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EA capacity building in Africa – trial, errors and successes

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Broadly taken there is high-level African commitment to embracing the concept of sustainable development, and over recent years there have been efforts to convert this commitment into sustained and productive action. There is also a general recognition that environmental assessments (EA) are useful and necessary tools for reaching the goal of sustainable development. However, whilst momentum has grown considerably in recent years, capacity is still insufficient for sound, self-sustained environmental management and the use of EA in development planning, approval and management. Capacity building is a multi-faceted, long-term process, and it is important for all partners to appreciate the need for balancing short term needs for professional assistance with longer term goals of acquiring strong national teams of professionals.

Environmental institutions in Africa have developed relatively rapidly over the last 10-15 years, and so has the legislation, but the administration and capacity to prepare and implement EAs and environmental management have been lagging behind. The reasons for this are many, but among the key factors is a general deficit of democratic governance. EAs need to be transparent and permitted to involve public participation at various stages, and where this is not possible the EAs may lend themselves to misuse, and favouring special interests or political rent seeking. Institutions responsible for the implementation of EAs must also have a strong capability of enforcement, which often is lacking in developing countries. A successful EA program justifying in-dept capacity building requires an educated and informed middle class demanding environmental quality, services and benefits, and access to free speech and an active media able to voice criticisms about environmental mismanagement. These challenges remain, though much less so than 25 years ago when global concerns for environmental degradation began to grow and institutional responses, including EA, were launched.

In summary, although there has been notable progress in Africa and now most countries have some basic arrangement of law, policy, administrative procedures, and government institutions to implement EA, the capacity to administer these EA arrangements is generally weak and inadequate, and there is even less capacity to monitor the implementation of EAs.

How capacity building for EAs evolved in Africa

The general lack of adequate EA capacity in Africa to secure sustainable development was realized already in 1995 when a high-level meeting of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) was held in Durban, South Africa, and resulted in a broad recognition of the value of EA, and identified a number of priorities for EA development in the region. This was a watershed event that gave new impetus to EA development and sustainable development, this time with high-level African political support. It was immediately realized that there had to be a strong focus on capacity development if EAs were to be prepared by local African consultants instead of international teams. An assessment of capacity needs was done by IUCN and an African Stakeholder Conference for EA Capacity Building was subsequently held in Nairobi in 1998 to discuss the assessment results and the way forward. The Nairobi conference precipitated several subsequent working-level discussions that led to a number of sub-regional and regional efforts for organized EA capacity development. An *African Stakeholder Action Plan for EA Capacity Building* was subsequently developed, although it was entirely based on donor funding, input, and support.

With the *African Stakeholder Action Plan for EA Capacity Building* as a guide, the Netherlands Government and the World Bank organized and funded an EA stakeholder meeting in 2000 that determined the need for a facilitating secretariat in Africa to promote the implementation of the Action Plan. This secretariat would also establish close links and communicate regularly with donors, and would network with various sub-regional and national initiatives for EA development. The Capacity Development and Linkages for Environmental Impact Assessment in Africa (CLEIAA) was established in Ghana as an interim secretariat for these purposes with start-up funding from Netherlands and the World Bank.

African EA specialists also developed the idea for a center of excellence for EA capacity-building in SADC countries, and the Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment (SAIEA) in Windhoek, Namibia was launched in 2001. SAIEA was the first and is today the most developed of a number of similar sub-regional institutions that include the Eastern African Association for Environmental Assessment (EAAEA), the Indian Ocean Association for Environmental Assessment (IOAEA), the West African Association for Environmental Assessment (WAAEA), and the Partnership for African Environmental Sustainability (PAES).

Several donors at the EA stakeholder meeting in Nairobi in 2000 became involved in direct or indirect support to individual networks. USAID's Regional Office in Nairobi became an active supporter of the Eastern African Association for Impact Assessment providing start up funding for two years. It later developed a pilot professional development (PD) fellowships training program that was offered through CLEIAA. A number of institutions both new and old became hosts for these EA building initiatives. The Dutch Government, in addition to providing core funding for CLEIAA, also supported a three-year program that funded African participation in IAIA's training programs and conferences.

The World Bank with Norwegian trust funds continued to provide support to several of the CLEIAA nodes in the form of short courses and workshops for a number of different EA related activities, and also provided separate funding for a project on democracy and public participation in EA in the SADC region to be implemented by SAIEA. CIDA funded the creation of an EA Policy in Zimbabwe and seconded staff to SAIEA. The European Union participated in several of the meetings that occurred as a result of these activities and expressed willingness to consider significant support to the CLEIAA system once it was permanently established and operational. DFID also participated in several meetings and indicated particular interest in SEA capacity-building activities that might be developed through these networks. Other potential partners that have been involved in the development of these activities include the Franchophone Secretariat of IAIA, the African Development Bank, and UNEP.

Although all these meetings, contacts and initiatives, led to a lot of EA capacity building activities, the *African Stakeholder Action Plan for EA Capacity Building* remained mainly

a reference document and a strategy for the bookshelves. However, SAIEA took the initiative in 2003 to reformulate the *African Stakeholder Action Plan for EA Capacity Building* in a joint conference with all the stakeholders and networks, and this resulted in the “*Environmental Assessment and Management capacity building strategy for Africa*”. This strategy proposes action through five programs: 1) EA and Management Organizational Architecture; 2) Training and Education; 3) Human Resources Development; 4) Policy Development; and Awareness and 5) Constituency Building. It is targeting stakeholders in the national public sector, the regional public sector, the private sector, and civil society. This revised and refined strategy continues to depend upon donors and sponsors for implementation.

In parallel with these institutional developments, the local consulting industries have interpreted the signals and responded with provision of EA services for both public- and private-sector clients. There are also a growing number of university-based groups and indigenous firms that do EA, especially in South Africa. The donors routinely use these services in preparing own projects. The quality of these services is highly variable and, with the exception of firms that have strong international or South African support, the results are often well below required standards. Capacity building in EA development and management continues therefore to be of high priority for Africa, along with some quality control system for vetting consultants. IAIA is presently in the process of developing a system for vetting EA consultants, based to a large extent on the regulations for Certification of EA Practitioners in South Africa.

Needs and demands

EA Capacity building efforts in Africa have to a large degree been driven by the personal interest of EA professionals and practitioners. There has been efforts to estimate the future demand and need for consultants and staff with EA expertise in Africa, but these efforts have mostly stranded because the situation presents a very time dependent and dynamic picture riddled with uncertainties. The demand for EA capacity is a function of development and donor activities, and particularly industrial development continues to be weak outside Southern Africa. In some countries, donors represent the only development institutions of significance requiring EAs to be done for projects, but also donors are increasingly channelling aid to forms of assistance which have less need for environmental assessments. Such aid is given as programme assistance, structural

adjustment programs, policy development, and national budget support which have few immediate or identifiable hard inputs requiring environmental assessments. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) suitable to address such dynamic program activities are still in its infancy and not often applied in Africa. However, it is increasingly becoming clear that having a strategic environmental assessment and policy in place when developments are being planned have long term benefits for decision makers and planners. Private investors are also increasingly becoming aware of the need to do environmental assessments properly in order to be in good standing with financiers and donors. Most African governments are also signatories to a number of international conventions where there are built in requirements for EAs.

Several of the existing EA networks in Africa did make an effort to do some form of capacity needs assessment, including CLEIAA, the Franchophone IAIA for French speaking West Africa, and SAIEA for the SADC region. However, although these efforts yielded important information and overviews, there were in the end few demand function estimates that could be used efficiently by practitioners.

In reality, throughout Africa, training and capacity building in the field of environmental assessment does not follow any established demand or needs assessment. Most formal training is given as an integral part of training in natural resource management or similar related topics. This is particularly true for universities and higher learning centres. Specialist short courses are given mostly on an ad-hoc basis, although fairly regularly in some cases (Ghana, Tanzania).

The institutional basis and public awareness

The institutional basis for EA development and use is strong in theory but weak in reality in Africa beyond South Africa. EA methodology development, regulation, capacity development, implementation, enforcement, and monitoring are normally the responsibility of Ministries of Environment or similar institution. In a vast majority of these cases these ministries have very limited power and are often bypassed by other and “heavier” ministries when developments are discussed. Even donor agencies with a strong formal focus on environmental management and conservation often pay limited attention to ministries or departments of environment when discussing aid programs with

recipient countries. Their counterpart agencies are always the ministries of finance or planning.

Although the legal basis for EA and environmental management in many African countries are quite well developed, the implementation and enforcement is very weak. The reasons for this are to be found in inadequate environmental staffing throughout the administrative systems due to financial constraints, lack of the ability to retain professionally trained staff since well trained staff can find better paid employment outside the responsible ministries, and a widespread and general lack of public concern for environmental standards, and finally the all too common opposition from private investors and industries. Very often national institutions and developers still view EA requirements as an unnecessary cost and obstacle to rapid development.

A major problem in this context is that the public awareness of environmental issues and context is very low. Everyone is concerned about access to clean drinking water, the need for decent air quality, the need for green spaces for children, and oftentimes also for issues like soil conservation, conservation of vegetation and wildlife, etc., but somehow this does not find an adequately strong voice when developments are planned by local investors or politicians, and are seldom heard in discussions with ministries of finance or in the dialogue between countries and donors. Although serious donors require EAs for development projects, they are also subject to a recipient orientation that rarely give priority to environmental health and sustainability, or even environmental conventions they have ratified.

Because of this lack of general public awareness, capacity building for EA in Africa should have a broader focus and incorporate the promotion of public environmental awareness. Capacity building for EAs in countries or regions without public awareness of the importance of a healthy environment is almost bound to fail, and that situation has to a large extent reduced the successes of EA capacity building efforts in Africa. If the public has no concern for the environment in their local living area, no local authority is going to be successful in creating an environmentally sound and healthy living conditions, and environmental impacts assessments of development projects may in such cases easily be futile exercises for the book shelves.

Positive impacts

Mitigating environmental impacts normally means that negative impacts of development activities are removed or compensated for so that the negative effects on humans and nature are brought back towards zero or to an enhanced positive status. The focus of EAs are almost always upon negative environmental impacts although environmental impacts are not always of the negative kind. Nevertheless, benign environmental impacts are often overlooked and bypassed quietly by developers and environmentalists alike. The positive environmental impacts of for example closing an open sewer system is seldom given a measured value in the EA although it may implicitly be one of the real reasons for an infrastructure project in the area, a project that may otherwise get its negative impacts carefully evaluated and detailed. A more neutral environmental accounting may have significant benefits in that it would demonstrate an apparent holistic and objective review of a development undertaking, thus silencing the common critics of the “biased” environmentalist profession. Capacity building efforts in Africa have to a large extent omitted to focus on such positive effects, and have rather led to an attitude where EA practitioners are viewed with scepticism and seen as a policing and delaying element in development.

Capacity building in EA management seldom includes an explicit assessment of positive environmental impacts and this has contributed to the all too common negative reputation of EA practitioners that they are always trying to stop development projects. By paying more attention to the positive sides of EAs, the market demand for EAs may over time increase.

Individual initiatives and sustainability

The logic of EA and its environmental focus has the ability to create enthusiasm and admirers. This is also true in Africa where a number of enthusiastic professionals have brought EA to the surface and to public attention over recent years. Without these champions the environment would undoubtedly have suffered more. One of the problems facing these champions is their relatively low number compared to the vastness of the African continent. Only recently have their numbers been growing sufficiently in some countries to enable the establishment of professional associations or networks. With the gradual introduction of Internet and email the situation is improving with sub-regional and regional initiatives being started. The African EA consultant business has also suffered under this because EA professionals have been too thinly

spread out to enable teams to be set up that can compete with international EA consultant teams from the developed world. This is often frustrating well educated and motivated professionals who have returned from finalized training abroad, but who finds very few work opportunities and stimulating networks in relative vicinity.

Most of the EA associations and networks in Africa are the results of the initiatives of individual “champions”. Although it is crucial and very positive that these champions exist, without whom very little would have been done in Africa, the structures they build are often fragile. If the champions leave, the structures often go dormant or collapses all together. Too little effort has been done in building teams around the champions that can secure sustainable institutions.

Sub-regional cooperation and Centres of Excellence

To strengthen links between individual EA professionals, learning centres and environmental authorities, professionals from most sub-regions in Africa started a dialogue that has resulted in several informal and formal professional networks. Presently there are at least one network covering Eastern Africa from Eritrea to Tanzania called the Eastern African Association for Environmental Assessment based in Nairobi, another covering the Indian Ocean States called the Indian Ocean Association for Environmental Assessment based in Mauritius, and yet another in West Africa covering the area from Senegal to Nigeria and called the Western African Association for Environmental Assessment based in Cotonou, Benin. There is also PAES (the Partnership for African Environmental Sustainability) based in Kampala, Uganda, and an Central African Association for Environmental Assessment based in Cameroon. There are also a few national IAIA affiliate organizations. Most of these associations or networks are struggling with finances and only has a minimal program based on voluntary work or donor support. Membership fees where they are requested are minimal and does not cover more than some basic activities.

Although the enthusiasm among its members is there, there is not enough personal economy to enable payment of membership fees that could offer a meaningful program for its members. A basic activity in all these associations is therefore to raise funds from donors

The idea of establishing Centres of EA Excellence in Africa were launched quite early on. Already at IAIA'94 in Durban the topic was discussed widely and had already then

been on the drawing board for some time. However, careful analysis showed in almost all cases that there was an inadequate demand for such centres, particularly at the national level. A few national centres had however been developed by particularly interested individuals, like at the Institute for Resource Assessment attached to the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and the Environmental Protection Authority in Accra, Ghana, or the EPA in Cotonou in Benin. Regional centres appeared more promising, but meant a more complicated legal and jurisdictional process. Only in South Africa was there a potential sufficiently large demand sector to enable more serious considerations of building an EA centre of excellence. The South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) had already at the time of the IAIA conference in Durban initiated contacts with interested individuals, and with some international support the idea of developing an Southern African centre of excellence for EAs led to the formal establishment of the Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessments (SAIEA) in Windhoek in Namibia by the year 2000.

SAIEA has proven to be a centre which with very limited international start-up support has moved to almost self sustainability based on income from advisory services to Southern African industries. However, the key factor in this positive development has been the enthusiasm and hard work of individuals. SAIEA today is a key capacity development force in the SADC region of Africa.

Nevertheless, although Centres of Excellence stand as a long term goal for many African countries, the demand for EA capacity training in each country will probably be insufficient for a long time to come. a few sub-regional centres may be possible if attached to regular universities, an effort which is presently underway in Ghana.

Donor support – financial sustainability

Donors like the World Bank with Norwegian trust funds, and The Netherlands, have been very important contributors and supporters for the establishment of EA professional networks in Africa. However, such support has been mainly due to interested individuals, and never reached any significant level beyond some minimal support for workshops, secretarial assistance, publications, and scholarships. Much of the support was also limited in time, creating weak incentives for longer term professional involvement. The majority of networks in Africa have been built on donor funding and enthusiastic individuals, none of which are stable systems. Only the Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment has been able to build a more economically sustainable

basis providing advisory services to private industries in Southern Africa. Although SAIEA has a small secretariat, it links together around 400 EA professionals in Southern Africa and can therefore offer a credible alternative to consultant companies from the developed world.

Fees from association members are rarely feasible as a stable funding source in Africa, but administrative overhead fees from EA work and training for donors can provide an important input to the running of their activities if well managed and planned. The sustainability of the EA professional networks in Africa is still uncertain. To pay fees for memberships in professional networks is still an uncommon practice among many African professionals, used to donor funding and support, regretfully leading to weak associations with inadequate maintenance budgets.

Conclusions

Building EA capacity in Africa is a road fraught with difficulties. Main problems are a lack of understanding among government staff and development investors for the multiple benefits offered by the EA process. Also, the lack of public concern for a healthy environment affects negatively upon political priorities in favour of EA work. This in turn affects the funding for capacity building which as a result is almost entirely dependent upon donors.

In spite of irregular and inadequate funding, individual champions have made tremendous advances in the profession in Africa, establishing professional associations, centres of excellence, training opportunities etc. Regretfully so many of these efforts depend on enthusiastic individuals and are therefore by definition fragile institutions. However, over time there are teams being built around these individuals providing a more secure future.

Great EA strategies have been made, but these are still awaiting donor funding, making them somewhat unrealistic. However, if public concern can be built, and requests made to donors through the central ministries like ministries of finance or planning, donors will be more willing to listen.

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