

Personal Stories of Change

Jean-Pierre Mas: A perspective from the international private sector

“Only when you start integrating additional perspectives can your position move closer to the right position”



Jean-Pierre Mas was Chief Executive Officer of Johannesburg Water Management (JOWAM) during his membership of the Water Dialogues South Africa (WD-SA). He is a Civil Engineer with 25 years experience in the design, management, operation and maintenance of water and sanitation systems in South Africa and various African countries as well as Latin America and France. In his five years as Chief Executive Officer of JOWAM, Jean-Pierre assumed responsibility for the management of Johannesburg Water – serving a population of 3.5 million people up to 2006 – and then responsibility for the City of Johannesburg’s Phakama programme aimed at enhancing and optimising various municipal systems and procedures for the public good.

In 2005, Jean-Pierre attended a meeting hosted by the Department for Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAf), which kick-started the Water Dialogues initiative in South Africa. He attended as the private sector representative and listened as Penny Urquhart and Jessica Wilson* described what The Water Dialogues was and how it might be useful for South Africa (the meeting was an open invitation to all stakeholders present).

While its overall focus at that stage was not defined, as hosts of the meeting, DWAf did express a desire to see the dialogue explore how to support and capacitate the public sector, which was in synch with JOWAM’s own capacity building agenda. Eventually, WD-SA did clearly define its research focus as being an exploration of all types of institutional arrangements that would be examined through a series of case studies.

Jean-Pierre joined The Water Dialogues with a long track record of water service management experience behind him; but he was well aware that the task at hand was a social issue and “not just a technical and financial matter”.

Before The Water Dialogues and his work with JOWAM, Jean-Pierre worked on a BoTT programme launched by DWAf to provide water to rural communities in South Africa. The project brought together a consortium integrated by the operator alongside a lead consultant, a lead contractor and an NGO, in an attempt to ensure participation from the communities and longer-term sustainability of the project’s outcomes. Without this element, Jean-Pierre feels the project would not have been successful, but it was not easy persuading all parties of this. The Water Dialogues thus became a continuity of this experience as well as an opportunity to address the stalemate around private versus public that was stopping the sector from progressing. The Water Dialogues also developed at a time when JOWAM was

* Penny Urquhart was co-author of the Scoping Study review, which formed the backbone for The Water Dialogues project, written and presented in 2004. Jessica Wilson is a founding member of the project and works for the Environmental Monitoring Group, Cape Town, South Africa

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facing criticism and open hostility regarding its involvement in the Soweto Programme and hence seemed to offer a platform for really explaining their own position to the rest of the sector.

Jean-Pierre maintains that while he was fully committed to The Water Dialogues from its outset, this commitment rested conditionally on establishing a clear code of conduct – an open representation for Jean-Pierre and other members of the group’s commitment to dialogue and not simply to throwing arguments across the table. This was not about “putting difficult things under the carpet” but about the “agreed need for ‘fresh air’ and opening windows – to move away from stereotypes”. In fact, Jean-Pierre says that in line with the setting up of the Code of Conduct, which surprisingly was ratified without too much difficulty, the ongoing substantive discussions between the various stakeholders and sectors “shed a lot of light onto what was important to different people; the reasons and values behind the positions”.

As an example of how these perspectives can be illuminated, Jean-Pierre describes a time when WD-SA discussed the Soweto project, and for the first time he became more fully aware of some of the positions of other members. This became an opportunity for Jean-Pierre to better understand the “human element” and the difficulty that various policies can create for people. Equally, it allowed Jean-Pierre to put forward some of the major opposing factors to this perspective, namely the service provider has an obligation to be fair to everyone and not be indiscriminately lenient to those who don’t pay (despite cases where they could afford to).

Jean-Pierre points out that National Working Group members share the same values when it comes to trying to get water services to all, particularly the poor, but they disagree on how to go about doing it. It became evident to these members that having all perspectives at the table allows a constant means for knowledge exchange. It was essential in Jean-Pierre’s opinion that the members of the Group reached this recognition that all perspectives are needed in a dialogue. “The environment around the Soweto project was totally polarised and stereotypes well-entrenched,” Jean-Pierre says. “If started earlier The Water Dialogues would have been a big help. Personally, in future I will be more cautious to take into account other perspectives even if certain timing has to be met.”

Among its other achievements, Jean-Pierre highlights the important role that the “chain of trust” between members of the Dialogues plays in creating a platform beyond the dialogue, which enables the wider sector community to “give each other a chance”. Jean-Pierre strongly advocates that it is important for the dialogue to initially operate within a small group; but the “bigger trust” inevitably follows on from this.

Reflecting on the Dialogues, Jean-Pierre says: “The question shouldn’t be asked in terms of: is your position right or wrong, but whether you are missing the full picture. Only when you start integrating additional perspectives can your position move closer to the right position. [Conducting research through the Dialogue] provides the opportunity to learn – about aspects where your understanding is not fully comprehensive.”