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COMMUNICATING THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) REPORTS IN AFRICA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Ambassador Dr. John O. Kakonge, Kenya Mission to UN Office in Geneva

ABSTRACT

For African countries to make the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process effective, the findings and recommendations of EIA reports must be communicated horizontally and vertically to the stakeholders. This article proposes that for this communication to be successful, several challenges must be addressed. They include insensitivity to cultural and language barriers, lack of accessibility of EIA reports and overreliance on foreign experts. Use of mass media, increased training of media journalists and reporters as well as other professionals, public inquiries by local leaders, and increased awareness of environmental matters on the part of communities can improve the EIA process.

Keywords: *communication, Africa, EIA, environment and development*

I. Introduction

Although significant progress has been made in the use of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) in Africa, much more work is needed to improve their efficacy as a tool to identify the positive and negative impacts of a project and to enhance or mitigate those outcomes accordingly (Kakonge, 2012). One challenge impeding the EIA process is the need for more effective communication of the findings and recommendations of EIA reports to all stakeholders. This shortcoming is partly attributable to the multidisciplinary nature of EIAs, which can lead to communication problems during implementation. In particular, the interpretation of existing environmental problems can vary greatly because information about them is not adequately communicated. Studies by Seeley and Adams (1988) and others, for example, indicate that the communication of findings and recommendations of EIA reports is complicated, in particular, by the different levels of expertise of those providing and those receiving the information. Holgate (1984) goes further by saying that the EIA process is often more limited by poor communication between planners and ecologists than by deficiencies in ecological knowledge. EIA findings and recommendations have generally not been effectively communicated in Africa, for example, because of the low level of public involvement and participation in the EIA process (Kakonge, 1999) or because less attention has been paid to the role of the public in the process in general.

Given the current investment being made in the EIA process, this problem of communication urgently needs attention by all concerned governments, the private sector and the public. This short paper highlights the importance of effectively communicating the findings and recommendations of EIA reports, identifies impediments to their effective communication, and offers strategies to improve the EIA process.

II. Need for Communicating the Findings and Recommendations of EIA Reports

EIAs are carried out in many African countries, but the findings and recommendations of these exercises are often not communicated effectively to stakeholders, communities or decision makers. Although the EIA reports are published for public inspection**,** this alone does not sufficiently communicate the substance of the EIA, which consequently loses its value and ends up being merely the fruitless fulfilment of a legal requirement (Wood, 2003; Kakonge, 2006).

In an ideal situation, the horizontal communication of the content of the EIA reports should prevent confusion or conflict between government agencies or between the different consultants involved in the EIA process (Hughes, 1998). For instance**,** to prepare the EIA for the Tana Delta Integrated Sugar Project (Mumias, 2007), a wide range of contributors was engaged, including economists, EIA practitioners, livestock specialists, fisheries specialists, wildlife specialists, sociologists, economists and lawyers as well as government officials from the Coast Provincial Headquarters, the Coast Development Authority, the Kenya Marine Fisheries Research Institute and the Kenya Sugar Research Foundation. A perusal of the report reveals, however, that each consultant prepared his/her own section of the EIA in scientific or legalistic terms specific to the consultant's field. As a result, those sections were not easily comprehensible to other consultants and professionals or to the general public and affected communities. This EIA might have been more effective had the resulting report been written in a simpler, more coherent manner.

Vertical communication of EIA reports is of paramount importance in ensuring that the public is included in the decision-making process so that their concerns are adequately addressed in the resulting environmental management programme. For example, in the case of the Tana Delta project in Kenya (Mumias, 2007) and the Rumuekpe project in the Niger Delta (Shell, 2006), the failure to communicate adequately the findings and recommendations of the EIA reports to the

local communities led them to believe that they were being marginalized. Ultimately, the environment degraded, resulting in violent resource-based conflicts in both regions.

Clearly, the communication of findings and recommendations of EIA reports both horizontally and vertically plays a crucial role in allaying fears, reducing confusion and conflict, and removing misconceptions about projects. This view is supported by Hughes (1998) who argues that communication of the EIA safeguards the EIA process by highlighting the main issues, harnessing local knowledge, increasing the project's capability to respond to the needs of the communities, reducing transaction costs (of conflict), and improving the general acceptability of projects. It is for these reasons that policy makers and project proponents need to pay more attention to the communication of the findings and recommendations of EIA reports, thereby enhancing the efficacy of the EIA process.

III. Challenges to Effective Communication of the Findings and Recommendations of EIA Reports

The ineffective communication of EIAs in Africa is primarily attributable to the following factors (Hughes, 1998), Wood, 2003; Kakonge, 2006):

(a) the complex, technical form in which the EIA reports are presented

(b) language barriers

(c) widespread illiteracy among the affected communities

(d) lack of availability of the reports for public review

(e) cultural differences and overreliance on foreign experts in the EIA process.

EIAs relating to complex, technical or scientific projects, i.e. those in the oil and mining extraction industries or involving power plants, are commonly presented as hefty tomes that are

largely drafted in nearly impenetrable scientific jargon. The unfortunate result is that these EIAs, which relate to projects with potentially adverse effects on both the environment and society, tend to be so incomprehensible that neither the local government authorities nor the local communities can make sense of them (Wood, 2003; Kakonge, 2006). The 412-page EIA report on the above-mentioned Tana Delta Integrated Sugar Project is a good example of a document drafted in dense technical and scientific language replete with chemical names, chemical equations, complex graphs and Latin-based binomial names (Mumias, 2007). Similarly, Bedford Fuels Inc. produced an EIA report for a biofuels project in the Tana Delta that reportedly weighs two to three kilograms and is written in highly technical language (A Rocha, 2010). The presentation of EIAs in such a technical form prevents their message from being communicated to readers who are not specialists and flouts the principle, recognized by UNEP (1998), of "providing (EIA) information in a form useful to decision makers."

A second factor inhibiting the communication of EIA findings and recommendations can be seen in the inadequacy of domestic regulatory systems. While most EIAs in Africa are produced in European languages in countries with predominantly illiterate populations, there are no formal requirements in most African countries for the systematic communication of EIA findings and recommendations to stakeholders and the public (Wood, 2003; Omondi, 2008). In both Kenya and Nigeria, for example, the public is merely notified of the publication of the EIA by the project proponent, informed as to where copies of the EIA reports are available for public inspection, and given a period within which to submit any comments to the relevant environmental authorities (Stevens, 2011, and others). There is no legal obligation placed on the project proponent to educate the public or to break down the report into digestible pieces of information for members of the communities, most of whom are illiterate, as was the case in the

Tana Delta in Kenya (Mumias, 2007). As a result, there was a gross failure to communicate the findings and recommendations of the EIA reports to the 25,000 members of the community who were to be displaced from their land as a result of the Tana Delta Integrated Sugar Project (Nunow, 2011). Even where public hearings were held regarding the EIA, the meetings took place away from the communities actually affected by the project (A Rocha, 2008).

A third challenge to the effective communication of EIA findings and recommendations is the lack of access to them by the affected communities or the general public. Project proponents often produce few copies of EIA reports, which are not easily accessible or available on the Internet. Worse still**,** for its biofuels production project in the Tana Delta, Bedford Fuels Ltd. produced an EIA report that was treated as classified information and not made available to the public for inspection (A Rocha, 2010). Even when EIAs are made available for public review, they are mainly held in national or provincial government offices, as prescribed by the relevant statutes.

A fourth impediment to effective communication during the EIA process in Africa is the overreliance on foreign experts for the preparation and communication of the findings and recommendations of EIA reports. These foreign experts do not necessarily understand the cultural and linguistic constraints posed by the local communities affected by the projects in question, and the reports are often poorly prepared and communicated as a result (Kakonge, 2006). For instance, although the EIA report on the Tana Delta Integrated Sugar Project acknowledges the importance attached by members of the local communities to information passed on by wise elders and comments on the inability of some communities to view women as a credible source of information (Mumias, 2007; Hughes, 1998), it is not clear that these issues were taken into consideration in efforts to communicate the findings and recommendations of

EIA reports to key stakeholders. It would have helped to pay more attention to the languages, norms, practices and values of affected communities in an endeavour to increase the effectiveness of efforts to communicate EIA findings and recommendations to stakeholders, helping to avoid conflict and improve project management.

IV. Strategies for Effective Communication of EIA Findings and Recommendations

EIA documents should be made available in simple language in order to support community consultations, and this information should be disseminated to the affected communities (ECA *et al*, 2007). In this connection, various strategies have been propounded in order to ensure that the process is effective. Wood (2003) and Omondi (2008) suggest the use of local experts to prepare EIA reports in Africa and the use of local leaders to communicate the findings and recommendations of EIA reports to stakeholders and the public. Local leaders and experts have a better appreciation than foreign experts of the cultural and linguistic barriers to effective communication of EIA findings and recommendations to affected communities.

The importance of removing the language barrier that obstructs communication with stakeholders and the public cannot be overemphasized. While project proponents and environmental agencies may permit themselves the luxury of writing the primary EIA reports in technical and scientific language, they should also endeavour to break this information down into simple, easily understandable parts that can be absorbed by stakeholders and the public. There is a variety of ways to achieve this goal, such as by using print media, newsletters, and leaflets or booklets to explain the main elements of the EIA to literate stakeholders and members of the public. This is what Robinson, Ross, Walton, & Rothnie (1996) advocated when they called for the breakdown of primary reports (i.e., the EIAs proper) into digestible secondary reports.

In order to reach illiterate members of the community, however, it is important to use other means of communication. These include public debates and public enquiries into the project and its impacts, visual aids and billboards, television and radio programmes, and theatrical shows to reach as many people as possible (Robinson, Ross, Walton, & Rothnie, 1996; Kakonge, 2006). Omondi (2008) highlights in particular the potential that radio stations, which broadcast in local dialects, have in ensuring the effective communication of EIA findings and recommendations.

The effective communication of the findings and recommendations of EIA reports can also be enhanced by training professionals who can interpret the EIA reports for the public and other stakeholders. For instance, media journalists and reporters covering environmental issues can be given special training to enable them to communicate EIA reports and project impacts more effectively (Kakonge, 2012). This particular approach has been served by the formation of the African Network of Environmental Journalists (Kakonge, 2012). Furthermore, the role of the media is not confined to reporting the issues around EIAs. Media outlets should themselves be regarded as stakeholders in EIA processes and play a role in illuminating the impacts of the project while also following up on mitigation proposals made in EIA reports.

Omondi (2008) also suggests exercises that target the public in their day-to-day activities, such as conducting door-to-door visits, addressing churchgoers and delivering public addresses in market areas. Such procedures require less mobilization of the public but can ensure maximum attendance while being more cost-effective.

V. Conclusion

From the examples given above, it is evident that policy makers and project proponents need to attach more importance to the communication of the findings and recommendations of EIA

reports in order to prevent environmental degradation, social and economic frustration, and violent conflict. The principal challenges to the communication of findings and recommendations of EIA reports include the overly technical and complex presentation of EIAs, the excessive reliance on foreign experts in the EIA process, cultural and language barriers, and the inaccessibility of EIA reports. A variety of strategies, however, such as the use of radio, billboards and print media, raising communities' awareness of environmental matters, and the conduct of public enquiries, can be employed to address these challenges, thus greatly improving the effectiveness of the EIA process.

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