“Rejecting the inevitability of poverty”: Empowering women for sustainable rural livelihoods through community-based employment-intensive rural infrastructure maintenance projects

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the extent to which employment-intensive rural infrastructure maintenance projects can be used as a tool to empower women to achieve sustainable rural livelihoods using Siyatentela rural road maintenance program in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, as a case study. A mixed method approach was employed to assess the program. Overall, this evaluation indicates that Siyatentela has benefited the community by way of employment creation, skills and knowledge transfer; improved access to socio-economic opportunities through access to cash and better transportation thus positively impacting community welfare and livelihoods.

Key words: Sustainable rural livelihoods, poverty, employment-intensive, rural road maintenance, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural development, encompassing three main thrusts, namely, local economic and human resources development, as well as improved services delivery relating largely to health, education and welfare, is one of the key priority areas identified by the South African government. For most rural areas, infrastructure development is the fulcrum that anchors sustainable development endeavours. In this regard, local and international experience has demonstrated the potential of employment-intensive public works programmes to provide jobs, alleviate poverty, build capacity and create community assets

The term "employment-intensive" is used by the ILO to describe a competitive technology where optimal use is made of labour as the predominant resource in infrastructure projects, while ensuring cost-effectiveness and safeguarding quality.

2. REVIEW OF SELECTED STUDIES

This section briefly reviews selected labour-based rural road provision and routine maintenance case studies focusing particularly on projects that mainstreamed gender in the preparation, design and implementation processes in Uganda and South Africa.

2.1 Uganda Transport Rehabilitation Project – Feeder Roads

The development objective of the feeder roads component of the Uganda Transport Rehabilitation Project (URTP) was to increase economic activity by improving transport...
infrastructure in the project districts in Eastern Uganda, namely, Tororo, Mbale, Pallisa, Kapchorwa and Busia. Project implementation commenced in 1995 and involved inter alia:

- Training, counselling and employing domestic small and medium sized contractors for feeder roads work, as well as facilitating such contractors’ access to equipment through leasing, hire purchase and other methods; and
- Introducing labour-based methods of road maintenance and feeder road rehabilitation whenever cost-effective.

The project was appraised and approved by the World Bank in 1993/1994, however, its formulation and design were largely uninformed by the prevailing enabling gender policy environment. There was no conscious effort to establish gender differences in travel patterns as well as transport needs in project design. Contractors were only encouraged to ensure that women constituted at least 30 percent of the labour force. In practice, however, this was dependent on the contractor with some going out of their way to invite women to sign up for road works, while others recruited only those who showed an interest. Thus, on average, women constituted only eight percent of the total number of workers employed on the project. Predictably, few women were selected to be gang leaders and forepersons largely because of the felt need for gender balancing. Even fewer women became contractors in their own right. Intriguingly, according to the project managers and the beneficiary districts, these women gang leaders, forepersons and contractors were amongst the best performing.

Besides working on the roads, women benefited through the sale of food to the road workers, which income was used for improving their welfare and reinvestment in their micro enterprises. Despite these benefits, the project did not introduce any significant changes to the prevailing division of labour in beneficiary communities. Women were typically assigned the task of food preparation and provision of water on the sites, thus reinforcing the traditional division of labour. Allocation of other tasks was also along gender lines based on the belief that women are more suitable for, and naturally more efficient at, tasks such as spreading gravel, excavation to level and grubbing, than men.

The gendered outcomes of the project were largely limited to women’s participation on account of the policy prescription. Women were not consulted with regard to project formulation, design and implementation, for example. Accordingly, prioritisation of road works, selection of contractors as well as the workers on the road, development of training materials, delivery of training, as well as implementation of the road works were not sensitive to gender.

2.2 Danida Road Sector Programme Support

The Danish International Development Agency (Danida) supported road sector programme built on and was informed by the foregoing experiences. The first phase of the Danida Road Sector Program Support (RSPS1) commenced in 1998 and was completed in 2002. The second phase (RSPS2) commenced in 2003 and was set to end in 2007. This review focuses on the labour-based aspects of the programmes. Both RSPS phases were conceptualised, designed and implemented within the framework of the Government of Uganda and Danida’s transport infrastructure policy frameworks, both of which are, to a large extent, gender responsive.

RSPS1 was also informed by a study that sought to unpack gender issues in road works that were to be addressed by the programme. Support of women’s participation in development was defined as one of the cross-cutting concerns that were to be pursued at all stages and levels of preparation and design. The design of RSPS2 built on the good gender mainstreaming practices of RSPS1 and was informed by a more systematic examination of women and men’s travel patterns and transport needs. The formulation teams included gender experts. Based on this analysis, a resource and time-bound gender management plan (GMP) with verifiable indicators was prepared. The GMP identified strategic actions to ensure that both women and men benefited equitably from RSPS2 implementation. Gender was also mainstreamed into the programme as well as all the component description documents, namely, in the objectives, outputs, activities, indicators, and the budget.

Gender, has, to some extent been mainstreamed in the implementation process. Most of the proposed GMP activities were implemented largely due to the fact that there was a dedicated budget to undertake the activities. The programme adopted a participatory approach wherein stakeholders, including women, were involved in the
preparation, design, implementation and monitoring processes. All the programme monitoring mechanisms were geared towards reporting on the progress made towards gender equality and women’s empowerment. The program employed full-time sociologists with a mandate for providing the technical oversight for incorporating gender in implementation. Gender issues were also incorporated in all labour-based training modules for all categories of trainees.

Most of the programme components adopted preferential measures for women to ensure commitment to redressing inequalities in accessing resources and opportunities. For instance, the form which was used by the districts for pre-qualifying contractors to be trained at the Mount Elgon Labour-based Training Centre (METC) provides for affirmative action for women. In order to encourage women contractors, firms were awarded extra points proportionate to the percentage of shares held by women. The system also promoted women’s employment amongst the contractor firms through awarding an extra half a point for each permanent female employee (up to 4 employees). To ensure that women get training opportunities at the METC, a contractor firm was awarded two bonus points for each female nominee.

Contractors were encouraged to use task instead of daily rates, adopt flexible working times, allocate women non-traditional tasks as well as provide them with separate and special facilities in order to promote their participation. One of the most significant outcomes of the programme was the institutionalisation of good practices in the road sub-sector policies, standards and regulations. Both RSPS phases initiated and financed the preparation of the Ministry of Works and Transport (MoWT) guidelines and a policy statement for mainstreaming gender in the road sub-sector. Gender is now part of the standard road works contracts and it has been incorporated in the METC training policy, curriculum and trainers’ guides.

Under RSPS1:
• Total women’s labour in contracted works constituted 23 percent of the total (485,000) worker days
• Women constituted 11 percent of the total person training days and 20 percent of the private sector contractors trained, and
• Attendance rates of women in construction site meetings ranged from 16-21 percent.

However, as a result of the inadequacy of mechanisms to ensure contractor compliance with the conditions laid out in the contract, the majority of the contractors did not adopt flexible working hours and neither was separate facilities provided for women. Contractors allocated tasks along the existing gender division of labour and, not surprisingly, some women also preferred work related to their traditional tasks in the household. The principle of equal opportunity was not always taken into consideration during the recruitment process. The criteria predominantly used for recruitment included physical fitness, trials as well as interviews on fixed dates, which negatively impacted women’s participation.

Both RSPS phases demonstrated the feasibility, as well as the value-add of addressing gender in the roads sector. However, this was under a project setting with Danida advisors playing a hands-on role in ensuring compliance. Despite the efforts at institutionalisation, gender has apparently not gained wider legitimacy in the roads sub-sector. For instance, there has been failure to implement the gender policy statement and mainstreaming guidelines, on account of lack of ownership.

2.3 Zibambele Labour-Based Construction and Maintenance Programme

The Zibambele Labour-based Road Construction and Maintenance Program in KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa, is a poverty alleviation initiative aimed at creating sustainable jobs for poor rural families. It is based on the realisation that labour-based methods in road construction and maintenance are cost efficient and at the same time empower local communities. In order to break poverty cycles, the Department employs a household rather than an individual. This ensures that a household does not rely on one person for continuity of the contract.

A spin off of labour-based methods which might be unique to the KwaZulu-Natal situation is the contribution that such projects make to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. This is well illustrated by the Nkonjane Project at khaKhandisa close to the University of Zululand. During the 1990s, this area was severely disrupted by political violence and general unrest. The area is characterised by massive unemployment, including young people with tertiary education. The Department was approached by the youth to establish an
employment-intensive project in Nkonjane. Over eighty people, predominantly youth, were employed on the project. The project cemented an important peace process that was driven by youth. It is indeed a good example of community and government working together to build social and physical infrastructure to the benefit of the entire community.

While Zibambele was piloted in 1999/2000 with 2 700 contractors, it has already achieved more than one third of the targeted 40 000 contracts. The Department is currently reviewing the results of the pilot projects with the intention of developing a programmatic approach to labour-based methods.

3. SIYATENTELA RURAL ROAD MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME

Besides cutting the cost of road maintenance and improving road conditions, the Mpumalanga Department of Roads and Transport implemented the Siyatentela employment-intensive routine rural road maintenance project as part of a much broader initiative that seeks to entrench government's extended public works programme\(^7\). Siyatentela, which started in 2005, now employs 544 women maintaining 272 km of rural roads with the following objectives:

- Creating sustainable road infrastructure to facilitate easy movement of people and their goods
- Creating remunerative jobs to alleviate poverty in inherently poor communities
- Building and entrenching the local skills base
- Stimulating, growing and mainstreaming the local economy

This paper discusses the extent to which employment-intensive rural infrastructure maintenance projects can be used as a tool to empower women to achieve sustainable rural livelihoods, using Siyatentela as a case study.

3.1 Siyatentela Project Impact Evaluation

CSIR Built Environment employed a before and after cross-sectional survey of upwards of 8% of Siyatentela participants to independently evaluate its impacts\(^4\). The CSIR relied on a mixed method approach including key informant interviews (regional managers, road superintendents/supervisors and ward councillors), focus group discussions, physical observations and project records to assess its impact on beneficiary communities. The mixed method approach enables easy triangulation, for example, information generated from physical observations was employed to cross-check project records as well as information from key informant interviews. The empirical analyses for the study were based on descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for Social Scientists and Excel.
3.2 Study Findings

Community mobilisation and involvement: Siyatentela, which was modelled on the relatively well-known Zibambele labour-based construction and maintenance programme in KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa, targets women in indigent households, especially female-headed families, identified through a consultative and rigorous screening and verification process involving many stakeholders including local political and traditional leadership. Whereas Zibambele involves youths, men and women as project participants, Siyatentela focuses only on poor women.

Siyatentela contracts: Siyatentela awards renewable twelve-month contracts. Although an individual signs the contract, to break the cycle of poverty in indigent households, Siyatentela “employs” the household rather than an individual, thus ensuring continuity should anything befall the chosen participant. Depending on skill and experience, participants earn monthly wages of between R600 and R1500.

Siyatentela contracts women to maintain the drainage system and road signs, ensure good roadside visibility, maintain the road surface in good condition, and clear the road verges of litter and noxious weeds. While on paper each participant is allocated half a kilometre, the actual length depends on the nature of the terrain – the more difficult the terrain is, the shorter the length of road. In practice, however, participants work in groups of ten to maintain a 5 km stretch of road close to their homes. Participants work two days per week with a maximum of 64 hours per month. Siyatentela encourages flexible working hours, thus allowing participants ample time to deploy their labour elsewhere.

“...Since the women work only two days a week, we have been encouraging them to start small gardens at home. Some of them are now doing good business selling vegetables such as spinach to other project participants and to the community at large...” (Project supervisor – February 2008).

Training, knowledge and skills transfer
Participants were technically trained on road maintenance and life skills over the duration of their contract.

“...Before the project, we did not know anything about drainage. Now we know what it means to have a good drainage system as well as how to maintain such drains. We are now in a position to undertake similar work when new opportunities arise, using skills we have acquired through Siyatentela...” (Project participant – February 2008).

Siyatentela also assists them to open bank accounts, form savings clubs, and invest some of their savings in other productive activities. Participants confided that training improved their skills and capacity to confidently work on the project. They now employ skills learnt on the project in their homes and community.
**Entrenching the rural private sector:**

Upwards of 70% of wages earned are used to buy food, clothing, agricultural inputs, tangible household assets as well as pay school and medical fees. Purchasing local goods and services has the effect of stimulating local businesses by strengthening local economic circuits, thereby providing a basis for the creation of wealth. Employing local labour means that a significant portion of the investment assigned to maintenance is retained within the community, which in turn is used to support local enterprises. In contrast, men often spend project wages on items and activities that do not improve household welfare in urban centres far from their settlement.

Figure 6 indicates that upwards of 60% of respondents use their wages to procure goods and services locally and in the nearest town, as aptly described in a focus group discussion.

"...We are making wise use of the wages we earn on the project. We have assisted each other in acquiring basic household goods that we did not possess prior to the project, including refrigerators, television sets, radios, electric stoves and other items of value. We have also used our wages to construct and improve our assets such as houses. This has certainly brought a sense of pride and achievement to our families and the community at large. These achievements are unlikely ever to have happened without the project..." (Focus group testimony, February 2008).

**Social capital:** Project participants felt that this deliberate affirmation of women the Siyatentela way is a positive development given that women often single-handedly fend for their families with meager resources. The project has elevated women participants’ social station, buttressed their self-esteem and ultimately improved their confidence, thus widening the window through which they view and respond to life’s opportunities and challenges. In addition, access to income and the formation of voluntary associations has broadened participants’ social networks. This is aptly illustrated by a participant’s testimonial:

"...I used to live in a make-shift plastic shack. My family and I were used to going for days without a decent meal. We were surviving on our neighbors’ generosity. I had never had a brand new pair of shoes in my life, nor traveled beyond the village, let alone visiting a big city like Nelspruit. I had never had a bank account in my life. Thanks to Siyatentela, I now have a proper roof over my head, a bank account, go to town at least once every month, have all these many people and friends I can talk to..." (Project participant – February, 2008).

The setting up of “investment clubs” to facilitate pooling resources for procuring household assets is indeed a living example of “community development in practice.”

Interviews with beneficiaries and key informants from all project sites revealed that the project impact was felt and experienced at three societal levels, namely, individual, household and the community as indicated in the Table 1.
Table 1: Siyatentela impact assessment outcomes

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<th>Labour</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Culture</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquire skills in road works</td>
<td>2 days a week spent on the formal job</td>
<td>Access to &amp; control of cash</td>
<td>Exposed to more public life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased workload</td>
<td>More fragmented use of time</td>
<td>Access to productive assets</td>
<td>Heightened esteem &amp; self-worth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Less time for leisure &amp; rest</td>
<td>Membership of savings club</td>
<td>More confident &amp; Question some traditions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical &amp; life skills</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Household</th>
<th>Net increase in skilled labour</th>
<th>Net increase in employment</th>
<th>Community</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road maintenance &amp; life skills transferred to community</td>
<td>Less time for community meetings &amp; work</td>
<td>Women participate more in community affairs including politics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintenance of community assets</td>
<td>More time spent on developing &amp; maintaining productive Assets</td>
<td>More children attend school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net increase in employment</td>
<td>Less time for productive work</td>
<td>Cash dependency</td>
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Table 2: Gender good practice guidelines

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<th>Labour</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Culture</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Plan tasks to accommodate women’s existing work/time burden</td>
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<td>✓ Adopt task rates rather than daily rates</td>
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<td>✓ Flexibility in starting time</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Undertake most works during the off-peak agricultural season or only work 2/3 days a week, allowing time for other household chores</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Deviate from the traditional division of labour by allocating women more technical tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Create awareness about the potential conflict of interests &amp; identify coping strategies e.g. hiring labour for farm work</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Adequate remuneration &amp; timely payment</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Sufficient tools &amp; protective clothing.</td>
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| Resources | |
|-----------| |
| ✓ Link employment-intensive infrastructure provision & maintenance initiatives to mainstream investment policy |
| ✓ Create awareness about the importance of women controlling household cash reserves – given that women’s income is likely to be spent on improving household welfare, payment of school fees & purchase of productive assets. |

| Culture | |
|---------| |
| ✓ Create awareness, targeting women, about the risks associated with exposure to public life |
| ✓ Create awareness, targeting men, about the importance of women participating in formal paid employment |
| ✓ Create awareness about HIV/AIDS transmission & prevention |
| ✓ Support women participating in productive activities |

Overall, this assessment indicates that Siyatentela has benefited the community by way of employment creation, skills and knowledge transfer; improved access to socio-economic opportunities through access to cash and better transportation thus positively impacting community welfare and livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

Most communities in rural South Africa have a preponderance of women in their demographic makeup. While women comprise a significant proportion of the indigent, crucially, they can also be instrumental in breaking the poverty cycle. Empirical evidence from Siyatentela and other such projects suggests that besides creating employment opportunities for those least able to compete on the job market, bolstering women’s incomes, productivity and empowerment is pivotal in positively transforming the rural socio-economic landscape in favour of sustainable livelihoods. Impacts can be gleaned on all multiple dimensions of poverty, in ways that are not evident from only increasing men’s income – from children’s education, health and nutrition status through to local human capital development, productivity and economic growth. Thus, investing in employment-creating initiatives that target and affirm women is not only important for poverty alleviation and social justice, but it also just makes good economic sense. Clearly, the need to mainstream programmes with such a clear developmental agenda in policy initiatives and practice cannot be over-emphasized.
REFERENCES


