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AFRICA

PAINTING THE LANDSCAPE

A CROSS - CULTURAL EXPLORATION OF
PUBLIC - GOVERNMENT DECISION MAKING

1. AFRICA

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Background

Antionette Pietersen (Toni) agreed to act as the coordinator for the African Region on this IAP2 research project. Dr Godwell Nhamo, based in South Africa and Dr Gustave Aboua, based in the Ivory Coast in North Africa and Toni Pietersen also based in South Africa, conducted interviews. The interviews were conducted with people representing different segments of society, for example, local government, provincial government, private sector, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and professional public participation practitioners.

The interviewers have all had exposure to public participation in the African continent, in particular Toni Pietersen who has worked in the field for about 12 years.

The African Region presents many challenges and because of various reasons. South Africa, for many years, was excluded from the international arena because of the apartheid regime. Since 1994, the new government brought about many positive changes in the country with the focus on democracy and a Constitution that entitled citizens of the country with *inter alia* access to information, human rights, environmental rights etc. Subsequently, South African legislation and policies, among other things, were adapted to reflect the fresh approach to effect change in the country, one of which the most significant was the fact that the South African public had to be consulted on all matters before any decisions would be taken by government. Since 1994, South Africa has gained significant experience with regards to public participation, something which is entrenched in every sphere of sustainable development, *i.e.*, economic, ecological and social. The execution of public participation in South Africa is done on two broad levels, firstly, within the existing legal framework and, secondly, as a measure of best practice principle. Furthermore, it should be noted that the public per se does not have the mandate to take any decisions in South Africa. The South African Government takes the final decisions.

In addition, interviewees in the South African context often referred to the word “*empower*”. It should be explained that in this country the word “*empower*” means “*to build capacity, or understanding or to educate*” as opposed to the meaning attached to the word “*empower*”, *i.e.* to put decision making power into the hands of the public as reflected on the IAP2 Spectrum.

It is not very clear in terms of North Africa who the actual decision maker(s) is. From the interviews it would seem that government takes decisions, but only after agreement has

been reached with the public about a particular project. This is an important phenomenon that will be discussed under 'Differences' section.

Recurring Themes and Similarities

The recurring themes that are reflected in all the interviews for the African Region are as follows:

- Public participation takes place within legal and/or policy frameworks.
- Despite interviewees' varying exposure to public participation, different way of understanding the concept of public participation and different ways of doing things, they seem to understand that there are different levels of public participation.
- It seems as if there is a need for a standardized public participation process that can be applied by all spheres of government, the private sector, NGOs and professional public participation practitioners. At present, the process seems "scattered" without consistency in application.
- There is an understanding that the organization responsible for conducting the public participation process must be "neutral", "objective" and/or "independent".
- There is an underlying "agreement" or theme that one of the critical functions of public participation is education.
- It seems as if public participation takes place with people representing all sectors of society, and in some instances, it would focus on specific targeted sectors of society depending on the type of project. Inclusion of people representing the youth and different genders is important.
- Education levels, illiteracy, language barriers, cultural differences, political interferences, lack of political buy-in and lack of availability of government officials on high levels were identified as common challenges to the African Region.

Differences

Whereas recurring themes and similarities were reflected by the interviewees of the African Region, obvious as well as subtle differences were noted, as follows:

- The most obvious difference is the use of the term "public participation" by the different role players. In North Africa, the terms "public survey", "public investigation", "public inquiry survey" and "public empowerment" seem to be the acceptable norm. It is suspected that the terminology stems from the type of work that is done, that is more related to, for example, land acquisition, legal procedures people need to be informed about, development and investment. In South Africa, the trend is to use the terms "public participation", "public consultation", "service delivery" and "public involvement". Interviewees seem to have a good understanding of the terminology that is used and could distinguish clearly between the different meanings.

- A significant difference between North Africa and South Africa is with regards to decision making. It is noted that in North Africa, decision making is a joint process, a partnership between the people and the government. Of particular interest is the fact that interviewees felt strongly about people reaching agreement, or consensus about a project before a final decision is taken on whether or not the project should proceed. One interviewee on local government level in North Africa, referred to the public participation process as being one of symbiosis, which means “respect for difference” but with a strong emphasis on “peace”. Public participation is definitely seen as a joint decision making process.
- However, as mentioned earlier, in South Africa, there is one decision making body and that is government. Citizens in South Africa do not make decisions, but it is hoped that their inputs in processes driven by legislation are taken into consideration before a decision is made. It is also noted that South African interviewees differ about the value that public participation add to processes: one faction is cynical and feels much remains to be done, that public participation is superficial and does not really incorporate the voices of the voiceless, while on the other hand professional public participation practitioners feel that it definitely adds value and that some projects have been prevented from proceeding as a result of public input. Furthermore, it is clear that there is a desire to involve people more in the actual decision making process. It is not understood that public participation is a process of agreement and/or consensus before implementing a decision. Rather, it is felt that the difference in opinion enriches sustainable decision making.
- It seems as if people are kept informed of progress after implementation of a project in North Africa, but the same cannot be said for South Africa. In fact, it has been identified as a significant gap in consultation processes: during the life of a project, people are kept informed, but after the decision has been granted, people are not kept informed of progress.
- In North Africa, public and/or community meetings are held within the communities where the venues are very accessible. In South Africa, interviewees seemed to have different views: some claimed that efforts are being made to provide funds to marginalized communities to attend meetings, while another claimed that meetings are held where the people are and yet another noted that poor people are excluded and no efforts are made to include them in the participation processes.
- There is a view by NGOs in South Africa that decisions are made before a process of public participation is conducted and that stakeholder fatigue could be attributed to the fact that people feel their opinions do not count or are not considered anyway and therefore, they would rather not waste their time by participating. This is particularly sad and perhaps indicate that despite all the legislation and existing guidelines for public participation, consultants are either not aware of the guidelines for public participation, are

not really interested in conducting thorough public participation or that there is a need for a standardized public participation process/methodology.

Conclusion

People are different, their roles are different and their responsibilities are different. It seems as if not all the interviewees understood some of the questions that were posed. Although interviewees understood that there are different levels of public participation and could distinguish clearly between the various terms used for public participation, it seems that the understanding of the concept of public participation is connected to the type of work the interviewee does, for example, a local government official in South Africa mentioned that public participation is service delivery. This understanding, or rather, lack of understanding of what public participation truly means, as well as the different perceptions of public participation, suggests that there remains much to be done in the African Region in terms of educating people to understand what the real meaning of public participation is, in particular within a specific country's political context.

Every country can boast good examples as well as bad examples of public participation processes, of how to do good public participation and how to completely disappoint a process. However, perhaps there is a need for a global standardized process that would fulfill international best practice principles within local contexts. There is a need for people to thoroughly understand the concept of public participation, perhaps to have a universal understanding, which is lacking at present. Only when such an understanding exists, can countries develop customized public participation processes that will add value beyond sustainable development within localized political contexts.