

THE AFRICA REGIONAL GROUP: PRESENT CHALLENGES AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

Martha Pretorius
Water Research Commission
PRETORIA, South Africa
E-mail: mpretorius@wrc.org.za

Introduction

At the previous IAMSLIC Conference held in Reykjavik, I was elected as Coordinator of the Africa Regional Group. This group has been in existence since 1995, but not much has happened in terms of getting an active Regional Group going.

The Africa Regional Group currently has 26 members and the geographical distribution of members in Africa is as follows:

Northwest Africa	12 members
East Africa	6 members
South Africa	7 members
Seychelles	1 member

2. Communication problems

Lack of effective communication lines between members proved to be one of the biggest problems in establishing a successful Regional Group. Analysing the membership details gives an indication of communication facilities:

Members with e-mail addresses	14
Members with fax numbers only	4
Members with only postal addresses	8

Even with just more than 50% of members indicating that they had access to electronic mail, communication through e-mail was mainly unsuccessful. Messages were either returned as "Undeliverable" or seemed to vanish into thin air, with no one responding! When, as an alternative, the same messages were faxed to members where fax numbers were available, the situation remained the same.

In an attempt to start an African network and to test the opinion of members on a few issues, a basic questionnaire was mailed to members. The results were disappointing! Only **thirteen** members (50%) could be contacted successfully and worthwhile feedback was received from only **eight** (31%)

Is there hope for improvement?

Africa is the continent with the largest number of countries classified as **Least Developed Countries** in the world. Not only is the continent in desperate need of a proper communication infrastructure, but currently the human capacity to manage such an infrastructure does not exist. Donor countries often dump outdated equipment on Africa, without providing any support or capacity building as far as maintenance of equipment is concerned. A further complicating factor is that in most African countries, political leaders are reluctant to allow privatisation of services in their countries, leading to inefficient, government-controlled systems.

But there is hope! At a workshop of African ministers of communication held in Cape Town in February 1998, a document, aimed to formulate the development of a telecommunications infrastructure for Africa was accepted. This document "*The African Connection: Building Africa's Communications Infrastructure*" addresses all the key elements required for the development of a working and successful communications infrastructure in Africa.

Currently, satellite technology (in the form of single or satellite constellations) for effective communication within and from Africa, is already available. Unfortunately, the cost for using this advanced technology is way above what most African countries can afford. Also, rural communities are often too far away from energy and communication suppliers to benefit from advanced technology. This unfortunate situation often forces countries to develop innovative solutions for their unique problems. One example: in South Africa, a combination of satellite and wireless radio technologies were used to get two schools situated in a remote region on line.

Regional information sharing initiatives in Africa

In Africa, two regional marine information sharing groups are currently active:

- RECOSCIX-WIO (Regional Cooperation in Scientific Information Exchange in the Western Indian Ocean Region)
- RECOSCIX-CEA (Regional Cooperation in Scientific Information Exchange in the Eastern Atlantic Ocean Region)

RECOSCIX-WIO was launched in 1989 with financial support from the Belgian government and the IOC from UNESCO. This group has been successful in providing countries in East Africa as well as the Indian Ocean island states with a working and functional information sharing system.

Their counterparts on the African west coast, RECOSCIX-CEA, only recently started with a similar initiative. Project plans and budgets have been prepared and they hope to start functioning within the near future.

Conclusion

Setting up any information sharing network in Africa is certainly no easy task! The main focus of the two existing networks lies in the provision of *marine* information. With *water* already identified as the most important resource in Africa, the sharing of information on the *freshwater* environment has been identified as a matter demanding immediate and urgent concern. The assistance of IAMSLIC and its members in supporting such an initiative will be essential to achieve success in this regard.

REFERENCES

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