

The PAANEEAC programme: bringing EIA professionals together

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National EIA systems include many actors: EIA agencies, project proponents, sectoral authorities, environmental and social NGOs, consultants, academics, lawyers, politicians and even journalists. Their views and actions largely determine whether EIA systems are successfully strengthened. The PAANEEAC programme assisted national associations of EIA professionals in Central Africa to bring all these actors together, to become platforms for exchange, and to undertake joint action to improve the system. The programme was considered successful by the participants. They experience these platforms as beneficial and have continued to keep them in operation after the programme came to an end. This article describes some of the success factors and the importance of the EIA associations within an EIA system.

Why the PAANEEAC programme? The role of EIA in Central Africa

About ten years ago, environmental impact assessment (EIA) professionals from Cameroun, Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and the Central African Republic were of the opinion that their national EIA systems were performing insufficiently*. Their EIA systems originated from the requirements of international donors and investors to determine whether projects are environmentally and socially sound. However, the EIA professionals observed that EIA reports were not always produced and often did not offer sufficient analysis to verify compliance, and that there was often a lack of enforcement throughout the EIA process. The consequences of this weak governance became obvious to the general public after the project had been implemented, at which point it was often too late to prevent adverse impacts. The professionals also observed that investors in the region had to comply with different or “negotiable” national systems. Although some EIA systems had been in place for years, governments had not made sufficient effort to improve their functioning.

* Evolution of environmental impact assessment systems in Central Africa: The role of national professional organisations. Bitondo, D. R. Post and G.J. van Boven. Yaounde, Cameroun: SEEAC, 2014
Evolution des systèmes d'étude d'impact sur l'environnement en Afrique centrale : Rôle des associations nationales de professionnels. Bitondo, D. R. Post et G.J. van Boven. Yaounde, Cameroun: SEEAC, 2013



Many professionals saw EIA not only as instrumental to sound environmental project design but also as important for more general transparent and accountable public decision-making about economic developments. This emphasis on EIA may seem exaggerated to governance experts in developed countries, but it must be remembered that EIA may be the only public decision-making procedure in place in developing countries, that warrants the transparency and public accountability of the government and – indirectly – of the project proponents. EIA provides for formal public consultation, and it is international practice to publish EIAs and any project approval decisions based on them. Without a well-functioning EIA system, decisions about projects may not be publicly justified and often may not even be published. In such cases, the government cannot be held accountable for its decisions when issuing licences or when an inspectorate supervises compliance with conditions of the licence, because these conditions are unknown to the public. Against this background, EIA professionals saw a need for a major strengthening of EIA systems and for harmonising them across Central Africa.

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Getting started: the formation of associations

Strengthening and harmonising EIA systems is easier said than done: a dialogue was needed to create momentum for concrete EIA system improvements. With this ambition in mind, around the year 2005, national associations of EIA professionals were formed or revitalised. The process was coordinated by a regional umbrella organisation known by the acronym SEEAC. The associations united professionals from different sectors and tiers of government with NGOs, consultants and universities. SEEAC and its member associations requested assistance from the NCEA in formulating a capacity development programme to help them achieve their ambitions. They needed international technical expertise about EIA systems, and they needed seed money to develop a momentum as member-based organisations. This programme, known by the acronym PAANEEAC, received 1.2 million euros funding from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2007 to 2013. The NCEA was requested to manage the small grants component and to provide technical assistance.

Platform for debate

PAANEEAC’s goal was that “associations of professionals contribute to EIA as a tool for good governance, poverty reduction and sustainable development”. Its approach had four main elements: 1) creating a platform for debate between professionals; 2) improving the legal and institutional framework; 3) improving the capacity of all actors in the EIA system; and 4) promoting the role of EIA in governance. The “platform for debate” element became key in achieving the other elements, and the NCEA’s role in coaching the associations to help them function as such was greatly appreciated. For example, the NCEA helped the associations and SEEAC to function as member-based organisations, to be attractive as a non-partisan (i.e. neutral) platform for exchange instead of a consultancy for whom improving the EIA system is

EIA mapping tool to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of an EIA system

The NCEA has developed a special interactive diagnostic tool to evaluate the performance of the EIA system in a country: EIA mapping. EIA mapping brings together EIA professionals for an interactive session, during which they are questioned about EIA legislation, the ability of organisations to put it into practice and the quality of implementation at project level. In this way, the strengths and weaknesses of the national EIA system become apparent. This interactive approach engenders a shared understanding of these strengths and weaknesses, as well as a shared sense of opportunity for specific EIA system improvements. In the PAANEEAC programme, the outcomes of the mappings have been used to differentiate the approach according to the local circumstances and needs in each country. This has been the basis for country-specific five-year strategies and action plans of each association. In each country a second EIA mapping was done at the end of the programme. The comparison of these two snapshots revealed clear progress over six years.

generally not the first priority. The NCEA coached the associations to implement their approach in a systemic and participative way – helping the EIA system, whose actors were now figuratively all in the same room, to reflect on itself and define joint action.

Seed funding

For each association, a budget was available for basic office facilities and an office assistant. Systematic annual planning and financial accounting were required for an association to be eligible for grants to support its functioning and activities. As PAANEEAC was temporary, a deliberate decision was made for the funding for activities in the programme to be seed funding only: just enough to allow the organisation of activities and as such promote the work of the associations, while stimulating the associations to seek more sustainable ways of financing themselves.

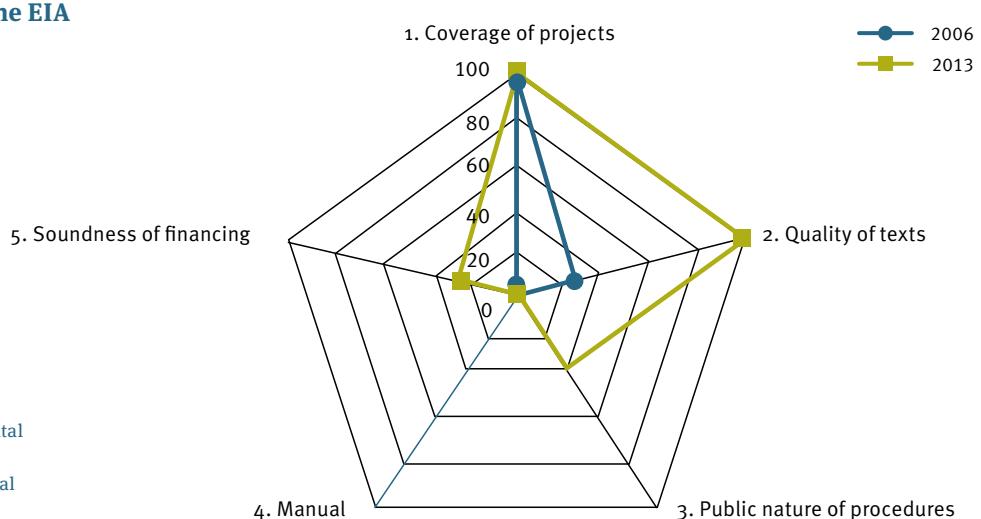
National and regional activities

Other than strategic coaching, the NCEA also assisted in the implementation of specific activities undertaken by the EIA professionals. Many of these activities were intended to improve the relationships, mutual understanding and joint action between the different actors in the national EIA system. Some are highlighted in the boxes in this article. Aside from these national approaches, PAANEEAC stimulated a regional platform function. At the Central Africa level, SEEAC has organised annual meetings of members and scientific seminars attended by national EIA agencies and other official actors. At the seminars, different topics of sustainable development and EIA have been addressed. Lessons from PAANEEAC have been shared, including, for example, the ways in which the financing of national EIA systems can be improved (inadequate funding is a general weakness that results in the quality of EIAs being highly dependent on consultants operating for project developers). See the article starting on page 22 for more information on this subject.

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Results of one aspect of an EIA mapping, monitored with a 7 year interval

Evolution of texts for the EIA procedure in Burundi



Source: Evolution of Environmental Impact Assessment Systems in Central Africa: The role of national professional associations

Improvement of EIA

* Key references and a video are available via our website (www.eia.nl)

In 2013, the NCEA evaluated the programme by means of a series of interviews*. This revealed that EIA professionals unanimously think the programme has boosted professional exchange and concrete action. Increasingly, more types of EIA professionals became active on the platform offered by PAANEEAC: they included environmental NGOS, academics, lawyers, journalists and occasionally also politicians. There is now an accepted agenda for improvement of EIA, and a platform where all professionals can meet and discuss. This practice also emerged at seminars at national and Central African level, and is continuing even though the programme has ended. The evaluation revealed that respondents do not regard EIA to be merely a technocratic instrument but that instead they consider the programme outcomes to be an invaluable contribution to governance for sustainable developments. They often referred to specific examples from sectors such as mining and forestry.

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Joint projects of EIA agencies and associations

One of the elements of the PAANEEAC approach was the availability of seed funding that could only be accessed jointly by the EIA agency and the EIA association. As intended, this greatly stimulated relationships between EIA professionals and the government. In all five countries the associations started joint projects with their national EIA agencies: for example, they produced EIA manuals, they developed EIA management information systems, or they drafted proposals for legislation together, depending on the specific needs for improving the EIA system.

Organising the training of trainers in EIA

The EIA mapping showed the need for training in EIA at national level. An important element of the PAANEEAC programme was therefore the training of national teams of trainers in EIA. In each country, five national EIA trainers were trained by a didactic expert, NCEA technical staff and a technical resource person. Subsequently, the national trainers developed their own training curricula and programmes. National courses were organised, sometimes with significant success, reaching dozens – sometimes hundreds – of professionals. In the course of the programme, such activities strengthened the relationships between EIA professionals in general and specifically between those active in the national EIA agency.



The future of EIA associations

The number of people who pay to be member of an EIA association has grown significantly, which is important since the associations now have to function without PAANEEAC's seed money. This is not easy because, as is also the case in Europe, associations of environmental professionals have long been supported financially by their governments, precisely with the aim of creating a non-partisan platform. However, it seems that many EIA professionals that were active in the PAANEEAC programme are now willing to continue the platform function, as they have noticed they have influence on improvement of the EIA system through the platform. The learning networks of EIA professionals may now have crossed a threshold beyond which they can function without financial support from PAANEEAC. In the coming years, the NCEA is available for technical support on request. This has already been formalised in multi-year agreements by SEEAC and the national associations in Rwanda and Burundi.

In conclusion, we are very content with the promising developments reached so far and are looking forward to work with inspiring EIA professionals in the future!

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