INTRODUCTION

Rural development, encompassing local economic and human resources development, as well as improved services delivery relating briefly 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 improve service delivery. In this sense, WE programmes are useful in promoting 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 spastic poverty. The choice of activities is dependent on several factors. Infrastructure is crucial for investment and economic growth. Other than 70% of public investment is channelled into this sector (World Bank, 2002).

SYIATENTELA ROUTINE ROAD MAINTENANCE PROJECTS

The Hymalanga Department of Roads and Transport implemented the Syiatenela employment-intensive rural road routine maintenance project as part of a broader initiative that seeks to entrench government’s extended public works programme. Syiatenela, which started in 2005, now employs 544 women maintaining 375 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 enthroning the local skills base
- Structuring, growing and mainstreaming the local economy

SYIATENTELA PROJECT IMPACT EVALUATION

CSR Built Environment employed a before and after cross-sectional survey of beneficiaries to independently evaluate the project’s impacts. The CSR 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: Syiatenela, which was modelled on the relatively well-known Zibambele labour-based construction and maintenance programme in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, targets women in indigenous households. Female-headed households, identified through a consultative and rigorous screening and verification process, are particularly targeted.

Siyatenela contracts: Syiatenela employs newly available early entrants. Although an individual signs the contract, the Syiatenela ‘emplaces’ the household rather than an individual, ensuring bonding of the chosen participant. Depending on skills and experience, participants earn monthly wages of between R651 and R7 100.

Siyatenela contracts women to maintain the drainage system and road signs, ensure good road-side 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 a 5 km stretch of road close to their homes. Participants work two days per week with a maximum of 64 hours per month. Syiatenela encourages flexible working hours, thus allowing participants ample time to attend to their formal studies.

“...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.” (Focus group testimony, February 2008).

Training, knowledge and skills transfer: Participants were technically trained on rural maintenance and life skills during 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 have also learnt how to maintain the road verges, using skills we have acquired through Syiatenela.” (Participant, February 2008).

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

“...Enriching the rural private sector: More than 70% of savings earned are used to buy food, clothing, agricultural inputs, tangible household assets as well as other items for medical care. The women also invest in 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 settlement.” (Focus group testimony, February 2008).

CONCLUSION

While women comprise a significant proportion of the rural, crucially, they can also be instrumental in breaking the poverty cycle. Empirical evidence from the Syiatenela and other such projects suggests that besides creating employment opportunities for those traditionally locked out of the mainstream economy, skill development empowers women to become more confident in their roles as caregivers, homemakers and child-rearing agents. Therefore, the need to mainstream programmes with such a clear developmental agenda in policy initiatives and practice cannot be over-emphasised.

REFERENCES

5. Mixture (2001) Entrenching the local skills base and breaking the poverty cycle. (Focus group testimony, February 2008).

Figure 1 indicates that more than 40% of respondents use their wages to purchase goods and services locally and in the nearest town as aptly described in a focus group discussion.

Figure 1: ‘Rejecting the inevitability of poverty’: Empowering women through community-based employment-intensive rural infrastructure maintenance projects

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