

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

M MASHIRI, J CHAKWIZIRA AND C NHEMACHENA
 CSIR Built Environment
 PO Box 395, Pretoria 0001, South Africa
 Email: mmashiri@csir.co.za – www.csir.co.za

INTRODUCTION

Rural development, encompassing 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. 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^{1,2}. The term ‘employment-intensive’ is used 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.

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 the infrastructure sector as a catalyst for pro-poor growth is grounded on 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)³.

SIYATENTELA ROUTINE ROAD MAINTENANCE PROJECT

The Mpumalanga Department of Roads and Transport implemented the Siyatentela employment-intensive rural road routine 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
- Stimulating, growing and mainstreaming the local economy.

SIYATENTELA PROJECT IMPACT EVALUATION

CSIR Built Environment employed a before and after cross-sectional survey of participants to independently evaluate the project’s impacts⁴. 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 Zibambele labour-based construction and maintenance programme in KwaZulu-Natal 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 an individual signs the contract, Siyatentela ‘employs’ the household rather than an individual, ensuring continuity should anything befall the chosen participant. Depending on skills and experience, participants earn monthly wages of between R601 and R1 500.

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 10 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)⁴.

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)⁴.

Siyatentela also assists them to open bank accounts, form savings clubs, and invest some of their savings in other productive activities.

Entrenching the rural private sector: More than 70% of wages earned are used to buy food, clothing, agricultural inputs, tangible household assets as well as pay school and medical fees. This stimulates local businesses by strengthening local economic circuits. In contrast, men often spend project wages on items and activities that do not improve household welfare in urban centres far from their settlement².



Figure 1 indicates that more than 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)⁴.

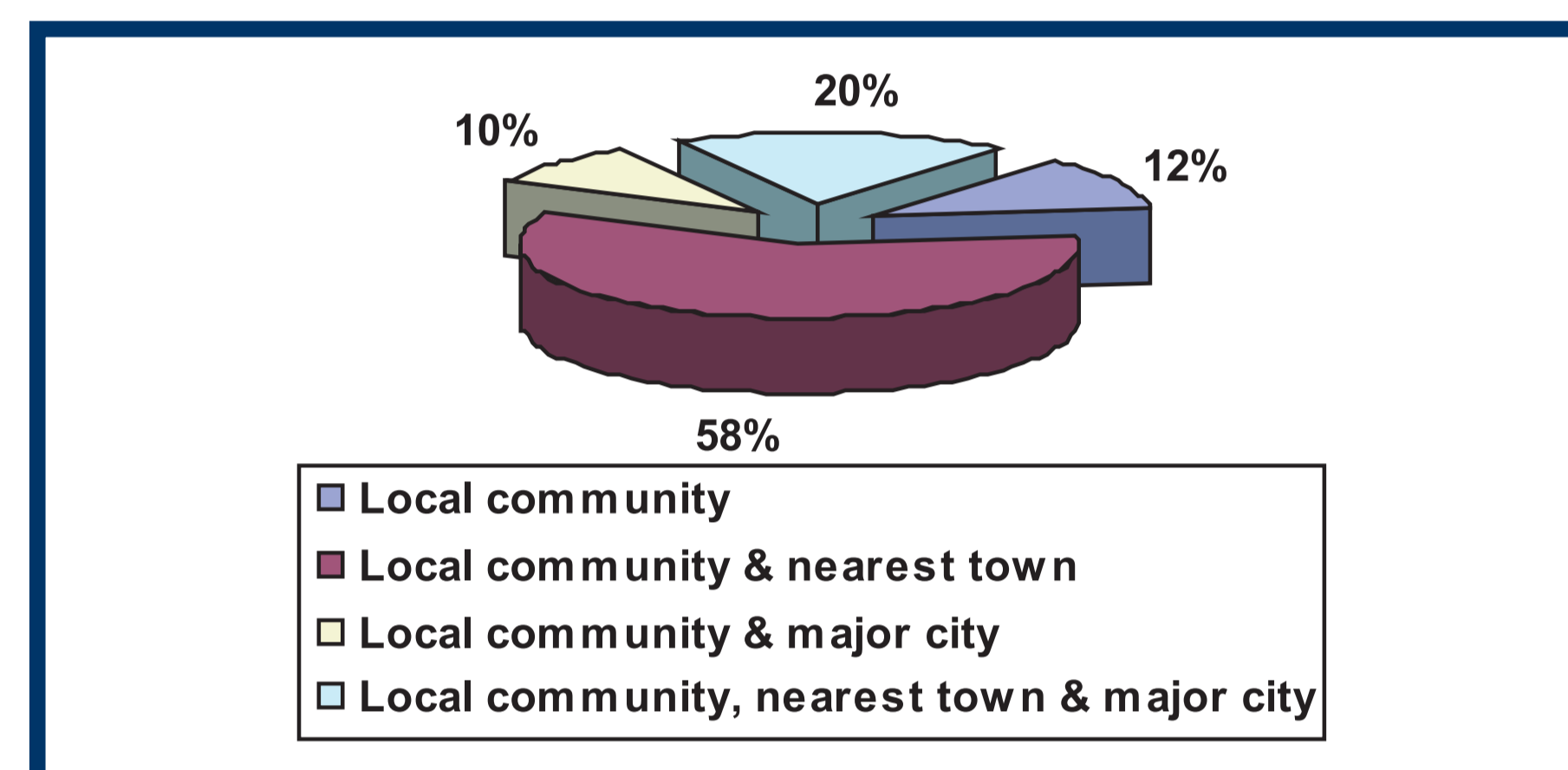


Figure 1: Places where wages are used

Social capital: Affirming 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.

“...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 neighbours’ 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)⁴.

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

“...When women get their wages they buy food and other needs for the family while men would use the money to drink beer and play lotto...” (Key informant interview, February 2008)⁴.

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 Table 1.

Table 1: Siyatentela impact assessment outcomes

	Labour	Time	Resources	Culture
Women	Acquire skills in road works	2 days a week spent on the formal job	Access to and control of cash	Exposed to more public life
	Increased workload	More fragmented use of time	Access to productive assets	Heightened self esteem and self-worth
		Less time for leisure & rest	Membership of savings club	More confident
Household	Net increase in skilled labour	Less time for household chores	Improved household income	Flexible working arrangement means women can balance work and home demands
		Structured 5 day week to utilise time more productively (farm, garden, work, etc.)	Improved food security and nutrition	Family and marriage stability/ instability
		Food security	School fees for children	Appreciative children
Community	Road maintenance & life skills transferred to community	Less time for community meetings and work	Brick under zinc houses	Tangible household goods
	Maintenance of community assets	More time spent on developing and maintaining productive assets	Improved transport infrastructure	Women participate more in community affairs including politics
	Net increase in employment		Better access to socio-economic services	More children attend school
		Formation and strengthening of social networks	Cash dependency	
		Improved farm/ garden produce and better prices for commodities	Enhanced literacy	
		Institution building e.g. savings clubs	Improved social cohesion	

CONCLUSION

While women comprise a significant proportion of the indigent, 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 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-emphasised.

Gender-sensitive infrastructure maintenance projects that are employment intensive can empower women to achieve sustainable livelihoods.



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