

Incorporation of digital tools to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of stakeholders engagement strategy in the Environmental Assessment process in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholders consultation is deeply entrenched in Cameroon's environmental statutory requirements. The requirement for stakeholders consultation during the conduct of Environmental Assessments (EA) is mandated by the Environmental Management Framework Law No. 96/12 of 5th August 1996 and its implementation Decrees. These legislations provide some minimum requirements for stakeholders involvement at two stages during the EA process: Stakeholders Consultation and Public Audiences/Hearings. However, the Cameroonian public participation legislations are void of précised specifications for the practical conduct of the public participation processes during EA realization. The adopted consultation techniques usually include: individual interviews, focus group discussions, public meetings and opening of public audience reading rooms¹. An investigation conducted on the effectiveness of the public participation processes in Cameroon disclosed: low public turnout with 75 % of participants during public audiences consisting of passers-by directed into the reading room; with Primary Sector Workers as majority participants; and the general interest of participants mostly centred on the socioeconomic benefits of proposed projects (49.3 %), (Lendzemo, 2012). Additionally, most development projects are often implemented in remote areas marked with inadequate socio-economic infrastructures such as roads, electricity supply and telecommunication network; low living standards and low literacy levels. This article focuses on developing a proactive and integrative stakeholders engagement strategy by associating a right combination of digital tools (e-consultation, public web pages, online surveys/quick polls, telephonic messages/interviews), which are adapted to the socioeconomic context of Cameroon to effectively engage, inform and consult the different stakeholders groups.

INTRODUCTION

Policy makers have adopted Environmental Assessment (EA) as an environmental management tool to ensure the sustainability of development undertakings. The practice of public participation involves employing measures to: identify relevant stakeholders, share information with them, listen to their views, involve them in processes of development planning and decision-making, contribute to their capacity-building, and ultimately empower them to initiate, manage and control their own self-development (ADB, (2001).

In Cameroon, the EA legal framework mandates for public participation during two key phases: Stakeholders Consultation and Public Audiences/Hearings.

Stakeholders Consultation: Stakeholders consultation is the pivot of the public participation processes during the conduct of EA in Cameroon. Stakeholders consultation meetings are usually marked by an exchange of information between the project proponent and concerned stakeholders in a two-way process. Feedback from consultation meetings are used to inform the impact analysis process.

Public Audiences/Hearings: Public audiences are geared towards publicizing the EA and obtaining feedback from the public on the findings of the study. Public audiences are organized by the Ministry of Environment at the expense of the

¹ The organization of public audiences comprise the opening of reading rooms where EA reports and their Non-Technical Summaries are displayed for the public to evaluate and give their opinions on the conclusions of the study.

project promoter after the admissibility of a draft EA report. Public audiences is a purely written exercise, involving the display of the EA report in reading rooms for consultation and verification by the public if their concerns have been taken into consideration. Public audiences organised via the use of mobile teams² due to the inaccessibility of some affected areas take the form of formal public meetings.

Planning and organization of the public participation processes

Stakeholders during the public participation processes are considered to be all the people and institutions that have an interest in the successful design, implementation and sustainability of a project. The commonly identified stakeholders groups include: Government supervisory bodies/agencies and concerned ministries, concerned national and international Organisations/association/groups, and the affected local population comprised of: Traditional authorities; Local Opinion Leaders (parliamentarians, mayors, etc.); Primary Sector Workers (fishermen, hunters, farmers, etc.); Public and Private salary earners (civil servants, doctors, teachers, etc.); Economic operators (traders, businessmen, etc.); Small crafts workers (hair dressers, tailors, etc.); and the Unemployed. Most at times, some participants do not fill the attendance sheet correctly; as such a last group entitled “Others” is attributed for such cases.

The public participation processes during EA are mostly tailored to suit the project context (project scale, location and socioeconomic context of the project area) and follows the procedures put in place by the Ministry of Environment. Vital aspects considered when planning for the public participation processes involve choosing the communication techniques/tools to be adopted to publicise and effectively engage/consult the various stakeholders. Table 1 below presents the traditional communication tools/techniques used during the public participation processes:

Table 1: Traditional communication techniques/tools adopted for the public participation processes

Phases	Stakeholders consultation	Public audience
<i>Communication channels deployed for the advance publicity of the public participation processes</i>		
Planning phase	Distribution of notification letters and brochures/Background Information Document (BID) Use of traditional authorities to notify the local communities of consultation meetings	Press releases on radio, television (TV), newspapers and hoisting of publicity banners Use of town criers, mega phones and loud hailers to publicise public audiences
<i>Communication channels used to disseminate information during the public participation processes</i>		
Implementation phase	Power point presentations, oral explanations, with the use of wall posters and interpreters to translate into local languages	Public display of EA reports, distribution of Non-Technical Summary of the report, and Oral explanations

This paper investigates the conduct of the public participation processes in the Cameroonian EA system and identifies the drawbacks that limit the effectiveness of the public participation processes. Efforts are made to develop a proactive and integrative stakeholders engagement strategy involving the association of the right combination of digital tools (e-consultation, public web pages, online surveys/quick polls, telephonic messages/interviews), adapted to the socioeconomic context of Cameroon to effectively engage, inform and consult the different stakeholders groups.

METHODOLOGY

The data used for analysis were sourced from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from participation in six (6) stakeholder consultations and six (6) public audiences. Several interviews/discussions and questionnaires were administer to some key actors in the EA process in Cameroon, including project proponents, environmental consultants, regulators and the local population (affected parties) of project areas. Secondary data was sourced from the review of stakeholders consultation chapters of twenty (20) EIA reports and their corresponding

² Public audiences organised via the use of Mobile teams comprises the constitution of a team composed of representatives of the Ministry of Environment and the project promoter, charged with the responsibility of publicizing the EA report to the population of inaccessible/remote project areas to permit them to express their opinions regarding the findings of the study.

public audience reports. The criteria/indicators for the effectiveness of the public participation processes were developed based on a review of the criteria/requirements of good public participation practice provided by the Aarhus convention (1998):

Table 2: Criteria/requirements for an effective public participation process

Stages	key criteria/requirements
Planning for the public participation process	Existence of legal requirement for public involvement
	Early start of the public participation process via the development of a stakeholders engagement plan that is open, transparent, flexible and context specific
	Timely and efficient advanced public notification/announcement of the public participation process
	Representative participation of all target stakeholder groups during the public involvement process
Implementation of the public participation process	Disclosure of objective information during the public participation process in a manner that is comprehensible to those being consulted
	Solicitation of public written comments
Documentation, evaluation and decision-making	Documentation and incorporation of the feedback from the public participation process
	Evaluation of the public participation process and decision making
	Report back to the public on the decision made

FINDINGS RELATED TO THE CONDUCT OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

Some key limitations in the planning and execution of the public participation processes

Table 3 below highlights some shortcomings in the public participation processes identified by Lenzemo (2012):

Table 3: Summary of some observed shortcomings in the public participation processes

Phase	Shortcomings	
	Stakeholders consultations	Public audiences
Planning phase	<p><u>Deficiencies in the respect of the 30 day advance notification period:</u> The regulatory requirement for a 30-day advance notification period of stakeholders is seldomly respected. Often, stakeholders receive their invitations at different time intervals below the 30-day notification time frame. Sometimes stakeholders are notified a day before or on the same day of consultation meetings.</p>	<p><u>Public audiences are organised as a literary review exercise</u> involving the reading of EA report or the non-technical summary and writing observations in registers. This limits the participation of low literate people (especially in rural areas).</p>
		<p><u>No set time frame for the release of public audience publicity messages:</u> There is insufficient publicity towards public audiences due to the inexistence of an established period for the release of publicity messages. Findings revealed that publicity messages are released from one (1) week to two (2) days before public audiences. This period does not provide enough time to achieve the mass sensitisation/information objective.</p>
		<p><u>Inefficiencies in the communication medias used to achieve the objectives of mass information/sensitisation of the public prior to public audiences:</u> The selected communication medias are not adapted to the realities of some project areas due to lack of socio-economic infrastructures such as roads and electricity supply, low living standards and low literacy levels of remote project areas. This is especially true for rural areas where the majority of projects are carried out, and where most press releases are hardly received. Furthermore, publicity banners are poorly hoisted such that they are sometimes stolen or destroyed by rain, wind or moving trucks.</p>
		<p>The timing of public audiences (10 am- 4 pm) falls within the working period of active Cameroonians, and thus limits participation rates.</p>
Implementation phase	<p><u>Inadequate use of communication/visualization techniques:</u> Deficiencies in the</p>	<p><u>Public audiences are marked by low levels of participation:</u> Participation rates during public audiences are highly influenced by the support staff, hired by the Ministry of Environment as a guard,</p>

	use of visual aid during consultation meetings to facilitate comprehension of participants especially in rural areas. The use and distribution of picture illustrations and brochures/fliers could enhance this process.	who intercepted 75 % of participants (passers-by) to visit the reading rooms. However, public audiences organized by the use of mobile teams turn to have higher participation rates since participants are mostly called upon/invited to participate by traditional rulers and verbal presentations are made with illustrations.
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Source: Lenzemo (2012)

Evaluation of some indicators of the effectiveness of the public participation processes in Cameroon

Below are the results of the analysis of some established criteria/indicators of the effectiveness of the public participation processes (Lenzemo (2012):

- **The level of representativeness of affected populations in project areas:** The results presented in Table 4 reveal extremely low levels of representativeness of the affected population following analysis of stakeholders turnout during the public participation processes.

Table 4: Level of representativeness of affected populations in project areas during public participation processes

Project sector	% Representativeness of the affected population	
	Stakeholders consultation	Public audiences
Mining	2.4	5.4
Electricity	7.7	12.2
Petroleum	1	0.5
Forestry	2.3	1.5

- **Representativeness of various stakeholder groups:** During the public participation forums, Primary Sector Workers emerged as the most represented stakeholder group during the public participation processes.

Table 5: Representation of the various stakeholder groups during the public participation phases

Socio-professional category of participants	Percentages	
	Stakeholders consultation	Public audiences
Primary sector workers	27.5	28.8
Unemployed	5.9	22.2
Public and private salary workers	16.6	20.5
Small craft workers	7.5	15.4
Local opinion leaders	18.9	6.0
Economic operators	2.2	3.9
NGOs/Association	3.5	2.6
Others	18.1	0.6

- **Quality of observations during the public participation processes:** It was evident that participants during both public participation processes are more interested in socio-economic benefits from projects.

INCORPORATION OF INNOVATIVE DIGITAL TOOLS TO IMPROVE ON THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN THE EA PROCESS IN CAMEROON

Inadequacies and inefficiencies of deployed communication channels/tools can be attributed as being some of the major limitations to the effectiveness of public participation processes. These insufficiencies and inefficiencies limit the effectiveness for the attainment of the following objectives: mass sensitization before the public participation processes; good public turnout and the provision of pertinent contributions towards the study. Mindful of the fact that communication is an integral part of stakeholders engagement process, there is a need for the development of a more

proactive and integrative stakeholders engagement strategy involving the association of digital channels which are adapted to the socioeconomic context of Cameroon in order to improve on the public participation processes.

Even though we live in a digital era with a myriad of digital tools, the effective usage of these sophisticated technological instruments depends on: the availability of the digital equipment/ tool and their soft/hardware, and knowledge of their utilization. In view of the fact that the highly targeted stakeholders (affected population) resident in areas with inadequate socioeconomic infrastructure, the use of advance digital tools in these areas is unlikely to obtain the effective mass sensitization and exposure objectives. In Cameroon, the use of digital channels during the public participation processes is very limited. The digital tools currently used include telephonic calls/messages and broadcast (TV and radio) and print media (newspaper) to notify implicated stakeholders of the public participation processes. In addition, PowerPoint presentations are sometimes made during consultation meetings. The availability and use of these digital tools is more predominant in urban areas than rural area where the access and facilities to some basic digital tools are possible and available. As such, an association of both traditional and contemporary digital tools is jointly required to optimize outcome of the public participation processes.

Modern digital channels such as some basic web-based applications; social media and online surveys can be used to improve on the stakeholders engagement strategy in EA in Cameroon. For example, web sites/pages can be opened for a one (1) month period by the Ministry of Environment, offering online blogs and discussions forums to provide an opportunity to disseminate information and receive stakeholders feedback on a conducted EA. Stakeholders consultation can be conducted using e-consultation and teleconference or Skype for some target stakeholders. Social media forums (such as Facebook, Twitters, You-Tube, etc.) and emails and telephonic messages/calls can be used to publicise/advertise/notify the concerned stakeholders/public of the public participation processes. The suggested digital tools make use of some low cost online services to inform (through publicity adverts) and engage (two-way communication) stakeholders/public during the public participation processes.

Table 5: Recommended stakeholders engagement strategy involving the incorporation of traditional and digital tools to improve on the public participation processes during EA in Cameroon

Phase	Traditional and digital tools to enhance the effectiveness of the public participation process	
	Stakeholders consultation	Public audience
<i>Communication channels deployed for the advance publicity of the public participation processes</i>		
- Advance publicity before the public participation processes	Creation of an email account specific to the conducted EA where stakeholders can email their concerns on the study	Opening of a public web page within the Ministry of Environment website dedicated to public audiences with the Non-Technical Summaries of EA report and a project blog.
		Use of visualization tools/software such as photomontage, wireframe diagrams, 3D Still and 3D animation to provide visual illustrations in the public web page
		Creation of sections within the web page for online discussion forum and blogs on the EA report
	Distribution of notification letters and Background Information Document	Press releases on radio, television, newspapers and hoisting of publicity banners
	Send emails and telephone messages to key stakeholders	Send emails and telephone messages to key stakeholders
		Post publicity adverts on Facebook, Twitters, You-Tube
	Use of traditional authorities to notify the local communities of consultation meetings	Use of town criers, mega phones and loud hailers, Organisations/Associations, village meetings and gatherings to publicize public audiences.
Distribution of brochures/fliers with summary details on the project and EA findings to local communities		
<i>Communication channels used to disseminate information during the public participation processes</i>		

Implementation phase	Power point presentations, and or oral explanations with the use of wall posters and interpreters to translate into local languages	pening of public audience reading room with the display of EA reports, distribution of Non-Technical Summary of the report, and Oral explanations
	- Audio/video recording of the consultation meeting	
	Reception of emails from stakeholders	Online collection of views during public audience on the public web page attributed to the EA report
	Consult some stakeholders via Skype	
	Teleconferencing with some stakeholders	
	Carry out e-consultation with some key stakeholders	Online survey/quick polls for concerns or recommendations regarding the EA report

CONCLUSION

The incorporation of the right combination of digital channels in association with traditional communication tools will offer more mass media opportunities and maximise exposure and avenues for the collection of stakeholders inputs during public participation processes. An effective implementation of the proposed stakeholders engagement strategy above will assist to ameliorate the limitations identified in the current public participation practice by:

- Increasing the outlets for mass publicity/sensitization before the public participation processes, especially for the public audience. The adopted stakeholders engagement strategy will enable a much wider audience to be informed prior to the holding of the public participation processes.
- Boosting public turnout during the public participation processes. The use of online digital channels provides an avenue for stakeholders with access to the internet to participate at given any moment during public participation processes. The use of more adapted traditional communication techniques to suit the socioeconomic context of some project areas allows for more members of the local communities to be informed of the public participation processes. This can consequently increase the turnout of the affected populations.
- Improving the quality of contributions. Web-based public audiences with project blog, diagrams and visual images, as well as the distribution of BID/fliers/brochures, use of oral presentations with visualization tools will enhance the understanding of information being disseminated during the public participation processes, and improve on the quality of contributions to the EA.
- Web-based public audiences overcome the time restrictions of physical participation during working hours (10 am -4 pm), since the web runs on 24/24 hours.

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