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Openness and Innovation in Colliery Rehabilitation Process Builds Community Awareness

The process of developing rehabilitation measures for a disused colliery in Witbank, South Africa, allowed for extensive creative opportunities for the involvement of the local community. The process was marked by its innovation and flexibility.

The Transvaal and Delagoa Bay (T&DB) Colliery project involved the investigation and design of rehabilitation measures for an abandoned underground coal mine north-west of Witbank in Mpumalanga, South Africa. After the mine closed, many parts of it collapsed or subsided. Spontaneous combustion of remaining coal also occurred, adding to the subsidence.

Residents in the area traverse the site daily en route to work in the neighbouring industrial area, exposing themselves to considerable health and safety risks as footpaths pass over undermined ground and through burning areas.

According to a review of the project conducted by Common Ground for the Calabash project, public participation formed a significant component of the rehabilitation process. Issues and concerns were solicited from stakeholders and significant effort was invested in raising awareness in the surrounding communities of the dangers associated with the site.

A dedicated programme of awareness raising was conducted which resulted in a high level of awareness amongst stakeholders of the dangers of the T&DB Colliery site. One of the key challenges was to shift entrenched habits that fundamentally threatened local inhabitants' safety and basic day to day survival. Innovative and intensive techniques were used including the formation of an informal steering committee with key stakeholders from surrounding communities, the production of a township play about the site and access control surveys.

Stakeholders interviewed indicated that it was easy to relate to the message conveyed by the play as it was created in a township style. The access survey provided an effective means of talking to regular users of the site and educating them on the use of safe pathways.

Key to the success of the process was the open approach and commitment of the project initiator, the South African Department of Minerals and Energy. In response to criticisms about the limits of the process initially, it agreed to expand the public participation process when it was well advanced. This openness enabled the consultants to adopt a flexible approach and respond to the needs of stakeholders as they arose. A project consultant said that the commitment of government was a significant factor of its success.

According to those interviewed, local stakeholders improved their knowledge and understanding of the site. They gained an appreciation of the environment and the manner in which it impacts on their lives. Relationships among the various local stakeholder groups were built and strengthened, improving their capacity to respond collectively in similar processes.

Among the lessons and pointers for action arising from the Transvaal and Delagoa Bay Colliery public process were the following:

- A social profile was prepared during the process, which enabled the public participation practitioner to develop an understanding of community dynamics and so ensure that a broad spectrum of groups were incorporated into the process;

- It was found that local NGOs can play an important role as intermediaries between local community groups and project teams. A local NGO played a significant role in communicating with local stakeholders and in acting as a point of contact;
- A feature of the process was that certain stakeholders stopped participating in the process when they did not see any direct benefit in doing so for themselves. A local councillor noted that certain stakeholders were unwilling to participate once they realised they would not be 'getting anything out of it';
- Certain stakeholders were provided with food and transport, which enabled them to participate effectively in an informal committee, which provided input to the process;
- Diverse communication methods were used which enhanced awareness and promoted participation. Graphical fact sheets, a newsletter as well as the township play were examples of these.

Diverse Stakeholder Involvement in Complex Trans- Boundary Gas Project Environmental Assessment

The environmental assessment of the Sasol Natural Gas Project was successful in involving stakeholders in Mozambique and South Africa in what proved to be a complex and extensive process. With the project covering nearly 900 km of gas field, gas processing works, pipeline and petrochemical plant, the assessment team faced major challenges in the design and management of stakeholder involvement. The outcome of the process saw the team succeeding in this task despite it having to take on widely varying geographic, political, social and economic conditions.

The project now implemented by Sasol, a multi-national petrochemical company, involves the extraction and processing of natural gas reserves in the Inhambane Province of Mozambique, including the establishment of a processing facility at Temane. The gas is transported via a new 865km cross border pipeline from Temane to Secunda in South Africa. Sasol's operational infrastructure in South Africa has been converted to effectively utilise the gas as feedstock, and for domestic and commercial reticulation to consumers.

Consultants from Common Ground, appointed by Calabash to review the stakeholder participation in the environmental assessment process, said that the primary challenge faced in this participation process was to design and implement a process which would not only deal with the geographic extent of the large linear project, but would also accommodate the highly diverse stakeholder groups.

The participation approach adopted, of sub-dividing the project into seven parallel environmental assessment processes for different components of the infrastructure, contributed significantly to finding a solution. Within each of the seven processes diverse approaches and techniques were adopted which encouraged the participation of the highly differentiated participating groups.

The leader of the environmental assessment process said in an interview that the stakeholders involved included high level national, provincial and district government officials in the two countries, large land owners in South Africa, as well as traditional leaders and small semi-subsistence communities in Mozambique.

The participation process had the distinct benefit of deepening civil society participation, notably within Mozambique, which is in the process of consolidating its democratic processes after years of colonisation and subsequent civil war. Stakeholders' capacity to participate in environmental assessment processes in both countries was also improved.

Many of the issues of concern raised by stakeholders were either directly addressed through the process, or indirectly through parallel processes.

Lessons and pointers for action include:

- The process accommodated parallel stakeholder participation processes that occurred at the same time as the environmental assessment, but were not part of it. These included an extensive broad-based stakeholder engagement strategy by Sasol in Mozambique, as well as negotiations by Sasol with South African landowners over rights for the pipeline to traverse their holdings;

- The independent, constructive and ongoing stakeholder engagement strategy by the developer enhanced the public process. Sasol's strategy in Mozambique in particular, provided information on stakeholder dynamics in the country, and also created a positive climate for stakeholder participation in the environmental assessment;
- Direct material assistance to certain stakeholders, in the form of payment to cover costs of transport and accommodation, enabled their active participation in the process. This was particularly the case in Mozambique where government officials had to personally pay to attend meetings in distant venues;
- The project showed how important it is to involve stakeholders from a political or social 'level' that is appropriate to particular stages of the project. Consultation in Mozambique was initially focussed on community level leaders, rather than individual community members. This was due to a degree of initial uncertainty as to the precise route that the pipeline would take. There were concerns that the process, if consultations involved too many grassroots community members, may lead to squatting on the proposed pipeline route by individuals motivated by possible expropriation payments;
- Specialist socio-economic studies conducted as part of the environmental assessment process allowed for extensive grassroots involvement and input into the process that might not have occurred through only conducting the standard public events often associated with environmental assessment processes; and,
- Caution needs to be taken in the selection and use of languages within environmental assessment processes as this can either facilitate or exclude the participation of certain groups. The use of Portuguese may have inhibited the participation of some communities in Mozambique, while the production of reports in English posed a challenge for government officials in that country.

Valuable Participation Lessons learned in Skorpion Zinc Environmental Assessment

Public participation in the environmental assessment process for the Skorpion Zinc mine development in Southern Namibia provides valuable lessons learned. The process undertaken between 1997 and 1998 has been noted as offering good examples of client dedication to good process, an open and listening attitude by the project consultants, the value of ongoing stakeholder communication and a commitment to addressing issues generated by participants.

The Skorpion Zinc project involved the development of a new zinc mine and refinery in the sensitive south western desert area of Namibia, about 20km north of the Orange River. The project represented a major investment in Namibia's economy and had potentially significant impacts associated with it.

According to a report on the stakeholder participation process prepared for Calabash by Common Ground, a broad range of stakeholders were involved, from the national level to local farmers and residents of Rosh Pinah, the nearest small settlement where accommodation for Skorpion employees was built.

While generally good participation opportunities had been provided, Rosh Pinah residents were not adequately involved in the public process. It was reported that many residents did not find the locally held public meetings an accessible means to express their concerns. A factor in the lack of involvement of this stakeholder group, identified by several of those interviewed in the preparation of the review report, may be their relative conservatism and isolation. One respondent described the community as "insular and resistant to change". A resident stated that while they had been given numerous opportunities to participate in the process, many chose not to participate. A factor inhibiting participation may have been that most residents are Afrikaans speaking, while the process was conducted largely in English.

The process was successful in seeing relationships being built between government officials and the company, and open communication lines being established between the development proponent and stakeholder groups, such as farmers and those residents who did participate. These relationships have been sustained beyond the environmental assessment exercise. A former government official who was involved in the process noted that the company had voluntarily made a commitment to the environmental assessment and participation process. He added his perception that the company "was not interested in window dressing".

The process was also useful in suggesting ways to deal with potentially divisive issues that arise in the course of environmental assessment processes. A fear was expressed that the proposed development of the mine would give rise to a large influx of work seekers into the area, overburdening local infrastructure and stressing community relationships. This issue was removed from the environmental assessment discourse. It was addressed in a separate negotiation process involving government and labour unions, which resulted in the establishment of a labour recruitment bureau based in Keetmanshoop. There was consequently a limited influx of work seekers to Rosh Pinah.

The process was a learning experience for many stakeholders groups in Namibia as it was one of the first processes undertaken under Namibia's new Environmental Policy. It enhanced the capacity of stakeholders to participate in subsequent environmental assessment processes.

A Rosh Pinah Environmental Forum was established during the implementation of the Environmental Management Plan. It assisted with the Plan's implementation, and addressed many other environmental issues in the area. Stakeholder forums of this kind can build relationships and provide an effective means of addressing issues.

Luxury Victoria Falls Hotel Development Provides Useful Lessons on Participatory Environmental Assessments

An environmental assessment process that included interesting stakeholder participation elements preceded the successful luxury hotel development on the Zambian side of the Victoria Falls. The process included public scoping and environmental impact review meetings, as well as a textured process of stakeholder interviews, which formed part of a specialist socio-cultural study.

The Sun International project comprised two hotels, a day visitor's centre and a small casino on the banks of the Zambezi River, close to the eastern cataract of the Victoria Falls. The project is expected to provide a strong stimulus for Zambia's tourism industry.

The hotel site falls within Zambia's Musi-Oa-Tunya National Park, which is part of the Victoria Falls World Heritage site and is regarded as both environmentally and culturally sensitive. The area is significant in the traditions, ceremonies and rituals of local communities who played a key role in the process through the participation of their chiefs and other leaders. The environmental assessment and public participation process was undertaken in terms of Zambian and international requirements.

A key challenge faced in this process, according to a review prepared for the Calabash project by Common Ground, was to ensure sufficient participation by stakeholders within budgetary and resource constraints confronting the project. They report that the exercise addressed these challenges through a combination of appropriate process design in which care was taken to involve stakeholders at an early stage of the process, as well as participatory activities conducted as part of a specialist socio-cultural study. The specialist study allowed for the textured involvement of grassroots-level community members in the process.

Local stakeholders interviewed in the review of the process indicated that there was high level political involvement in the environmental process. The national government of Zambia strongly favoured the development as it was seen as a possible source of capital and income for the country. As a result it sought to speed up the assessment process and made clear its support, notwithstanding the concerns of government officials and members of civil society lobby groups.

While there were concerns raised about political involvement, stakeholders interviewed felt that the process had allowed for extensive debate. This was new within development processes in Zambia, and according to the report, it made a positive contribution to the development of civil society and the promotion of a democratic discourse.

According to a Sun International representative, the participation process added significantly to the form and character of the proposed development.

A further benefit was highlighted by a local heritage specialist, who said that the process helped local communities develop an understanding of the value of their heritage as well as their contribution to tourism.

The review report identified further lessons and pointers including:

- The project steering committee, which was made up of local stakeholder groups, the developer, government officials and the assessment consultants, was a useful vehicle to provide input and guidance on public involvement activities;
- It was important to recognise and make use of appropriate channels of communication in traditional communities while being wary of their limitations. Local traditional governance in the Victoria Falls area was such that the Chief, a popular local figure, could confidently speak on behalf of his subjects; and,
- The language used during participation activities must be appropriate for the participating stakeholder groups. The use of English may have excluded certain groups in the process, although key technical terms were translated at meetings.

Early Stage Environmental Assessment at Popa Falls meets Participation Challenge

The preliminary environmental assessment on the proposed Popa Fall Hydropower project in Namibia has been identified as providing important participation lessons. A report on stakeholder participation in the project prepared for Calabash by Common Ground has highlighted how stakeholders in Namibia and Botswana were meaningfully involved in the process.

The proposed Popa Falls Hydropower Project involves the development of a 20MW hydro power station at Popa Falls on the Okavango River in north-eastern Namibia. The proposed project is one of a number of options currently being investigated by national electricity utility NamPower to meet the growing demand for power in Namibia.

The Okavango River is extremely important in the lives of local people, providing raw materials and agricultural opportunities. Tourism is a small but growing industry. Downstream of Popa Falls, in Botswana, is the globally significant Okavango Delta.

The review report noted that a key challenge in the public process was to meaningfully engage at an early stage in the project with a broad spectrum of stakeholders in Namibia and Botswana. The project team was successful in achieving significant participation by using a variety of meeting techniques with stakeholders in both countries, who ranged from grassroots community leaders and members, to high level government representatives.

Stakeholders interviewed noted that there was relatively poor responsiveness on the part of government representatives in both countries. Notwithstanding this concern, democratic discourse in the area of the study was promoted by the opportunities provided. This was particularly significant since the process was at a very early stage in the project life cycle. NamPower's open attitude and commitment to the public process reinforced this factor.

A local tourism operator expressed praise for the client's openness noting that "for a change there was an opportunity for people to comment on a proposed development".

The review report concluded that the public participation process contributed to the sustainability of the project by exposing a range of issues early enough in the project life cycle for them to be considered and incorporated into the design of the proposed project. The environmental assessment consultant noted that the process of consultation had been tailored around the fact that it was a preliminary exercise with limited information being available for public consideration.

There was a strong emphasis on consulting with isolated rural communities. Although traditional community structures provided an effective means of consulting with local stakeholders, an instance was reported in which a chief may have inhibited certain stakeholders from raising issues due to his endorsement of the proposed project.

A local Namibian NGO played a role in enhancing local community participation in the process. It conducted an independent workshop on the project with local communities which helped to ensure that the stakeholders had a better understanding of the process and were empowered to respond in a more complete and textured manner.

Email had been used to disseminate information on the outcome of the preliminary environmental assessment. This was not appropriate for all stakeholders. The use of newspapers, however, did provide an accessible means of disseminating information in Namibia, Botswana and internationally.

A lesson drawn from the process was that the public participation processes should be designed for specific stakeholder needs. In this instance separate and slightly difference processes were employed in Namibia and Botswana which were consistent with local conditions.

Conflict Managed through Environmental Assessment in Port of Durban

The Integrated Environmental Management process in the Port of Durban, South Africa, was run as a collaborative problem solving exercise, and involved stakeholders at all stages, including the negotiation of an agreed solution.

Growth in container traffic in Durban, South Africa's largest port, in the two decades prior to the mid-1990's exceeded the design capacity of the existing terminals. With port-related industries being the largest contributor to the economy of Durban and also a significant element in the economy of South Africa, the port authority urgently sought a solution. It proposed the construction of new facilities that would impact on the Bay of Durban.

While the Bay was no longer pristine, it remained an important and sensitive ecosystem. It plays a crucial role as a nursery ground for juvenile fish, important to the national fisheries sector. The Integrated Environmental Management process took on this challenge and sought to find a solution by involving stakeholders in navigating through the range of issue that needed to be examined.

The major challenge confronted in this process was to integrate a process of participatory planning with an environmental assessment exercise. Stakeholders were taken through an extensive stage-by-stage process of problem definition, solution generation, assessment and the selection of an eventual agreed course of action. The project team organised diverse participation techniques and activities which built the capacity of stakeholders to participate and also promoted and ensured their participation.

According to the report on the process prepared for Calabash by Common Ground, a notable aspect was the inclusion of a participatory visioning activity at the start of the exercise. The project team conducted an exercise with all local stakeholders to identify a joint vision for the future of the Bay. This vision not only provided guidance in the generation of solutions, but also served as a framework for assessing options jointly generated. The exercise of developing the vision built the relationships among stakeholders and deepened their commitment to the process.

The process also included a novel negotiation process through an advisory committee constituted by the participating stakeholders. This committee, whose membership and groundrules were agreed to by the stakeholders, served as a vehicle to bring finality to the process by negotiating and selecting a final recommendation for the consideration of the port authority. The final recommendations were interesting in that they were distinctly different from those originally proposed by the port authority at the initiation of the process.

A dedicated and creative media strategy formed part of the process, which created a supportive environment in the mass media. Relationships were built with journalists, which resulted in improved and accurate reporting.

Additional lessons and pointers for action include:

- The project team treated all stakeholders, including the proponent of the development, equally. This assisted in building the trust and confidence of all stakeholders in the process, as well as its outcome;

- The port authority, as the proponent and client, adopted an enlightened and constructive approach to the process. While it first promoted a particular solution to the problem it faced, it also realised that it was important to open the process and allow for a range of possible solutions to be aired. As a result a solution was found which differed significantly from that originally proposed; and,
- By treating the environmental assessment as a process of facilitated problem solving it was possible for conflict management approaches to be at the core of the participation methodology.