



## **Perceptions on addressing the water services needs of the most vulnerable households in Bushbuckridge Local Municipality**



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## Executive summary

The broad objective of this paper is to highlight the complexities of poverty and how understanding vulnerabilities in relation to rural livelihoods can enable water service provision to respond to the needs of the poorest households in communities. This is based upon work carried out in ward 16 of the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality, in the context of participatory assessment and planning with community based structures, local government and a number of government department officials, and the subsequent reflection on what took place there, and its implication.

The report reflects on the challenges of adopting water services delivery approaches based on the livelihoods realities of poor people. In doing so, this paper explores the complexities and practicalities of understanding rural livelihoods systems from a water perspective. Special attention is given to the various ways in which local service providers perceive and conceptualize poverty (and vulnerability), and how their perceptions informs their implementation of services and their selection processes for identifying the poorest households. The understanding (based on ongoing work with stakeholders) is that while there are planning frameworks which encourage an integrated and poverty reduction focused approach to service delivery, in practice this is still a challenging task to achieve, partly due to the complex realities of identifying and reaching the poorest and partly due to the fragmented nature of service delivery processes in most municipal areas in South Africa. The importance of addressing governance issues if we are to achieve water service provision that makes a real contribution to poverty eradication is emphasized.

Some of the key issues to be considered in any attempt to plan services that are based on the livelihoods realities of poor people are outlined in conclusion. Many of these relate to the issue of institutional development and capacity building and include:

- Adopting a learning approach and providing practical tools for unpacking the complex linkages between water and poverty, and for understanding the role of water services in addressing poverty and reducing vulnerabilities.
- A multidisciplinary approach to poverty eradication where water services is recognized as one of the key contribution to poverty alleviation.
- Poverty in rural areas is a result of both physical deprivation and socioeconomic processes and structures; therefore understanding and action must focus on some of the historical, social, economic and political factors leading to vulnerabilities and poverty.

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## Acknowledgements

AWARD is a non-profit company that has been working in the north-east of South Africa in the Sand River Catchment (SRC), on the border of Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces, since 1993. AWARD works to secure water to improve the quality of life of the rural populations and the sustainability of the natural resources within the Sand River Catchment.

Over the past year, AWARD has been developing a programme, which looks specifically into the links between water security and livelihoods, called SWELL (Securing Water to Enhance Local Livelihoods). A number of partners and funders have been part of this effort. We would like to acknowledge their contributions. CARE South Africa – Lesotho contributed methodological inputs, resource persons and funding. The documentation of this work was done with support from the Multiple Use Systems (MUS) project ([www.musproject.net](http://www.musproject.net)), part of the Challenge Programme on Water and Food.

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# 1 Background and Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

There is a considerable effort by policy makers and service providers, to address the water and service needs of the poor and most vulnerable, through policies and service delivery strategies that recognize the centrality of water in reducing poverty. Within the water sector for instance, the strategic role of water in tackling poverty and in reducing vulnerability is widely recognized and spelled out as a priority issue. As a result, practical strategies for providing sufficient water for both domestic and productive uses for poorer households are increasingly being sought and explored. This commitment is evidence that water services providers are starting to acknowledge the reality that without access to sufficient water for both domestic and productive uses in and around the household, the poor and most vulnerable are excluded, and will continue to be excluded, from options that would allow them to diversify and secure their sources of livelihoods and thus reduce their poverty.

However, despite this growing commitment, lack of water services still persists in many parts of the country. These are mainly a result of problems in the way in which water services are delivered rather than the absence of water resources themselves. These factors present challenges and undermine the efforts made to provide sufficient water for people living in extreme poverty. As a result, the poverty conditions of vulnerable groups remain unresolved and become aggravated by problems of water scarcity.

The factors contributing to the situation of lack of access to water services and extreme poverty conditions in rural areas are multiple and often interlinked, requiring an integrated and holistic approach in addressing them. For one, the multidimensional nature of poverty presents enormous challenges in identifying and selecting the most vulnerable groups in any given society. This is further compounded by current planning processes adopted by water service providers. In South Africa, water provision is a responsibility of various sectors, with each sector responsible for providing water for specific purposes. This approach leads to each sector prioritizing “their” water uses over others, and then failing to recognize the multiple uses of water in people’s livelihoods. Moreover, service providers within sectors are only concerned with addressing and meeting water needs specifically falling within their mandate. The result is water services that are fragmented and uncoordinated and are not responsive to the livelihoods realities of poor rural people (Maluleke et al., 2005).

Responding effectively to the water service needs of poor people surely requires services to be planned on the basis of an in depth understanding of poor people’s livelihoods realities and the role of water in livelihoods strategies. Adopting such an approach to planning for the provision of services can potentially result in services that will better respond to the realities and needs of the poor in a more integrated and sustainable manner. This however requires processes and frameworks that will allow a systematic exploration of the context-specific linkages between poverty, vulnerabilities and water

services and explore practical ways of addressing these through integrated and holistic water services programs.

In recognition of the above, the NGO AWARD (Association for Water and Rural development) has been carrying out an ongoing action research process called SWELL (Securing Water to Enhance Local Livelihoods). SWELL is a community based planning approach that aims to enable improved allocation and use of water resources and services for water related livelihoods and help reduce poverty (for a detailed description of the SWELL approach, see Maluleke et al., 2005). SWELL aims to overcome the problems associated with water insecurity for multiple uses, which finds its root causes in the interplay of multiple factors which are related to uncoordinated planning (fragmented approaches to service provision), and a lack of an in-depth understanding of the livelihoods realities of poor people. SWELL, then, aims to facilitate a process that enables a systematic exploration of the above mentioned complex concepts. This is achieved through engaging multiple stakeholders in participatory processes of enquiry, knowledge exchange and learning, around livelihoods and poverty and the role of water services in these.

While efforts were made in the first stages of SWELL to focus specifically on the poorest and vulnerable groups of the villages, it was felt by AWARD and partners that a more in-depth exploration of vulnerability was called for. The assumption was that, while service providers are generally aware of the poverty conditions of rural people, the needs of the most vulnerable people tend to be complex and invisible and as a result, they are often not accommodated in mainstream service delivery. One partner sought to focus specifically on issues of gender and HIV and AIDS in relation to water, but after earlier attempts to do so, SWELL believed it would be more appropriate to consider factors of vulnerability, with awareness of these as aspects to be aware of.

This report aims to reflect on the experiences of focusing on vulnerability in the SWELL process. Specifically, it aims to explore how the understanding on vulnerabilities in relation to rural livelihoods can enable water service provision to respond to the needs of the poorest households in communities.

## **1.2 Structure of this report**

This paper has four sections. First, it sets out the background of the SWELL approach in the stage that focused on vulnerability; and why and how this focus came about.

The second section aims to provide conceptual clarity on poverty and vulnerability and goes on to examine how these key concepts have informed the conceptual framework that SWELL is continuing to develop and refine as the process unfolds. This is followed by an outline of how the SWELL approach is using these concepts in its work.

The third section of the report then reflects on what emerged from working with the stakeholders who participated in the SWELL work that focused on vulnerability, drawing on the conceptual framework to assist in this analysis.

The final section considers the implications of the stakeholders current perceptions on the implementation of programmes designed to address poverty and highlight some of the key issues(emerging from this work) to be considered in any attempt to plan services that are based on the livelihoods realities of poor people are presented

## **2 The context**

### **2.1 Background to this component of SWELL**

The SWELL methodology has been implemented in 11 villages of ward 16<sup>1</sup> of the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality over a period of 3 years. The various villages were clustered and assessed in 3 stages, in which participatory processes were carried out in each of the villages. This report draws from the SWELL processes undertaken in the last 4 villages of ward 16 (Lepong, Hluvukani, Servile B and Dixie).

The main focus of this final stage was on understanding the dynamics and complexities involved in providing water services that are ‘responsive to, and based upon a thorough understanding of poor people’s livelihoods.’ (Van Koppen, 2006). This was undertaken through engaging stakeholders in participatory processes of inquiry and knowledge sharing. Specifically, the process entailed exploring with stakeholders, their current perceptions and understanding of poverty, and the complex social factors underlying poverty and how these can be taken into account when planning for water service provision.

To tackle some of the conceptual challenges of understanding poverty and to gain a greater understanding of local perceptions of poverty, it was decided to facilitate the processes in the local language and not in English as previous SWELL processes had been. This proved to be a powerful means of exploration, as it allowed for contextual depth and clarity. What was critical, however, was to capture the essence of the phrases and terms used to describe poverty and vulnerabilities and to relate these to the broader conceptual frameworks informing the SWELL process.

The following section outlines the logic of the overall SWELL process

### **2.2 Overview and outline of the process**

The overall process in the 4 villages was undertaken over a period of 3 months involving multiple stakeholders from both community level and service provider level. Stakeholders participating at the various levels of the assessment process included: Department of Water Affairs and Forestry extension officers (3 participants); Department of Agriculture extension officers (3 participants) Department of Health and Social Development (3 representatives); Hluvukani Home Based Caregivers (HBCs) (20);

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<sup>1</sup> A ward is the lowest political demarcation of local municipalities, and consists of a number of villages.

Village representatives from the 4 villages (This group was composed of members of the Community Development Forum (CDF), Water Committee, and Traditional Authority).

A phased approach to assessment was adopted and this focussed on distinctive but related levels of assessment and employed a wide range of participatory tools.

Specifically, the process was divided into the following distinctive phases:

- *A multi stakeholder planning workshop*

This process was carried out over a period of 2 weeks and it ran concurrently with the participatory assessment process at community level. During the planning workshop stakeholders explored in great length, the concepts of poverty and vulnerabilities and how these are linked to sustainable livelihoods and to water services. This process further provided a significant platform for stakeholders and facilitators to challenge some of the current understanding of and responses to poverty. The workshop further enabled us to assess the programs put in place by service providers and community based organisations to address the needs of poor people, and the processes of identifying the beneficiaries of such programs. A considerable amount of the material presented in this paper was generated during the planning workshop.

- *Participatory assessments at village level*

This was carried out in each of the villages and focused on understanding the available water resources at village level and how these are, managed and made available for the multiple water uses. The tools used for assessment included participatory wealth ranking exercises with community members and focused group discussions with members of community level structures. These tools were instrumental in exploring how community members themselves, define poverty and vulnerabilities. The process at village level was facilitated by an assessment team comprising of AWARD's staff and a mix of extension officers from various government sectors and members of community structures.

- *Focus group discussions with care givers and planning for household assessments*

A 2- day workshop was then held with the HBC supervisors who were part of the 10 day workshop, plus additional village based carers working directly with poorer households were conducted with 20 care givers from a local home based care centre. This process was instrumental in further exploring the local understanding of poverty from people working directly with the most vulnerable households, and for unpacking the specific impacts of water insecurity on the livelihoods of vulnerable households.

It was agreed that 20 of the most vulnerable households in each village would be interviewed. Four groups of 2 people per group interviewed 5 households per village. Each group had a caregiver who was well known to the households.

- *Household level assessments*

The assessment process at household level was based on semi-structured interviews. These were discussed with care givers and piloted in one village (Hluvukani) before they were administered in the 3 villages. Instead of selecting households on the basis of the wealth being categories identified during the village level assessment process, households



were selected on the basis of ‘vulnerability’ categories identified by care givers themselves during the focus group discussions. This approach proved to be a useful way of selecting and reaching the poorest and most vulnerable households in each of the 4 villages.

▪ *The Village synthesis phase*

The objective of these synthesis workshops was to provide feedback of the information obtained from both the village and household level assessments; as well as to obtain comments and clarifications from the community members on the research findings. Critical outcomes of the processes included the identification of problems and potential solutions in water services provision and use, as well as prioritization of key problems and related solutions. In essence, the workshops were instrumental in seeking validation of key research findings and the correction of erroneous findings, as well as the identification and prioritization of water-related problems and solutions.

• *Stakeholder feedback and planning*

The stakeholder synthesis phase follows the village synthesis phase and had the following objectives:

- To give feedback of the SWELL assessment carried out in the 4 remaining villages
- To analyze and prioritize the problems leading to water insecurities in ward 16, and to agree on possible and practical solutions for addressing the problems.
- To plan together for a way forward

Since the stakeholder feedback phase marked the completion of the assessment process, a critical outcome of this phase was agreeing on a way forward for taking the vulnerability focus further into broader planning processes. All stakeholders committed to the ongoing multistakeholder learning and planning processes, and to taking the outcome of the current swell process to decision making level in their sectors.

### **3 Conceptual Framework**

This section explores the theoretical linkages between livelihoods, poverty, vulnerability and water services provision. In the SWELL process the focus was on unpacking these concepts separately with stakeholders, assessing their understanding in relation to the current theory of poverty, vulnerabilities and water services. Focus was also on assessing how stakeholders understanding of these concepts is translated (or not translated) into service provision.

#### **3.1 Poverty**

Poverty manifests itself in diverse ways across different contexts, and although common characteristics of poverty can be identified, poverty is experienced differently by different individuals, households and communities. Even in the same household, poverty is often experienced differently by individuals. Moreover, even if people are subjected to similar conditions of poverty, their response to it varies. This largely depends on the assets and capabilities they rely on in their attempt to cope (Soussan, 2003). Given that the precise

causes and manifestations of poverty vary across contexts, it becomes critical to understand the specific causes of, manifestations of, impacts of, and responses to poverty in different contexts. This is of particular significance in establishing who the poorest of the poor are and in planning interventions.

There are many approaches to understanding poverty, and to poverty eradication. Despite varying views, poverty is now widely recognized as being complex, all encompassing and dynamic. Poverty is a phenomenon that relates to both the material and non-material aspects of existence. The material dimension of poverty includes such aspects as the deprivation of essential assets and opportunities, poor access to basic services crucial for meeting basic needs (i.e. water services, health services; education services); lack of income and food, lack of shelter and poor health. The non material dimension of poverty refers to the less tangible and often hidden aspects of poverty such as vulnerability to external shocks and stresses and an inability to cope with these, lack of rights, lack of dignity and autonomy, lack of control over resources, lack of voice and participation in political and decision making processes, lack of security, and lack of social connections (UNDP, 2002).

Although the different dimensions of poverty are widely acknowledged in development policies, evidence suggests that in reality there is still a heavy reliance on economic measures of poverty.

None the less, the multidimensional nature of poverty highlights the importance of considering both the non-material and material dimensions of poverty in any efforts to combat poverty. It implies that poverty needs to be addressed in an integrated way, combining several actions in several ways and focusing not only on the economic dimension but also on other equally important factors such as gender, age, and social class.

### **3.2 Livelihoods**

Poverty and livelihoods are almost inseparable concepts, as poverty is experienced by people within the context of their livelihoods. Understanding the concept of livelihoods therefore gives us a practical means for understanding poverty and its impacts on livelihoods.

Specifically, the sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) recognizes the importance of assets and capabilities (both material and non material) for households in generating their livelihoods and in coping with shocks and stresses posed by their environment.

'A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. (Chamber and Conway, 1992)
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This definition of a sustainable livelihoods implies that poverty occurs when people 'cannot sustain the capabilities assets and activities required for a means of living and when they are unable to cope with stresses and shocks due to lack of resources (Soussan, 2003).

Poverty in this sense reflects a lack of access to assets (both material and non material assets) and capabilities necessary to sustain a livelihood, more than a reflection of lack of income. So people are not poor because of lack of income, but because of lack of access to a multiple critical assets and also because of the socio political circumstances which influence their access to resources and thus their ability to cope with sudden stresses and shocks. Recognition of these factors is therefore critical when understanding poverty and the vulnerabilities of livelihoods.

### **3.3 Vulnerability**

The concept of vulnerability is relevant to a number of disciplines and this implies that the term is perceived and applied differently across disciplines. For this reason, it becomes critical to clarify what the term implies within a specific context, and at different levels of analysis.

The most common use of the concept of vulnerability is in risk management and disaster relief programmes, with respect to peoples' exposure to environmental risks and hazards. Within this context, vulnerability is used for predicting who is most likely to be affected by natural hazards and what can be done to reduce their vulnerability (Prowse, 2003). Even within the water sector, the main area of focus is mostly on vulnerability in relation to water related hazards such as droughts, floods and cyclones, where the poorest are considered as being the most vulnerable to water related hazard such as floods and drought. This emphasis on the biophysical aspects of vulnerability tends to exclude the interactions of the multiple socio political and socioeconomic processes underlying the vulnerabilities of poor people's livelihoods. Reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing household's capacities to cope requires an understanding of the linkages between the different layers and how these interact.

In the SLF vulnerability is recognized as a multidimensional concept that is a result of the interplay of multiple factors operating at a number of levels. These include political, social, economic and natural factors. The vulnerability context refers to the shocks and stresses in their environment that affect peoples' livelihoods, over which local people have no control. Vulnerable livelihoods are those which when exposed to risks have difficulty in coping with them (Scoones, 2005). In this sense, vulnerability has two aspects: being exposed and subjected to risks (the shocks and stresses which are a critical source of vulnerabilities) and the lack of means to cope (inadequate assets and capacities, material and non-material, leading to defenselessness). A critical point of focus should therefore be on analyzing the conditions, processes and circumstances that makes it difficult for people to cope.

The concepts of poverty and vulnerability are increasingly recognized as strongly related and mutually reinforcing. However, while vulnerability is often closely associated with poverty, it is also seen as being distinct. The nature of the exact linkages between the two concepts is an area of ongoing debate. Much of the debate is with regard to whether vulnerability is the cause of poverty, whether it is a result of poverty, a symptom of poverty or part of the multidimensional aspect of poverty (Prowse, 2003).

Vulnerability is indeed a complex phenomenon, involving different factors, most of which interact at varying levels. This emphasize the need to clarify what we mean by “poverty”, “vulnerability”, and which aspects of vulnerability and poverty we are seeking to address in a given context or within a particular discipline.

### **3.4 Poverty and water**

*“The relationship between water and poverty is as complex as poverty itself”*

The centrality of water in the livelihoods of rural people can not be overemphasized. Water is essential for the sustenance of life, but in the context of poverty and vulnerabilities, access to sufficient water, along with sustained access to other critical resources and services, is fundamental to the elimination of poverty and for reducing vulnerabilities. For rural people living in extreme poverty, adequate and sustained access to water for multiple uses (domestic and productive uses) presents opportunities for escaping poverty and for coping with vulnerabilities (Maluleke et al., 2005). This is because for poor people, water also plays a critical role in ensuring food security, secured income, improved health and well being, and overall socio economic conditions (Van Koppen, 1999). Ensuring adequate access to sufficient quantities of water for multiple uses is central to poverty eradication and for promoting sustainable rural livelihoods.

On the other hand, lack of access to sufficient quantities of water for multiple uses has drastic consequences for poor rural people. First, because water is required for carrying out activities that brings in food and income, lack of access to adequate water supply directly translates into less food, less income, less time, poor health and general well being. Furthermore, since water is essential to many livelihoods activities of the poor, lack of access to water imply that the poor are left with limited options to cope with multiple vulnerabilities and to escape poverty.

The relationship between water and livelihoods is made more complex because of the multiple roles of water in people livelihoods activities and strategies which are diverse and complex themselves. Moreover water can come from multiple sources, via multiple technologies.

### **3.5 Livelihoods, water, poverty and vulnerability**

The SLF enables us to easily make the linkages between multiple livelihoods strategies and multiple water uses. The framework shows how in different contexts, sustainable livelihoods are achieved through access to a range of livelihoods resources (natural,

economic, human and social) which are combined in the pursuit of different livelihoods strategies (Moriarty, 2004).

The approach thus offers a practical tool for understanding the linkages and gaps between the biophysical, technical, social and human aspects of water.

Water can thus be characterized in SLF terminology as:

- Physical (e.g. reticulated supply and other infrastructure)
- Natural (e.g. water bodies and groundwater)
- Human (health, collection)
- Social (e.g. cultural values)
- Financial (e.g. water costs and tariffs)

The SLF more specifically allows for a practical examination of the following critical aspects:

- The role and importance of water in people's livelihoods.
  - Water and food security
  - Water and income generation
  - Water and household maintenance
  - Water based livelihoods and livelihoods diversification
- The role and importance of water relative to other assets that make these livelihoods possible
- The role of water in the vulnerability of water based livelihood strategies
- People's assets (including capacities) to draw on for potential water related livelihood strategies.

From a water perspective on livelihoods, it becomes critical to consider people's needs around water in order to perform their specific livelihood activities and possible new activities, and identify issues other than water that contribute to the success of people's water related activities. It is equally critical to consider water in relation to households' vulnerability context: how water insecurity increases vulnerability and undermines people's capacities to cope with day to day stresses; and how water security can build poor people's assets and increase their resilience in the face of shocks and stresses they are subject to.

### ***3.6 SWELL's approach to looking at vulnerability***

The SWELL approach emphasizes the need to recognize and address the social, economic, political and institutional context through which water is made accessible for rural people. However, in addition to analyzing the broader context, it is also critical to consider the different factors that define how different households within communities and different individuals within households, are affected varyingly by shocks and stresses posed by the environment. The interactions of the vulnerability context and the dynamics at inter and intra household level determines people's proneness to shocks and stresses and also their capacity to cope. Therefore, reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing

household's capacities to cope requires an understanding of the linkages between the different layers and how these affect people's access to water.

In the SWELL context, the main focus is on understanding the linkages between the vulnerability context (shocks and stresses) and the circumstances that makes certain Households more vulnerable to the shocks and stresses posed by the vulnerability context. In this sense vulnerability is viewed, not only a result of exposure to risks but also a result of the underlying socioeconomic processes which plays out at inter and intra household level, and serve to reduce people's capacities to cope with risks.

Analysis should thus be on 2 levels, namely

(a) *Analyzing the range of **shocks and stresses** which contribute to households' **insecurities**;*

At this level, the focus of analysis is on the various existing shocks and stresses in the broader environment (political, socio cultural, economic, and environmental) and on the interactions between the different spheres of the broader environment. Understanding this is critical in determining how processes at this level create opportunities and blockages for sustaining poor people's livelihoods.

(b) *Analyzing how different households develop **coping and adaptive strategies** in response to external shocks and stresses and how this is influenced by their conditions and circumstances (ongoing livelihoods insecurities)*

The main purpose of analysis at this level is to understand the livelihoods strategies of different categories of households, their capacities to cope with shocks and stresses and the circumstances they are faced with in carrying out their livelihoods and in responding to poverty. Our concern is those households who will be most affected by the shocks presented by the external environment. This means focusing on the social positions and everyday conditions that people live under.

In trying to cope with water insecurity, different households will employ different strategies depending on their resources and their livelihoods circumstances.

Analysis at the 2 levels is critical for understanding the context specific determinants of vulnerabilities and how these impact differently on different households, and for defining ways of mitigating such factors.

#### **4 Stakeholder perceptions and their implications**

Having seen now the theoretical linkages between water, livelihoods and poverty, this section reflects on how stakeholders perceive these linkages, and how these have shifted as a result of engaging in a systematic process of exploration and knowledge sharing. What was clear was that people brought in certain perceptions, and that these colour their practices. These assumptions were however scrutinized and challenged during the workshop discussions.

Although the overall SWELL process included assessments and discussions at village and household level, what is presented in this section mainly draws from the planning workshop with stakeholders. The stakeholder groups participating in the planning workshop were from sectoral departments, from local municipality and from community level structure (CDF's water committee, ward committee and Home Based Care). It should be noted that this was not a research process in which people were interviewed and their opinions were gathered only, it includes that which arose during workshop sessions in which new concepts were being introduced, and which created a reflective and learning space for participants.

The conceptual framework discussed in the previous section was instrumental in organizing and analyzing the reflections and findings of this section of the paper. Based on the conceptual framework and on the broad objectives of the SWELL programme, the following questions were formulated to guide the discussions.

- How do service providers and communities understand and define poverty and vulnerabilities?
- What are the perceived linkages between poverty, vulnerabilities and water services?
- What are the perceived water service needs of vulnerable people and how are these responded to and considered in planning?
- What support structures and mechanisms are put in place to address the water service needs of the most vulnerable groups?
- How are vulnerable groups identified/selected and what factors are considered in selecting them

#### ***4.1 How do local service providers and communities understand livelihoods?***

The sustainable livelihoods framework was drawn upon in the workshops and provided a structure for introducing concepts and guiding discussions. The starting point was to first introduce and discuss the concept of livelihoods in relation to poverty and then explore participants' understanding of this concept, and its application in their own living and work contexts.

Phrases such as "living", "everyday living", "a way of living", "status of life", and "needs necessary for living" were (initially) used by participants to define livelihoods:

A sustainable livelihood on the other hand was described as:

- A sustainable livelihood is when people are able to meet their basic needs such as food and income, shelter and water
- A sustainable livelihood is when access to these basic needs is sustained over a period of time

- A livelihood can not be sustainable as long as people can not meet their basic needs.
- Happiness is also an indication of a sustainable livelihood

A synthesis of the phrases above yielded the following definitions of a livelihood and a sustainable livelihood:

*A livelihood refers to ‘a way of making a living’, and to make a living, one needs to own or have access to particular assets, both material and nonmaterial.*

*A sustainable livelihood on the other hand is viewed as ‘a better way of making a living’ where people are able to maintain or even enhance their “better way of living” on an ongoing basis, relying on their available and accessible assets and resources.*

In this context ‘making a living’ encompasses all aspects of what a livelihood and what a sustainable livelihood is. And although the different aspects are not specifically viewed as different elements of a livelihood, the definitions highlight the following aspects of a livelihood:

- (1) The importance of having access to both material and non material assets in generating a livelihood (‘in making a living’)*
- (2) The importance of being able to maintain and enhance these assets on an ongoing basis.*

Access to assets and resources was recognized as a critical aspect of generating a livelihood, with ‘time’ as a distinguishing factor between a livelihood and a sustainable livelihood. This use of time is critical in that it highlights the importance of sustainability and emphasizes that ‘for a livelihood to be sustainable, access to resources must be on an ongoing basis’. This implies that a livelihood can not be sustainable for a day or for a week, so to have access to adequate water for one week in a month, was regarded by stakeholders as a unsustainable access to resources and therefore as an unsustainable way of ‘making a living’. Similarly, to have food for only one day in a week or receive food parcels once a month was considered a highly unsustainable means of ‘making a living’. The irregular distribution of food parcels by government sectors to poorer households for instance, was cited as a local example of an unsustainable way of ‘making a living’, and as a local example of an ‘unsustainable way of responding to poverty’.

## **4.2 Livelihoods and poverty and the role of service providers**

Livelihoods are generated and carried out within a context of a household, with households differing in terms of the assets and capabilities that they own.

In particular, poor households were perceived as households who lack any of the following basic resources necessary to make a living: food or stable sources of food, stable source of income, and shelter. This means that those households who are unable to



sustain their access to these resources and for longer periods are considered as poor households or ‘people living in poverty’.

Poverty was specifically defined as ‘any situation where people can not sustainably access or maintain resources , a situation where people have few basic assets to rely on and no means of accessing any resources required for generating a livelihood’. In this sense poverty is viewed largely as ‘deprivation’, although to a certain extent, other aspects of poverty were considered and this includes: lack of parents, unhappiness or poor emotional state and lack of a strong social network. The non material aspects of poverty were somewhat mentioned without thinking them through. These were only unpacked during the discussions on poverty and vulnerability.

This perception of poverty by stakeholders at service provider level is similar to the perception of poverty at community level, where poverty was largely defined in material terms, with the following cited as the characteristics of a ‘very poor household’: Lack of money, lack of clothing, lack of food, lack of shelter. And although the lack of other physical assets were used by communities as indicators of poverty, lack of money was emphasized as a critical indicator, and this was because access to income was considered as the main determinant of accessing other resources such as food and clothing. The use of money as an important factor in deciding who the poor are was evident in all the villages (Cousins et al., 2006). In the context of vulnerabilities, this perception clearly under-values other assets which could be just as important to generate a livelihood: e.g. livestock, access to land and connections or membership in village structures.

Although both the non-material and material aspects of poverty were regarded by stakeholders as critical to consider when thinking about the poor and about poverty, there was no consensus amongst stakeholders regarding the role of water service providers in responding to the intangible effects of poverty, such as ‘poor emotional state’ or ‘unhappiness due to lack of resources’. The question raised by some participants was whether the provision of water alone lead to ‘happiness’ and whether identifying those with ‘poor emotional state’ and understanding the underlying causes of their emotional state is the role of water services stakeholders. If happiness in this context is viewed as an expression of the non material aspects of poverty, then this point raises a critical question regarding the role of water service providers in responding to those issues that are an important aspect of poverty but do not clearly fit into their mandate.

To emphasize this point, a government official, in response to the question on their role in relation to vulnerable households and water, said “we don’t deal with households, we deal with communities, we provide water to the community as a whole, and the community must look after the vulnerable households”. Another comment made was that ‘all people in villages require water’, so the water needs of ‘vulnerable people’ (in this case households affected by HIV/AIDS) are met for by providing water to the community as a whole.

On one hand, this can suggest that there is little recognition and understanding of the conditions and the special needs of vulnerable groups by water service providers, but on the other hand, it reflects the challenges of dealing with cross cutting issues in service delivery programs. HIV/AIDS is a cross cutting issue requiring the inputs of various sectors, but the question is, how is this approached in a targeted and integrated manner, particularly by service providers 'traditionally' responsible for providing material services such as water services. What are the practicalities of considering some of the social aspects of poverty in providing water to poorer households, factors which might not necessarily be related to a lack of access to water but are exacerbated by water scarcity?

The impacts of water scarcity on households affected by HIV/AIDS were particularly felt and expressed strongly by care givers. And in the end, it was considered to be their role to cope with water scarcity, either by collecting water for their 'clients' in other villages or by storing water in big containers. This issue raised other critical points related to care givers carrying the burden alone and even expected to rely on their own means to deal with the impacts of water scarcity on their 'care giving' activities. In this context, most care givers often have to contribute water collected for their own households to some of the vulnerable households they care for.

To capture the extent of the impacts of water scarcity on vulnerable households, one care giver said "*Loko ku nga ri na mati hina to care givers hinga Carry*" (without water, care givers can not care). This was considered by most service providers as an example of 'true caring' but not necessarily as a serious indication of the need to collaborate their efforts of ensuring water security to poorer households.

To a large extent, addressing the impacts being discussed here was seen as the responsibility of social workers, of department of health and of NGO's. One strategy to ensure water availability for households affected by HIV/AIDS was for NGO's and private companies to donate water storage tanks to affected households.

### **4.3 Stakeholder's perceptions of vulnerability**

If poverty is viewed as 'any condition that prevents or makes it difficult for a person or household from accessing and maintaining basic resources necessary for sustaining a livelihood, and necessary for coping with shocks and stresses. What then is vulnerability, who is vulnerable and what contributes to their vulnerability?

While poor people were defined as 'people who are unable to meet most of their basic needs. Vulnerable people were viewed as *'those who are suffering and living in extreme poverty'*. This group of people was referred to as 'poor people living in extreme poverty, who either have no means of coping with poverty or very limited and unsustainable means of coping. In this perception of vulnerability, *'extreme poverty'* was used as a distinction factor between being poor and being vulnerable. Specifically, situations of extreme poverty or of vulnerability were referred to as:

- A situation that makes it difficult for a person to meet their basic needs without relying on external assistance such as help from neighbors, relatives or government.
- A *vulnerable situation* can be any severe situation that leaves people ‘defenseless’ and as a result suffer from emotional and mental problems.
- “Vulnerable people” are those people that have no source of income and no source of food, no support networks, and no means of coping.

Examples of people living in such conditions include: the disabled, the abused, the elderly, the sick or terminally ill, child-headed households, orphans that have no source of income, drunkards and children whose parents are alcoholics/ drunkards.

Vulnerability is viewed as both an aspect of poverty and as a result of poverty. Meaning one is vulnerable because they are poor, and on the other hand one is poor because they are vulnerable. This view of vulnerability as either an aspect of poverty or a result of poverty is relevant because it suggest a strong link between the external environment (shocks and stresses) and the household’s conditions. What this example does not immediately highlight is what the factors contributing to the vulnerabilities of these households to external shocks are. However, this example was still relevant because it provided an entry point for unpacking the underlying factors leading to both poverty and vulnerabilities.

What became evident in the discussions was that, in the local language, the line between being vulnerable and being poor is blurry, and in practice, the two concepts are used interchangeably and sometimes without making a clear distinction between them. For example, the following phrases were specifically used by stakeholders from service provider level, to distinguish between the poor and the most vulnerable groups.

- ‘Very poor people’
- ‘Disadvantaged groups’
- ‘The poorest of the poor’

An example from a village level assessment process also highlight this phenomenon and illustrates how these two concepts are used interchangeably, depending on the context and who is using them. In this particular village, the “poorest of the poor” were considered as a group of people who are not working and are very poor, and lack of material assets was used as the general characteristics used to classify this group. i.e. lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of money for school, lack of shelter and people with no parents. “The poor” on the other hand were classified as a group of people who are receiving social grants or any form of assistance from external agencies. This group included: pensioners, people with disability, the elderly, orphans and people looking after lots of children.

This example indicates how the characteristics of the group considered as vulnerable by the stakeholders participating in the workshop are not considered as such by villagers. For villagers, this group is poor but not vulnerable because they already receive support in the form of social grants from government. This is probably linked to the fact that, at village level, ‘income’ was considered as a critical indicator of poverty. For service

providers however, this group is considered vulnerable regardless of whether they receive social grants or not.

While stakeholders do attempt to distinguish between the poor and the most vulnerable by using such phrases as ‘very very poor’, ‘people living in extreme poverty’ or ‘the poorest of the poor’, ‘disadvantaged groups’, these categories are somewhat broad and do not highlight clearly the factors considered in rendering someone vulnerable. This also relates to the selection processes used to identify vulnerable groups, where service providers largely rely on village level structures to identify ‘the poorest of the poor’ without specifying what to consider in selecting these people.

#### ***4.4 Identifying the factors leading to the vulnerabilities of livelihoods***

The factors considered locally as leading to vulnerabilities were examined by first analyzing the shocks and stresses presented by the broader environment. The following were identified by stakeholders as the main factors leading to vulnerabilities:

- Poverty lead to lack of resources to access and secure basic needs
- Water scarcity mainly impact on food security, on health and well being and on other crucial water related activities such as small businesses.
- Lack of job opportunities leads to high unemployment rates and to poverty
- Diseases impact on people’s productivity and also leave a lot of children without parents
- Drought lead to food insecurity for most households
- Poor service delivery by service providers aggravate the poverty situation in ward 16

The factors above highlight both the various shocks and stresses and also illustrate the impacts of these on local livelihoods. The factors can either result from the interactions of the various spheres of the vulnerability context or could be viewed as both the symptoms and results of poverty. In this case the different factors were specifically viewed by stakeholders as the main factors leading to poverty and to vulnerabilities in the villages of ward 16. This was linked to poor service delivery in general and was largely emphasized by stakeholders from village level structures and home based care members participating in the stakeholder workshop. These factors are however not only exclusive to vulnerable groups but affect all rural people in ward 16, although the extent of the impacts will differ from household to household depending on their assets and their social circumstances.

In addition to identifying the external shocks posed by the environment, the underlying factors and conditions leading to the varying proneness of households were discussed and identified. Understanding these factors is critical in reducing households’ vulnerability. However, this could only be achieved through a guided process of exploration where the facilitators had to give examples and challenge stakeholders to think more about the different circumstances facing different households and determining their capacity to cope with stresses.

After a lot of probing, stakeholders were able to identify the specific variables explaining the variations of impacts of stresses amongst households.

Key variable	Examples of groups affected
<i>Gender and age</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women headed households( Women with no employment, No stable source of income, or with very low income) or (Women caring for sick people and other family members)</li> <li>• Child headed households( particularly those with no grants, no stable source of income, and very poor)</li> <li>• Elderly headed households (with the elderly caring for and supporting grandchildren and other extended family members, where the parents are sick, have died, or are absent) or ( with a sick elderly person) or (with no social grants) or (where they are caring for sick household members)</li> </ul>
<i>Sickness and disability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households with members affected by HIV/AIDS ( Sick parents caring for children, children looking after sick parents, loss of source of income due to ill health,)</li> <li>• Households with members living with HIV AIDS( with no social grant, no care giver and no source of income and food)</li> <li>• Households with people living with disabilities</li> <li>• Households with members living with other chronic diseases (households with terminally ill people)</li> </ul>
<i>Other factors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households without anyone to carry out most crucial household activities( Household maintenance activities such as collecting water, firewood, food generating activities and income generating activities</li> <li>• Households with a large number of household members who all depend on either 1 old age grant( R780.00) or a child grant (R180.00)</li> </ul>
<i>Refugee status</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refugee households with no access to official documents and therefore no access to support from government</li> <li>• Refugee households with a combination of the above factors(sickness and disability, old age, orphans)</li> <li>• Refugee households (particularly Mozambican with no papers and lack access to grants)</li> </ul>

The above examples highlight specifically the social factors and conditions that influence people’s capacities to cope with shocks and stresses. Furthermore, such a set of factors allows us to identify the kind of households which are most at risk, and to then find out what their livelihood and coping strategies are, what their particular constraints are regarding resources and capabilities. This can then inform how we identify direct and indirect means to minimize the negative effects of vulnerability.

It should be noted however, that with regard to factors rooted in broader sociopolitical processes, i.e. gender inequalities, social exclusion and stigmatization, there was no clear consensus as to how these can be challenged and addressed.

The issue of social exclusion is discussed in more details below

#### ***4.5 Social exclusion of vulnerable groups***

Even if not excluded from community activities and services, vulnerable households might not participate in public activities due to other factors beyond their control, such as sickness and not having an available and appropriate person from the households to send, or meetings are held while they have gone to collect water.

In most instances, attention is not paid to why vulnerable groups do not attend meetings, this often goes unnoticed and as a result, vulnerable household are excluded continuously.

Other reasons for the further exclusion of vulnerable groups has to do with the requirements used by those responsible for selecting vulnerable groups at community level. To qualify for certain public benefits one requires official documents, but many vulnerable households are not in possession of such documents. For example, to receive a child grant requires a birth certificate for the child, and it is a common requirement for selected beneficiaries of poverty relief and developmental programs to possess official documents (identity documents, birth certificates and death certificates). Assisting vulnerable households to acquire such documentation was considered by stakeholders to be “beyond the scope” of those responsible for selecting the beneficiaries for such programmes.

Apart from the complexities involved in deciding who are the most vulnerable, the processes currently employed by service providers to select the poor raises a number of questions. This point is highlighted because it emphasizes the point that the exclusion of vulnerable groups has a lot to do with institutional processes.

It is also evident that those most vulnerable generally fall into the category of marginalized groups. Either marginalized economically or marginalized socially by gender (women and girls), by age (the elderly and children) by illness or disability (those affected by HIV/AIDS) or by immigration status (refugees). Marginalization in itself is a direct outcome of broader social, political and cultural factors and is as a result deeply entrenched in the structures and processes of society (Phillip 2004).

#### ***4.6 Poverty in relation to water service provision***

In relation to water, what are the implications of providing water to communities, as opposed to providing water to meet the specific needs of different households within communities? Whose role is it to identify these households and whose role is it to define selection criteria inclusive of all the important factors contributing to the vulnerabilities of people’s livelihoods?

The wider impacts of water insecurity on the livelihoods of the poorest households and individuals were considered to be the result of ‘lack of water’ due to dysfunctional water infrastructure and ‘a lack of commitment on the side of water service providers, to provide water for multiple uses. Water scarcity (both in the form of potable water and rain water) was regarded as one of the factors contributing to poverty and to

vulnerabilities, For example, as a result of water insecurities, households whose poverty condition was not necessarily severe could easily become vulnerable due to a destruction of their water dependent livelihood strategies, i.e. food generation. Furthermore, the conditions of vulnerable households who lack the necessary water related assets such as water storage tanks or the means to purchase water could also be made worse by water insecurity.

DWAF officials on the other hand did not consider the provision of water for irrigating food gardens or for livestock watering as part of their mandate. In fact, the use of water for such activities is considered 'illegal' by DWAF. In the context of poverty, where water contributes significantly to coping with poverty, this raises critical issues. This further reflects the impacts of compartmentalizing water services, where some of the water uses at household level fall between the gaps and are therefore never prioritized and considered in planning. From a DWAF official's perspective, water scarcity is a result of illegal operation of water infrastructure by villagers as well as illegal connections of private yard taps and boreholes by both villagers and government sectors. e.g. department of social development. Social development on the other hand, considered their 'illegal' connections of boreholes in community gardens and chicken farming projects, as an important effort to address poverty and not necessarily a violation of DWAF's rules.

#### ***4.7 Programs to address the needs of the 'poor' and the selection of vulnerable groups***

To assess the programs provided by service providers to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable, different service providers presented their programs. This exercise also provided insight into the details of what informs the selection criteria used by various stakeholders,

The following questions guided the process:

- How does your organization or department respond to the needs of the poor particularly vulnerable groups?
- Who are the beneficiaries of the programmes?
- Who are considered poor or vulnerable and therefore qualify to benefit from your programmes?
- What is water used for in any programme?
- How is water a limitation in implementing any programme?
- What other general challenges do you face in the implementation of your programme?
- Who do you work in partnership with?

An analysis of the different programmes rendered by different sectors in local communities indicates that there is often no clear criterion for identifying vulnerable households. Instead all poverty eradication programs are assumed to be meeting the needs of the community as a whole, including the poorest. There is thus no clear

distinction between programmes geared towards meeting the needs of the poor and programmes geared towards meeting the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups.

With regard to identifying vulnerable groups, broad statements such as ‘the poorest of the poor’ or ‘the disadvantaged’ ‘the vulnerable’ or ‘the unemployed’ or ‘poor women’ are used by government sectors to select beneficiaries for most of the programmes geared towards poverty alleviation. The criteria used by home based care was clearer in disaggregating vulnerabilities

A critical point raised however (by service providers) was the fact that a lot of the poverty eradication programmes implemented at local level are often not based on the urgent needs of the poor but are based on decisions made at a higher level. As a result, officials will often implement only what is considered (by their seniors) as programmes which will benefit the ‘poorest of the poor.’ The problem with this approach is that it doesn’t clearly define exactly who the “poorest of the poor are” and also does not recognize that poor people are equally not vulnerable. What even makes it complicated is the fact that the village representatives responsible for selecting the “poorest of the poor” do not seem to have a transparent procedure for selecting vulnerable households. In some instances, a list of vulnerable people is compiled by village level structures and this list remains the same for years.

The points above highlight the importance of viewing vulnerabilities as a state that can be mitigated by addressing some of the external factors leading poorer households to vulnerable situations. This point also relates to the issue of the linkages between poverty alleviation and promoting sustainable livelihoods (by creating enabling environments as a strategy for tackling poverty). Should poverty alleviation focus on giving hand outs or should the focus be more on creating an environment which will enable people to move out of the circle of poverty? On the same breath, should poverty eradication focus only on changing the conditions of poorer households by providing reliable services such as water services, or equal attention should also be paid to challenging the factors and practices (gender inequalities, social exclusion) leading some groups and individuals to be more prone to poverty and other shocks?

## **5 Concluding reflections**

Poverty and vulnerabilities are multifaceted concepts. They are complex, context specific and affected by wider political, social, economic and environmental factors. These concepts are so interlinked, and often difficult to unpack. Poverty makes people vulnerable to various shocks and stresses, while on the hand, their vulnerability to shocks and stresses exacerbate their poverty and hence their vulnerability to future shocks. From a water perspective, access to multiple water sources, has the potential to increase people water security and so to improve the resilience of poor people to other forms of vulnerability. However, ensuring this also requires the inputs of a number of sectors and role players. A starting point is indeed a good understanding of the factors constraining vulnerable people to access water for their multiple uses.



Identifying the most vulnerable households and people alone is only a starting point. What is important is to consider the factors underlying their vulnerabilities, and to use this understanding in addressing these factors. In our experience identifying the underlying factors leading to household's vulnerabilities proved to be complex.

This difficulty in recognizing the factors underlying vulnerabilities poses several questions:

- (i) In the absence of an external facilitator how would these factors be taken into account by service providers in planning and providing services to the most vulnerable?
- (ii) Given the invisibility and the inter linkages of some of these factors, how can service providers be supported (on an ongoing basis) in identifying and in responding to the non material dimensions of poverty?

The SWELL assessment made it clear that vulnerable people are indeed excluded in most service provision programs, particularly those programs with a poverty eradication agenda. This can partly be attributed to uncoordinated planning processes evident in the area of study or else where in South Africa. However, the exclusion of vulnerable people is also a result of the complexities involved in unpacking the root causes of vulnerabilities to external shocks.

A wide range of reasons were provided to explain the unintended exclusion of vulnerable groups in service provision. The main contributing factors could be linked to broader socio-political and socio-economic factors. Although stakeholders were able to identify some of the social factors and conditions that influence people's capacities to cope with shocks and stresses, it was evident in this experience that there was no clarity regarding the role of water services in addressing the underlying factors leading to the conditions and positions of vulnerable households. A lot of these issues were considered as falling within the mandate of social workers and of care givers. On the other hand, stakeholders from government sectors argued that their programs are to a large extent responsive to the needs of the 'poor' and therefore of the most vulnerable, although they 'might not be addressing all the problems of the poor', they are still contributing to 'poverty eradication'. The point above comes back to the question posed numerous times in this report regarding the role of water service providers in addressing the effects of poverty and vulnerabilities.

Which aspect or effects of poverty do different service providers address and what processes will ensure that, even those aspects that might be considered 'not falling within their mandates' are taken into account?

Rhetoric questions they are indeed, but it should be evident from the discussions in this paper that there is indeed so much more to be done. We are so full of questions because we realize that poverty is like a river running through ward 16 and many other villages in South Africa. But in this case, the river has no water to provide, but only hardship and suffering. For this reason, it is these questions that we are taking forward into our own

ongoing battle against poverty in rural areas, and our work with villagers, village structures and service providers.

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