

CALABASH PROJECT:

Improving public participation in environmental assessments in Southern Africa

Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment (SAIEA)

The use of public participation (PP) in the environmental assessment (EA) process experiences many challenges that limit the full benefits of public participation from being realized in the SADC region. SAIEA has designed a World Bank and Canadian CIDA funded project that will increase the capacity of southern African countries, in involving the public and civil society in decision-making in environmental assessments in areas that affect them. This project is being called the "Calabash Project".

The focus of this project will be to develop a capacity building and research program at the community and government level so that communities and Government ministries involved in EA have the capacity to use PP more effectively in EA. The project will also focus on how Public Participation can be used more effectively if the project is community generated, or for projects that are sponsored by external proponents. This project is all about trying to close the gap between SADC regulators and CBO's/communities with respect to public participation in EA. Calabash is meant to build a bridge between civil society and the regulators so that the public and local communities are invited and welcomed into the PP phase of the EA process.

What has happened so far?

One of the first outputs from the research component of the project is a comprehensive Situation Assessment of EA and PP in the SADC region. A Project Advisory Team has now been formed from a cross section of partner institutions in the region. The first project planning workshop with the project team was held in Windhoek on November 20 + 21, 2003. The workshop proceedings and the Situation Assessment Report are available on the Calabash News site of <http://www.saiea.com>

Other significant achievements have occurred as well. Calabash has established collaborative partnerships with a number of regional and international organizations.

A brief description follows:

1. The International Association of Impact Assessment has launched an international capacity building effort to include biodiversity assessment in EA. SAIEA/Calabash is to act as a node for the SADC region.
2. The International Council of Metals and Mines is working on ways to make mining more socially acceptable in the SADC region. PP plays a huge part of this, and Calabash is part of the ICMM team
3. UNEP is launching its new Integrated Assessment procedures worldwide, PP is a part of this. An east African country may be a pilot country and UNEP has indicated Calabash could participate/assist.
4. The University of Montreal is developing a suite of "Best Practices in PP". Calabash is part of this exercise
5. Ethiopia has just passed its new EA law and there is a huge gap between civil society and regulators with respect to making the EA law work. Calabash is part of the Ethiopian/World Bank advisory team.

6. The Environmental Law Institute (USA) and their environmental governance programs in Africa are similar to Calabash's objectives, and cooperation discussions are now underway.

7. NEPAD has recognized Calabash as a node to assist with issues related to EA and PP for projects stemming from NEPAD initiatives.

Work is now underway to build an electronic library of the most practical and relevant EA/PP information that could be used in the SADC region. This will be housed on the Calabash website which is now under development (along with newsletters and other similar communications tools). Work will soon begin on doing detailed ex-post analyses of case studies where PP was used successfully in the EAs in the SADC region. This project will also form the basis for the methodology for PP, which is appropriate to the SADC cultural and social climate. It will be at this point that workshops will be planned to bring stakeholders together to discuss information and knowledge generated through Calabash as well as the lessons learned in the case studies. This will be the embryo for forming the SADC PP methodology, and PP training programs etc.

How can you become involved?

Calabash welcomes all news, information, opinions and ideas about this initiative as well as matters related to EA and PP. In particular, you can assist Calabash by sending us any information or lessons learned on how PP was used successfully in an environmental assessment. The Calabash web site will have a page devoted to lessons learned for all to use.

Please contact Peter.croal@saiea.com for more information and how you can participate.