

Promoting Local Economic Development through the Sanitation Programme

Kathy Eales and Richard Holden, The Mvula Trust

“Development projects should complement and reinforce one another, and extend the skills and resources of people who participate in them.”

Introduction

The national sanitation programme offers us an immense opportunity – not merely for health improvement and privacy, dignity, safety and status benefits of decent toilets – but for far-reaching poverty alleviation and local economic development (LED).

Sanitation projects can act as catalysts for real LED, through funding local planning and management processes, helping develop new skills and building new relationships. External project funds can provide a real cash boost to local economies through bringing in new streams of money that allow ordinary people to upgrade their toilets. The money will go to local builders who have built the toilets, to local suppliers who supplied materials, and to local project teams, through sanitation committees, who make the projects happen on the ground.

The key to LED is to extend the length of the economic chain within the local economy – how long each Rand remains in the local economy, how many times it passes from one person to another before it leaves the community, and how it is used to add lasting value to people’s lives.

Local project drivers

Sanitation and hygiene improvement is primarily a household-level activity, and is not complex. Potential project drivers live in every village and settlement – people with the building skills, organisational skills and the commitment to development needed to achieve lasting improvements to local hygiene and sanitation.

On-site dry toilet technologies are simple and easy to construct, using materials and skills available in any community. In most cases, the only external materials needed are tools, cement and reinforcing. Local builders need very little training to adapt their skills to build robust, affordable, good quality toilets.

Why a reliance on outside contractors?

Municipalities are under great pressure to spend money and deliver rapidly, and bulk-purchase of pre-fabricated structures can address this need. Contractor-driven approaches may be quick – but they create few jobs and develop few skills in targeted communities, and provide few opportunities for local small businesses and suppliers.

Rapid “one size fits all” toilet programmes by-pass opportunities for local skills development and mentoring and, at best, provide only short-term jobs. Even more importantly, the sanitation benefits of this approach are short-lived: often these toilets are rejected by local people, and are abandoned and vandalised. Sanitation projects

need to look beyond constructing toilet structures – they should develop and entrench local skills to support ongoing sanitation improvement long after projects end.

Sanitation improvement with LED

Sanitation and LED benefits are maximised when municipalities work with local organisations and local service providers to build toilet structures that households like, can afford, and are willing to maintain. Where local builders benefit directly from projects they become very effective champions for sanitation improvement, and help build local demand!

The pace of delivery within districts can be speeded up considerably by clustering several settlements into single projects, and clustering numbers of projects into area-based programmes. In this way, large numbers of village sanitation projects are active at the same time, building momentum on the ground. District delivery targets are met, working through local organisations at the pace of each community. Households are offered real choices around the types of toilet structures they want, and local builders are able to use local materials to deliver toilets that fit with local building styles.

This approach requires real working partnerships between municipalities and local services providers. For example, local organisations need to acknowledge delivery pressures facing municipalities, while municipalities need to acknowledge cash-flow challenges facing small businesses.

Ways in which to exploit LED opportunities in sanitation projects

- Maximise the use of community talent by starting projects with an audit of local skills that could be tapped or developed (rather than relying on expensive and unsustainable external support).
- Clarify needs, assumptions and expectations up front.
- Acknowledge that sanitation projects will not provide lasting employment for more than a handful of people. Provide skills training that can be adapted for other projects and needs.
- Where possible, entrepreneurship and financial planning skills must accompany technical training. Don't re-invent wheels – link up with small and medium and micro enterprise (SMME) support initiatives run through other programmes.
- Mentoring of local service providers by project agents is economical if project agents are then employed in new projects in adjacent settlements. Local service providers can then also train and support counterparts in other communities.
- Mainstream support for local entrepreneurs by writing it into sanitation programme contracts and procedures.
- Provide local suppliers with specific information on the needs and time frames of sanitation projects.
- Develop proper management systems for accelerated delivery, without compromising community needs.

Demand for new facilities may be high during sanitation projects, but will tail off once most people's needs have been met. Toilet building is just one service SMMEs can offer communities. Others include servicing and repairing of toilets, building rainwater tanks, and building better quality houses. Business skills developed through sanitation programmes can be used to develop other successful business.

Conclusion

Our vision for improved sanitation must be linked to key strategic imperatives for local government:

- Sustainable community development;
- Reviving economic growth, and improving the quality of economic growth; and
- Conserving and enhancing our natural resource base.

Handing over toilet construction to outside contractors may be simple, but the benefits are limited and often short-lived. By working with local organisations and service providers, project funds remain within the local economy for far longer, create work opportunities and support small business development.

This approach requires municipalities to be pro-active in identifying opportunities for LED within sanitation projects. It also means understanding where sanitation fits into broader integrated development, impacting not only on better infrastructure, but on skills development, income generation and health. Development projects should complement and reinforce one another, and extend the skills and resources of people who participate in them.

Resources:

- *Builder's Manual: for the construction of dry sanitation toilets*, 2002, The Mvula Trust

(1 014 words)