‘Rejecting the inevitability of poverty’: Empowering women through community-based employment-intensive rural infrastructure maintenance projects

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INTRODUCTION

Rural development, encompassing local economic and human resources development, as well as improved service delivery relating broadly 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 on which sustainable development endeavours are grounded. Both local and international experience has demonstrated the potential of employment-intensive public works programmes to provide jobs, alleviate poverty, build capacity and create social cohesion. The choice of an employment-intensive intervention is used to describe a competitive technique where optimal use is made of labour as the predominant resource in infrastructure projects, while ensuring cost-effectiveness and safeguarding quality.

Given that the poor’s main resource is their own labour, employment-intensive initiatives offer the best bet for the fight against spiralling poverty. The choice of an employment-intensive intervention is grounded in several factors. Infrastructure is crucial for investment and economic growth. Often, more than 70% of public investment is channelled into this sector (World Bank, 2002).

SYMATENTELA ROUTINE ROAD MAINTENANCE PROJECTS

The Mpumalanga Department of Roads and Transport implemented the Siyatentela employment-intensive rural routine road maintenance project as part of a broader initiative that seeks to entrench government’s extended public works programme. Siyatentela, which started in 2005, now employs 544 women maintaining 272 km of rural roads with the following objectives:

- Creating sustainable road infrastructure for easy movement of people and goods
- Creating jobs to alleviate poverty in inherently poor communities
- Building and entrenching the local skills base
- Strengthening and mainstreaming the local economy

SYMATENTELA PROJECT IMPACT EVALUATION

CSIR Built Environment employed a before and after cross-sectional survey of participants to independently evaluate the project’s impacts. The CSIR conducted 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.

STUDY FINDINGS

Community mobilisation and involvement: Siyatentela, which was modelled on the relatively well-known Zambian labour-based construction and maintenance programme in Kusululu (in South Africa), targets women in indigent households. Female-headed households, identified through a consultative and rigorous screening and verification process, are particularly targeted.

Siyatentela contracts:

Siyatentela awards renewable yearly contracts. Although individual runs of the contracts, Siyatentela ‘employs’ the household rather than an individual. Depending on skills and experience, participants earn monthly wages of between R431 and R1 100.

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. In practice participants work in groups of ten to maintain 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 display their entrepreneurial talents.

- ‘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 participant – 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 services...’ (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.

- ‘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).

CONCLUSION

While women comprise a significant proportion of the industrious, crucially, they can also be instrumental in breaking the poverty cycle. Empirical evidence from the Siyatentela and other such projects suggests that besides creating employment opportunities for those traditionally locked out of participation in the workforce, women’s productive incomes, productivity and empowerment is pivotal in progressively transforming the rural sector. Such initiatives have ultimately improved their confidence thus widening the window through which they view and respond to life’s opportunities and challenges.

REFERENCES