

LEARNING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

– Building a two-way bridge



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When it comes to conservation, there is much to learn from one another, as a recent project funded by the Water Research Commission (WRC) shows. Article by Inga Jacobs and Karen Nortje.

The loss of intellectual assets, skills flight and the resultant institutional memory loss are major threats to effective water management, particularly in water-scarce countries such as South Africa where the onus is on the scientific community to find technological solutions. According to Agenda 21: “a fundamental goal of capacity building is to enhance the ability to evaluate and address the crucial questions related to policy choices and modes of implementation among development

options, based on an understanding of environment potentials and limits, and of needs perceived by the people of the country concerned.

This definition not only speaks to the ability to draft well-informed, relevant policy and developing implementation strategies, but also requires that these take into account, and are in fact, based on locally defined needs. One WRC-funded project sought to do just that, but unravelled the multiplicity of benefits of capacity building for various individuals by ensuring that capacity building objectives are a focus of project design as opposed to a mere positive byproduct.

In fact, the most powerful benefit realised was that by designing the project around capacity building

objectives, the project was enriched by two-way learning exchanges between researchers and university students; project members and community members. Additionally, this approach produced holistic and integrated findings as well as policy recommendations that were locally driven but also provincially, nationally and regionally applicable. In so doing, the project sketched the social complexity of the issue at hand – multiple understanding of conservation.

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING

The project, ‘Knowing, Caring and Acting (KCA): Making Use of Socio-Cultural Perspectives

to Understand and Improve Conservation', headed by CSIR Senior Researcher Karen Nortje, aimed to develop a conceptual understanding of:

- local socio-cultural perspectives of conservation, which translated into the various ways in which people know and care about conservation, and the various ways in which people act on this; and
- how the conservation planning process is influenced by the knowing, caring, acting dynamic and local socio-cultural perspectives.

planning occurs should be taken into account. In response to this statement the KCA project team took the research of freshwater conservation to the local communities of Hazyview and Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga.

At the outset, the project questioned the implicit dichotomy of western-scientific understandings of conservation and local socio-cultural realities and the perceived moral superiority of existing conservation planning models as processes of 'teaching' conservation practises to 'uninformed local community members'.

Because of the need to map out the multiplicity of understanding of conservation, the project team (comprising CSIR researchers and students from the Department of Development Studies and Anthropology at the University of Johannesburg), used the notion of capacity building as methodology through participatory, collective learning approaches including focus groups, theme-based interviews and participant observation.

The emphasis on a participative process ensured locally-relevant findings, and not merely a literature review of scientific best practice. In addition, it promoted two-way exchanges of information on conservation and sharing of experiences of conservation practices.

The KCA project had several capacity building components. Firstly, students were employed to assist with fieldwork research and as such gained valuable hands-on experience of conducting qualitative research in the field. Secondly, interviews/questionnaires were completed by several hundred school children and interactive participatory exercises were conducted to create awareness around conservation practices. Thirdly, focus groups were held in communities where researchers exchanged ideas with community members on conservation and the perceptions people have on it – in essence – we learned from them.

When we learn from one another, be it community member or researcher, a bridge is built – one that connects science, policy and communities.

CSIR Senior Researcher Dr Inga Jacobs (wearing cap) with Anthropology students Innocentia Mduli and Sibongile Bambisa and Developmental Studies student Marida Aucamp are guided by a local woman to interview sites.

There is a growing recognition that there is an implementation crisis in the field of conservation. Simultaneously, there has been an ever-growing realisation that solutions for this crisis can only be found outside the conservation process and beyond the confines of the natural sciences. For this reason, the broader socio-economic and political context within which conservation management and

The view that society should be influenced by, and should adjust their knowledge systems, their values and behaviours in greater support of conservation, is an enormous socio-cultural and socio-political challenge. While unsustainable and environmentally damaging practices are rife at the local level, this view undermines the needs and challenges of local communities.

GOOD LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Through research-focused mentoring, Marida Aucamp, a Development Studies Honours student, was able to base her Honours Dissertation on the KCA project and worked side by side with the researchers, obtaining hands-on experience of qualitative research methods in the field, working with institutional representatives and communities. Fieldwork development training

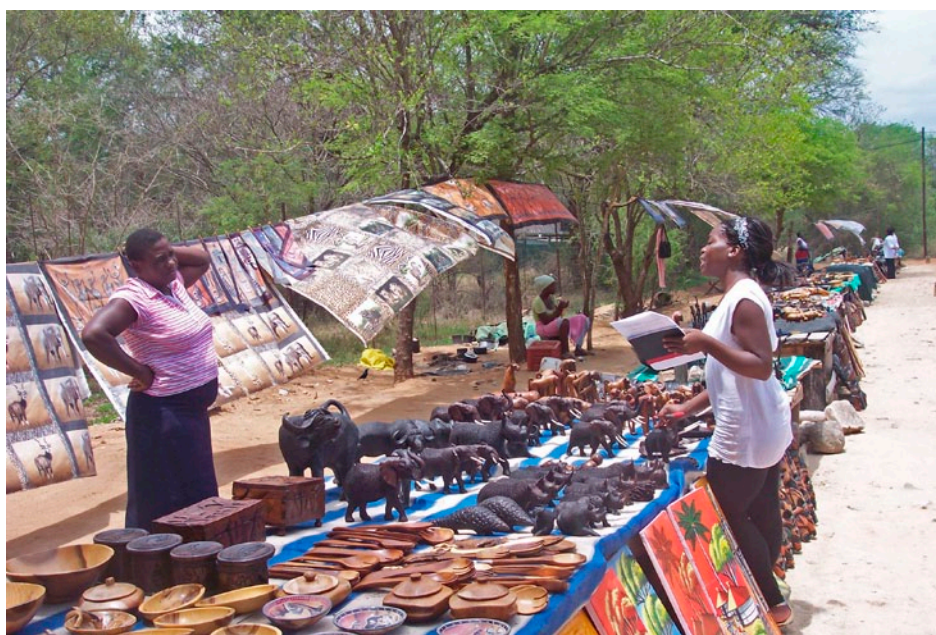


was also provided to Sibongile Bambisa and Innocentia Mdluli, two Honours students in Anthropology. Acting in the capacity of translators, they also contributed substantially to the depth of project findings.

“The experience presented me with a lot of learning opportunities. Most of all, with the opportunity to learn from experienced researchers how to do fieldwork; how to conduct interviews and focus groups,” notes Aucamp. For Bambisa it was also an eye-opening experience. “Doing research in the area was exciting, but difficult at the same time. As a Zulu woman, I found it hard asking some questions, such as people’s age, education background and marital status. In most Nguni cultures it is forbidden to enquire about your elders’ age and educational background as it is regarded as disrespectful. However, such questions had to be asked because I was not there as a Zulu woman but as a student and a research assistant.”

This project is a good example of where the WRC’s effort to create the space of capacity building in the field of water research has been immensely successful at different levels. For the students, it has been a good learning experience which will help them in their future careers as social scientists. For the CSIR team it has also been rewarding to be able to share one’s own experience and knowledge, but also to engage with community members and learn of the socio-cultural perspectives that often contradict scientific understanding of conservation.

“It was interesting to go back where I did part of my growing up and do research about something simple that is actually complicated, water. I was an insider all the way during the field work and this made it easier for people to communicate their thoughts with me,” says Mdluli. “I learnt that some people put themselves above



nature which makes it difficult for them to understand that nature is to be shared by all living organisms and that it should be looked after.”

SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES

The second capacity building component of the project involved conducting surveys and participatory exercises with 231 primary and high school learners. The third capacity building component involved the sharing of experienced around the wise use of water, the value of water, and the importance of water to local communities. Here, inter-generational reflections and childhood stories were shared about the nearby river.

In this instance, it was time for researchers to learn about socio-cultural practices, belief systems, the compartmentalisation of conservation and the non-linear nature of the knowing, caring, acting dynamic. Essentially, knowing about conservation may not lead to caring, and thus may not necessarily translate into acting. Other socio-cultural, political and socio-economic factors determine the nature and sequence of this dynamic.

Through a learning-by-doing approach, multi-dimensional capacity building research frameworks, such as the one exemplified in the KCA project, have much value to offer the water sector. Qualitative research methods are best able to operationalise such frameworks, and allow for the expansion in time and space of the background knowledge that informs policy and planning

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processes. As we learn from communities, we are able to produce issue-relevant, impactful and sustainable solutions that are in tune with the needs of communities.

Social or collective learning, capacity building, or something resembling ubuntu? Whatever term we choose to give it, addressing capacity challenges in the water sector requires a two-way learning approach. When we learn from one another, be it community member or researcher, a bridge is built – one that connects science, policy and communities. □

Anthropology Honours Student Innocentia Mdluli engaged in a semi-structured interview with a curio vendor.

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