

# Social benefits in the Working for Water programme as a public works initiative

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**The Working for Water programme is a pioneering environmental conservation initiative in that its implementation successfully combines ecological concerns and social development benefits. By addressing unemployment, skills training and empowerment, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and transformation issues, the programme gained political support and secured significant funding. Developing a range of social interventions brought significant challenges, however, with little opportunity as yet for a comprehensive research programme. This paper presents the ways in which the programme has contributed to poverty alleviation and social upliftment while controlling invasive alien plants, and outlines plans for three research projects.**

## Introduction

The Working for Water public works and conservation initiative has broken new ground in addressing urgent social needs in South Africa. As a developmental programme, it has experimented with new and sometimes innovative ways of leveraging social benefits. Its interventions and their social results have not yet been fully researched and documented, as much of the programme's limited management and research capacity was focused on quantifying and implementing the environmental aspects.

As a country characterized by pockets of wealth on the one hand and grinding poverty on the other,<sup>1</sup> South Africa is actively seeking to redress these imbalances by emphasizing rural development and job creation. In most developing countries, short-term economic growth and social delivery take precedence over ecosystem conservation, so there are few examples of projects in such countries of significant, non-aid funding investment in conservation. One example, however, is South Africa's Working for Water programme.<sup>2</sup> It was developed with the dual function of controlling invasive alien plants — one of the major global threats to biodiversity — and providing for social upliftment. Widespread international recognition of the programme's success<sup>3-6</sup> has hinged on its combining conservation goals with those of poverty reduction through the creation of employment and skills development through training. Working for Water's ability to attract generous public funding is unusual for an environmental project in a developing country.<sup>2</sup> Its social development aspects made it politically attractive, which helped to secure continued support from the national government's annual allocations of poverty relief.

This paper outlines the programme's context and social factors that helped to shape it over the first seven years, the development of social interventions, and the identification of research priorities for the future.

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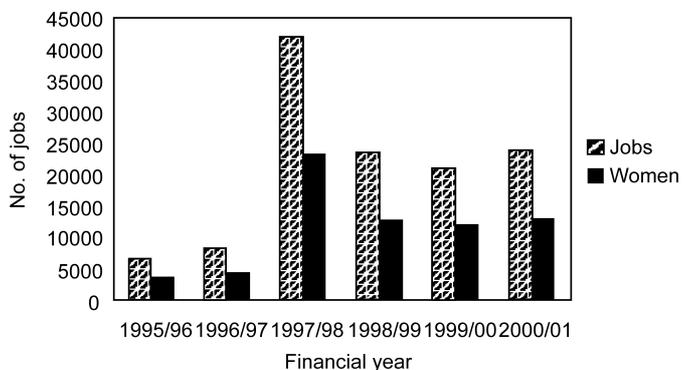
## Social development aspects of the programme

The Working for Water programme, conceived in 1995, was required not only to develop effective approaches to the control of invasive alien plants, but also, simultaneously, to contribute to social development. One stated goal of this community-based initiative was to invest in the most marginalized sectors of South African society, enhance their quality of life,<sup>7</sup> and ensure that benefits would target those people who needed them most — including the 'poorest of the poor', women, the disabled, youth, single-headed households, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, ex-offenders, and rural communities. In this section, we summarize key social factors underlying the programme's development, and specific approaches that it adopted in response to each.

**Unemployment.** South Africa has high levels of unemployment. The Labour Force survey<sup>8</sup> states that, by 1998, there was 41.8% unemployment in the country. The result was acute poverty, especially in rural areas, where development opportunities were limited. Unemployment was further fuelled by an increase in company restructuring, brought about by adjustments to new post-apartheid economic conditions, and mirroring global trends.<sup>8</sup> South Africa's new democracy was expected to generate many more employment opportunities. The need for job creation allowed Working for Water, as a public works programme in rural areas, to become politically attractive.

The programme set out to create as many employment opportunities as it could. During its first year of operations (from October 1995 to March 1996), the programme employed 6163 people.<sup>9</sup> This figure rose significantly in 1997, when poverty relief funding was secured,<sup>10</sup> and, since then, high levels of direct employment have been maintained (Fig. 1).

**Poverty relief funding.** An initial grant of R25 million from the government's funds for reconstruction and development<sup>9</sup> was used to establish the Working for Water programme in October 1995. Once it had proved its significant employment potential, it succeeded in obtaining considerable further funding, largely from government's poverty relief budget. First secured in the 1997/98 financial year, these funds became the major source of



**Fig. 1.** The number of jobs created by the Working for Water programme over the first 6 years of its existence, showing the proportion of jobs going to women. Data are from the annual reports.<sup>7,9-11</sup> The unusually high employment figures in 1997/98 reflect the fact that the full annual budget was not released till late in the financial year, but had to be spent during the last few months of that year, which allowed many more people to be employed, but over relative short periods.

support. After an initial allocation of R150 million in the 1997/98 financial year, funding rose significantly, reaching R315 million (or 79% of its total budget) in the 2001/02 financial year.<sup>11</sup>

A recipient of public poverty relief funds may not benefit from them for more than two years in every five-year cycle. This requirement, in recognition of the large number of unemployed South Africans, aims to spread the benefits as widely as possible. The programme tried to address workers' need to secure meaningful work after their two years of employment and on-the-job training in Working for Water.<sup>9</sup> Options with which the programme experimented included setting up small enterprises of contractors to assist private landowners to clear their land of invasive alien plants, and, in addition, small enterprises focusing on the by-products of clearing projects, such as the sale of firewood, and the manufacture of charcoal, furniture, or other products made from wood and bark.<sup>17</sup> Some enterprising former employees of the programme have negotiated private contracts, especially in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. These accomplishments remain undocumented, however, and the factors contributing to success are not yet clearly understood. Further research is needed to guide the design of interventions that will make the programme's benefits as sustainable as possible.

*The HIV/AIDS pandemic.* With an estimated 5.3 million people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa in 2002,<sup>12</sup> Working for Water also faced the challenge of dealing with affected as well as infected employees. The widespread and growing pandemic has had an effect on all employers, forcing them to deal with growing levels of infection among workers and their families, and with consequences for staff safety and workplace productivity. Questions have arisen about the responsibilities of employers to educate employees in infection prevention, and about the ethical treatment of infected employees.

Working for Water developed a two-pronged approach to HIV/AIDS among its employees. On the one hand it aimed at prevention of HIV/AIDS infection among HIV-negative workers and at raising awareness. On the other hand it attempted to provide a supportive environment for those who tested HIV-positive.<sup>7</sup> To improve safety for workers in the field, a set of 'universal precautions' was introduced to reduce the risk of transmission of blood-borne pathogens, which included training in the care of bleeding wounds, nosebleeds, and blood spills. Currently, the programme is developing role-model interventions in pilot projects.<sup>7</sup> The effectiveness of these interventions is not yet fully known.

*Capacity for using available funds.* When the government made funds available from its special poverty relief allocation in 1997/98, cabinet called for proposals from government departments for projects that had the potential for utilizing these funds. Many departments were, at the time, dealing with realignment and consolidation after the country's unification under a single government. Treasury, moreover, asked for proposals only in November 1997, which gave little time to plan and allow for spending by financial year end in March 1998. As a result, few departments could formulate and submit proposals for the use of available funds, or implement proposals on a large scale at short notice. Working for Water had already initiated wide-ranging alien plant clearing projects, however, and was able to submit suitable proposals that simply extended the programme. This gave access to significant funding, but also created problems arising from insufficient capacity to deal with the substantially enlarged budget.

Working for Water responded by drawing on existing capacity in organizations with the expertise to employ, train, and manage workers in alien plant-clearing. These were mainly provincial

conservation agencies (for example in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) and South African National Parks. Further support came from water boards (for example Rand Water), municipalities (for example the municipality of Cape Town), and forestry companies. Management and technical support also came from the CSIR's Division of Water, Environment and Forestry Technology, and from the Plant Protection Research Institute of the Agricultural Research Council. With Working for Water capacity stretched by the rapid approval of large budgets, the dedicated professionalism offered by these organizations contributed greatly to the programme's success.<sup>13</sup>

*The transformation imperative.* South Africa's racial patterning of poverty and unemployment<sup>1</sup> had made most rural people ill-equipped to benefit from post-1994 economic and employment openings. Apartheid had ensured inferior levels of education in rural areas and little chance for development. The creation of employment in combination with skills development was one of several goals for South Africa's new government as it set out to redress social imbalances in society, amongst others by tackling gender representation at all levels in employment, and providing opportunities for young people and for the disabled.

The Working for Water programme took deliberate steps to address the urgent need for transformation. They include the following.

- The development of entrepreneurial skills. The programme introduced a contractor scheme, which sought progressively to 'wean' people off a daily wage approach to work, initially through piece work (where workers are paid for pre-defined 'pieces' of work, such as an area to be cleared), then closed contracts (where contractors are hired without tendering on the open market), to the final stage of independent contractor.<sup>10</sup> This scheme puts people living within an area identified for clearance of invasive alien plants in a position to apply for contract work, and develops business skills.
- Provision of training. Training within the programme has focused on three main areas. Training in work-related activities (the development of skills in machine and herbicide use, and worker safety issues), training in health (with a focus on HIV/AIDS), and contractor development, accounted for 25, 40, and 31% of training expenditure, respectively.<sup>11</sup> The programme proposes ultimately to develop projects in which all team members will undergo training for 48 days in a two-year employment cycle (in this way fulfilling a requirement of poverty relief funding).
- Addressing gender imbalances. Since inception, the programme ensured that at least 60% of the wages would be earned by women (Fig. 1). We do not yet fully understand, however, the implications of the improved financial status of women in a male-dominated society, or the potential consequences of preferential employment of women in communities where many men are also unemployed.
- Re-integration of ex-offenders. South Africa has a high prison population, estimated at about 142 400<sup>14</sup> in 2003, with former offenders having difficulty in finding work in an environment of high unemployment. The programme gives employment to ex-offenders, to address the inability of the prison system to re-socialize former inmates.

*Lack of awareness.* Alien plants were introduced into South Africa from many parts of the world,<sup>3</sup> and had already covered some 10 million hectares when the Working for Water programme began.<sup>15</sup> This widespread distribution of the problem was not matched by widespread understanding or awareness of their destructive effects by the general public or by key role-players (such as the nursery trade, landscape architects,

agroforestry practitioners, and developers). Ignorance remains a major contributor to the introduction, spread, and tolerance of such species by South Africans. Solving this principal cause of the problem goes beyond the immediate objective of clearing the invasive alien plants that cause concern.

Working for Water launched a campaign to raise awareness and educate the public about the threats posed by, and challenges in dealing with, invasive aliens. The Weed Buster Campaign of 2000 was followed in 2001 by an alien plant Schools Education Pilot Project,<sup>11</sup> which included research to measure and understand the level of alien plant awareness among educators and learners in ten selected schools in each of the country's provinces. The programme's educational focus has also targeted nurseries, parks and municipalities, and resulted in a partnership with the South African Nursery Association to ensure that nurseries do not sell invasive alien plants.<sup>11</sup> These outlets have also become a means for informing the public about the choices they make when they buy plants for gardens and landscaping.

### Social development research plans

Working for Water's social development research is relatively new, having been formally included as a research field in late 2002. Most of the programme's social development interventions were aimed at improving conditions in poor communities, but its implications for the lives of affected people have not been fully investigated and preliminary, exploratory research has not yet yielded robust results.<sup>16</sup> In the context of funding limitations, a panel of experts advising on social and developmental research priorities have identified three spearheading projects,<sup>16</sup> as follows.

*The development of a viable 'exit strategy'* (that is, interventions to maximize the chances of workers of either securing gainful employment after leaving the programme, or successfully setting up their own businesses) is the focus of research to be commissioned shortly. Preliminary findings in 2002 revealed that most workers and contractors leaving the programme were not fully equipped to secure work outside it (although this situation also reflects the general economic depression in rural areas). The research will determine the extent to which the training provided by Working for Water has been useful to people after leaving the programme, and the extent to which it has contributed to the ability of people to diversify or add value to their livelihood strategies once they have left it.

*The socio-economic impact on households and individuals.* The research objective will be to define and explain the socio-economic impact on households of members being employed in a Working for Water project, and to develop methods of monitoring household-level effects on the programme's beneficiaries. Such information would help the programme to adjust its employment conditions so as to maximize the benefits for households.

*Dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic.* This study will assess the extent to which Working for Water strategies for dealing with HIV/AIDS and with employees (including contractors and their

teams) are in line with current best practices, and to provide implementation guidelines for managers.

### Conclusion

The multiple environmental and social developmental objectives of the Working for Water programme have been described internationally as being without precedent.<sup>5</sup> The programme has expanded rapidly since 1995, and now operates over 300 projects throughout South Africa. The combination of rapid expansion, technical and social complexity, a narrow base of social development staff, and pressure to spend large sums of money in very short periods of time, have put significant pressure on the attainment of Working for Water's social development goals. Data-gathering in this field, to inform management decisions and the design of future social development interventions, remains vital to the future impact of this unique environmental initiative.

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