered, semi-forested, grassland area. But just over the mountain the landscape changes dramatically. The community of Nhlungwane lies in a dry, stony, semi-desert area. These people are amongst the poorest communities in the province. Yet they have demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness over the last few years with their community-run water project. Louise Torr reports.



Sthombe Ngubane is the deputy chair of the Nhlungwane Water Committee. She is seen here collecting water from the standpipe.

The uThukela and Mpofana rivers run through the area where the Nhlungwane community lives, and community vegetable gardens are cultivated at the confluence of these two rivers. However, not everyone lives on the river banks, and the gardens are far from the Nhlungwane people's homes.

The Nhlungwane community is a relatively small settlement of around 220 homesteads. The dry river bed of the Nhlungwane River runs between the homesteads, but this river only flows during times of heavy rainfall. In the past the women had to walk long distances to the Mpofana River to collect water.

HOW THE WATER PROJECT WORKS

The water project was completed six years ago. Forty taps have been installed at standpipes throughout the community, with each tap serving about five households. A diesel engine at the pump-house pumps borehole water to four storage reservoirs, from where the water flows back to the taps. In addition there are five handpumps located in the area.

The price of standpipe water is R7.00 per family per month. People make their contributions on the seventh of each month. For this they get three times 25 ℓ a day, i.e. 75 ℓ on weekdays, and five times 25 ℓ on weekends, when they need more water because there are more people around, which involves more laundry and more cleaning.

Each tap has a caretaker, who administers the water supply to each cluster of homes. The community adheres to strict rules regarding the collection and payment of water. They collect water at 7:00, when



Women perform much of the physical labour in this inhospitable region. Their burden has been considerably reduced since water has been piped closer to their homes.



The uThukela River flows through the arid, stony area that is home to the Nhlungwane community. Women used to collect water from the river before water was provided closer to their homes.

the caretakers are on duty for one hour. If they haven't paid their R7.00 monthly fee by the seventh of every month, they have to go to a handpump. They have a penalty system in place for late payments – if they fail to pay after seven days, the cost is R12.00 per month, instead of R7.00. If anyone wants more, they have to pay twice as much. There is no sliding scale.

99% of the people pay for their water. However, there are five handpumps where water can be obtained without having to pay. Those who cannot afford to pay use these, or those who may need more water than their daily allowance.

People are prepared to pay for the standpipe water close to their



Deputy chair of the Nhlungwane Water Committee Sthombe Ngubane collects water from the standpipe and carefully waters the vegetables in the small garden adjacent to the homes.



Buzi Mzila is the pump operator, as well as being an additional committee member of the Nhlungwane Water Committee. Her duty is to make sure that the pump is working, and that people are getting water.

houses because this has many advantages over the handpumps. The handpumps are far from the households; do not always yield enough water; take time to pump and deliver water (people have to avoid queuing); and sometimes the handpumps break down. Broken handpumps are reported to the district municipality.

People are disciplined and careful about the way that they use water. They ration themselves to three containers per day during the week. However, they also need water for their cattle, and for this they rely on the rivers or on water from the handpump.

A COMMUNITY MANAGED PROJECT

Nhlungwane is a small, progressive and cohesive community. There is a high level of participation in community affairs, and as a whole the community is cohesive and disciplined. On the twenty seventh of every month, the water project staff and caretakers get together and discuss issues related to water and its use.

The community has appointed a number of staff to keep the water flowing to their yards. A plumber fixes pipes and taps, and services reservoirs. An operator runs the pump house and services the pump. An administrator collects money, plots graphs of indicators such as income, expenditure and the consistency of supply. A number of caretakers are responsible for managing the collection of water from the standpipes.

The borehole water is managed from the pumphouse. The diesel generator needs an oil and filter change every 250 pumping hours (every 2-3 months), and this servicing is done by the village staff.

WOMEN PLAY A LEADING ROLE

There is a high level of involvement by women in the project. The chair is a man, but the project is 90% run by women. All the caretakers of the standpipes are women, and the pump operator is also a woman.

The women agree that the water project has brought some



Women in the small home garden alongside the standpipe. People in this arid region use water sparingly, and honour their water bills.

Women from Nhlungwane participate actively in the water project, and play important decision-making roles.



changes to gender positions and perceptions, and has given women a more prominent role in their community. It has provided an opportunity for women to get involved and play a role in making decisions. Women often advise the men, who do pay attention to their advice. Men also ask the women for help. The women recognise that in a society where women are generally placed in a subordinate position, this project has tipped the balance as far as gender equality is concerned.

Their involvement in the project has helped the women to develop certain skills. For example, women have learned how to lay pipes and how to operate and maintain an engine. Women are motivated to ensure the success of the water project, because they are the main water users. Men work in town, and the women contend that the men don't know where the water comes from. Women manage the water in the community, and they teach their children about water and the uses of water.

The water project has improved the

quality of people's lives. The women believe that the very fact of getting water close to their homes is the outstanding achievement of this project. It was difficult before, and they no longer have to walk long distances to fetch water. It is easier to cook, and to clean homes, to cultivate family gardens and to keep livestock. Through this project people have learned to sit down and resolve their problems. Since they started getting piped water there has been no cholera in Nhlungwane.

FREE BASIC WATER

For a cohesive community such as Nhlungwane, with a good track record of paying for their water supply, the issue of free basic water in 2004 offers exciting opportunities, and also some dangers.

Pietermaritzburg-based Partners in Development (PID) is currently working with the Mvula Trust on a Water Research Commission project concerned with different models for the implementation of free basic water in rural areas. PID

is liaising with the uMzinyathi District Municipality and uThukela Water Partnership, a new service provider that delivers water to this community. They are considering ways to enhance the current positive community involvement, so that with free water allocation, they can further develop their judicious use of water to improve their living standards. This community has done so well, that opportunities will be explored for them to keep running their own scheme, as they make the transition to free basic water. One option that may be tested is a voucher system which will entitle families to receive their free basic water allotment free of charge, as well as the opportunity to buy additional water to enhance their quality of life.

The quality of people's lives in Nhlungwane has improved due to the close proximity of water to their homes. The key to the phenomenal success of this project is the involvement of the community, particularly the women, and their efforts to take ownership and to manage their own water supply. 