



REAL PEOPLE DOING UNREAL THINGS

Franchising public service

It struck Kevin Wall, a civil engineer at the Council for Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR), as bizarre that in many small SA towns we can happily eat branded fast food and fill our cars with petrol from a local pump, but can't be guaranteed that water from a tap is safe to drink.

"We've built infrastructure at a rapid pace in SA, but, for a variety of reasons, it's often not being maintained," says Wall. "The major challenge is there are neither the skills nor effective incentives to maintain infrastructure, especially in outlying areas."

Various reports show that SA's infrastructure is in dire straits. For example, the yet-to-be-released Green Drop report, which assessed sewerage facilities across SA, shows that of 850 sewerage works, only 32 were functioning up to standard. Just four of those were outside the metropolitan areas.

The petrol and food industry analogy set Wall to thinking that franchising could be used to help the public sector revitalise the maintenance of basic infrastructure.

The CSIR needed an on-the-ground partner to play the role of franchisor, and brought Amanza'bantu Services, an East London-based company specialising in the construction of water infrastructure, on board.

MD Oliver Ive found that school toilets are one of the most neglected types of infrastructure.

"In many rural schools the toilets are so shocking that many learners, especially the girls, have to go home to relieve themselves — and because they generally live far from school, they don't come back to class," says Ive. "That has a major impact on their education."

The challenges to maintaining school toilets are wide-ranging. Ive found that many pit latrines built years ago had never been emptied. "Some were used as refuse dumps, others were totally overgrown by bush," he says.

The Eastern Cape education department agreed, and with development funding from Irish Aid, a project to



Oliver Ive and Kevin Wall

conduct routine maintenance on school toilets in the Butterworth education district was piloted. Six members of the community took up the opportunity to become trainee franchisees.

"With advice, training and support from Amanza'bantu, the franchisees were able to take out loans to start their businesses," says Wall. "They also required equipment — everything from protective clothing, digital cameras to bakkies and bush cutters."

Less than a year down the track, the franchisees — mostly women — are servicing more than 400 schools in the area. Turnover is around R500 000/year each. Payment is made from schools' existing budgets for facilities operation and maintenance.

The education department, delighted with the results, is requesting that the project be extended to another three districts, more than trebling the schools serviced.

"Equipped with the skills to manage the business of maintaining infrastructure, the franchisees will expand into other areas of infrastructure, such as hospitals and municipalities," says Ive.

Using franchisees to maintain small-scale infrastructure will overcome many challenges. "The franchising concept ensures quality control and reliability while offering first-time entrepreneurs the

Kevin Wall Civil engineer

THE UNREALITY CHECK

- Conceived the idea of using franchising to maintain public infrastructure
- Six franchisees now service 400 Eastern Cape school toilets as a pilot project
- Expanding the concept to municipalities



Franchisee at Butterworth

chance to set up profitable businesses," says Wall. "Whereas jobs created in construction are inevitably short-term, a maintenance job is a job for life — so the employment opportunities are sustainable."

Ive says similar partnerships can now be created in municipalities, and for routine maintenance of more than just water services.

Though many municipalities may not be able to justify the cost of employing full-time higher-level staff, the franchising concept allows this cost to be shared by many facilities.

Says Wall: "The franchising concept works with maintaining toilets, and it will work with potholes too." **Jacqui Pile**