

Obstacles to Environmental Governance: An African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

Africans have always been dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. About 70% of people in Africa rely on forests for their food, shelter, energy and even medicine. Biodiversity is Africa's greatest asset for economic development. However, the concept of environment is somewhat novel and foreign to Africans. This is mostly because the environment is considered from a very individualistic perspective.

Economic and social issues in Africa have rarely been related to environmental concerns despite the obvious importance of natural resources to the economy and clear ties between environmental degradation and poor health and productivity. Environment and Natural Resources Ministries were created only recently in most African countries. Their role and status within cabinets is still unclear and contested. As a result of their quest for greater power, the name, status and positioning of these ministries within political hierarchies have changed frequently. For example in Tanzania, the Tanzania Environment Council and the Division of Environment were moved to the Office of the Vice President so as to endow them with greater authority. In Uganda, the Ministry of Environmental Protection changed its name and position for the same reasons. In Kenya, the situation is similar and many departments with environmental responsibilities are scattered across other ministries. The National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) was created in 1999 to undertake and coordinate efforts in:

- Protection and Conservation of the Environment;
- Environmental Impact Assessment;
- Environmental Audit and Monitoring;
- Environmental Quality Standards;
- Environmental Restoration Orders, Environmental Conservation Orders and Environmental Easements;
- Inspection and Analysis of Records;
- International Treaties, Conventions and Agreements.

This new institutional arrangement poses new challenges. In this structure, the Minister of Environment is not fully in charge as he can only act through a board of directors. For example, the Minister has no authority to stop an anti-environmental act in his own capacity without the approval of the board.

Despite the creation of new institutions for environmental protection throughout the continent, countries in Africa are severely limited in their capacity to address environmental concerns. Low awareness of the cause and effect relationships between environmental damage and human health, welfare, and economic development is a primary reason. Several other critical factors, however, jeopardize the effectiveness of environmental governance in Africa.

FINANCING

All other sectors receive priority over the environment as far as financing is concerned. Environmental authorities and activities receive considerably smaller allocations from the national budgets. In some cases, when financial shortages are experienced, the environmental sector is the first to lose its budget to other priorities. In Uganda for example, financing was transferred from the environment to the education sector to sponsor free education.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

There are numerous environmental institutions at the regional and national levels, which operate with little or no coordination. Greater coherence is necessary, yet no efforts toward that end have been initiated.

INSTITUTIONAL STATUS

Environment Ministries are very weak compared to other ministries. The sector lacks capacity to enforce environmental legislation. Police possess enforcement powers even within the environmental realm but their lack of knowledge of environmental legislation prevents any meaningful involvement.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Citizens' lack of familiarity with environmental issues limits their ability to demand better environmental protection and take action to that effect. In Kenya, it has become increasingly clear that even magistrates in the courts of law have little knowledge about the Environment Act and even less capacity to apply it.

LACK OF INFORMATION

The information currently available to government officials does not allow for effective decision making at the national level. The information used by decision makers is in most cases outdated or inaccurate. There is an obvious lack of monitoring systems that would allow decision makers to make effective decisions. There is an urgent need for systematic scientific information that can be used by governments in policymaking. Comparative information and assessment of what has worked and what hasn't in environmental policy will be critical to the creation of a functioning governance system. Moreover, information must be made available to all relevant groups and individuals to ensure that each person understands their right to a clean and healthy environment and their responsibility for its protection.

MOVING FORWARD

Environmental problems are not confined to the local level only even when their impacts are seemingly limited. Consequences often extend to the regional and international levels. These wider impacts, however, often go unnoticed. Understanding how communities in other regions are affected by our actions would make the concept of 'environment' more concrete and instil a sense of responsibility. The challenges to Africans are tremendous but the need for improved environmental governance at the local, national, regional, and global level is pressing.