

CONCEPT PAPER

ESTABLISHING A CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Introduction:

Establishing a **Civil Society Forum for Promoting Sustainable Development In Southern Africa** is an initiative that emerged from the Southern Africa post WSSD civil society Workshop organized by the Danish 92 Rio + 10 project partners in Southern Africa, to improve coordination of activities and promote active participation and influence of civil society engagements in national, regional and international activities towards promoting sustainable development.

The idea is to have a vigilant, proactive, and vibrant civil society network that is participatory, influential and well coordinated on activities such as Information sharing, campaigns, lobbying and advocacy and capacity building and would work towards integrating sustainable development issues. This would increase visibility and recognition of civil society in Southern Africa and subsequently promote strong partnerships amongst civil society organizations and also with governments, international community, and other stakeholders including donors.

Background:

Over 27000 civil society delegates attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in various forms and capacities. The civil society presence at the WSSD made very little impact, if any, on the proceedings. The civil society delegates from Africa, particularly in Southern Africa were remarkably invisible. The trend of passive Southern Africa civil society participation in international events continued to prevail at the WSSD despite creation of a SADC core group that was mandated to steer the SADC civil society WSSD process. The SADC civil society poor performance is attributed to the following factors:

- a) Lack of capacity to engage at local and international levels
- b) Lack of leadership in coordination and facilitation of civil society activities
- c) Lack of effective communication system and media strategy
- d) Lack of skills and well defined strategy for lobbying, advocacy, campaign and negotiation skills
- e) Lack of identity, mandate, and legitimacy
- f) Lack of financial and human resources
- g) Shallow understanding and lack of shared vision on concept of sustainable development issues in local context (i.e. SADC context)
- h) Lack of collective civil society voice from the region

The WSSD was a golden opportunity for the civil society in the region to engage and make their voices heard at an international level. Unfortunately it just passed by. The region might have to wait for another 50 years to host a similar summit. However, there are so many international and local events that are happening that require active participation of the Southern African civil society. The civil society is at the center of many sustainable development initiatives and yet it is denied space in decision and policy-making processes. It is acknowledged that any success in sustainable development initiatives lies on active participation of the civil society. Therefore, the civil society must claim their legitimate space in those processes.

It is against this background that a the Danish 92 project partners in Southern Africa organized a Post WSSD civil society workshop under a theme “**Promoting Sustainable Development in Southern Africa**”. The Workshop drew participants from some key networks in Southern Africa to share their experiences and lessons and to put to record achievements and failures from participating in the WSSD process. This laid a foundation for developing a strategic plan for a way forward in engaging with the WSSD outcomes and assisted in identifying possible means of creating linkages to the various activities and processes the SADC civil society networks and bodies are engaged with. To this effect, a proposal was made to establish a **Civil Society Forum for Promoting Sustainable Development in Southern Africa**”

Objective:

The main objective of the proposed forum is **to facilitate quality cross-sectoral and cross-thematic dialogue and strategic influence on policies and decisions related to sustainable development in the SADC region and beyond.**

Conditions and Principles:

The proposed forum will operate under the following conditions

- a) Recognizing and linking with issue and sector based networks in SADC and beyond
- b) Operating within the regional economic blocs (e.g. in context of SADC, AU etc)
- c) It should work towards resuscitating and complementing the SADC NGO council
- d) It should have clearly defined criteria and principles for participation and coordination some of which are shared vision, common values and shared principles in
 - 1) equity and human rights
 - 2) promoting sustainable livelihoods
 - 3) promoting social, environmental, and economic justice
 - 4) commitment and solidarity

Structure and Activities:

The forum will comprise of a loose structure with a coordinating committee comprising of national focal points and thematic coordinators. Participation will be open to all legitimate networks and organizations in southern Africa and will link with the African processes through the body that will be driving the African processes.

The forum will seek to indulge in the following activities:

- a) Strategic thinking and planning
- b) Research and information dissemination
- c) Coordination and facilitation
- d) Raising institutional profiles
- e) Awareness raising
- f) Capacity building
- g) Facilitate issue based multistakeholder dialogue
- h) Facilitate negotiation initiatives for civil society in Southern Africa at major international and regional fora

The operations of the Forum will be concretized and formalized at the African Civil Society parallel meeting to the AU Heads of State Summit in Mozambique from 27 June –2nd July 2003. Networks and organizations in the SADC region are invited to show their interest to joining the forum and /or make comments on the proposal.

For more information or any comments and contributions, please contact:

Environmental Monitoring Group Attention: Annie Chimphango Tel: +27 21 448 2881 Fax: +27 21 448 2922 Email: annie@emg.org.za or info@emg.org.za	ABIODES Att: Helder Malauene or Norberto Mahalambe Associacao Para Agricultura Biologica Biodiversidade e Desenvolvimento Sustentavel Tel/ Fax: + 258 1 314 854 Email: abiodes@teledata.mz
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