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**Poster Title:** Environmental Assessment: A Green Steering Wheel

**Abstract**

Environmental Assessment (EA) is a planning and decision support tool used in developmental projects across the globe. Though it has been in practice for several decades now, its effectiveness and benefits towards promoting sustainable development (and reducing negative environmental impacts) remains contested by many developers, decision makers and academia. This is because countries experiencing sustained population growth prioritise industrial and infrastructural development with less concern for environmental consequences. The desire by decision makers to improve economic growth and address poverty often leads to circumvention of the planning processes and the implementation of environmental safeguard tools such as EA. Reasons advanced for inadequate willingness to embrace this important planning and decision support tool are: the process takes time to complete and it is costly (developers), complexity of the requirements and lack of clear terms of reference (practitioners), pressure to accomplish development and provide services to the population (governments), lack of proper skills to conduct the EA process (regulatory authorities). This paper is drawn from a poster prepared by Professional Development Fellowship Program participants under Capacity Development and Linkages for Environmental Assessment in Africa (CLEAA) to share some of the best environmental practices. The goal is to promote the use of EA best practices in sub-Saharan Africa which will enhance development that does not compromise the sustainability of the environment.

**Poster Summary:** This poster presents some of the experiences by CLEAA's Professional Development Fellowship Program participants, promoting the use of environmental assessment best practices in sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Introduction**

The poster designed by the 2017/2018 CLEAA (Capacity Development and Linkages for Environmental Impact Assessment in Africa) EIA Professional Fellowship Participants from Southern Africa for the IAIA 2018 conference is aimed at illustrating how environmental assessment can play the role of a green steering wheel for the protection of the environment in the face of rising development in Africa. Natural, political and social transformations around the globe influenced by climate change, population growth, globalisation, economic development and migration, pose various consequences to the environment (McMichael, 2000). Cities in sub-Saharan Africa in particular are experiencing a massive increase in population due to an increase in birth rates and rural urban migration in search of sustainable livelihoods (Buhaug and Urdal, 2013). Growth in population has triggered an increase in the demand for infrastructural development (such as road construction, electricity, water reticulation and housing development) and urban growth associated with the construction and expansion of economic hubs.

It is well documented that development activities impact negatively on the environment constituting of water bodies, land, humans, vegetation, air and wetland areas (Angel *et al.*, 2005; Seto *et al.*, 2012; Uttara *et al.*, 2012). The situation is worsened by inadequate environmental planning as a result of either a neglect of the environmental management process or poor execution of the environmental investigation process. This paper examines the challenges in conducting EIA in Africa and suggests some best practices to be adhered to in development planning and implementation which will not compromise the environment. The use of environment in this paper refers to the natural, social, and cultural environment according to United State Agency for International Development's definition (USAID, 2010).

## **Environmental Impact Assessment Process in Africa**

Environmental impact assessment has a long historical background which can be traced to the enactment of a National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 in the United States of America (Sowman *et al.*, 1995; Ogola, 2007). According to the authors the institution of the Environmental Act in the United States of America influenced the development and

implementation of formal and informal environmental evaluation procedures in developed and developing countries although the growth pace in developing societies was slow (Sowman *et al.*, 1995; Ogola, 2007). In the 1970s and 1980s EIA investigation and reporting in Africa were championed by bilateral donors and multilateral agencies from Britain, Norway, Denmark, USA and France (Kakonge, 1999). South Africa was notably one of the first countries in Africa to introduce EIA concerns into the development process in 1970s (Kakonge, 1999). This move by the government of South Africa saw the establishment of an integrated environmental management (IEM) tool in South Africa in 1989 (Kidd and Retief, 2009). Thereafter, EIA procedure was recommended by several governments in Africa through several pan-African meetings and agreements (Kakonge, 1999).

Literature on environmental assessment process in Africa has pointed out issues in the implementation of environmental impact assessment process. For instance Kakonge and Imevbore (1993) identified issues hindering the execution of EIA procedure in Africa such as inadequate environmental legislation, inappropriate institutional framework for coordinating and monitoring government activities, a shortage of qualified manpower, inadequate financial resources, absence of public awareness of the need for EIA and lack of suitable screening procedures to determine development projects which require EIA. Similarly, Tshwene-Mauchaza (2015) identified constraints affecting the performance of EIA process in Botswana, such as lack of independence of the competent authority, inadequate institutional capacity and stakeholder coordination, poor coordination of the Botswanan EIA association with consequences on the quality and effectiveness of the EIA process.

Nevertheless, Retief (2010) found out from an investigation that there is a shift in the debates on environmental assessment from quality and implementation of the environmental assessment process to discussions on the relevance of environmental assessment. The study was based on an assessment of the contents of papers submitted for South African IAIA conferences between 1997 -2008 (Retief, 2010). Retief's (2010) findings suggest that there is a concern about the contributions of environmental assessment to the development of the economy. This shift in the EA debate emerged from the disillusion with the effectiveness and efficiency of the EA system in South Africa. Therefore, in order to address the issues raising questions on the relevance of EA Retief (2010) proposed a simplification of the legislative frameworks, an enhancement of capacity for the application of the legal frameworks and the introduction of supportive tools for EIA. This findings made by Retief (2010) partly explains why there is reluctance in the application of environmental assessment in Africa. Most

governments in Africa are pre-occupied with addressing issues relating to poverty, slow economic growth, high unemployment rates and poor infrastructural development, thus leading to the circumvention of the EIA process. The paper/poster therefore explains how EIA can play the role of a green steering wheel through the implementation of suggested best EIA practices discussed in the next section.

### **EIA Best Practices: CLEAA EIA Professional Fellowship Experiences**

This section of the paper illustrates how environmental assessment can facilitate careful planning and execution of the EIA process which will lead to positive development and the enhancement of the environment. The best practices discussed in this section were learning outcomes from the CLEAA 2017/2018 fellowship programme. The CLEAA EIA Professional Fellowship Programme was instituted in 2001 as a Pan African initiative to enhance African EIA professional capacity building through participatory learning and strengthening EIA professional networking (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2005). CLEAA EIA Professional fellowship is aimed at promoting sustainable development (Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 16) which ensures that development activities are conducted within National and International Environmental Legislative Frameworks.

Best environmental management practices require a rigorous process including securing a holistic and clearer definition of the environment, ensuring independent environmental investigation, effective implementation of appropriate legislation and international standards and good governance. The definition of what constitutes an environment must include ecological, social and cultural aspects of the environment. For instance, USAID Safeguard Policy defines the environment as “The complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors that affect and influence the growth, development, and survival of an organism or an ecological community and the complex of social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community” (United State Agency for International Development (USAID), 2010:2). Independence in the implementation of environmental assessment process is essential to ensure transparency and good governance. An independent environmental practitioner is expected to take into consideration all aspects of the environment in the investigation process (Htun, 1990). All reports and records compiled from the environmental investigation must be clearly developed to inform decision making for the approval or rejection of the environmental

application for a proposed development by a regulatory authority. Review and auditing of the environmental reports form an integral part of the EIA process to ensure that the reports comply with stipulated legislations. As a measure of good practice, affected and interested community members are to be included at different stages of the EIA process. Involving the interested and affected parties in the EIA process and taking their views into consideration promotes transparency in the process and good governance. Good environmental practices ensure that development activities do not adversely affect the environment. This therefore implies that the environmental assessment tool should not be perceived as a hand break to prevent development but as a catalyst for sustainable development. The good practices discussed above may not be applied effectively without bringing all parties on board to understand why it is important to manage the environment sustainably. Governments can play a key role through adequate institutional frameworks and regulatory processes in encouraging continuous involvement of all parties in the management of the environment. Of paramount importance is the continuous monitoring process to be promoted by governments to ensure compliance with environmental regulatory processes. Sanctions can also be used by governments to enforce effective application of environmental legislations and policies.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the growing drivers of change in Africa including population growth, economic and infrastructural development and climate change, the CLEAA EIA Professional Fellowship Southern African 2017/2018 team, used the knowledge acquired during the training in 2017/2018 to design a poster for awareness creation on the need to promote best environmental assessment practices. The poster illustrates what needs to be taken into consideration in conducting an EIA investigation to promote environmental sustainability. The aim of the sensitisation is to show that EIA is not aimed at preventing development activities but it is a tool which protects the environment against arbitrary destruction by development activities. The paper discussed some of the challenges faced in conducting EIA in Africa. Among the challenges was the reluctance by governments and other development proponents to engage rigorously in the EIA process. The paper suggests best environmental practices and encourage governments to play a central role in setting up institutional and policy frameworks for the effective implementations of EIA as well as efficient enforcement of EIA processes.

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