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This report provides the opportunity to reflect on experiences of public participation in environmental assessments in Southern Africa. These experiences show that the work being done in the region stands up to the tests of international best practice in many respects. The six case studies presented here indicate much that is good about sustainable development activity in the region, and that many lessons can be drawn from it.

Of course, there are numerous other examples and case studies which we have not focussed on, which can add to our source bank of experience. As a consequence this report should not be treated as a comprehensive overview, but rather as providing a cross section of regional experience. From this cross-section we are able to draw lessons which are illustrative and give direction for practice.

The case studies cover a diverse range of countries, contexts and stakeholders. The countries covered – South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and Namibia – represent a cross section of characteristics. They include a range of development types, with South Africa representing a mix of highly developed, as well as underdeveloped economic sectors. Mozambique, in turn, has a similar combination, but with a great emphasis on the underdeveloped sectors. The case studies cover the full range of development types.

The social contexts within which the public participation processes occurred reflect the underlying nature and diversity of the respective economies. Social conditions included advanced, multi-dimensional and integrated urban economies like that found in Durban. By contrast, they also included highly under-developed, isolated and mono-dimensional local economies, such as those in certain parts of rural Namibia. A range of rural towns with their associated rural region were also covered. These include elements of both of the above, with an emphasis on underdeveloped and marginalised conditions. The condition of isolated mining towns, such as that associated with the Skorpion Zinc Project are characteristic of parts of the region, and have the distinct variation of being both highly isolated, but also having access to significant resources associated with the mining company operating them.

The social class character of the stakeholders involved in the case studies represent all formations associated with the conditions described above, including capital owners, managerial and professional petit bourgeois groups, working classes, peasants, and the marginalised and dispossessed poor and unemployed.

An important distinction between stakeholders is reflected in their varying capacities to participate within the case study processes. Differences in capacity are often a reflection of social class, and reflect varying levels of access to material resources, education and knowledge, time, and the skills necessary for entering the environmental assessment discourse.

Cultural variations were marked ranging from modern, metropolitan cultures associated with many of the more affluent participants through to traditional community structures. The challenge in most of the processes was to straddle this divide.

Political structures and polities are similar in the different countries to the extent of the emergence of democracy and open civil society engagement with the policy and development process over recent decades. The rate of change and extent of provision of the basic freedoms of access to participation, information and justice vary between countries, although all show a fundamental commitment to these considerations.

Within this context, it becomes valuable to reflect on the lessons drawn from the case studies. These can, consequently, be divided into three broad types. These are:

- Lessons of methodology: these tell us about the broad approach we might adopt in designing and implementing participatory assessment exercises;
- Lessons of practical implementation: these guide us on the day to day practical necessities of implementation that allow public participation in assessment processes to be undertaken successfully; and,
- Lessons of attitude: which are lessons that guide the behaviours of all stakeholders and participants in environmental assessment processes.

A focus on all three of these areas is necessary to ensure that we achieve good practice. The last of the three is possibly the most significant. Practitioners, government agents, development proponents and stakeholders in assessment processes need to approach these exercises in the most appropriate way. It is possible to have a very good methodology and practical implementation techniques, but fail to bring the appropriate attitude to the process. Practitioners who reluctantly implement public participation processes or governments who pay such exercises mere lip service do a disservice to the practice of environmental assessment.

It is through combining the lessons in all of the three respects set out above that we might move to ground breaking and developmental environmental assessment processes. Effective and constructive processes of environmental assessment with associated public participation processes can serve the broad goal of sustainable development. Good environmental assessment processes can promote the creation and conservation of capital in all respects. Best practice should ensure that outcomes are found which not only don't destroy natural capital, but which also build financial, social, human and physical capital. Environmental assessment processes can be fundamentally developmental when looked at in this way. A constructive and creative approach to the public participation elements of these processes is critical to achieving the developmental outcomes so needed in this region.

While we are fortunate to have good experiences to show and draw lessons from, it is nevertheless clear that there is a significant need to build capacity in this field within Southern Africa. All role players need to be targeted for such capacity building, including government agents, both political and official, representatives of civil society, business actors, and the consultants who undertake the critical task of environmental assessment. The interventions required include the need for:

- A best practice guide for public participation in environmental assessment in the region targeting the needs of all stakeholders, not just practitioners;
- Publicity on, and promotion of, best practice in this field; and,
- Training and mentoring of stakeholders in the implementation of these practices.

This is an ongoing task for which the foundations have been well laid in the region. The work of regional organisations such as the Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment, as well as the activity of governments, businesses, stakeholders and practitioners provides fertile ground for this critical challenge. The web page for the Calabash Project provides a wealth of links and resources useful for this task. It can be found on the Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment web site at www.saiea.com. This resource provides a useful pivot around which to pursue higher levels of practice in this critical field within Southern Africa.



