

**A Case Study of Participation
in the Bantu Bonke Hydroponics Project**

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the dynamics of community participation in the case of the Bantu Bonke Hydroponics Farming Project, located in Midvaal Local Municipality, Gauteng. It forms part of Planact's broader research project that is investigating participation and development from the perspective of the poor. This project is particularly focused on the added value of participation to the development process, and the issues that need to be considered to ensure that participation can be successful.

The specific project was selected as a research case study since it was described as having a strong community empowerment dimension, given that it is a community initiative, which also had municipal support and corporate social investment opportunities. We therefore initially viewed it as a case study which could show 'best practice' in participatory approaches and could potentially also highlight the political dynamics affecting community participation. Our entry point into this community project was through the local municipality, who regard it as a case of successful community participation and an overall successful local economic development initiative within the municipality.

The research, conducted between June and November 2009, used a qualitative, process evaluation methodology, which included introductory meetings with municipal officials to gauge the potential value of this case for the overall research project, site visits, and interviews with a range of stakeholders. We drew largely on the perceptions and experiences of community members (project workers, members of the community representative structure – the Communal Property Association (CPA), community members not directly involved in the project), as well as the externally appointed project manager (Magidi Agricultural Development), the key donor representative (Rand Water Foundation (RWF) manager), and local councillors. In addition, we drew on project documentation, including reports and meeting minutes provided by the project manager that focused specifically on community participation in the project. Through the process of enquiry and subsequent analysis, many interesting issues came to the fore including the ways in which participation is understood, the participatory processes engaged in, and how these were perceived in terms of the positive benefits and the challenges experienced, as well as requirements for successful participation. An analysis of these aspects, in relation to various theories put forward on the subject, provided valuable insights into the dynamics of community participation in a project with a local economic development focus.

2. Background

2.1 Background to Bantu Bonke Village

Bantu Bonke Village was established in 2000 through a donation of 23.1315 hectares by Anglo American Farms Limited in an effort to comply with the provisions of the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA 1997). The donation comprised 87 existing housing units of the Uitvlucht

Village, land for a school and sports field, and land for agricultural purposes. Families of Anglo American's former farm employees¹ in good standing acquired ownership and secure tenure of 45 housing units. The remaining units were transferred to their existing residents. The property is held in common by a Communal Property Association (Deed of Donation, May 2000). The village is located on the former Panfontein Farm, within a rural area of the Midvaal Local Municipality approximately 75 kilometres south of Johannesburg's central business district (Figures 1 and 2).

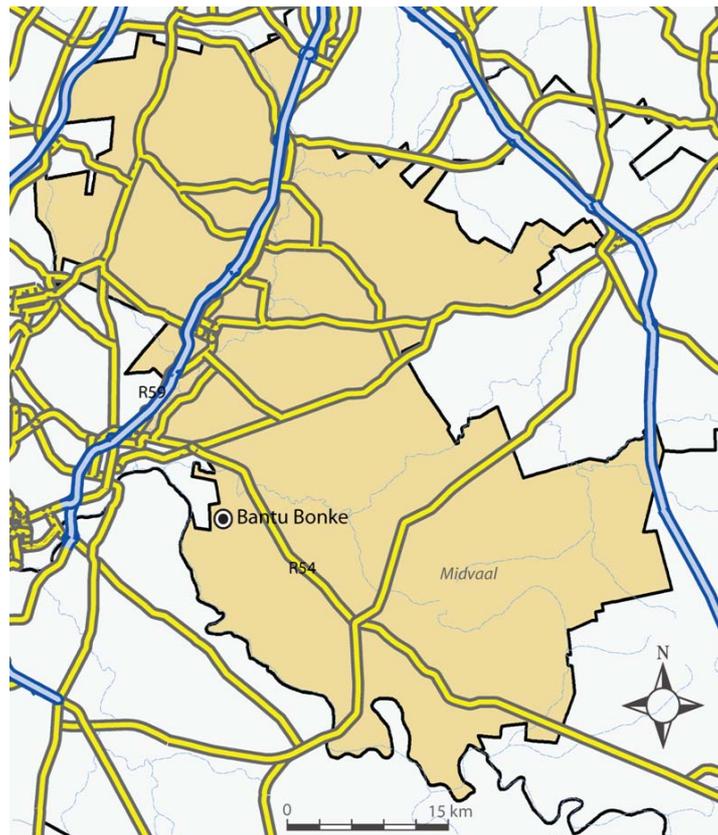


Figure 1. Location of Bantu Bonke

¹ According to interviews with the direct project manager, when Anglo American Farms Limited terminated their farm operations in the area, the former employees were told to move off the land. However, due to their resistance and their requests for assistance from government to intervene, Anglo American Farms Limited was asked to donate the land to the community members remaining on the land, which they then did.

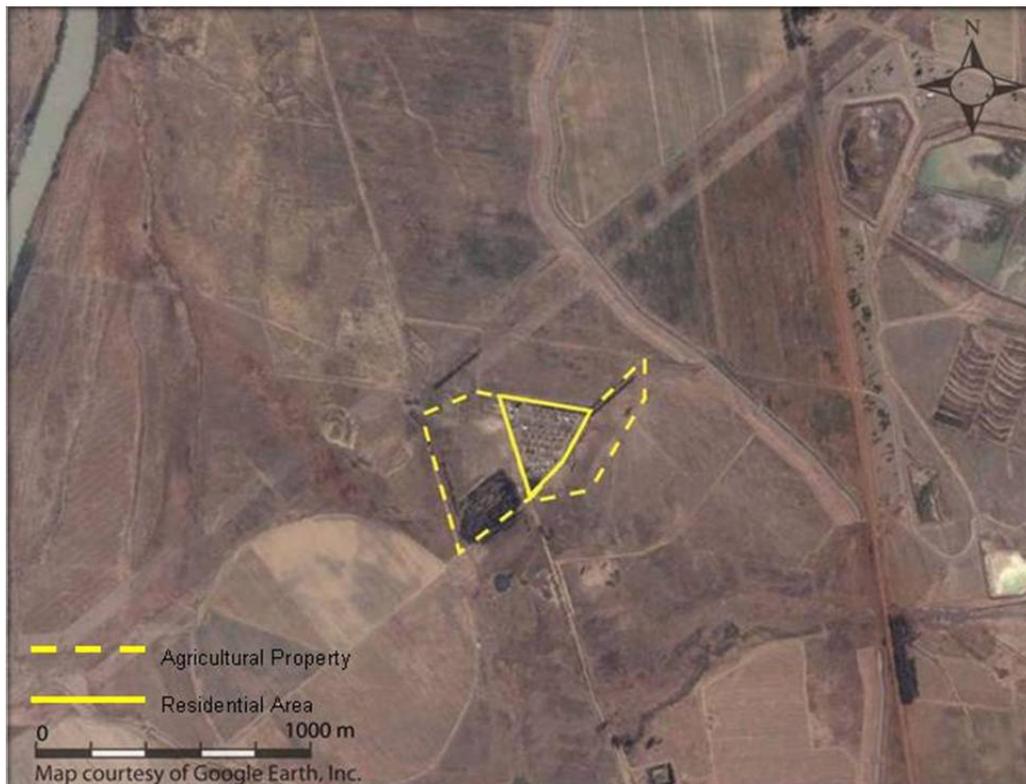


Figure 2. Satellite image of Bantu Bonke

The satellite image (Figure 2) provides a clear indication of the peripheral, marginal location of the Bantu Bonke area in relation to the broader municipality.

The community, represented by the Uitvlucht/Panfontein Community Association, and state representatives (Department of Land Affairs and Gauteng Department of Education) agreed to a number of restrictions in their acceptance of the donation. These restrictions include a stipulation that the village cannot extend beyond its current boundaries, due to the possibility of future exploitation of Anglo-American's coal reserves. In addition, the two parcels of land designated for agricultural purposes cannot be re-zoned for residential purposes. While small-scale farming is permitted, the raising of livestock, with the exception of poultry, is prohibited. These two parcels are also to provide for a cemetery as well as drainage and sewerage facilities. Ownership of these two parcels is vested in the local authority (Deed of Donation, May 2000).

Once the land transfer was finalised, the community officially registered as the Bantu Bonke Communal Property Association. The Communal Property Association (CPA) is an oversight and representative organisation that manages the Bantu Bonke Village common property. As of 2007, there are approximately 422 residents with an average household size of 4.9 people. Over 70% of the population is younger than 35 years old. Unemployment is very high and a majority

of community members do not have formal work (Magidi Agricultural Development, 8 March 2007).

Since 2000, infrastructure improvements have been made to Bantu Bonke, including sewerage upgrades (Midvaal Local Municipality 2009). In 2009, the Midvaal Executive Mayor announced R1.2 million for the construction of the Bantu Bonke Multi Purpose Centre for the provision of social services, as well as for a park or soccer field (ibid).

2.2 Background to Bantu Bonke Hydroponics Project

In 2006, Bantu Bonke Village received a 6-year grant worth R2.75 million from the Rand Water Foundation for a 3-phase farming project. The Rand Water Foundation (RWF) was first established in 2004 to act as a “socio-economic change agent” for Rand Water, a public agency that maintains and distributes most of Gauteng Province’s water supply (Rand Water Foundation November 2009). The Bantu Bonke farming project is Rand Water Foundation’s flagship community farming project. The Foundation chose to fund the Bantu Bonke project in particular due to its potential to alleviate poverty through sustainable job creation and entrepreneurial development as well as the implementation of water conserving technology. According to one community member interviewed, there were at least two agricultural projects that were unsuccessful in Bantu Bonke before this project was established.

The project first began when the Local Economic Development (LED) officer of Midvaal Municipality, in cooperation with Magidi Agricultural Development, applied to the Rand Water Foundation for funding (Interview with project manager²). Magidi Agricultural Development is a private consulting firm established in 2001 that specializes in providing agricultural development and technical support services, including farm-business management and project facilitation expertise (Magidi Agricultural Development, Business Profile). In the project’s business plan, Phase One would establish 15 hydroponic tunnels for vegetable production and create an estimated 39 jobs, although some jobs would be seasonal. Beginning with hydroponics appeared to be a logical choice because the site’s small area prohibited commercial farming (Interview with project manager). Hydroponics is a method of cultivating vegetables without soil. It is a high-yielding production method that generally uses less water than normal agriculture because the water can be reused. Since protection of the plants is important, hydroponic agriculture is only practiced within enclosures where the environment can be carefully controlled (Jensen 1997).

Phase Two of the project would implement poultry farming, creating an estimated 20 jobs, and would start upon the completion of Phase One. Phase Three would organize a commercial fish

² The interview was with the Director of Magidi Agricultural Development as a representative of the project management function. All references to the “project manager” hereafter refers to this interview. There is also a second staff member of Magidi Agricultural Development serving as the direct project manager who also provided some insights and is referred to as the “direct project manager” where relevant.

farming project, creating an estimated 128 jobs. Phase Three depends on the signing of a business plan and Memorandum of Understanding between the Rand Water Foundation, the Department of Science and Technology, the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), and a private company based in Ventersdorp, which would market the fish to Japan (PPDC March 2009).

2.2.1 Project Implementation

In 2007, the project implementation was preceded with an audit of the community “to enable project partners to understand and have all the necessary data of the village” including the community situation in terms of its demographics, assets and challenges. This was seen as a means to “develop all necessary solutions before and during project implementation” (Magidi Agricultural Development, 8 March 2007). The first five hydroponic tunnels were constructed in 2007 and in October 2008, Bantu Bonke produced its first harvest of cucumbers and sold them to the Vereeniging and Johannesburg Fresh Produce Markets. Another five tunnels were constructed in 2008. Originally, the 15 hydroponic tunnels were to be built at the same time. However, the National Development Agency, which had agreed to partner with Rand Water Foundation and provide R1,500,000 to the project, backed out of the project. As a result, the tunnels’ construction was staggered. The National Development Agency returned to the project in 2009 to help construct the last five tunnels (Interview with RWF manager). The professional contractor involved employed community members for at least 80% of the casual labour (Magidi Agricultural Development, 2 September 2009). Currently, the farming project relies on the labor of 20 volunteers, the majority of whom are women, who receive a stipend from Rand Water Foundation. As many as 39 employees will be formally hired once the project becomes financially sustainable (Interview with project manager).



Figure 3. At work within the hydroponic tunnels
© Magidi Agricultural Development.

In March, 2009, a Project Partners’ Development Committee (PPDC) was established to act as a monitoring and advisory body for the project’s development, including its production infrastructure, capacity building, marketing, and promotion (PPDC, March 2009). The PPDC is made up of the Rand Water Foundation, the Midvaal Local Municipality, the National Development Agency, and two private businesses that donated building materials, OCON Brick Manufacturing and Sky Sand (Pty) Ltd. Vaal University of Technology was also invited to join the PPDC after donating computers to the village. The PPDC was explicitly

formed with the intent of improving communication and relationships between the donors of the project, including the National Development Agency as well as with the Midvaal Local Municipality (Interview with project manager). Since its establishment, the PPDC has held numerous meetings and received reports from the project manager about the project.

The expectation of Magidi Agricultural Development and the Rand Water Foundation is that they will withdraw from the hydroponics project once it becomes profitable and self-sustainable. Currently, the project manager and the PPDC manage the project. In preparation for the future, a primary agricultural cooperative structure - the Bantu Bonke Agricultural Cooperative - was officially registered in October 2009 with the Companies and Intellectual Properties Registration Office (CIPRO), (CIPRO 2009). The cooperative was formed with the aim of taking over the management of the project in the future. The constitution of the cooperative, ratified by cooperative members in September 2009 (through an agreement with the CPA)³, specifies that a nine-member management committee will run the daily operations of the project and that a member-elected Board of Directors, with between five and nine members, will act as an oversight committee for the management committee's work. At the time of writing, nine community members currently serve as members of the cooperative (five project workers and four community members) and are being trained in project management skills (Magidi Agricultural Development, November 2009). The official management committee and board of directors have as yet not been established.

In preparing to eventually hand over the project in entirety to the community, the project manager is actively training the current volunteers and interested cooperative members to handle the management responsibilities in an effort to determine those most dedicated to the project. Training courses were initially offered to 46 community members identified by the CPA, and 40 candidates who took up this opportunity were then rigorously tested and interviewed for positions on the future Cooperative Management Committee (Interview with project manager). These 40 persons served as volunteers for a period of five months, receiving a small amount as a token of appreciation for their services. Later, in February 2007, a panel made up of representatives from Rand Water Foundation, Ocon Bricks, Sky Sand, the Midvaal Municipality and the CPA, selected a total of 20 project workers⁴ (Discussion with direct project manager).

In summary, the stakeholders involved in the project are as follows:

- **Bantu Bonke Community** – these are the residents within the community who are seen as the overall beneficiaries of the project, including the project workers currently working on the project and cooperative members, as well as residents not directly involved in the project.

³ It was explained by the direct project manager (Magidi Agricultural Development) that the constitution of the cooperative was ratified through an agreement with the CPA and current cooperative members, since community members could not be effectively called together to approve the constitution.

⁴ It should be noted that the project workers are regarded as full-time employees but they receive a limited stipend that cannot be regarded as a salary. It was explained by the direct project manager that they will only receive a salary once the project produces a profit, but for now they are paid from Rand Water Foundation's funds.

- **Bantu Bonke Communal Property Association (CPA)** – an oversight and representative organisation that manages the Bantu Bonke Village common property and addresses the general affairs of the community. The CPA was registered in 2000 and almost all of the elected members continue to serve as officials except for two changes due to members who passed away. Nine community members serve as officials of the CPA, including five executive members and four additional members. An annual general meeting is held where community members review the performance of CPA officials in order to determine whether new members have to be elected. There are no specifically scheduled public meetings, but meetings are held with the broader community as the need arises.
- **Bantu Bonke Agricultural Cooperative Members**– a community business entity that will take over the responsibility of the project after the project manager and key donor have exited from the project. The direct project manager explained that the reason for creating the cooperative was to ensure that there was a specific legal entity focusing specifically on the project. Any resident of Bantu Bonke over the age of 18 is entitled to become a member of the Cooperative and will receive share of profits when the project is profitable⁵. This cooperative was an informally constituted body before it was formally registered as an agricultural cooperative in October 2009. Currently there are nine cooperative members, made up of four community members and five project employees. Future developments are to include a **Cooperative Management Committee** who will manage the Cooperative’s daily functions when Magidi Agricultural Development and RWF leave the project, as well as a **Board of Directors** to act as an oversight committee for the Management Committee’s work. The Board of Directors have to approve of paychecks and endorse the Cooperative Management Committee’s financial statements. The Board members are elected at an annual general meeting of cooperative members. Directors hold their position for a period of two years and are eligible for re-election. The constitution declares that a majority of the Board of Directors constitutes a quorum (Constitution 2009). The constitution outlines paths of communication between stakeholders. The Cooperative Management Committee must remain in contact with the Board of Directors, meeting with them at least weekly. The Board of Directors must at minimum meet monthly with the Communal Property Association. In addition, the annual general meeting is held with cooperative members, the Board of Directors, and the Cooperative Management Committee (Constitution 2009). The Board of Directors is to report to the CPA on a monthly basis, who will in turn report to the members of the community on a quarterly basis (Constitution 2009: 29)

⁵ It is not clear when the project will be profitable – according to the RWF manager at least another three years is required. This links to the lack of clarity on the financial aspect of the project which is not very empowering for the residents - discussed further later in the paper.

- **Project volunteers/employees** - 20 community members currently serve as project workers earning a stipend. These are people who work on the project on a daily basis. They received special training to work in the garden before the start of the project and further training continues to be provided in terms of administration and project management skills.
- **Rand Water Foundation (RWF)** –the main funder of the project and the corporate social investment arm of Rand Water. It is a vehicle through which Rand Water fulfills its commitment to helping government in achieving its vision of a better life for all, by promoting job creation, skills transfer, community capacity building, and poverty eradication among poor communities in South Africa. The Foundation currently operates within Rand Water’s areas of supply.
- **Magidi Agricultural Development** - the project manager appointed by RWF to manage the project until it becomes sustainable. It has also contributed to the training and selection of volunteers who are working in the garden. The company was established in 2001 with a focus on providing consultancy services in agricultural development, in support of community groups funded by the private sector, government departments, and donor organisations seeking to improve the social and economic welfare of communities.
- **Midvaal Local Municipality** – the project is based in this municipality. The LED officer helped with the project’s application to RWF. The municipality has donated at least R85 000 to the project. It should be noted that this is the only municipality led by the main opposition party (the Democratic Alliance - DA) in Gauteng.
- **Bantu Bonke Farm Project Partners Development Committee (PPDC)**. The PPDC was established in March 2009 to act as a monitoring and advisory body for the project’s development, including its production infrastructure, capacity building, marketing, and promotion. Committee members include project funders only:
 - a. Rand Water Foundation - main funder of this project and the principal chair of the meetings of the committee
 - b. Midvaal Local Municipality - the convener of the meetings in consultation with all partners
 - c. Ocon Brick Manufacturing - a brick manufacturing company established in 1982, Ocon Brick is the leading manufacturer of clay stock bricks in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Ocon Brick promised to support the project by providing free bricks that will help to build the structures in the project (e.g. offices and storage facilities)
 - d. Sky Sand (Pty) Ltd. - a company that supplies sand and has promised to supply free sand that is needed when project structures are constructed

- e. The National Development Agency (NDA) - a government agency responsible for supporting social development initiatives through project grants. So far it has contributed R 1.5m to the project
- f. Vaal University of Technology - invited to join the PPDC since it has donated 37 computers to the local youth development committee

The following stakeholders map (Figure 4) indicates the relationships between the stakeholders and provides an indication of their relative powers in the project:

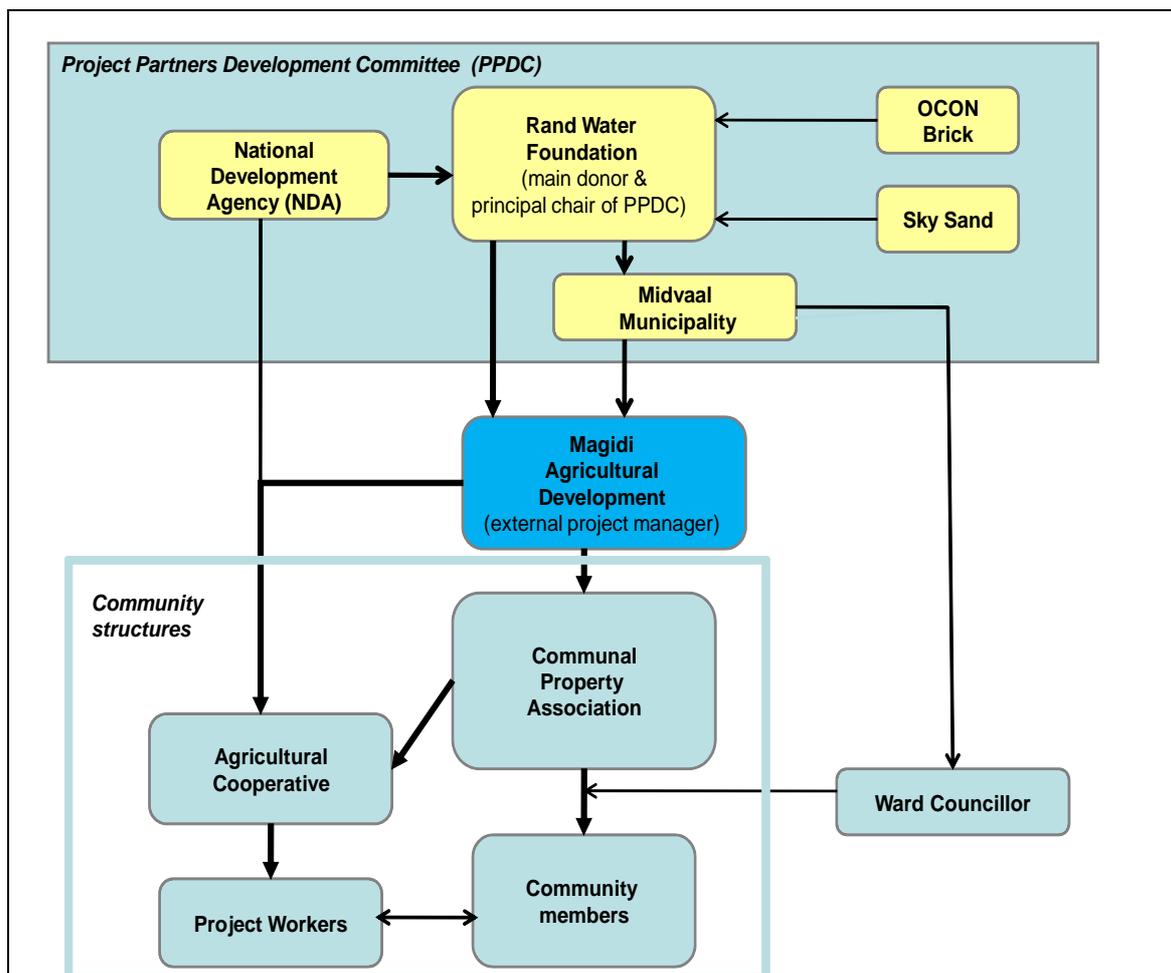


Figure 4. Stakeholder Map

3. Findings and analysis

3.1 Objectives of participation

Discussions and interviews reveal that the project definitely includes some form of participation by community members but that these developed while engaging in the project rather than being stipulated before commencement of the project. While the business plan outlines the overall objectives of the project, neither the project documentation nor the responses are clear about the specific objectives for community participation in this project. There are, however, some references to possible objectives not explicitly stated as the overall objectives of participation – these point to consultation, information sharing, creating an understanding of the project, procuring labour, and some aspects of decision-making.

The monthly activity report (September 2009), for instance, indicates that “the consultation process would continue to inform the community about the whole process”. The purpose of a range of meetings with members of the community (cooperative members and the broader community) is largely geared towards sharing information: “updating about outcomes of meetings”, “explaining roles”, and “informing about project developments”. The aim of information sharing is explained as creating a better understanding by community members so that there is acceptance (buy-in) of the project. This is clearly captured by the project manager:

The idea of meeting with the community on a weekly basis is that when these activities are taking place, no one can say they didn't know what is going to happen. You engage with them at that level, explaining the requirements and what it takes. In the end, you don't want people against what is supposed to be helping them because they feel that they haven't been informed. (Project manager)

In meetings with community members, the purpose was also geared at “getting casual labour” which points to more narrow instrumentalist objectives for the benefit of the project. Yet some of the meetings and also the later trainings are geared towards “skills transfer” for the benefit of poverty alleviation in the long run which could be interpreted as a focus on the objective of empowerment and transformation of living conditions through economic opportunities. This perspective is further reinforced by views from one of the project workers: “In my understanding the community role is to get employed and work in the project and make sure we make wealth for the rest of the community, because this project belongs to all of us.”

In very few instances, it is also clear from the documentation that participation was geared toward some degree of decision-making: for example, a meeting with project workers had the objective “to finalise the selection of the best supplier”. The meeting minutes also refer to plans to get approval from community members for finalisation of the cooperative's constitution; meeting minutes indicate that “a copy of the constitution was shown to all the community members and a day for a meeting will be organised where the constitution will be discussed so

that there will be comments and approval of it” (Magidi Agricultural Development, 10 September 2009:15). Yet it was later revealed that this broader community approval process did not take place due to limited community attendance, with the result that the approval was agreed between the CPA and the cooperative. While decision-making is regarded as a higher-level type of participation, it also depends on the kinds of issues that people are *allowed* to decide on, which seem to be closely controlled by those with more power – the donors and project manager. Again, here, this reflects more narrow objectives focused on technocratic project efficiency to a greater extent.

The RWF manager reflects a higher-level objective of participation, to ensure that projects respond to what people feel they need: “They must tell us what they want, not us telling them what we think they want”. Yet in practice this objective is not followed through with all of the relevant actions since there are restrictions in terms of how people engage with those in power.

This limited clarity with regards to the overall objectives of participation points to a common occurrence where many development projects have bought into the idea of participation to ensure compliance with good governance principles (also the legislated requirement of participation in South Africa) and so set out to include participation as a practice but often with no clear objectives in mind. This has implications for how participation is understood and put into practice since there are no clear indicators by which to monitor participation.

3.2 Understanding of participation

More powerful stakeholders such as the RWF manager and the ANC councillor seem to display a higher-level understanding of what participation should entail:

The participation process in the project should be in such a way that people could be able to give their views, ideas and be able to raise their needs. People should show why they need a particular project in their community. People should feel ownership of the product which they participated on its initiation. When people are participating they should be able to foresee the difficulties to be encountered in the project. (Councillor)

The RWF manager further highlights the notions of partnership in engaging with people in terms of their needs, saying, “you don’t impose things onto people, you do things with them”.

Community members displayed varying degrees of understanding participation. Those with a greater insight indicated that participation is about involving people directly affected by development projects, where everyone can take part in the project, yet acknowledging that this happens more effectively through forms of representation as indicated in the following statements: “Participatory development should include the people who are affected by development projects that are meant for them” and “The definition of participation is all about the representation of organisations. Participation is everyone taking part without hindrance”. In

one instance participation was understood as a way of solving problems: “We are able to solve our problems if we are involved and participate in the process”.

However the large majority of community members, including project workers and cooperative members interviewed, displayed far more limited understandings of participation, citing aspects of gaining information, understanding, and learning: In their words it is “a platform where we learn and teach each other”, and “the community needs to feel as part/be part of the project and understand what we are doing”. Some (particularly project workers) related the term “public participation” to external involvement for advice and understanding: “outsiders helped to stimulate activity among us as a community”; “public participation ensures that those who are outside of a process get to know and understand what is happening”; and referring to the external project manager in one instance: “public people can give advice”. In two instances, interviewees openly acknowledged that they did not understand what the term public participation referred to - as pointed out by one of the project workers, “I do not understand the word”.

3.3 Participation process

Within this context of how participation is understood it is interesting to see how its application unfolds in this project. The main aspects observed in the responses include the introduction and timing of participation; the location, frequency, and the language used in meetings; transparency; information and understanding; inclusivity with respect to gender dimensions; representation; decision making; and the exit strategy of external support. The ways in which these aspects were considered and implemented during the project determine the perceptions of the stakeholders with regards to the outcomes experienced.



Figure 5. Training session with project manager.
©Magidi Agricultural Development

The RWF manager explained that the community was engaged from a very early stage when there were no notable developments in the area; in her words: “from the beginning RWF engaged the community while the area was still an open veld.” Noting the importance of location in ensuring that people can attend meetings, she highlighted that “every meeting was held in the community”. She indicated that the project manager conducts weekly meetings with community members “to inform them and get their views as well” and in turn the content of these meetings are shared with RWF through monthly reports and meeting minutes. She

acknowledged the important facilitation role of the main structure representing the community - the CPA: “they are the ones who send people out to these weekly meetings so that besides the project workers, the community at large is also aware of what is going on.” She also pointed out that community members are aware that they can contact the RWF if they have concerns with the project manager (although this seems to be disputed as indicated later in the paper).

From the comments by community members, the participation process was said to involve home visits at the early stages and general meetings to explain the project clearly and to motivate people to get involved, as reflected in the following statement, which is representative of a number of similar comments expressed by community members:

When the project started, the community was invited to meetings and being briefed on the mandate of the meetings. When they were explaining the project it was explained well as language barriers were not an issue. Some of the issues were not clear at first but I asked and sufficient explanation of the grey areas was given. (Community member)

These sessions were also seen as serving to motivate people to get involved in the project: “In the general meeting held, the committee indicated that all people are welcomed to participate in the project. The idea is that when the project starts yielding some profits, everyone in the community will benefit.” This process also seemed to be geared largely at facilitating the process of acquiring labour for the project: “There was enough time to let people put their names on the list and the criteria was easy, they said the unemployed people in the community who can be committed to the project should attend the training.” (Interviews with community members)

The role of representative structures also formed part of the process with the establishment of an interim agricultural committee to ensure community participation. However, this committee was considered not fully representative and so was disbanded. Eventually, the project reverted back to the CPA to represent community interests, as reflected by members of the CPA:

The agriculture committee was not fully representative and was disbanded to ensure that we have only one structure, that is CPA. CPA is fully representative. (Community member)

The CPA also ensured that in each and every family there is a person who works or if they do not work they are given preference in the project. (Community member)

The project manager’s comments reinforce the key role played by the CPA, considered the representative voice of the community: “So the CPA would give us a list of names. We had to adhere to the requirement of the people, so whatever they do they are safe. But we do not go and pinpoint people.” It is interesting to note that the CPA is well regarded as the community’s overall main representative structure with oversight responsibilities for all of the activities of the community. The idea of forming a separate committee, eventually leading to the formation of a community cooperative, was to allow for a group of people to take responsibility for the

agricultural hydroponics project. This structure would, in turn, report to the CPA as the overall community representative structure.

Decision-making by community members also forms part of the process, although the extent of engagement at this level seems to be limited to certain aspects. Community members (at least two) highlight that the project sought the consent of the community: “There has been a consultation, people from the community were called in the meeting and they agreed to start the project.” This is further reinforced by the project manager, who highlighted the importance of taking community views into consideration: “If there is any step of the project that needs to be undertaken, we call a meeting, where we all have to agree. We’ve touched base with the community - the thinking is like this, and we need your view. All these processes, they make input”.

In terms of project implementation, project workers and cooperative members had some decision-making powers. For example, in a meeting with the project workers, the problem of slow spinach sales was addressed “with the aim of coming up with a better selling strategy.” The group decided to establish selling stations at specific locations in the area. Subsequently, the cooperative agreed with the identified selling stations and recommended several other locations (Magidi Agricultural Development, 3 and 4 September 2009).

Yet the project manager also highlights that decision-making on certain important aspects is limited to those in financial control, which also limits the project manager’s powers in the process:

I can make decisions about which crop to plant, but there are decisions about the funding; the project funding is all with Rand Water. (Project manager)

This decision-making aspect seems to be addressed in the exit strategy for Rand Water Foundation, which envisages a reduction in funding over time and eventual community ownership in the form of overall management of the project, explained as follows:

We [Rand Water Foundation] will have a gradual reduction on the budget - the R6 million will need to be reviewed..., that’s my exit strategy. By the time the budget is finished, the Bantu Bonke people will be running the project. (RWF manager)

3.4 Perceptions of participation in the project

Based on the process of how participation unfolded in the project, the perceptions, as expressed by the range of respondents, point to largely positive views and benefits but also include some negative views and challenges experienced.

3.4.1 Positive elements including benefits

Community members felt that their participation was respected through the process of regular information sharing and a commitment by the project manager to addressing their concerns, as captured in the following response:

Feedback on the progress of the project is continuously communicated with the community, with allowance to question certain issues or questions we have in mind. The manner in which participation is respected and treated in the meetings is satisfactory, even though I would like to see more people at the meetings. (Community member)

A number of community members observed that participation resulted in a better understanding of the project, which in turn increased their levels of participation:

The outcomes of the project have seen a satisfactory level of participation, as the community has been very involved. Above 70% of the community fully understands the project and the 30% don't have a clear understanding as they did not really participate. (Community member)

The positive relation between participation and understanding is further reinforced by the local councillor, "they [community members] were given an opportunity to raise their concerns and everything was cleared for them. That shows that the process of participation is clear and people have an opportunity to participate." Community members were positive about the fact that they felt "listened to" by those in power (the project manager and Rand Water Foundation).

These positive feelings also extended to feelings of empowerment in the sense that community members felt the participation process allowed for a sense of ownership to develop more strongly, while at the same time, their skills were being developed and their attitudes had changed through the process:

The people of the community have never before felt that they have ownership; the ownership of the project brings about a sense of self empowerment to the people as there are also management courses that build skills. (Community member)

The participation of the community has made a great contribution to the project, as it changed the mindset of the community. People were negative before towards community activity, therefore the project has changed the attitudes of the community members. The project in itself is people-centred therefore the participation has been crucial to the success of the people. (Community member)

In addition, the community representative structure – the CPA – also highlighted the positive effect on community members in terms of wanting to gain more information and not only through 'invited spaces' of the project structure:

People of this community ... always want to know once there is information about development. There is flexibility in participating and they just do not wait for meetings only. They give input always and are greedy for information. (CPA member)

The overall benefits of participation in the project in terms of *personal development* can therefore be summarised as empowerment, in the form of learning how to participate more effectively by learning from others; gaining a sense of direction (“we get to know where we are going”); as a result becoming more aware of their own potential (“we are now aware of what we can achieve”); and so gaining more confidence through representing others. The following quote aptly captures many of these aspects:

The participating process is important and beneficial as people get to know and learn a lot about their own development. I have learned that when you are elected people show confidence in you, now I have to work for them. (CPA member)

The project manager reiterated the development of confidence among community members, observing that “this has been a community that has been repressed for too long. I think people are beginning to find their voices now”.

There is also a positive gender dimension, since women were strongly encouraged to get involved in the project and there is the sense that their confidence as potential leaders could be developed. While women have been employed as project workers, their empowerment as community leaders is still hampered by the dominance of men; hence, a focus on women’s development is seen as a necessary area of empowerment that could potentially be very beneficial:

We’ve had so many meetings with the committee where only men speak, no women speak ... Some of the women could become leaders in the community. I could identify them, but they were never afforded this opportunity in this committee. It’s only men with the connections. I think this should serve not only as a project to participate, but a means to develop and empower women. (Project manager)

While the above highlight the significance of personal development, a few of the responses also pointed to the positive impact of participation on the project itself. In a more general sense, respondents felt that the project was able to achieve “more” and that participation helped to “better” the project (not explaining what that “more” or “better” entailed). Elaborating more clearly, the RWF manager pointed to the potential of more employment creation, “The community feels that the few workers who are working on the project will make the project grow to such an extent that it will absorb more people - that’s the attitude that they have in reference to the project.” Others commented that that the project would “not have run as smoothly”, with some going so far as to assume that the project “would have failed”. More specifically, some community members pointed to the possibility of financial abuse had there been no participation in the project: “funds would have also been misused if there were no community members”. There were also some perceptions focusing on specific employment and related skills development opportunities, particularly mentioned by project workers: “Participating has helped us a lot because we are now working.” Project workers also noted the benefits of having gained

specific work skills: “I have learned a lot by my participation like how tunnels work” and “we have learned a lot about planting”.

It is important to note that this project is strongly geared towards skills transfer to ensure the sustainability of the project as an income-generating and employment creation initiative. The project documentation provides much insight into this specific element, with reports indicating that “the purpose of delegating [administrative] tasks to [project workers] was to ensure that they understand the business principles and [will] be proficient to manage the project in the long run” (Magidi Agricultural Development, 31 October 2009:13). This was coupled with a strong training focus, which would be “conducted as an ongoing programme for the project’s skills transfer initiative” (*ibid*:14). The later formation of the cooperative structure was also based on the skills transfer approach, which included cooperative members’ involvement in training, administration and management tasks of the project. Gradual role clarification through training and engagement in management tasks by members of the cooperative structure was seen as particularly important since there was initially confusion by some cooperative members who assumed that they would be paid for performing these tasks. Yet their role was seen as eventually managing the project on behalf of the community, described in reports “as the future leaders of the project ... being able to guide the sustainability of the project” (Magidi Agricultural Development, November 2009:9). The training programme includes classroom-based theoretical training and upon request from trainees, a practical application element where they would “put into practice some of the skills they have learned”. This was structured as an incremental process, starting with the appointment of weekly management teams to prepare and supervise activity plans, which would be “steadily increased to monthly, then quarterly periods”. (*ibid*:27) This was aimed at identifying leadership and management potential and “to improve elements of self-confidence for future project leaders” (*ibid*:28).

Financial management skills development was also becoming a more crucial aspect of empowerment for cooperative members, since the cooperative would take on more financial management roles, particularly with regards to the funding grant from the National Development Agency (NDA), made available more recently. Reports indicated that the NDA funds would be deposited into the bank account of the cooperative and that they needed to manage the approved budget according to allocated line items for every purchase made (Magidi Agricultural Development, 31 October 2009:8). This is definitely considered a move in the right direction, with community members taking responsibility for financial management coupled with the necessary support process of skills transfer as part of the overall exit strategy.

3.4.2 Negative perceptions

Although limited in comparison to the largely positive views, it is important to take note of the negative views and reasons for this.

On the one hand, some community members were blamed for the limited effectiveness of participation in that they did not understand what was happening in the project and did not make efforts to understand, which points to a lack of commitment: “The reason why people don’t come to meetings is because the people don’t have a true understanding of the project, and are not trying to learn about it.” One project member also pointed out that project workers are simply carrying out their tasks as required and not going beyond this: “There has not been much input from our side besides ensuring that we implement the project work as expected.”

One community member placed the blame on the limited effectiveness of the representative structure, saying that, “the CPA is not active enough for the community; the community is interested in the project but the CPA is not doing enough. The CPA’s role is to interact with the community along with the project manager.” This aspect is further elaborated on by the project manager, who raised concerns about the process of representation and the importance of feedback to the community: “It’s the leadership in the community coming to the meeting; whether they take the information to the individual residents, who knows?”

Notions of dependency on external expertise (as a result of limited understanding) also raise concerns about the limited effectiveness of participation as it is currently practiced:

One of the major ongoing challenges is if you’re saying participation, but as an outsider you have to do everything, because people here don’t have information about what is happening or an understanding. If you leave everything in the community’s hands, it doesn’t move. (Project manager)

On a different level, those in more powerful positions are criticised for limiting the participation of community members in financial issues as well as for limiting interaction with Rand Water Foundation, particularly in relation to financial transparency:

From day one of the project the problem we faced was finance - Magidi and Rand Water are running the finance on their own, the treasurer of CPA is not involved, we only get reports which we just agree with as Magidi does the administration. There is no forum where stakeholders meet but Magidi and Rand Water meet on their own. (CPA member)

We can deduce that the stakeholders not involved in these higher-level discussion meetings are community members, project workers, and community representative structures, as is evident from the list of stakeholders forming part of the PPDC and those excluded from this forum. According to the direct project manager, community members were not included in financial management since they did not display adequate capacity to manage finances but that this skill would be developed through a skills transfer programme over time.

4. Factors limiting community participation

4.1 Community divisions

Quite a few community members denied any form of divisions amongst themselves and tried to present a picture of a very cohesive, closely-knit community, as reflected in the following comment: “The community gets along very well, there are no sects in between community members along political party lines”. Yet after further investigation, it became evident that, like many other communities, Bantu Bonke has also experienced internal divisions, some dating back to before the introduction of this project, involving issues such as personal relationships and political divisions. In relation to the current project, there are divisions in terms of different expectations – relating to potential opportunities for quick financial gain, and also different opinions as to how the project should unfold.

One example referred to by the local councillor indicates that some groups dominate in the community as a result of their access to information, and linked this also to their political affiliations. She indicated that there are diverse groups in the community, with differences spilling over into the project, but also acknowledged that these differences did not negatively affect the progress in the project:

There are different groups in the community – the CPA and the People’s Forum (PF). This [the PF] is a group which was a breakaway from the ANC in the 2006 local government elections but now it’s back again to the ANC; this group is more dominant in the project...[since it is] comprised of very clever people and they have all sources and channels of information...[yet] these people are able to work and have progress. (Councillor)

It is, however, important to note that no other interviewees mentioned this other structure. Even after some more probing, a project worker indicated: “I don’t know any other structure other than CPA”. Without pointing to specific political parties or structures, political divisions were pointed to by some community members as the reason why people are seen to behave in certain negative ways to maintain political dominance in the area. Yet others downplayed this aspect by citing evidence from the project’s success, indicating that “if there were political parties involved there would be many more problems in the project”. These comments do, however, point to the potential problematic aspects of political allegiance – particularly when it comes to dominance and exclusion. It seems that community members felt they needed to present a positive, unified picture of the community; one may question whether this could be masking more destructive divisions that could put them in a negative light in terms of gaining future support, or whether it represents an attempt at trying to prevent further divisions along political lines.

The project manager, however, has a different take on the impact of community divisions, reflecting a much less cohesive community. The divisions he observes are linked to attempts at maintaining power and, in the process, trying to exclude people who may actually contribute positively to the project. This situation then results in delays in the project, since information does not reach everyone who could also potentially help the project:

There are divisions in the community that are dating back to almost ten years ago, which will not make this project easy. That's part of what made us spend so much time, because divisions are there. There are people who won't recognize other groups. Some of the people not recognized by others are actually helping [the project] positively, and that's what we are looking for. (Project manager)

4.2 Local labour opportunities and project efficiency

One interesting example of a community member's influence on the project was cited, where the person fought against a tender awarded to an external company. This resulted in the decision being overturned by Rand Water Foundation and the tender awarded to the community member who claimed to have knowledge of how to do the job. Yet the community member was unable to do a satisfactory job, resulting in more money being spent, as it was necessary to bring back the external company to rectify the problems created. How then does one balance efficiency with the participatory goal of providing local people with income-generating opportunities through local development projects? The answer could perhaps lie in ensuring that equal opportunities are created to qualify for contract awards and that adequate management support is provided in the form of resources and capacity development.

4.3 Financial management

As indicated earlier, many of the community members interviewed raised concerns about their limited direct engagement with the other stakeholders, particularly those in financial control. This has also limited the engagement of community members in the financial management of the project - an issue heightened by delays in payments: "We never discussed the budget from Rand Water and we do not get paid on time". The delays in payments seem to have contributed to community members' heightened concerns about the financial management and their exclusion from this aspect of the project, as is evident from this comment by a community member: "The challenges that have been faced are about getting paid and the handling of finances. People are not getting their basic salaries...months pass without payment". In the words of a project worker, "we do not know where the problem lies; we are given many excuses like the person responsible for the funds is on leave or the papers we sent are misplaced".

According to the direct project manager, the cause of the problem with regards to delays in payments was explained to community members as an invoicing and payment system problem with Rand Water Foundation. However, since it was difficult to justify with clear evidence, it was hard for community members to accept this easily - subsequently the project managers tried to find ways to shift dates for invoicing and payments to solve the problem. The lack of clarity in information given, however, creates a breakdown in trust and de-motivation on the part of project participants. This can easily happen when one group of stakeholders is not treated with the participatory ideals of respect and equal treatment in relation to open, direct interaction with those providing funds, particularly when they are negatively affected by problems in financial management. The situation also indicates a ceiling preventing full community empowerment in

terms of financial management, so participation itself is limited to certain elements of project management. However, Rand Water Foundation's response to this is that the exit strategy, as referred to earlier, involves a process of gradual empowerment in this aspect with the community cooperative taking on more financial responsibilities over time. Elements of paternalism are evident here in that it seems the decision as to when community members are ready for such levels of participation is dependent on the views of the donors and project managers. It may have been more beneficial to involve community members in this crucial aspect from the start of the project so that it builds trust and so that the process of skills transfer and empowerment in financial management is facilitated through the engagement with donors and/or project managers.

4.4 Municipal support and political dynamics

It is interesting that the municipality displayed a keen interest in highlighting this project as one of their successes, yet it has received much criticism from community members and donors (also in light of the fact that it was the municipality who supported this application for funding from Rand Water Foundation and later provided additional funding for the project). There was a strong outcry that the local municipality was not providing sufficient support to the project, but instead contributed to frustrations as a result of delays created in the project and additional problems for the community in terms of basic services and lack of engagement in municipal processes:

The municipality and other institutes that pledged support are no longer there. (Community member)

The municipality does not help the project and the only time we interacted with them was when they came to put meters for water, forcing us to start paying for water.⁶ (Community member)

The municipal IDP has been clear to us in terms of what they will do for us but for public participation the meetings are [conducted] in the language of the whites, ... and again they do not inform us about public and IDP meetings on time. (Community member)

More specifically related to the project, after the local municipality was contacted with regards to problems with water pipes, the municipality did not respond and so the RWF manager resorted to Rand Water engineers to fix the problem. As a result of this problem, more than R40,000 worth of produce was lost. In addition, the municipality is said to have taken a year to approve building plans for the project, and have still not delivered on their promise made in 2007 to

⁶ It should be noted that the project, as well as individual households, are affected by water services from the municipality so both aspects seem to be conflated in this statement but rightly so since the one affects the other. In terms of household water services, water meters were more recently installed by the municipality without informing community members that they would now have to pay for water. When the project business plan was produced, it was revealed by the municipality that the Bantu Bonke community households together owed approximately R20,000 in rates and taxes. This then affected municipal support for the project, which was why more pressure was put on community members to start paying for these services (Discussion with direct project manager).

install a sewerage system⁷. In other instances it was implied that higher levels of government have also been called upon to address concerns raised.

There have been inferences that the problems experienced with this municipality have to do with the political party dynamics (opposition politics) in the area since it is a DA-led municipality (the only one in the province), while the specific community of Bantu Bonke generally supports the ANC. One of the community members' responses pointed to this dynamic as follows: "There was a bit of negative vibes from the DA in charge of the community to dampen the process" and then in comparison, referring to the positive role played by the ANC, "The ANC played a big role and helped to market this community, especially [the role played by] a national MP who helped to fight for the installation of electricity." It has also been observed that the municipality has not communicated sufficient details about the project to the local ward councillor – a situation attributed to the fact that the municipality is DA-led and that it is an ANC councillor serving the particular community. A number of stakeholders have indicated that they believe that this political struggle between political parties is a problem since community members (and by implication, the project) seem to be used as pawns in these political power games.

While we cannot be certain about the truth in these statements since they were not further explored, what is clear is that the role of the local municipality as stipulated in policy documents is to provide an efficient service to the communities under their jurisdiction and to facilitate community participation, particularly through the local ward councillor, irrespective of political party affiliation. Yet the examples cited above leave a lot to be desired and hence work against effective participatory practices, since this specific community seems to have lost some morale due to the limited support and attention to its needs.

4.5 Project sustainability and skills transfer process

As indicated earlier, the plans of Rand Water Foundation (and Magidi Agricultural Development) are to withdraw from the project once it becomes profitable and is self-sustainable. It was indicated that the RWF Board anticipates the withdrawal from the project in three years' time (from 2009). Yet concerns were raised about this time frame:

Although three years may seem like a lot, it is not enough for that kind of project...only in 2011 will the structures to be built be in operation; then we are meant to exit. I still feel that we need to give them [the community] another chance to stand on their own feet after the structures have been completed...I believe by the time that budget is finished, the Bantu Bonke people will be running the project. (RWF manager)

Currently there is a strong emphasis placed on building the capacity of the cooperative structure and its members to manage the overall project in the long run. Much training is being invested towards this goal. Although the exit strategy seems to have been carefully considered, and some

⁷ The sewerage system here is also required for the planned building projects as part of Rand Water Foundation's longer term project phases for the community.

movement has occurred towards this goal, it is still not clear at this stage how much time and investment will be required to ensure the sustainability of the project once the external stakeholders have exited. It seems that efforts to develop financial management capacity through the active involvement of community members was not introduced early enough (even though it has been introduced now, with the management of NDA funds). The cooperative structure was very recently established and it is not clear from the responses to what extent they will be able to liaise effectively with the overall community representative structure – the CPA. The constitution of the cooperative stipulates that the Board of Directors of the cooperative is to report to the CPA on a monthly basis and that the CPA then reports to the community on a quarterly basis⁸. Ideally one would hope for a complementary situation where the two structures have a strong level of cooperation in the interests of the broader community. Again, here, it becomes clear that empowerment through participation needs to start as early as possible to ensure that community members are able to take over the management functions of projects geared for their benefit.

5. Requirements for successful participation

Based on the positive elements and challenges described above, further analysis points to some important considerations towards fostering successful community participation, which can result in personal and community empowerment and, potentially, more successful development projects.

Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of community members' understanding of the *project*, yet almost nothing is mentioned about understanding *participation* and its objectives. Experiences in this project (as well as a range of literature on the subject) show that there are many different ways of understanding participation, as well as its aims, strongly affecting the ways in which it is implemented and its subsequent results. It is therefore important to ensure that all the stakeholders have a shared understanding of participation and its specific objectives within the context of the development project in relation to the needs of the community. Ideally then, stakeholders should be involved in a process of participatory planning and monitoring to ensure that the participatory practices meet the desired objectives.

It is suggested that community members participate from the start in a process of decision-making about whether the project should be implemented in the first place. The ward councillor highlights this as follows: "If participation is not introduced at the beginning of the project, people might have a different picture of the project; for example, the Bantu Bonke project is a project which people have made a choice that this is the kind of project which they want." The early engagement of community members in order to take their needs and preferences into

⁸ It was explained and emphasized that the cooperative was formed not to replace the CPA as the community representative structure but to take specific management responsibility for the hydroponics project operations. The cooperative would continue to report to the CPA as the overall structure responsible for the general affairs of the community (as indicated by the direct project manager).

consideration is further reinforced by the RWF manager when she says that “firstly, we need to talk to the community before anything takes place in the area”.

Community members who addressed this question directly, although more vaguely, also support the view that participation contributed to the project itself being more successful: “Public participation was key as essentially it allowed provision for more to be achieved.” Going slightly further, another community member specifies that this involvement should also include elements of cooperation: “From this project I have learned that getting along and cooperation are essential for the success of such projects”.

The importance of creating an understanding about the project among community members is considered especially important so that people are able to participate more effectively, as indicated by the project manager: “Participation is better once they have the tools [understanding and skills], because then they can engage you”. While not everyone in the community may come on board in terms of participation in the project at the same time, those community members who display deeper levels of understanding and interest can motivate others to become involved – the project manager refers to the importance of identifying and supporting champions to take these processes further: “Once those champions have been identified, our role should be to support those champions...any development that takes place should be championed by the people who are there”.

Community representative structures are also highlighted as a key conduit to better coordinate community participation:

And if there are no structures, encourage community members to build structures because you can only talk to them through a structure and not as individuals. Luckily in Bantu Bonke we found a structure in place. We need to communicate everything with the community. If community members want to raise concerns, they must go through the correct structures. (RWF manager)

It can, however, be argued that while representative structures are useful, they should not completely replace individual voices – space should be provided for individual voices to be heard if the structure is not effectively representing their concerns.

It has also been pointed out that external stakeholders such as donors need to invest the necessary time to understand the specific context of the community:

When we do this development work, those who put in their financial resources should know that it may not happen next week, but maybe next year...it’s key to understand the beneficiaries of the project. One of the biggest lessons is that you really have to understand a particular situation in a particular area. (Project manager)

While an important aspect of generating such understanding can be done through an audit of the community situation as was done in this project, this is often not enough since the social dynamics are often revealed over time through an intense close working relationship with the community, as is clear from the project manager's experience.

Skills transfer is considered very important in empowering community members to engage more confidently and effectively in the participatory process as active citizens and, consequently, to be able to contribute more effectively to project successes and sustainability. This should include a strong focus on the development of skills in leadership, project management, and especially financial management. It should also take into account gender dimensions, paying close attention to the empowerment of women. Furthermore, classroom-based theoretical training should be coupled with opportunities for practical application through increasing levels of responsibility over time. The process of empowerment should start early in the project, including involvement in meetings with key stakeholders—the process of debate and decision-making itself will be a valuable and necessary learning experience.

Community divisions need to be dealt with in such a way as to allow for positive and constructive debate on differences, since there will always be some differences of opinion but these should not be allowed to hamper participation by all sectors of the community. A way of dealing with this effectively could be to ensure that all members of the community have equal access to information and opportunities for their development, and to avoid dominance of particular groups at the expense of excluding others.

Municipal support in ensuring genuine participation by all within its jurisdiction is important in motivating people to take up their roles as active citizens. This requires the municipality to live up to its mandate by delivering services efficiently and working through the participatory structures effectively, utilising the local councillors and ward committees or community representative structures, but also allowing for individual concerns to be addressed if these structures prove ineffective. This mandate should be carried out to support all persons residing within the municipality, irrespective of political party affiliation, and particularly to guard against using, or rather abusing, power for party interests.

It is important that external agencies (such as donors and project managers) embark on support initiatives with clear exit strategies that will ensure the sustainability of projects once donor support ends. This ideally requires a process of planning the timeframes for specific activities, ensuring an effective process of skills transfer, and involving community members in planning, decision-making and monitoring processes throughout the process.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of community participation in the Bantu Bonke Hydroponics project has yielded valuable insights into a range of important factors.

What is evident is that community agency comes through as a key element in ensuring that participation is not limited to technocratic purposes, i.e. merely to ensure that the project runs smoothly for project efficiency and effectiveness (Sinwell 2009). In fact, as the analysis reveals, genuine community participation should involve an engagement with a range of dynamics, and requires considerable time investment to understand the context of the particular community. It is important to ensure a common understanding of participation and its objectives, to involve community members in decision-making and empowerment processes, and to effectively address community concerns through careful participatory planning. This should involve flexibility in rethinking strategies, and careful social facilitation going beyond the traditional role descriptions and stipulated requirements of external project managers:

The amount of energy it takes, talking and explaining, is above any amount of money you can put into it...it [understanding and dealing with social dynamics] is also not our mandate, our mandate is to work on the project. (Project manager)

In view of the actions of the current project manager, it is clear that there is a strong sense of commitment to put in the energy required to understand and engage community members in the project going beyond their specific mandate. However, community members, while reflecting a generally positive view of participation and its impact in this project, seem to have been limited in terms of engaging in genuine higher levels of participation. The community has so far been unable to engage on the same platform with other stakeholders, such as the donors, and in more important decision-making aspects, such as those involving financial management. Yet they have not been passive in merely accepting this situation. The interview responses point to a few community members who are able to challenge aspects they do not agree with - for example, some have challenged the degree of information provided, which led to broader community meetings, and some have challenged the initial formation of the agricultural committee since it was considered ineffective to represent community interests, which, again, led to the disbanding of this structure. There was also the case in which a community member challenged the tender award processes, resulting in a decision being overturned in favour of appointing local contractors (even though this proved problematic for the project). While not resulting in immediate changes, community members (particularly CPA members) also constantly raised their concerns about the lack of transparency and efficiency in terms of financial management, and not being included in meetings with the donors and other stakeholders.

To some extent, the project has also been able to address the concern about their lack of involvement in financial management through the exit strategy, which works towards the eventual management of the project by the community through the cooperative structure

established. Representatives of Rand Water Foundation seem to value community participation, and believe that one should not impose projects on people but work with them instead. Yet this notion is not put into practice effectively - working with them should ideally also involve a process of direct engagement, rather than working constantly through the externally-appointed project manager as an intermediary. The project manager has also shown a deep appreciation of what community participation entails, investing considerable time and energy in aspects of empowerment through skills transfer, although he remains concerned about the continued strong dependence on external project management. This has to do with the way in which the project unfolded, and could perhaps have been limited by creating the space for community members to engage in higher levels of participation throughout the project; this may have allowed them to take on more responsibility at an earlier stage and so further develop essential skills.

According to Arnstein's ladder of participation, it seems the process and outcomes of participation in this project have moved beyond the lowest levels, but currently fall more strongly within the middle ground of tokenistic participation – informing, consultation, and placation that, in Arnstein's words, “allow the have-nots to hear and to have a voice... and to advise...but they lack the power to ensure their views will be heeded by the powerful” (1969). These are legitimate steps in the right direction towards genuine, higher levels of participation, but should not be allowed to stagnate at this level – in fact the analysis suggests that this level needs to be accompanied by a higher level of participation in decision-making, coupled with a process of capacity development for empowerment. While some may argue that certain aspects of the higher rungs of participation such as “partnership” are also evident, since community members were able to influence some decisions, it is clear from the fact that they have not been included as part of the donor-dominated partners committee (PPDC), that genuine ‘partnership’ has not been achieved. Community members do not yet have opportunities to engage with traditional power-holders around the same table, and thus have minimal negotiating power.

One could also interpret the ladder of participation as a progression through the various levels from the bottom to the top, as community members become more empowered. This seems to be the approach followed by the key donor and project manager, to incrementally open the gates to higher levels of decision-making. For example, more recent developments indicate attempts at moving to higher levels such as “delegated power” in the form of managerial power – evident from the focus on the cooperative structure and the skills transfer programme. Yet sustainability of the project will depend on full managerial power and ownership, which will in turn depend on the capacity development progress. There is also always the threat that the demands of potential new donors, who may use their resources to serve particular development agendas, may limit genuine community participation. What is important, though, is that the higher levels of participation should continually be strived towards – community members in this case have indicated that they have gained a better understanding of participation through the participatory attempts of the project, and have gained more confidence in raising their concerns. This is

shown, particularly, by their ability to put pressure on the power-holders to engage them in higher levels of participation, including pushing for more direct access to the donors and the municipality and insisting to be involved in key decision-making aspects. These aspects are crucial in working towards a situation where community participation is used to transform power relations, allowing for a more equitable engagement in terms of decision-making amongst the range of stakeholders, particularly the community members who are most directly affected by decisions that are to be made.

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