

EIA Large Scale Engagement: 2.5 Million People

By Paige Diana Kelly, BSc Hon Student in Environmental Management, UNISA, South Africa
Co-author: Alexandra Maurtua Konstantinidi

Abstract

This paper provides a true insight into the public participation outcomes involving the analysis, presentation and organisation of data collected, within the context of a national-scale project to improve telecommunication network coverage and technology.

Author Keywords

Stakeholder's engagements, informal informants, large-scale, data management, public participation

Introduction

Mobile Telecommunications Ltd (MTC) intends to expand their network coverage countrywide with the objective of providing 100% population coverage to all Namibians. This initiative results in the construction of 524 new Base Transceiver Stations (BTS) across all 14 regions of Namibia over a two-year period.

Public participation is an integral part of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process, as it provides opportunities for interested and affected parties (I&APs) to participate in the decision making process. The public's input on matters affecting them is sought and the main objectives are to improve the efficiency of communication; ensure transparency on the process and establish a platform for public involvement in the development of the EIA. Public participation on such a large scale requires an integrated approach, in order to engage with the greatest number of people to allow for a meaningful survey sample. Due to the scale of the project, it was divided into three phases, namely basic/screening, scoping and detailed assessment, to gain insight into key stakeholder's views, opinions and concerns, and the long term benefits and impacts associated with the new infrastructure.

Methodology

Given the complexity of the project the assessments were staged in three phases. All phases included its own public participation process and report, stakeholder engagement and communication plan allowing maximum opportunity of engagement. The objective was to create awareness amongst the public, provide them with all the necessary information and receive feedback which was taken into account in the EA (Environmental Authorisation) process. Due the extent of the project, the sites visits during Phase 3 were organized to only visit key cluster areas where the sensitivity of the receptors could be higher.

Stakeholder Consultation was undertaken during all phases of the project to ensure a focused and effective public consultation process as required by the Environmental Authorisation (EA) regulations. Consultation formed the basis of the entire EA process ensuring that all Namibians are informed and have an opportunity to take part in the process.

Case Description: MTC Namibia (081 Every1)

Due to the increasing demand for mobile voice and data services in Namibia, the pressure to continuously expand the national mobile communications footprint is increasing. It is for this reason Mobile Telecommunications Ltd (MTC) Namibia intends to expand their network coverage countrywide with the objective of providing 100% population coverage to all Namibians. This initiative will result in the construction of 524 new Base Transceiver Stations (BTS) across all 14 regions of Namibia over a two-year period. The project is currently in progress.

Phase 1 detailed the screening assessment, the main objective was to consult various affected Ministries and Authorities in establishing their

concerns and further recommendations. Additionally, specialists were to apply a screening process for all sites into sensitive zones across Namibia and were distinguished into:

1. No Assessment – site posing no further environmental risk and not sensitive;
2. Basic Assessment – Low risk and low sensitivity sites; and
3. Detailed Assessment – sites with a medium to high risk and medium to high sensitivity defined by the specialists.

These assessments defined above formed Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the project.

Phase 2 included the implementation of the agreed upon approach as mentioned above. The main objective for phase 2 public participation was to create awareness amongst the public, provide them with all the necessary information and receive feedback. The methods of engagement used were face-to-face meetings, focus groups and public consultation meetings, and mass communication: Website, Email, Dedicated telephone line, fax and SMS, Radio announcements /interviews, television announcements; and newspaper adverts.

All comments were captured in a securely filed data management system to allow for record of all communications per channel and analysis of all communications. The analysed data of concerns was taken into consideration for Phase 3 detailed assessment in the field at site of moderate and high sensitivity. All communication channels were left open from Phase 2, and remained open until the end of Phase 3

Phase 3 required an in-depth analysis of the impacts related to the moderate and highly sensitive sites. Using the information collected during Phase 2, other literature available of the area of study and after analysing information from key informants, the primary aim was to perform a well-planned detailed assessment on site. The purpose of the engagements with the informal informant is to create awareness about the project and receive first hand comments and opinions with regards to the proposed project.

The travel agenda for the project was divided into two trips, namely and geographically the Northern and the Southern areas of Namibia, to allow for the best data collection opportunities. Site location identification required the use of a GPS device to mark our destination for route guidance and location of all existing and proposed MTC towers. Trcks4Africa, a community contributed GPS data exclusively map was downloaded onto the

GPS. A highly detailed map on both the Geography and infrastructures of Namibia, allowing us to make informed decisions and gauge the areas of high sensitivity to visit key stakeholders. Each evening the next day's route would be discussed, assessed and planned strategically to allow for the best opportunities to meet with as many key informal informants as possible to accommodate the time constraints.

Record of all informants was kept throughout the process, by the use of Consent and Photographic Consent Forms - confidentiality rights explained. No audio recording was taken during the process.

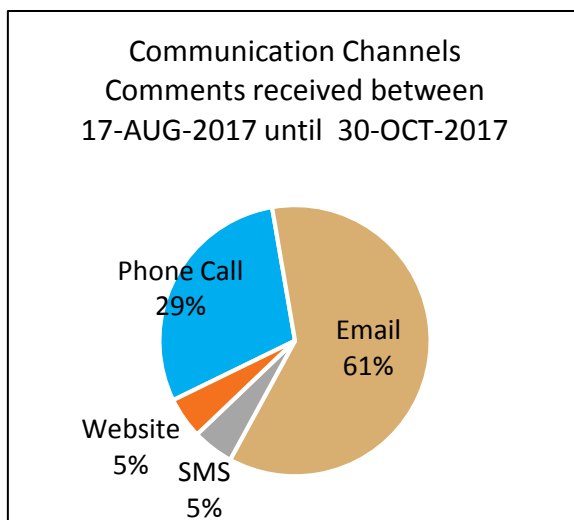
Objectives

The main objectives of the project was to bring better coverage/service to those areas with existing coverage but to more so bring coverage to areas that are currently out of reach of network. MTC will deploy 2G, 3G and 4G sites as well as upgrading existing sites technology to 3G and 4G. In doing so MTC will increase their national footprint which will benefit particularly, the remote and rural areas. With the population growing at a rapid rate and the number of cell phones per capita having increased, the demand of users thus taking the current network capacity to its current limits.

65% of the proposed sites are located in rural areas. Communities indicated a desperate need to communication with families, friends, regional services, doctors, ambulances, schools, police and business.

Results

The analysis of Phase 2 showed within the channels of communication only 48 I&APs were registered from 14 regions of Namibia with one engagement from an offshore vessel in the Atlantic Ocean. The channels resulted in a total of 69 comments registered with Coverage being of the highest interest and concern, followed by informants wanting to be registered as I&APs and requesting further information. Location and Network formed the most popular comments with members of the public wanting to know about specific sites in their areas. Radiation was a minor topic of discussion over the issues of health, site location and radiation itself. Members of the public required more information on the impacts on health that would potentially come from the proposed towers. Requests were made for more awareness and information to be distributed and made available to the public.



Phase 3 had a total of 115 key stakeholders were consulted over a travelled distance of nearly 9000km across Namibia. A very small part of the population showed interest in the project while on site and an average of 6 informal informants had knowledge of the proposed site located in close proximity to either the home, school or workplace etc.

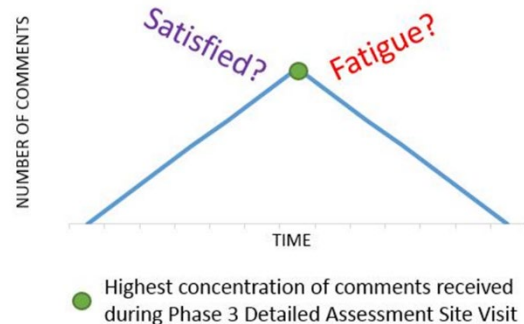
Question

How much time is required to communicate with 2.5 million people? All legal requirements of the EA process according to the Namibian law and legislation was fulfilled and exceeded by extending public consultation periods to allow for more engagement and travel of information.

Despite so little engagement from stakeholders in the project of a population of 2.5 million, everything possible was done to reach all communities in the time available.

- Did people reach a point where they were satisfied about the project?
- Were people not interested in the project?
- People showed concern but then become fatigue by the information?

Time vs Number of Comments received throughout the Public Participation Period



Lessons Learnt

In saying the above the following lessons were learnt from the complexity and scale of the project. Sufficient time must be allowed for stakeholders to familiarise themselves with such a large scale project and identify their preferred channel of communication before they ultimately engage in the process. Many Namibians communicate by means of storytelling. Additional time is required for word of mouth to reach remote areas to allow communities to familiarise themselves with project information and decide on a preferred channel of communication before they ultimately engage in the process. The methodology implemented must be used throughout the entire process in order to measure improvements. Consultation was constrained due to limited time and budget, information travel time and physical distance travelled (9,000kms) to participate in one on ones. The website was constructed as an interactive tool providing information to Namibians on the project and process. However, it required network connectivity which in many areas was extremely limited.

Conclusion

The approach taken for the Phase 3 detailed assessment public participation, was to assess the proposed sites at a strategic level and apply a detailed assessment to establish sites with a medium to high risk and medium to high sensitivity as defined by the social specialists. Data analysis showed that of the 2.5 million people impacted by the project, a small representation of the population were actively involved in the participation process. Interpretation of data allowed the identification of material issues, locality of comments, popular channels of communication, positive and negative comments and ranking of key topics. It is evident that sufficient time must be allowed for stakeholders to familiarise themselves with such a large scale project and time needs to be given to allow for best quality results although this can vary depending on possible satisfaction or fatigue of the information.

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