

04th Sep 2002
D. News

Public can play a major role in shaping environmental projects

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JOHANNESBURG (IPS) Despite an impressive record guaranteeing people more information on environmental issues, seven countries across the Americas, Africa and Asia have still to ensure that the public can play a decisive role in shaping projects that impact their respective environments, says a new report.

The governments in the countries surveyed — including Chile, Mexico, Uganda, South Africa, India, Indonesia and Thailand — have performed "less well in facilitating participating and least well in providing access to justice," adds the report launched in Johannesburg on Tuesday by the World Resources Institute (WRI), a Washington-based think tank.

Participation

In only Thailand and Uganda, do constitutions specifically recognise "public participation in decision making", the report, 'Closing the Gap: Information, Participation and Justice in Decision-making for the Environ-

ment,' points out. Even then there are lapses, like the laws and regulations on environmental impact assessments lacking "provisions guaranteeing public notice and comment".

In Indonesia, on the other hand, "a persistent 'culture of secrecy' pervades the bureaucracy, undermining information disclosure policies", adds the 145-page study.

The United States and Hungary are also included in the first study that attempts to gauge how the countries surveyed have implemented one of the key promises 178 countries made when they endorsed the declaration that came out of the 1992 Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro.

That promise was the "Principle 10" of the Rio Declaration. It states that environmental issues need to be tackled with the participation of "all concerned citizens, at the relevant level".

In addition to ensuring that the public will have access to environment-related information held by gov-

ernment authorities, Principle 10 states that individuals must be given the "opportunity to participate in decision-making processes."

It also holds out that "effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided."

Blueprint

However, WRI experts at Tuesday's launch view this principle as a promise unfulfilled 10 years after the Earth Summit, which was the first UN conference that provided a blueprint to achieve development for the benefit of the millions living in poverty without destroying the planet.

"The main areas of decision making are outside the scope of public participation," says Jonathan Lash, WRI's president. "People rarely have opportunities to participate at the project levels."

In South Africa, communities are not fully aware of the level they can be involved to participate at the decision-making level, despite the country having an open information policy,

adds Thabo Madihlaba of South Africa's Environmental Justice Networking Forum.

The same is true for Thailand, says Somrudee Nicro, director of the urbanisation and environment programme at the Thailand Environment Institute. "Government officials are reluctant to ensure access for public participation, and people don't know about the law and their rights under the law."

The WRI report has been developed by The Access Initiative, a global coalition of some 25 civil society groups from nine countries.

Among the positive findings are success stories in Mexico, South Africa and Uganda during emergencies that threaten public health.

In Mexico, for instance, the study rates highly the quality and availability of information supplied to the public after a volcano eruption.

Information

South Africa and Uganda have scored high marks availing the public information during cholera out-

breaks. Thailand and Chile, however, earn a mixed record for the way the governments provided information to the public on the quality of air in their respective capitals, Bangkok and Santiago.

While information was available, it was "often compromised because of insufficient detail."

On the negative side of the balance sheet is the way the public in India, Thailand and Indonesia, for instance, has been precluded from participating in "decisions concerning specific projects, permits and concessions."

Communities

"For the most part, public authorities in the cases assessed failed to inform affected communities or public interest groups that they were initiating a process to grant an operating license for a factory, award a forest concession, or approve a development project," the report states.

But at Tuesday's launch, WRI experts admitted that the World Summit on Sustainable Development

(WSSD), which began in Johannesburg on Monday, may not be the best model of transparency and greater public participation in decision-making they will want to use to elicit change in the countries surveyed.

For this UN summit, which runs from Aug 26 to Sep 4, has been cold-shouldering representatives of civil society in playing their part in the negotiations underway to achieve sustainable development.

"We strongly feel that the current WSSD process is not friendly to civil society. And the United Nations is gradually diminishing the role of civil society as a result," says South African environmentalist Madihlaba.

The tight security cordon around the summit's main venue has irked other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), too. "These (government) negotiators are taking decisions which will effect the lives of everyone in the world yet civil society cannot have a voice," one NGO activist was quoted in Tuesday's edition of "The Star," an English-language daily.