

Environmental Action Plans in Africa

Since many of the root causes of environmental problems stem from factors outside the control or influence of a project authority or a single ministry, the World Bank has increasingly been working with governments to examine these issues on a wider scale. In Africa, a broader sectoral approach has been attempted—for example, forestry issues have been the subject of national forest actions plans, and biological conservation has been the main focus of national conservation strategies. But recently a number of African countries have undertaken comprehensive national environmental action plans (EAPs), bringing the Bank and national governments into uncharted territory.

EAPs go beyond traditional assessments and general policy recommendations, formulating specific actions needed for the implementation of these policies. In effect, they provide a framework for the integration of environmental considerations into the country's overall economic and social development, cutting across all sectors and involving national and local officials, as well as academic experts, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies. However, this approach may not necessarily be suited for all nations; for many, a more thematic approach—forestry, conservation, dryland management—may be just as useful, particularly where there is a clear need to concentrate on one set of environmental issues.

By the latter part of 1989, three EAPs—in Lesotho, Madagascar, and Mauritius—had been completed, with World Bank assistance. Those for Ghana and Rwanda were well along, plans in Burkina Faso and Guinea were underway, and other countries had expressed an interest. It is still too early to develop models for nations to follow, but some lessons can already be drawn from these initial experiences.

First, a basic prerequisite for success is clear political endorsement and active support. In Madagascar, the Prime Minister, with endorsement from the President, took a personal interest in the formulation of the EAP. The King of Lesotho spurred the initiative in his country, personally chairing the National Environmental Workshop in April 1988. In Mauritius, the Prime Minister and Finance Minister clearly gave their commitments.

Second, broad participation in the formulation of an EAP is essential, ranging from the national ministries to the local populace. This means that unlike what has occurred in the past, efforts must be made to systematically encourage and build on participation by communities and local NGOs at all stages of the process. In general, such an approach will be slower, but in the long run, it should contribute to a stronger national and local capacity to formulate programs, along with greater community involvement.

In the countries that have been developing EAPs, rural institutions and NGOs have been consulted early in the planning process, with media interest purposely stimulated to help broaden the level of participation. In Lesotho, village councils, the National University, and NGOs are all represented on the recently established Non-Governmental Advisory Board. In Rwanda, local NGOs are conducting a survey to obtain an overview of the main environmental concerns in rural areas. In Burkina Faso, the EAP work is, to a large extent, based upon the National Plan to Combat Desertification (1986), developed as a result of broad public participation.

Third, there is a need to build up technical and scientific data and analysis in support of environmental programs, often with help from NGOs involved in this area. A new national laboratory will be established in Mauritius under its EAP to provide information on water quality, pollution control, and so on, for different government agencies and private groups. In both Madagascar and Ghana, a national program for mapping, remote sensing (by satellites), and land titling is about to be implemented as a tool for improved natural resource management.

Fourth, links to economic decisionmaking must have priority, and this connection has been strengthened in recent years by high-level political interest in the environment. Indeed, the environment figures more prominently than before in many countries' overall national development policies. In both Lesotho and Rwanda, the EAPs were formulated under the direct supervision of the Minister of Planning, with the aim of incorporating it into the next Five Year Development Plan. Ghana initiated its EAPs as part of its structural adjustment program. And in Mauritius, the Government quite quickly developed a comprehensive investment program parallel to the EAP.

Fifth, with the rapidly growing donor interest in the environment, EAPs serve as a valuable framework for aid coordination, in large part thanks to their interdisciplinary nature. But the development of a national environmental action plan does not necessarily mean that a large number of new or duplicate projects must be initiated. In Rwanda, for instance, where numerous NGOs are active, the EAP will function as an important coordinating tool for their activities. In most cases, however, it is likely that EAPs will also help improve the preparation of new projects and programs. Finally, while national environmental action plans are relatively new, and the majority have not yet reached the implementation stage, it is already clear that they can serve a useful purpose when a broader framework for environmental action is required. In Mauritius, for example, the Government has moved quickly to limit activities that contribute to environmental degradation. A number of bans have been instituted, including those on the use of spear guns and dynamite in fishing, the extraction and sale of coral, the removal of sand from beach areas, and the discharge of untreated waste water into rivers, lagoons, and the ocean. Moreover, all new project proposals are now screened by the Government for possible negative environmental effects.

Thus, the EAP process represents one of the first systematic attempts at eliciting broad popular involvement—not just at the implementation stage, but also in the planning and formulation of environmental policies and programs. Working on a multisectoral level, and breaking ground by actually trying to avoid—not just solve—problems, the EAPs hold good promise. But quick follow-up after the completion of the plan will be essential, ensuring continued momentum and both national and institutional support for dealing with these issues, which are of increasing urgency for Africa's development. ■

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