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EFFECTIVE LINKAGES AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF VELD FIRES

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Keywords: Extension officer; organising; legislation; public management; linkage; governmental relations; system model; organisational arrangements.

ABSTRACT

Integrated public governance is one of the challenges of Government. The importance of governmental departments, NGOs and stakeholders working together in a coordinated and well-managed manner in times of natural and man-initiated disasters, cannot be emphasised enough. To determine the nature and extent of this, the management of the most severe veld fires during 2008 in the Waterberg District of the Limpopo Province was researched with reference to the nature and extent of the integrated public governance achieved. The agricultural extension officers' ability to establish interest groups in the respective communities and to build linkages between themselves and other organisations and government institutions has proved invaluable in the quest of the Limpopo Province Department of Agriculture (LDA) to bring about more effective public service delivery in the Province.

In the article, notice has been taken of the most prominent legislation in the field of agricultural public service rendering, and the way in which public management per se and governmental relations as 'vehicles' determined the level of effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the management of three major veld fires in the Alma, Rust de Winter and Dwaalboom areas. The response time by departmental officials of the various spheres of government and the ultimate time when governmental assistance was received, were compared.

The vital roles of the Agricultural Extension Officer and the supporting offices of LDA in the management of agricultural related crises, are also highlighted. Lastly some logical conclusions are drawn and recommendations made to improve the agricultural service rendering in the Province.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Integrated public governance is a major challenge for any government to implement in enhancing sustainable agricultural development. Strong effective vertical linkages between the various spheres of government at national, provincial and municipal level as well as horizontal linkages with people outside government and its bureaucracy like Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other agents cannot be overemphasised. People outside government may hold information to which public decision-makers (central or lower spheres) have no or only incomplete access. These linkages become even more important for faster response and more effective management when natural and man-initiated disasters occur.

During 2008, devastating veld fires destroyed thousands of hectares of valuable grazing in the Waterberg District of the Limpopo Province. The objective of this article is to show that effective linkaging and integrated public governance are essential and must be taken fully into account in the designing and implementing of more effective and efficient public management. To achieve this objective, the article will discuss different public management approaches followed in three respective areas of the Limpopo Department of Agriculture (LDA) in the Waterberg District, namely Alma, Dwaalboom and Rust de Winter where the veld fires occurred, and will conclude with the valuable lessons learnt in these different settings.

2. ORIENTATION

The Limpopo Province is the most northerly situated province in South Africa. It is divided into five districts and twenty-three municipal areas. The Waterberg District represents the most southern district of the province and consists of six municipal areas, namely Modimolle, Bela Bela, Thabazimbi, Lephhalale, Mokopane and Mookgophong. See Figure 1 for geographical locality map of the respective areas as well as where the disastrous veld fires occurred:

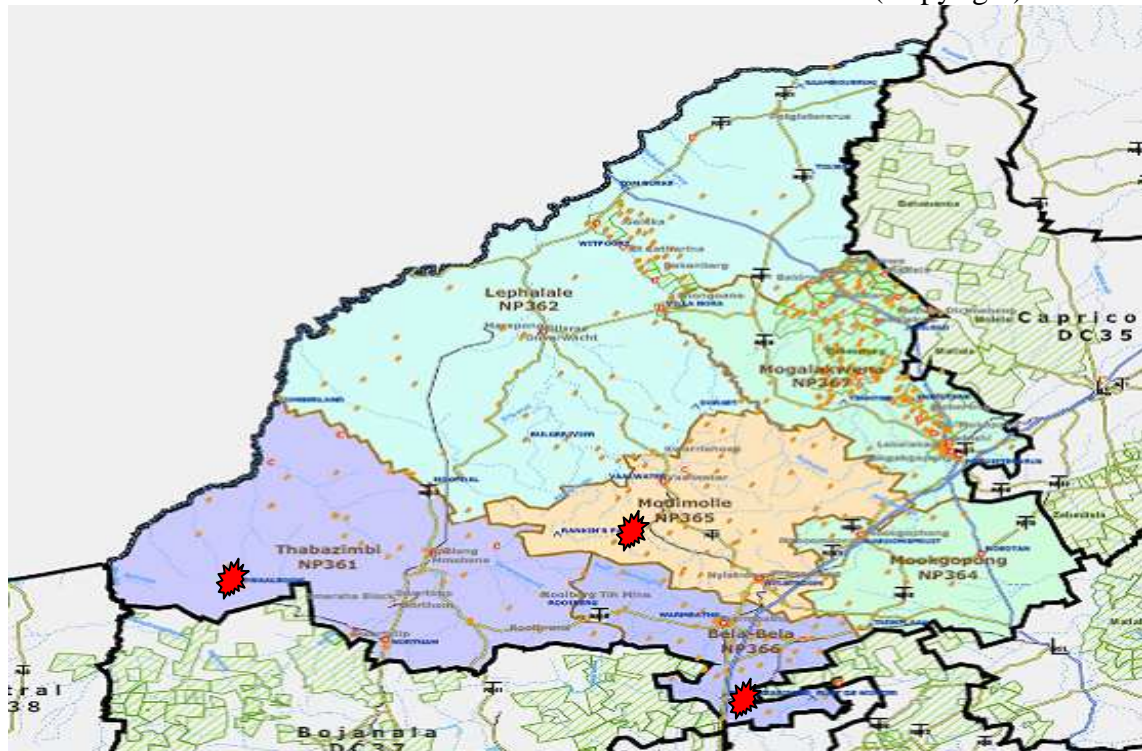


Figure 1: Locality map of Waterberg District
(Thabazimbi Municipality, 2009)

With reference to the nature of the day-to-day service rendering by LDA and its geographically dispersed offices, the following vision and mission have been identified and determined:

The vision statement is: *“A united and prosperous agricultural sector where people, livelihoods and natural resources are in perfect balance”*

The mission statement is: *“To contribute to the economic growth of the Province through sustainable agricultural sector and food security programmes for a better life for all.”*

(LDA, 2006:5).

It is important to understand the flow of information in LDA since the manner of command has an influence on the speed and accuracy in which information is passed on to relevant public decision-makers. Table 1 illustrates the flow of information in LDA:

Table 1: Flow of information in LDA with reference to Agricultural Extension Services in the Waterberg District

Level in LDA	Mandate
Provincial Level (Head of the Department)	Strategy Development and Decision-making: Evaluation of information received and decision-making of assistance to be given and determination of its format. Disseminate information on decisions taken through the relevant channels
District Level (Senior Manager: Cluster)	Tactical level: Assess information received, compile reports with recommendations and forward to higher level.
Municipal Level (Manager and technicians)	Operational level: Gather information and forward to the higher level

(Source: LDA Departmental Organogram: 2006)

The flow of information in the case of the veld fires is as follows:

Agricultural Extension Officers gather information and submit it to the Deputy Manager: Extension, who compiles a comprehensive report. This report is submitted to the specific area's Departmental Municipal Manager for approval and then forwarded to the relevant Municipal Cluster: Senior Manager. From there it is submitted to the General Manager Western Cluster and the General Manager: Technical Production Services. The General Manager: Technical Production Services, after consultation with the Head of the Department, then makes recommendations regarding the governmental assistance to be given or not. If need be, as in the case of the veld fire disaster at Alma, the information is also forwarded to the MEC of Agriculture in the Limpopo Province, who then forwards it to the National Department of Agriculture in Pretoria. This process led to the official declaration of Alma as a "Disaster Area", but not in the Rust de Winter and Dwaalboom incidents. When an area is declared a disaster area it receives financial assistance from Government within a short space of time, given the circumstances of the disaster. Normally this assistance will be in the form of a grant or in this case fodder for livestock supplied at a highly subsidised rate.

Other important role-players and stakeholders in the local agricultural environment of the Province are *inter alia*, the Waterberg District Municipality situated in Modimolle, the local municipalities of Bela Bela, Modimolle and Thabazimbi, agricultural unions such as AgriSA, the Northern Transvaal Agricultural Union, and the National African Farmers Union and private sector businesses which played an important role in the coordination and management of natural disasters like the veld fires.

3. LEGISLATIVE ASPECTS

The following legislation plays a determining role in the various actors' quests to use governmental relations as a public management vehicle to achieve more effective, efficient, economic and sustainable public service delivery within the Province:

Table 2: Legislation in SA since 1983 as related to agricultural services

Year:	Act:	Summarised purpose and/or goal:
1983	Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act 43 of 1983.	Aim of this document is to ensure that agricultural land is used for agriculture and not exploited for urban or industrial use (RSA, 1983).
1994	Public Service Act and Regulations 103 of 1994.	To provide for the organisation and administration of the public service of the Republic, the regulation of the conditions of employment, terms of office, discipline, retirement and discharge of members of the Public Service and matters connected therewith (RSA, 1994).
1995	White Paper on the Transformation of Public Service.	To establish a policy framework to guide the introduction and implementation of new policies and legislation aimed at transforming the South African public service (RSA, 1995).
1996	Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996.	This is the supreme law of the Republic, which embraces the human rights principles and sets forth the right of access to water as part of a lengthy list of social and economic rights. These include, <i>inter alia</i> , the right to a healthy environment, housing, health care, food, social security, education and culture (RSA, 1996).
1997	White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (better known as the <i>Batho Pele</i> White Paper).	This seeks to introduce a fresh approach to service delivery: an approach which puts pressure on systems, procedures, attitudes and behaviour within the Public Service and reorients them in the customer's favour, an approach which puts the people first (RSA, 1997).
1998	National Veld and Forest fire Act 101 of 1998.	To prevent and combat veld, forest and mountain fires throughout the Republic. The Act provides for a variety of institutions, methods and practices for achieving the purpose (RSA, 1998[a]).
1998	National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998.	To provide for co-operative, environmental governance by establishing principles for decision-making on matters affecting the environment, institutions that will promote co-operative governance and procedures for coordinating environmental functions exercised by organs of state (RSA, 1998[b]).
1998	Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998.	To provide for the definition and establishment of municipalities in accordance with the requirements relating to categories and types of municipalities and provide for an appropriate division of functions and powers between the categories of municipalities (RSA, 1998[c]).
1999	Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999.	To secure transparency, accountability, and sound management of the revenue, expenditure, assets and liabilities of the institutions to which this Act applies (RSA, 1999).
2004	Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003.	To secure sound and sustainable management of the financial affairs of municipalities and other institutions in the local sphere of government (RSA, 2003).
2005	Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act 13 of 2005.	To establish a framework for the national government, provincial governments and local governments to promote and facilitate intergovernmental relations (RSA, 2005).

From the aforementioned exposition of some of the most important pieces of regulating legislation in the public agricultural environment, one can see that LDA and its public policy executing organisational units have a wide variety of legislation to keep in mind when rendering extension services to the public.

4. LINKAGE PLANNING AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

The traditional definition of governance assumes that public decision-makers (central or lower spheres) have sufficient information about the available resources, prioritised needs and solutions as well as the most effective and economical ways of addressing societal needs. In reality, however, information and resources are usually unevenly shared at various levels. Information is not just a technical matter, but also has a socio-economic dimension. Participatory governance aims to address this problem by

introducing maximum transparency and sharing of information through the forming of linkages that include all actors and eventually lead to joint decision-making where applicable (Schneider, 1999).

The concept “linkage” is a term that is used to indicate that two systems are connected by information into a greater system. It is important if barriers occur between the two systems that they are permeable enough for messages and responses to flow out of each to the other, and that a link can be created between the two systems. Usually, poor communication between linkage partners, a lack of coordinated planning and implementation of actual linkages are the cause for inefficient linkages between major institutional actors in a collaborative governance quest. The following principles should be kept in mind with the planning of linkage systems (Riviera, 1996):

- Coordination and agreement on linkage planning methods by partner organisations and institutions;
- Sufficient involvement and representation of key partners;
- Adequate follow-through for planned activities, through the assignment of responsibilities;
- Effective commitment by all partners and actors;
- Sufficient resources (funding and staff) for implementation of partnerships and linkages;
- Time factor: The establishment and implementation of linkage plans require considerable time and attention, and approval at various levels of an institution;
- Effective communication structures between partners and actors;
- Flexibility in reaching the linkage agreements between organisations and institutions with different mandates and responsibilities;
- Supportive government policy and the necessary commitment by decision-makers;
- Recognition of the extent of interdependency between various actors;
- Agreement about shared benefits and costs where applicable; and
- Changes in the institutional environment like leadership or organisational structures. The linkage needs and requirements of partners often change with the institutional and economic environments, and therefore agreements reached between stakeholders during the planning phase should also be adjusted on a regular basis.

In addition to the aforementioned vehicle for improved collaborative governance at the grass-roots level, the aspect of governmental relations can be highlighted. Hattingh (1986) differentiates between three forms of it, being intra-governmental relations, inter-governmental and extra-governmental relations. Intra-governmental relations manifest within a public sector institution, inter-governmental relations manifest as the contact and deliberations between governmental institutions and extra-governmental relations are the result of contact and deliberations established by a public sector institution with associations, enterprises and individuals outside the governmental institution. The “secondary vehicle” which drives its realisation is found in the internal and external organizational arrangements of which communication is the most important one.

Another public management tool which the authors feel should be added to the formula for improved public service delivery on a regional scale is an understanding of the Politics-Administration System Model. See Figure 2 for a graphical illustration of the system.

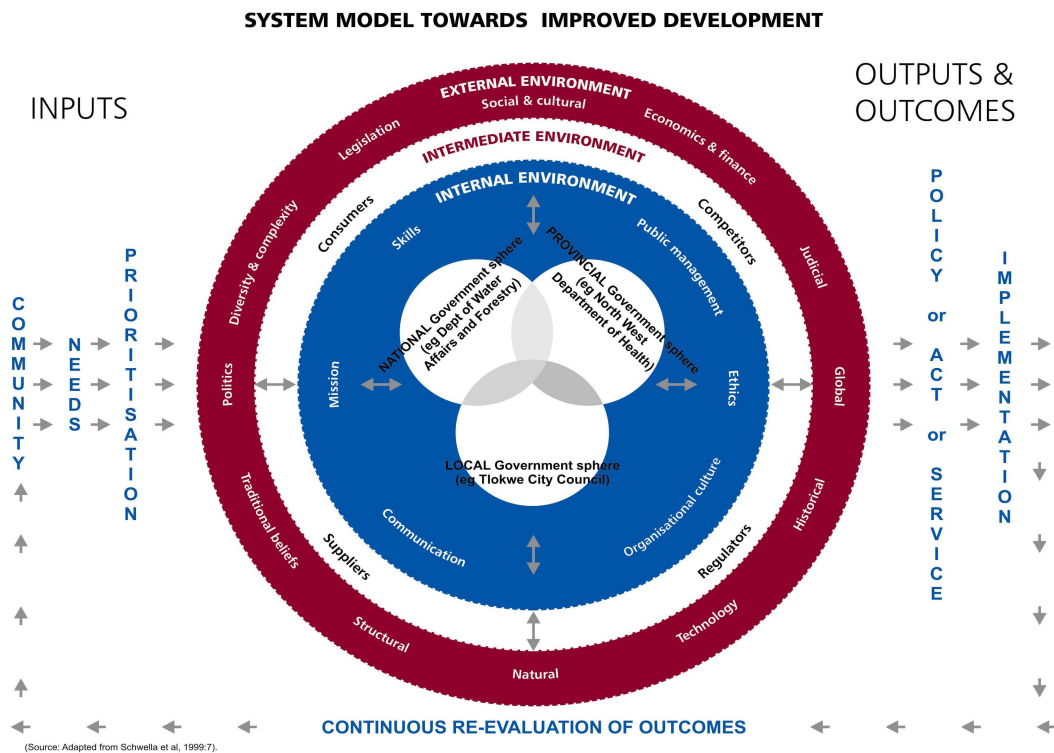


Figure 2: Public Management System Model
 (Adapted from Schwella et al, 1999:7)

One can see in Figure 2 that the needs identified by and in the various communities (on the left-hand side of the flow diagram), are prioritised and taken up in planned and budgeted public management and prioritisation of possible solutions to the identified challenges by the various role-players (indicated in the centre of the flow-diagram) before a specific output is produced (indicated on the right hand side of the flow-diagram). The arrows in the figure are indicative of the nature of contact, communication, co-operation, monitoring, and governmental relations as determinants of the resulting co-operative governance and organisation manifesting between all the actors in and from the different environmental spheres. The produced outputs then have specific implementation values and outcomes which can be monitored and evaluated by all concerned and eventually also by the communities where the initial need originated.

Clear identification and management of the following organisational principles are imperative for the improvement of communication, government relations, coordination and participatory governance:

- Nature and extent of foundational legislature in place;

- Effective, efficient and sound economic public management (planning, structuring, leading and control) of governmental institutions;
- Identification and maintaining an effective contact database of the correct actors involved – especially their individual strengths and weaknesses;
- Facilitation of effective intra-, inter- and extra-governmental relations with all actors by means of, *inter alia*, organising and modern communication technology; and
- Incorporation of the Public Management body of knowledge (PMBOK) regarding aspects such as strategic planning, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analyses, management by projects, risk management and performance management.

5. THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSIONIST IN ESTABLISHING AND IMPLEMENTING LINKAGES

An extension system cannot function effectively without relevant contributions from and constant two-way interaction between the institutional actors responsible for the agricultural development process. Many linkage problems between institutional actors in agricultural development are caused by poor coordination in the planning process, poor communication between linkage partners and the absence of the willingness or commitment to follow through with the actual linkage planning (ISNAR, 2001).

Not only are linkages between various institutional actors important, but also at all levels. Good cooperation at field (operational) level is virtually impossible without the active support and role of the extensionist in the process. The extensionist plays an important role in the promotion of participation and this role has led to descriptions of his/her activity as catalyst, educator, planner, coordinator, information broker, intermediary, mentor, activist, negotiator and mediator. This broad view of the extensionist's range suggests the following dimensions of his/her roles (Oakley, 1991):

- *Structuring*: The development of internal cohesion and solidarity among linkage partners, and of some form of structure or organisation which brings people together and serves as a forum for continued involvement. Here it is important that the different capacities of actors in the system should be recognized. Once these are understood, the respective responsibilities and objectives can be coordinated.
- *Facilitation*: This is a service role which assists the linkage partners to undertake specific actions designed to strengthen their participation. These actions include the acquiring of specific technical skills, gaining access to available resources or translating ideas into practical projects.
- *Linking*: S/he helps to develop links between people with similar contexts and facing similar needs.
- *Animation*: This entails the process of assisting partners to examine and explain issues in their own words and to realize what they can do to bring about change.

- *Intermediary*: S/he serves in the initial stages as a go-between in regard to helping establish contacts within and between structures to improve participation and to create the pre-requisite conditions necessary for participation. To be effective in this regard the extensionist should understand the specific needs of the clients and introduce them to the procedures and mechanisms for dealing with this.
- *Withdrawal*: This entails the progressive, conscious withdrawing from the direct role with the linkage partners and increasingly to encourage them to undertake and take responsibility for the specific structure.

Despite the aforementioned clearly defined roles, many extensionists still believe in their role as that of teaching or telling instead of creating an environment where people form effective linkages in order to help themselves.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three case studies were identified in the Waterberg district of Limpopo Province, which was struck by devastating veld fires during 2008. Data were collected from departmental reports that were submitted, the minutes of relevant meetings held with the various actors in the various municipalities, statistics on *inter alia*, the number of “applications for fodder relief” received and analyses done by fellow officials of LDA in the Waterberg District office and at the provincial Head Office in Polokwane on the nature of public management during the disasters.

This aforementioned information was measured against the following set of criteria to determine the reasons for faster or less speedy LDA assistance to affected farmers:

- Involvement of various spheres of government: Local, District and Provincial;
- Existence of farming / community structures or unions;
- Support from NGOs; and
- Reaction time of various actors.

A three-point Likert scale was used to measure the effectiveness of the integrated public management of the veld fires in the Waterberg District, where 1 = Not effective, 2 = Average, and 3 = Very effective.

7. ANALYSIS OF THE VELD FIRES

The following summarised exposition provides information and explanations on the veld fire outbreaks in the Waterberg District during 2008, the developments around them and LDA support realised during and after them.

7.1 Alma

The veld fire started on Friday, 29 August 2008, at the Verdrag Training Centre of the South African Police Service (SAPS), 50km northwest of Modimolle. The fire was finally contained on 1 September 2008. A total of 66 000ha was destroyed which affected 52 farmers. The farmer unions, AgriSA and Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU), took the lead and mobilised immediately. They contacted the Provincial Department of Agriculture, the MEC office, the Waterberg District Municipality, and the Office of the Executive Mayor. The farmers in the area also had a risk

management plan among themselves and the implementation of this plan ensured that the fire was contained within a short period. An emergency meeting was arranged for 2 September 2008 with all stakeholders present. The MEC for Agriculture, the Executive Mayor of Waterberg District and other high ranking officials of LDA and the local municipality all attended the meeting.

The local farmer unions compiled a list of farmers affected and also of farmers who were in dire need of livestock fodder. Donated bales of grass were distributed from 5 to 7 September 2008 to the farmers according to the priority list received. The Waterberg District Municipality footed the bill for the transportation of the fodder from the Toowoomba Research station in Bela Bela to the disaster-stricken farmers. The farmer unions also went so far as to contact a service provider who took over the process by registering with LDA as a service provider and provided the necessary quotations for fodder for the livestock. They needed official letters from LDA that would enable the disaster-stricken farmers to obtain fodder at a 70% subsidised rate. These letters were made available on 11 September 2008.

Table 3: Rating of critical factors for successful integrated management of veld fires in the Alma area

	Critical factors:	Rating of management:
1	Risk reduction team in place	3
2	Inter-departmental forum in place	2
3	Risk Reduction Plan in place	3
4	Roles and responsibilities of all actors clearly defined and allocated	2
5	Leadership informed	3
6	Extension officers involvement / presence in veld fire area	3
7	Response time by extension officials in submitting documentation	3
8	Response time of farmers in submitting claim forms	3
9	Response time of LDA on assistance	3
10	Response time of Local Government on assistance.	3

Note: 1: Not effective; 2: Average; 3: Very effective

The level of co-operative governance manifesting in this case was applauded by the chairperson of AgriSA when he said:

“Frankly I have not yet seen this level of expediency and commitment in any other Government Department – Congrats!!!!” (E-mail H. Jansen)

7.2 Rust de Winter

The disastrous veld fire in the Rust de Winter area also started on 29 August 2008 and was contained on 31 August 2008. The fire was reported to LDA on 1 September 2008. Most of the local farmers, labourers as well as “Working on Fire” teams from DWAF with their specialised equipment and trained fire-fighters were involved in the fighting of these fires. “Working on Fire” teams are appointed on a contract basis by the Department of Water Affairs and trained operators on the combating of veld fires.

Farmers and communities can call for their assistance at a nominal rate in the event of veld fires.

Table 4: Rating of critical factors for successful management of veld fires in Rust de Winter area.

	Critical factors:	Rating of management:
1	Risk reduction team in place	1
2	Inter-departmental forum in place	1
3	Risk Reduction Plan in place	1
4	Roles and responsibilities of all actors clearly defined and allocated	1
5	Leadership informed	1
6	Extension officers involvement / presence in veld fire area	1
7	Response time by extension officials in submitting documentation	1
8	Response time of farmers in submitting claim forms	1
9	Response time of LDA on assistance	2
10	Response time of Local Government on assistance.	1

Note: 1: Not effective; 2: Average; 3: Very effective

Fifteen farmers in the area were affected with a total of 12 400 ha grazing destroyed. The same fires also destroyed additional thousands of hectares in the neighbouring provinces of Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Survey documents of the extent of the disastrous fires were only submitted to the District and Provincial offices of LDA by 7 October 2008, delaying governmental assistance. Farmers only received their letters for subsidised fodder assistance during the week of 15 December 2008.

7.3 Dwaalboom

Fire in the Dwaalboom area started on 2 November 2008 and was contained on 4 November 2008. The outbreak and containment of the veld fire was reported to the SAPS on 4 November 2008. LDA was notified on 5 November 2008 and arranged a meeting with the affected farmers and the local municipal disaster manager for 7 November 2008. This was the second veld fire in the area for the 2008 season. An estimated total of 12 050 ha was burnt during the period of 2 – 4 November 2008 with a total area of about 32 000ha burnt during this season in the Dwaalboom area. The veld fires affected sixteen farmers.

Table 5: Rating of critical factors for successful integrated management of veld fires in the Dwaalboom area

	Critical factors:	Rating of management:
1	Risk reduction team in place	3
2	Inter-departmental forum in place	1
3	Risk Reduction Plan in place	2
4	Roles and responsibilities of all actors clearly defined and allocated	2
5	Leadership informed	2
6	Extension officers involvement / presence in veld fire area	2
7	Response time by extension officials in submitting documentation	2
8	Response time of farmers in submitting claim forms	3
9	Response time of LDA on assistance	2
10	Response time of Local Government on assistance.	1

Note: 1: Not effective; 2: Average; 3: Very effective

The community around Dwaalboom offered support in whatever way possible. Special mention was made of the Thabazimbi Municipal Council, PPC Dwaalboom and OBARO, who provided manpower, as well as fire-extinguishing and disaster-relief equipment. Due to ineffective communication and extra-governmental relations with the service provider, the initial quotation only mentioned delivery of fodder at Alma, and an amended quotation was needed for delivery at Dwaalboom. The disaster relief letters of LDA were only issued on 15 December 2008.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These three case studies in the Limpopo Province illustrate that an effective extension officer usually maintains good relationships with all actors in the area to bring about efficient, cost-effective and sustainable public service delivery. The fact that the disaster-stricken farmers and the responsible agricultural extension officers of LDA in the area knew and trusted each other, led to quick and effective sharing of valuable information. This was not the case in the Rust de Winter area where it took 19 days to complete and submit survey reports to LDA's Provincial office. The fact that the farmers were not formally organised also negatively impacted on the recovery and assistance time.

An effective network system between all spheres of government is vital - the faster a report can move from ward level through all the channels to national government, the sooner assistance can be granted. It is also important that the various departments involved in offering support to farmers should be informed about who is responsible for which documentation to submit in the process of assistance, since some processes can run simultaneously. Reports that are submitted to sector departments must also be submitted to Local Government which forwards information through a different channel to the Office of the President. This process then ensures that governmental

assistance is initiated from the President's office as well, and not only from the relevant National Department.

Support and endorsement of the Risk Reduction Plan by all role-players are necessary for effective and speedy assistance when needed. The Alma (Modimolle) report was submitted two days after the fire, the Dwaalboom (Thabazimbi) report five days after the fire, while the Rust de Winter report was submitted nineteen days after the fire was controlled. This long period for report had a direct influence on the turn-around time for the farmers receiving governmental assistance.

Well-organised farmer groups make it easier to combat fires and to gather information. Positive involvement of farmers unions also fast-tracked not only the identification and assistance of beneficiaries, but also helped with the identification of appropriate service providers.

The nature of inter-governmental relations between farmers also plays a determining role in the quest to facilitate more effective governmental relations and co-operative governance. In the case of the Alma veld fire, the community as well as other role-players like the municipality, government and NGOs rendered assistance. The same co-operation and coordination however did not materialise in the Dwaalboom and Rust de Winter veld fires where some of those involved merely stood back and observed the disaster unfolding before their eyes without active assistance.

The following recommendations are made, taking into account the aforementioned conclusions and lessons learned:

- A formal working relationship between farmers, regulating and public service rendering institutions as well as non-governmental enterprises and individuals should be developed and facilitated by the geographically dispersed extension officials;
- Farmers should be assisted to organise themselves, if not formally as part of a union, at least as a fire committee;
- Farmers should be encouraged to register and become actively involved as members in the Fire Protection Association in their respective sectors; and
- Maintenance of firebreaks by landowners is imperative for the management and control of runaway fires. The primary role of responsible extension officers is to inform their farmers about their responsibilities with regard to the Veld and Forest Act (1998).

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