

Reflect & act



MARCH 2011

OVERVIEW

IIED Climate Change Group

Project name:

Knowledge-sharing initiative for SACU country parliamentarians

Project leader:

Achala Chandani

Time frame:

2009–2011

Cost:

Approximately £153,600

Objective:

To promote an informed, proactive and challenging debate on climate change within Southern African parliaments, and to support parliamentary action that improves climate legislation and policy, leading to equitable low-carbon growth, mitigation and adaptation strategies.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The upcoming UN conference on climate change in Durban, South Africa throws a spotlight on African climate policy. As part of a knowledge-sharing initiative in Southern Africa, we assessed parliamentarians' needs for more information on climate threats and responses, and ways to improve their capabilities as key stakeholders influencing national and global decision-making. Funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and partnered with the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA), IIED worked with parliamentarians in the Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU) – Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland – through interviews, literature surveys, field trips and workshops. Similar studies in Malawi and Scotland also fed into this project.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Parliamentarians play a vital role in developing climate resilience by bringing constituents' concerns into national fora and scrutinising how governments are responding to domestic and global climate change issues. Parliaments are also a good mechanism for ensuring policy continuity.

Improving leadership on climate change

MPs in Southern Africa need better information to help them fully engage with the climate crisis.

This December, the next UN climate change conference will be held in South Africa. The stakes are as high as ever: more than 20 years of international negotiations still haven't saved poor and vulnerable people from suffering the worst impacts of climate change – and the crisis is particularly acute on the African continent.

These besieged local communities are represented in policy and law-making processes by members of parliament (MPs). And it is the constituents of these MPs who are being asked to reduce their daily carbon footprint. Yet most African climate change initiatives are spearheaded by ministers of the central governments, not by parliamentarians. With this project, we set out to discover what parliamentarians need to become leaders on climate change policy in countries of the Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU).

Spotty understanding

First, IIED researchers interviewed MPs in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland. We also talked to other players, such as government ministry officials and civil society organisations to compare their knowledge and find gaps where the groups weren't connecting.

We found that parliamentarians' understanding of the human causes of climate change varied greatly, and they commonly conflated it with other environmental issues such as ozone depletion, air quality and even littering. Awareness of the role of greenhouse gas

emissions was greatest in more industrialised South Africa. Throughout the region, though, MPs tended to describe climate change mitigation as a concern of the developed world.

Parliamentarians more firmly grasped the impacts of global warming on their constituents and the need to adapt. But many were unsure of effective responses, and their national agendas are already burdened with urgent problems such as poverty and AIDS. The best hope for tackling climate change, suggested one MP in Lesotho, was to make it a cross-cutting issue: "We can talk about climate change when we address issues in agriculture, when we talk about malaria, when we talk about trains or buses, when we talk about firewood. By talking about it all the time, the governments and people will realise that it is happening now and we have to start dealing with it now."

We also identified systemic causes of these knowledge gaps. Whereas MPs in wealthy developed countries are used to commissioning briefings on pressing issues from parliamentary researchers, the Southern African parliamentarians have limited access to such aides. In some countries, even internet was not widely available to MPs.

To get information on climate change, the parliamentarians mostly rely on mass media and the central government. Parliamentary committees have the power to call in NGOs for briefings, but members reported they rarely did so; instead, governments were often the ones to introduce experts to MPs. This limits the independence of the

Thus, parliamentarians are a key stakeholder group in the current climate change debate. The research described here fits into a larger initiative that encourages MPs to exchange knowledge with other regional stakeholders, including academics, civil society groups and government officials. In this way, the project helps them better understand the problem of climate change, become more effective watchdogs on government, and make informed decisions on national policy, planning and implementation.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Some SACU countries have cross-party committees relevant to climate change, but legislative and policy frameworks on the issue are fragmented.
- Parliamentarians in the region are well aware of climate change effects, but less knowledgeable about effective responses.
- To ensure parliaments can effectively shape climate policy and hold executives to account, we need to invest in providing information to parliamentarians across the region.

PARTNERS' VIEW

The importance of including parliamentarians in any effort to improve climate change policies and interventions in the region is very high. It is essential to treat the climate change issue within the broader development debate. Parliamentarians, as legislators, representatives of the people and as overseers of the public purse are in a key position to respond to climate change challenges in an effective and holistic manner. IIED and AWEPA have been able to assist herein by involving climate change parliamentary champions and by combining needs assessment, research, technical assistance and workshops where parliaments of the region could exchange experiences and best practices. This combination not only served the goal of efficiency, but also contributed to project logic and efficacy.

Geertje Hollenberg
AWEPA

IIED CLIMATE CHANGE GROUP

Working in collaboration with partner organisations and individuals in developing countries, the Climate Change Group has been leading the field on adaptation to climate change issues.



Parliamentarians went on field trips to learn more about issues such as climate change mitigation and green economic development.

legislature – their ability to bridge constituents' concerns and those of government, and to hold the government to account. It will be crucial to invest in providing better information, from more diverse sources, to parliamentarians across the region.

To broaden the picture obtained from interviews, IIED carried out a literature survey and research on existing committees, policies and legislation on climate change – the base that parliamentarians are working from. In some countries, relevant cross-party parliamentary committees are in place, though typically they do not focus solely on climate change. For example, in Botswana at the time of interviews, climate change was being addressed by a committee on agriculture. This bundling of climate with one related sector could distort decision makers' responses.

Legislative and policy frameworks are even more fragmented – though this is changing in some places. During interviews and research, none of the countries had established a specific law or policy coordinating action on climate change at the national level. Most related measures have emerged as by-products of other objectives – energy production, disaster management and so on – and are administered by myriad government bodies, leading to fragmented decision making. With such patchwork policies, it could be difficult to measure success or to formulate climate-savvy development strategies.

Outlook improving

Over the study period, however, global warming crept towards centre stage in these countries. Namibia now has a

strong national policy drafted, and South Africa recently issued a Green Paper on climate change responses. Also, encouragingly, all the countries do have policies and laws already that can be used to address climate change, albeit in a piecemeal way. Given a greater command of the issues and better institutional arrangements for coordinating action, parliamentarians could use existing tools to place climate resilience high on the public agenda. To strengthen this potential, we closed the project with a regional workshop where parliamentarians from all five countries sketched work plans leading up to the 2011 UN conference.

To expand the research beyond IIED and build credibility, the study's results have been vetted by the interviewees and written up by respected in-country experts. Next, they will feed into a longer-term initiative for knowledge-sharing among parliamentarians, which IIED is currently developing.

The ongoing goal is to improve the MPs' capacity to translate climate issues from the local to the national and international levels, and vice versa. Negotiators in Durban this December will be representing governments, with their often limited national interests. Parliamentarians should play an active role in representing vulnerable communities and constituents – both nationally and in global policymaking.

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