



INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

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Stakeholder Participation and Engagement: Fostering a Community of Interest

DLIST : distance learning & information sharing tool
BENGUELA

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REGIONAL HOTSPOTS: UNFOLDING THE "BIG PICTURE"

Along the south-western flank of Africa a 'Big Picture' is slowly unfolding. For many decades locked in the grip of Apartheid, and with large tracts of land off-limits because of mining and even war, the region is now entering a new era that will see the sustainable development of its rich potential to sustain the human populations that live there.

The 'Big Picture' involves many different regions and processes that are progressing simultaneously. DLIST attempts to achieve synergy between them by encouraging participants to contribute information

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Abstract: DLIST-Benguela is an information sharing programme, comprising an online platform, distance learning courses, and a social networking programme in southwestern Africa. This is a region in a rapid state of transition, with changes in land ownership, socio-economic challenges resulting from dwindling mining, and environmental pressures, in a context of a fragile environment and debilitating poverty. The overall aim of DLIST-Benguela is to increase access of local communities to information that is critical to environmental management and sustainable livelihood creation. One of the main challenges faced by DLIST (and by participatory development in the broader sense) is to reach and engage a representative group of stakeholders. The first lesson we learnt was that stakeholder engagement benefits from an integrated approach. This interactive (online) communication approach required active facilitation. While there are individual lessons to be shared from the project, the key learning from DLIST relates to what was earlier called "social capital", or trust. The objective, rather than simply disseminating information to an "audience", is to build an enduring "community of interest". This approach is specifically designed for multi-stakeholder engagement (in different sectors of society, different countries) and hence can be applied in other LMEs or transboundary regions.

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Stakeholder Participation and Engagement: Fostering a Community of Interest

Experience of the GEF sponsored

“Distance Learning and Information Sharing Tool (DLIST-Benguela)” (UNDP/GEF Project)

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

DLIST-Benguela is an information sharing programme, comprising an online platform, distance learning courses, and a social networking programme. It focuses on the coastal areas flanked by the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) along the west side of South Africa, Namibia and Angola. This is a region in a rapid state of transition, with changes in land ownership, socio-economic challenges resulting from dwindling mining, and environmental pressures, in a context of a fragile environment and debilitating poverty.

The overall aim of DLIST-Benguela is to increase access of local communities to information that is critical to environmental management and sustainable livelihood creation, founded on the Benguela Current's coastal and marine resources. DLIST promotes the sharing of ideas between coastal interest groups, different tiers of government and between a wide array of players that include local communities and the private sector. DLIST was explicitly designed to complement the GEF/UNDP BCLME project

DLIST-Benguela aims to:

- ◆ bridge the information divide through an accessible ICT application and user support programme;
- ◆ promote the flow of information and improve networking between coastal role players;
- ◆ create a common pool of knowledge; and
- ◆ facilitate dissemination of the scientific outputs of the BCLME and BENEFIT programmes, as well as other projects, to all civil stakeholders along the BCLME.

A concept that was born in 1999, the current phase of DLIST is under implementation as a GEF MSP project since October 2005 for a

period of three years. The main outcomes of the project defined at project inception were:

1. To put in place an innovative and user friendly ICT platform for coastal stakeholders
2. To offer coastal stakeholders distance learning courses on sustainable development in coastal areas
3. To offer DLIST users free access to information and promote the flow of information between them
4. To make DLIST accessible to coastal communities for their empowerment and uplifting

THE EXPERIENCE

Issue

One of the main challenges faced by DLIST (and by participatory development in the broader sense) is to reach and engage a representative group of stakeholders. Subsequently, to ensure equal access to information, and define processes so that stakeholders have a real chance to be part of them – for them to become development partners. In the context of transboundary resource management, these challenges are additionally complicated by the diversity of stakeholders, and that they are frequently geographically dispersed over a large area.

Addressing the Issue

The DLIST-Benguela project was designed somewhat as a pilot for an approach. Could stakeholders in the BCLME region be successfully engaged and subsequently empowered making use of an online platform, distance learning courses, and a supporting social networking programme?

Project development progressed as a series of smaller, **iterative “pilots”**. Each element of the

approach would first be tested, and based on feedback from the growing user community, be adapted and more completely rolled out. This allowed our team to tailor the communications approach to the reality and information needs of stakeholders.

The first lesson we learnt was that **stakeholder engagement benefits from an integrated approach**. No one “channel” was ideal for all segments of the audience, nor for all situations. The DLIST “mix” evolved to include web platform, online discussions, newsletter, a distributed film festival, printed material, radio and face to face workshops. Even the distance learning course played a key role in engaging specific sectors of the audience in a focussed manner.

To expand on a few elements of the approach:

1. **Web platform/knowledge management:**

Our website is really an engine that generates content, discussion, leads - that are then developed in many ways.

- a. The web platform was organised around audience information needs (rather than project architecture) and evolved as new information demands arose. Our team worked hard to think of content from a users’ perspective – “why would it matter to me”, “what can I do” etc.
- b. Engagement did not result from “clever technology” in the conventional sense. We worked to make technology as simple to use as possible – with only those features which users absolutely needed. For example, while we tested allowing users to contribute content directly, we realised that (for our specific audience) it was far simpler to ask users to simply email word or PDF documents to a website manager than to train them in the complications of contributing web content.
- c. We encouraged users to create their own page on the platform (again, allowing submission in any format, attached to email.) These are called “partner kiosks” and provide a networking opportunity, as well as giving members of the community a

sense of co-ownership of the platform.

- d. One promising function was a simple “911 HELP” button. Users were encouraged, by clicking on a prominent button on the home page, to send any topically relevant question to the DLIST website admin team. The questions were then routed to experts in the DLIST user community for answer, with the admin team keeping track of progress. This provided an opportunity to interact with users – based on their needs – and acted as a form of social networking when users were put in touch with subject experts within the online community.
- e. The project ultimately aims not only to answer questions, but to build a “common pool of knowledge”. This pool of knowledge is fed by ongoing information needs analysis and is driven by users. While the e-library helps the community of practice to store and reuse assets, the DLIST team collects information from different sources to generate “information parcels” that aim to make subject information accessible to anyone. Each of these parcels is really a lens on topic, for example coastal property development, which surfaces as a “burning issue” through the discussion forums. In general, a mix of online/ print and other channels is used.

2. **Courses/distance learning**

For the DLIST project, courses are a way of engaging key role players in a meaningful way, while building capacity and networks

- a. A semester course on Sustainable Development in Coastal Areas has been on offer since project inception, and serves as broad introduction to the topic in the context of the BCLME. Distance learning students are typically industry or government decision makers who feel the need to improve their knowledge of sustainable development. Further courses are under development, with a module on Integrated Coastal

- Zone Management about to be launched in March 2008.
- b. By collaborating with a tertiary institution, the sustainability of the courses (beyond project lifetime) was ensured. Teaching staff at the institution manage all course related student interaction.
 - c. Demand for the semester courses is very high. Users have also expressed the need for shorted, skills based courses. A module in Stakeholder Participation is now being launched as a pilot.

3. Social networking

Through outreach activities such as training events, workshops, film festivals, awareness campaigns and road shows, community radio, a community of interest is built where users are actively involved. These activities create awareness for our target issues and, at the same time, keep the DLIST community in touch with each other, building networks.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

This interactive (online) communication approach required active facilitation. DLIST worked with key information sharing partners in each region (“champions”) from as early as possible, making continuous efforts to nurture relationships. We engaged in active moderation of online discussions, and would occasionally directly invite key people in on relevant discussions. We further made use of “push media” in the form of an electronic newsletter. The newsletter followed up on topics of interest from the discussions and significantly consisted of partner-generated content. In this way, DLIST’s reach was extended beyond registered discussion participants.

During the project design phase, access to the internet was considered a potential obstacle – specifically for an approach that relied substantially on email and web based interaction. In practice, we found that the barrier to communication was not technological in the many instances – there are now over 44 million internet users in Africa, many of them the very decision makers that DLIST hoped to connect. DLIST users included people in the remote regions of Angola, South Africa and Namibia,

who had access via satellite line, cellphone, internet café or even the nearest library.

For users who did have internet access, the interactive online mode of communication offered clear benefits. One way to extend the conversation beyond the web platform was to encourage these users to become “information intermediaries”. To do this, we aimed to package information in a format that was as easy to share as possible – for example as PDF files that could be freely printed or shared on memory stick.

To further improve access to web content, we piloted the concept of regional “nodes” – offices where users could come and access the web based platform for free, download learning materials and receive the support of a trained “node moderator”. Initially, where these nodes were totally independent initiatives, they had limited success. It was hard to maintain a network of small regional information centres, and users seemed reluctant to engage node moderators. We subsequently learnt to integrate the local presence with an existing information hub – a library, resource centre or museum. In this way the project supported a local initiative, built valuable partnerships and we greatly simplified the management of the nodes.

As already mentioned, the project design made strong provision for communication channels other than web – for example community radio, where the team developed phone-in programming linked to discussions on the website. The integrated communications approach afforded multiple points of contact between stakeholders (including project staff) over a period of several years. This built an enduring “community of interest”, a group of people who share some level of trust and who effectively become project partners, sharing project goals. The “social capital” thus built allowed the DLIST team to distribute the communications process to members of the stakeholder community and so extend our reach. As an example, a travelling film festival was organised in over 20 locations by local partners, with the DLIST project mainly providing access to the films and marketing materials, and co-ordinating high level arrangements.

Our team are presently working to answer a new set of questions which we feel relate very closely to what we have learnt:

- ◆ How can one enable richer communication between project proponent and stakeholders? The typical meeting report – a bullet list of requirements or concerns – is deeply unsatisfactory?
- ◆ How to better maintain a community of practice between formal participatory sessions?
- ◆ How to really “distribute” the participatory process?

REPLICATION

While there are individual lessons to be shared from the project, the key learning from DLIST relates to what was earlier called “social capital”, or trust. The objective, rather than simply disseminating information to an “audience”, is to build an enduring “community of interest” – a group of people who effectively become project partners. While this could be achieved in any number of ways (we have highlighted what worked in the DLIST context), in our experience, it requires sufficient time and resources to grow and maintain such a network.

Social capital grows when a group of people have multiple points of contact over a significant period of time (in terms of project lifetimes), and where all parties gain something they perceive valuable from the interactions. The approach requires an open-ness to the perspective of stakeholders – to engage people on their terms, based on their needs. This may prove challenging for a project with limited scope, pre-defined goals and especially limited contact time (whether online or offline) with stakeholders.

DLIST significantly leveraged the benefits of web based communication to build and maintain a community. In some regions, and more specifically with particular stakeholder audiences, this may not be most appropriate. Above all, it is important to be attentive and listen to the information needs in the target community and to select the most appropriate means of distributed engagement.

SIGNIFICANCE

This approach is specifically designed for multi-stakeholder engagement (in different sectors of society, different countries) and hence can be applied in other LMEs or transboundary regions. The DList experience is significant because it is the first attempt in the GEF IW community to introduce such a multi-layered approach to a region characterized by wide socioeconomic differences, linguistic groups and internet accessibility levels. In complex management situations there are typically multiple role players, initiatives, programmes and needs to consider, and there is thus often need for a “centralised” point of contact. This central point of contact or network can facilitate a multi directional communication (and engagement) process, the development of a community of practice, allowing for the participation of community members and other players that would normally not take part directly in that management.

REFERENCES

Please visit DLIST’s website at www.dlist-benguela.org and write to the DLIST Team at admin@dlist-benguela.org. You may also contact the Project CTA, Francois Odendaal, at francois@ecoafrika.co.za or the Project Coordinator at rean@ecoafrika.co.za.

KEYWORDS

- ◆ Information sharing
- ◆ Information and communication tools (ICT)
- ◆ Community of Practice

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