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Public hearings in environmental and social impact assessment for energy sector projects in Cameroon

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In Cameroon, like in other countries, public hearings are the most common method of citizen involvement mentioned in Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). To elicit various attributes of current practice and characteristics of these public hearings in Cameroon, with focus on access, process and outcomes, we used an interpretive approach. This research unveiled an array of problems, including shortcomings in public hearing practice, law and regulatory framework, limited access to information, and inconvenient location of reading rooms (depositories). Public hearings do take place in depositories but they do not provide participants with the opportunity for direct debate and consensus-building. This research demonstrated that, local economic stakes tend to take precedence over critical questioning during public hearing events. However, public hearings in Cameroon attest to the growing willingness to challenge ESIA reports that may be fully backed by the government. In order for public hearings to be worthwhile events in Cameroon, there is need to build credibility and mutual trust among stakeholders.

Keywords: energy, public hearings, environmental and social impact assessment

Introduction

Considering that Public Participation (PP) has been increasingly prioritized at the core of national Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) legislation in countries around the world, there is growing interest in the dynamics and efficacy of PP – especially as it is becoming a social expectation. However, the literature on limitations of public participation is extensive (Wolfgang and Rasid 2002). There is no consensus on the methodology for achieving adequate PP (Diduck et al. 2007; Ker Rault 2008; O’Faircheallaigh 2010) and it is open to a number of different interpretations. At one level, it is considered as a flexible and adaptive process and social learning exercise (Webler et al. 1995; Sinclair and Diduck 2001; Collins and Ison 2006; Ker Rault and Jeffrey 2008). At another, it is considered as a normative approach, inspired by Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969). The ladder depicts participation as essentially a linear process and hierarchical involvement, and fails to capture the dynamic and evolutionary nature of user involvement (Collins and Ison 2006). Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of, the latitude of interpretation, the need for PP in ESIA is universally accepted. Despite the plethora of criticisms from scholars and experts, in Cameroon, like in many ESIA jurisdictions around the globe, Arnstein’s ladder of citizen engagement explicitly remains at the core of the approach to participation. While recognizing that PP is a controversial subject, this research focused on public hearings, which are the method of citizen involvement most commonly mentioned in ESIA literature (Richardson et al. 1998; Palerm 1999; Wolfgang and Rasid 2002; Baker and McLelland 2003; Heather and Koontz 2004; Diduck et al. 2007; Chavez and Bernal 2008; Nadeem and Hameed 2008).

Since inception of formal ESIA legislation in 1996 (environmental Law), with regulatory improvements in 2005, no thorough study has been carried out on public participation and public hearings in ESIA. It can therefore be argued that there is a need for more such studies to reflect on our five years of PP practices. This work seeks to highlight the current situation concerning the practice of public hearings during ESIA for energy sector projects in Cameroon. In doing so, we seek to identify constraints to effective public hearings and opportunities for improving public hearing practices in Cameroon. We did this by analysing documents, organizing focus group discussion and conducting semi-structured interviews in order to understand the perceptions of individuals relating to the process, implementation and outcomes of public hearings in ESIA for energy sector projects in Cameroon. We focused on energy sector projects for three reasons:

- (1) At the present time, the Government of Cameroon is committed to accelerating the development of oil, gas and dams for electricity purposes. Many large infrastructure projects in the energy sector are therefore currently being implemented across the country’s landscape. This enables us to look at actors at different levels in different socio-cultural settings.
- (2) Energy (oil) shortage and unavailability of affordable, and reliable electricity is a general problem in Cameroon, which could entice people to take part in participative initiatives with the aim of constructing solutions to energy problems.
- (3) Large infrastructure projects are particularly characterized by a great deal of public attention and protest (Lidskog and Soneryd 2000).

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This paper proceeds as follows. After this introduction with a focus on public participation in ESIA, there is a section on legal and regulatory requirements for public hearings in the Cameroonian context. Subsequently, we describe the study methodology, followed by a discussion of results. Finally, the constraints and opportunities for improving public hearing practices in Cameroon are considered.

An overview of legal and procedural disposition regulating ESIA and public hearings in Cameroon

The principal legal and regulatory frameworks that lay down ESIA in Cameroon is the law no. 96/12 of 5 August 1996, bearing the framework law relating to the management of the environment in Cameroon; the Decree no. 2005/0577/PM of 23 February, 2005, which formally launched Cameroon ESIA procedure; and the Order no. 0069/MINEP of March 2005 prescribing the different categories of projects that would necessitate an ESIA.

The law no. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 gives overall provisions for public participation. Article 72 of this law explains that 'the participation of the populations in the management of the environment must be encouraged, particularly through: free access to environmental information, within the imperative reserve of the national defense and of the State safety'. The same law stipulates that the rational management of the environment and of the natural resources in Cameroon must obey a certain number of fundamental principles, among which is the principle of participation which states that:

each citizen must have access to information relating to the environment, including dangerous substances and activities;

decisions concerning the environment must be made after a consensus between the economic operator on the one hand, and the groups concerned as well as the public on the other hand to ensure environmental protection.

The current ESIA legislation in Cameroon provides no room for an appeal by the proponent and other stakeholders against the decision if the above-mentioned consensus required by the legislation does not eventuate. However, since the Penal Code punishes air and water pollution, adulteration, etc., Cameroonians can use these provisions and their constitutional rights to a healthy environment to enforce environmental law.

The Decree no. 2005/0577/PM was enacted to operationalize the above-mentioned public participation-specific provisions. Article 11(1) of this Decree states that the realization of the ESIA must be made with the participation of the local populations concerned through consultations and public hearings. Public hearing is then a new process in Cameroon where democratic process and environmental awareness are still evolving. It takes place during the ESIA report review process.

Order no. 0069/MINEP of March 2005 classifies projects requiring an ESIA into two categories. Category 1 projects are those projects requiring a simple ESIA, while Category 2 projects are those requiring a detailed ESIA

study. Public hearings are mandatory for detailed ESIA. In accordance with the provisions of Decree no.2005/0577/PM of 23 February 2005, public hearing shall aim at advertising the study, recording possible objections to the project and enabling the population to have their say on the findings of the study. In Cameroon, public hearings are funded by the project proponent and implemented by the Ministry of the Environment. In order to ensure a well-organized public hearing event that is in accordance with the provisions of the Decree, the Minister of the Environment creates an ad-hoc committee. Effective and massive participation of the stakeholders, the number of comments freely lodged, wide publicity of the event through mass media and the existence of depositories with ESIA reports are assessed to determine if a hearing is well organized and in accordance with the Decree. In practice, public hearing events consist of pre-event communication activities (information through written press, radio communiqués, television and banners), and then the organization of hearings, which generally take place in reading rooms (depositories open at the sub-divisional headquarters and not within the vicinity of the community where the project will be implemented). Participants are free to sign up, consult documents (ESIA reports, copies of the bilingual non technical summaries) put at their disposal in these reading rooms, ask questions for clarification to representatives of the Ministry in Charge of the Environment and representatives of the project proponent/ESIA consultant present in reading rooms, provide their written opinions in the register, and sign a written record of their observations. Reading rooms usually open from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Considering the bad of state of roads in some regions, sometimes mobile teams made up of representatives collect the observations of affected communities, especially those within the vicinity of the project. At the end of any public hearing, ESIA and public hearing reports are sent to the Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Environment (IMCE), which is the final advisory and consultative body in the ESIA review process with members drawn from different government ministries having a stake in a particular project. It provides an opinion on the ESIA and forwards its opinion to the Ministry in Charge of the Environment. When the Ministry of the environment receives the opinion expressed by the IMCE, it concludes the evaluation of the ESIA and rules on the admissibility of the study. If the Ministry rules in favor of the study, it issues a Certificate of Environmental Conformity (CEC). Otherwise, a conditional ruling accompanied by measures to be taken by the proponent is issued.

Research methodology

The investigation of public hearing practices in Cameroon used an interpretative research approach because it provides significant depth of insight into the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who actually live it (Schwandt 1994; Sandberg 2005). Our philosophical stance is that, as stakeholders are involved in

public hearing processes, their interpretation is the best source of understanding. This approach allowed respondents to recount their own versions of public hearings. The overall research strategy included a literature review (step 1), semi-structured interviews (step 2), focus group discussion (step 3) and document analysis (step 4).

Step 1: literature review

The purpose of literature review was to acquire knowledge, and develop understanding criticisms of public hearings at national and international levels. Some substantial work has already been done worldwide on criticisms of public hearings in ESIA. Such criticisms of the public hearing, as unveiled by Hadden (1989), Sinclair and Diduck (1995), Connor (2000) and Heather and Koontz (2004) are manifested in four related sets of problems: legal, administrative, communication and citizen representation. According to Heather and Koontz (2004), legal problems refer to how requirements are written in the law itself, while administrative problems centre on how government officials implement the law. Citizen representation refers to the degree to which citizen participants are representative of the affected public and finally, according to Bond et al. (2004), communication refers to two-way communication, where there is a dialogue between the developer and the public oriented to reach (if possible) consensus and where mutual learning takes place. Administration problems encompass access to information, which according to Foti and Lalanath De Silva (2010) refers to (1) the availability of information and (2) the mechanisms by which public authorities provide environmental information.

Since these above-mentioned criticisms are based on democratic characteristics of developed countries where institutional infrastructures are robust, it was important to elicit views on various attributes of current practice and characteristics of the public hearing in Cameroon through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis.

Step 2: Semi-structured interviews

Analysis of public hearing attendance sheets suggested that stakeholder groups comprise five categories: direct affectees, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), ESIA consultants, academics and officials of the concerned government departments. Non-probability purposive and snowballing sampling was then used (Zikmund 2003) to produce a list of interviewees from the above stakeholder groups. Zikmund (2003) describes this as a technique in which an experienced individual selects the sample based on judgement about some appropriate characteristics required of the sample members. To ensure that the right respondents were selected, these criteria were used:

they had made a comment on ESIA reports/energy sector projects that was published in some form in the public domain;

they had been involved in ESIA in some way;
they had been working in the environmental field as an ESIA consultant;
they had been affected or consulted in one way or another in a project where an ESIA was done;
they had taken part as a member of an interest group during an ESIA: CSOs, Community-Based Organizations or Cameroonian development partners.

Linked to the interpretivist paradigm being followed, the types of questions in the interviews did not lend themselves to quantitative answers, as they required a detailed exploration of the context within which public hearings operate. Data were collected from September to December 2011 and from five levels of stakeholder groups: ESIA administrators (2) and two ESIA administrators on retirement, ESIA Consultants (6), project proponents (3), CSOs (12) involved in ESIA processes, local community representatives affected by energy development projects (6), financial development partners (3) and one representative from the Ministry of Land tenure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Yaoundé (State political capital) and at Lom-Pangar and Song Mbengue (project sites). For example, respondents were asked whether they were able to understand a voluminous technical report and give comments. The purpose of the interviews with the concerned ESIA administrators was to learn how the public hearing process was actually working? The proponents and consultants were interviewed to obtain information on a range of issues like their perception of ESIA, public hearing procedures and costs. The interviewees were asked how they came to know about the invitation to participate in the process, and how convenient the location and timing of the availability of information about the project were to them. Anonymity and confidentiality measures were provided to improve the quality of the results.

Step 3: Focus group discussion

The sample for focus group discussion was selected from the national energy platform target population. The criteria were that respondents had to be involved in energy sector projects and public hearings. The data gathering method selected to access peoples' perceptions is discussion (Swan 2011). Focus group discussions, which are also recommended for obtaining qualitative data (Bryman 2001), were conducted, since it was possible to gather key stakeholders (project proponents, ESIA consultants and the regulators, academia, CSOs). On 13 December 2011, a focus group discussion was organized with a multi-stakeholder group. These stakeholders comprised six parliamentarians, one ESIA administrator from the Ministry of the Environment, 15 civil servants from four ministries (social affairs, land tenure, energy, economy and planning), two academics, two representatives from CSOs representing a network of 17 local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associations, and two representatives from energy private sectors. Discussion was based on public hearing practices in Cameroon.

Step 4: Document analysis

Since the analysis of documentary sources is one of the major methods of social research and is considered as meaningful and appropriate in the context of qualitative research strategy by many researchers (Mason 1996), ESIA guidelines, Cameroon's ESIA legislation, ESIA reports and public hearing reports (Matanda Block; Iroko Block; 2D seismic Bomono; Offshore block Etinde; Heavy Fuel Oil (HFO) Logbaba; 2D seismic Ndian; Forage Njonji; Dibamba power plant; Bojongo; Lom-Pangar dam project) were reviewed. Excerpts from public hearing reports analysed are given in Table 1.

Data were analysed regarding their correspondence to selected criticisms of public hearings revealed by literature review.

Results and discussion

Document analysis, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews revealed an array of problems including shortcomings in public hearing practice, law and regulatory framework, limited access to information, low literacy, high costs (travel, documents, etc.) and limited public hearing outcomes.

Shortcomings in public hearing legal and procedural requirements regulating public hearing

Decree no. 2005/0577/PM of 23 February 2005, enacted to operationalize public participation in the ESIA process in Cameroon contains a number of limitations that could impede public hearing event outcomes and learning perspectives. This legal provision does not require specific reporting format for public hearing events. This failure has resulted in some confusion and lack of uniformity in reporting public hearing events. As an ESIA report is a final product that includes the outcomes of a public hearing event, it is useful to outline the structure or format for which the public hearing event will follow and be reported. In this way, it becomes easier to acquire an organized set of information. It also facilitates the analysis, which is an essential step towards the identification of key learning points. The problem would be that the legislator did not envision public hearing events as institutional and social learning processes, or as knowledge building processes. This finding is in line with previous data reported by Fitzpatrick (2006), showing that learning is important to ESIA but it is rarely identified as an objective of process design. An approach increasingly discussed in the literature involves the concept of social and organizational learning, in which stakeholders work together, sharing information to identify effective, socially acceptable strategies to mitigate impacts and identify opportunities (Webler et al. 1995; Diduck and Mitchell 2003; Fitzpatrick 2006; Chavez and Bernal 2008).

Decree no. 2005/0577/PM, does not implicitly require the Ministry of the Environment to make publicly available public hearing reports and final ESIA reports. This does not provide stakeholders with confidence and

Table 1. Excerpts from public hearing reports.

	Number of participants	Gender		Number of individual written observations	Period of hearings	Number of reading rooms/mobile teams
		Male	Female			
Project Ndian River block seismic	220	162	58	55	19–24 October 2009	1
Lom Pangar dam	1893	1596	297	507	19 January to 1 February 2011	6
Shallow water seismic survey in Matanda Block, Offshore Cameroon	494	412	82	131	19–24 January 2009	2 reading rooms and 1 mobile team
extension HFO thermal plant Logbaba-Douala.	198	N/A	N/A	46	19 November 2004 to December 2007	N/A

Source: Authors' own construct.

satisfaction that the project development will adequately address their concerns and issues. In order to maintain continuity and for confidence building, ESIA legal framework should explicitly require the Ministry of the Environment to share with key stakeholders outcomes from public hearing events. Apart from the above-mentioned shortcomings, this Decree does not specify public hearing duration and the number of public hearing reading rooms. These flaws have also resulted in some discrepancies among a few ESIA stakeholders. According to project proponents, funding agencies and NGO representatives, these gaps establish a basis for negotiation and corruption. However, although a determination of the required number of reading rooms is complex and dependent on the function and scope of each project, the duration of hearings can be predicted. From Cameroon ESIA administrators' perspectives, the public hearing duration and number of reading rooms as determined by the Ministry of environment depend upon project size, type, impact area, population and potentially controversial issues. Public hearing event duration varied from 4 to 14 days over the period 2006–2010 (Table 1), with reading rooms open from 10:00 a.m to 4:00 p.m. Over the course of these days, the public were invited to inspect the report and to submit written comments. Representatives from NGOs and ESIA consulting firms argued that, in the current practice in Cameroon, there is minimal time to read the document, time for public input is limited and there is an unrecognized resource imbalance, both financially and technically, between proponents and the public (Meinhard and Sinclair 2006). It does not allow the public, voiceless people, vulnerable groups and seriously affected families to seek out technical guidance and financial support.

In contrast, in Pakistan and Bulgaria for example, stakeholders are given 30 days, following a notice published in two national daily newspapers, for submitting written comments before the public hearing (Heather and Koontz 2004; Nadeem and Hameed 2008). In addition, Baker and McLelland (2003), pointed out the minimum notice period of 45 calendar days and the maximum of 90 days given for the public to inspect the report and to submit oral or written comments. This study does not argue that Cameroon should copy these approaches or that everything should be set out in legislation, but as Meinhard and Sinclair (2006) report, there are a number of principles that should be entrenched in legislation to ensure that participatory events are meaningful. These should include requirements for minimum notice periods, and some guarantees in terms of locations, access to ESIA reports and duration of hearing events.

Inadequate language instruments

The problem of language constraint was revealed in six public hearing reports. Project proponents went to Anglophone regions with ESIA reports written in French and vice-versa. Cameroon is a bilingual country (French and English) and according to circular no. 001-CAB-PM

of 16 August 1991 on bilingualism in Cameroon, the practice of bilingualism requires a French and English versions of any public document. It is worthwhile noting that this constraint is allowed by the ESIA law, which only requires a bilingual non-technical summary of any ESIA report. Language plays an important role in ensuring that the audience absorbs information (Okello et al. 2009). In order for public participation to be effective, information should be of immediate relevance, be attractive and brief, and be appropriate to the people's abilities, experience, knowledge, language and culture (Beresford and Croft 1993). As the most vulnerable persons are those who are illiterate, it is important to increase the resources for translating or summarizing the ESIA reports in local languages, so that people are really aware of the possible impacts of the project.

Access to ESIA reports and information

ESIA reports are not made publicly available during informational activities that take place before and after public hearings. ESIA administrators explained that photocopies of ESIA reports, which are typically over 350 pages in length, are expensive. Furthermore, they said that they usually receive from any proponent 20 copies of ESIA reports and these copies are intended for the IMCE members. The Ministry of the Environment attempted to make ESIA reports available before hearings through local chiefs, but this did not work because the reports were not well handled as they were supposed to be returned to the IMCE members. According to CSO representatives interviewed, since there is minimal time to read the document, and the cost of copies cannot be supported by the Ministry, accessibility is limited. Access to information is a critical aspect of a participatory process (Hanna 2000; Sinclair and Diduck 2005). In order for public hearing to be effective, it must be accompanied by real opportunities for access to information as well as provision of key information. Furthermore, data should be available in forms that meet participants' needs (Hanna 2000; Fitzpatrick and Sinclair 2003).

Advertisements and press releases are undertaken with a view towards mobilizing the stakeholders for a robust level of participation in the public hearings. Whilst advertisements in newspapers can potentially reach wide audiences, they are generally expensive and limited in the quantity of information they provide. Apart from advance public notices, one potential approach is the use of technical sessions prior to the hearings. By word of mouth, information dissemination can also be used to improve local community reach regarding public hearing events. We experienced this approach in a number of projects subjected to ESIA in Cameroon and it seems that access to information can be balanced with readable, general summaries of the potential environmental and social impacts.

Public hearings in Cameroon appear to comprise public access to ESIA reports as they do not provide participants with the opportunity for direct debate and

consensus-building. They intend to create publicity for the study and provide opportunities to lodge comments on ESIA reports. They always take place in reading rooms and working documents in these rooms are mainly made up of ESIA reports (three ESIA reports, more than 300 copies of the bilingual non-technical summaries, three registers of observations and three registers of participation). Public hearing reports show that women were underrepresented (Table 1) in these rooms. The heavy gender imbalance is due to the fact that women are mostly engaged with household chores and so do not have time to go to reading rooms. Furthermore, public hearings require reading skills and literacy, which are lower for women. The literacy rate of Cameroon was estimated by The World Factbook (2009) to be 77% for males and 59.8% for females.

Members of communities interviewed during this research indicated that the cost of travel to reading rooms is a barrier to their participation in public hearings. For example, within the framework of the Song-Mbengue/Sakbayeme dam project, people from Sakbayeme village were very willing to participate in on-site public hearings, but many found it impossible to attend hearings held in Pouma (the centre of the city). Comments from parliamentarians and CSO representatives interviewed reveal that citizens lack formal means to comment on ESIA reports, lack basic reading skills and lack the ability to understand technical content. The disproportionate number of individual written observations over the general number of participants could attest to this comment. For illustration (Table 1), the public hearings for ESIA of the Ndiou River block seismic project, had a general participation of 220, with 55 persons making written observations.

In contrast, for the Lom-Pangar dam project, 1893 participants took part in the hearing, which involved a total of six reading rooms, with 507 individual observations. In this case, local chiefs received ESIA reports prior to the hearings but illiterate local populations found technical information to be a barrier to enjoyment of their access rights. During the public hearings for a shallow water seismic survey in Matanda block, Offshore Cameroon, participants also raised that the technical quality of the report was not suitable for peasants and fishermen.

This finding is in line with earlier studies reported by Bond et al. (2004). They also found that participants may wish to engage in public hearing processes but lack the human or economic resources to undertake comprehensive reviews of the documentation and defend their positions. Appah-Sampong (2003) also found that the effectiveness of public hearings has been hampered by the inability of the affected communities to easily understand project proposals owing to the low levels of literacy. This lack of understanding has usually led to hostilities during public hearings. It would have been more beneficial if the locals could have a thorough understanding of the ESIA to facilitate effective discussions. This issue of understanding ESIA documents is a dilemma because, according to Foti and Lalanath De Silva (2010), even fully literate populations may find technical information a barrier to enjoyment of access rights.

Level of interaction, deliberation and facilitation

In Cameroon, public hearings take place in reading rooms. According to CSOs representatives, Key ESIA team study members are not systematically present at the public hearing, and most of the concerns raised may not be answered satisfactorily. Reading rooms as an approach are valuable, but they do not provide participants with the opportunity for direct debate and consensus building with other stakeholders. They do not foster constructive dialogue and can perpetuate an 'us vs them' feeling. In addition, the current practice does not deliberate and does not report to all key stakeholders records of public hearings, although any decision-making process finds benefits from having transparent and interactive communication processes with the public (Bond et al. 2004). Decision-makers need to publicly announce the extent to which each public hearing/deliberative initiative will have an influence over data collection, options and decisions. This would have been done in order to maintain continuity and for confidence building. The entire process needs to be transparent. This will help increase the credibility of the proponent and develop mutual trust among stakeholders. The hearing would essentially be structured discussions and a forum where mutual agreement and consensus would be reached between the stakeholder groups, the regulatory bodies and the proponents, or a form of participation in which stakeholders and proponents are brought together in a forum to express their opinions and offer suggestions on a proposed undertaking in order to influence the decision-making process (Appah-Sampong 2003).

Outcomes of public hearings

In accordance with the Decree 2005/0577/PM, public hearings are intended to create publicity for the study, provide opportunities for the consideration of possible objections and to enable the participants to identify themselves in the final document. Furthermore, based on practice, public hearing reports analysed stated that public hearings in relation to ESIA consequently represent a means of checking the conformity of the information contained in the report of the ESIA of the project and the detail report as concluded during the public consultation. According to the reports analysed, the main expectation of these public hearings is to secure the substantial and active participation of the local population and other stakeholders related to the project. Even if in the current practice it is difficult to determine the extent to which each public hearing initiative influences data collection, ESIA report content, and decisions, it is worth recognizing that projects subjected to detailed ESIA regularly undergo public hearings in Cameroon.

In the current practice in Cameroon, feedback to participants is not always provided. Similar findings are reported by Sinclair and Diduck (2001). This is likely to hinder public hearing outcomes because individuals are motivated to participate because they will have a chance to influence the outcome (Foti and Lalanath De Silva 2010).

Providing feedback of public hearings to participants is likely to provide to stakeholders with confidence and satisfaction that the project development will adequately address their issues.

As a means of checking the conformity of the information contained in the ESIA report and the detailed report as concluded during the public consultation, the public hearing report just describes what was done and analyses the observations collected in relation to the results of public consultation. These reports do not interpret how each hearing suggestion might guide the assessment process and how respondents can make further contributions, such as providing comments on the draft ESIA report. Assuming that the role of regulatory authorities (Ministry of the Environment) in this process is to serve the public interest, or trade off socio-environmental protection, public and proponent interests, it would have been interesting to find in public hearing reports suggestions regarding future assessment and hearing processes.

Current public hearing practices in Cameroon seem to be a formality, as indicated by the fact that administrators do not go beyond the minimum requirements necessary. No final decision has ever been delayed and no project has ever been rejected because of public hearing recommendations. Even the research did not find a case with a high opposition by local communities. For the HFO-Logbaba project, 17.4% of participants expressed opposition, and apart from this, no opposition was recorded. We would have expected that certain aspects of the project proposal would have been altered, additional mitigation measures and commitments made and final decision on projects delayed until substantive issues raised were addressed. For example, during the Ndian river block hearing, participants raised questions about benefit sharing and better social assessment, but the project proponent said that social development issues are the state's responsibility. Attendees did point out a significant flaw in the executive summary and health impact aspects (Matanda block project) as well as the lack of applicable indicators to check the efficiency of mitigation measures on disposal of sewage (Drilling Iroko block project).

Even if public hearings do not directly impact the final decision in a given project, they have the capacity to enhance public trust in the ESIA decision-making process in Cameroon. From 2005 to 2010, the period considered in this study, there has been a presence of environmental groups as well as a diverse array of local organizations, businesses, specialist and individuals involved in public hearing activities (Table 2).

The attendance and the distribution of opinions of the project at the hearings vary, but from Table 2, it can be said that those attending might have financial stakes or some other direct connection with the project rather than representing the interests of the broader public. For example, statistics from Table 3 show that the participants focused their interests on the socio-economic benefits from the projects rather than the negative environmental impacts. Some participants also raised environmental and socio-economic stakes.

Table 2. Excerpt from public hearing reports/type of participants.

Type of participants	Ndian river block seismic project	Lom-pangar Dam project	ESIA extension HFO thermal plant Logbaba-Douala	ESIA for proposed shallow water seismic survey in Matanda Block, Offshore Cameroon
Farmers	106	NA	NA	NA
Small craft-workers	37	258	NA	54
Primary sector operators	47	994	58	197
Salary earners	18	236	58	63
CSOs	02	30	06	N/A
Economic operators	10	46	03	N/A
Jobless	N/A	281	20	36
Local leaders		54	48	
Students				50

Source: Authors' own construct.

Table 3. Excerpt from public hearing reports/stakes raised.

Project	Percentage of environmental stakes	Percentage of socio-economic stakes
Block Etinde project	17%	91%
Ndian river block project	36.4%	63.3%
Lom-Pangar Dam project	14%	88.2%

Source: Authors' own construct.

In Cameroon, community members close to the project vicinity always focus on economic opportunities offered by it. Citizens and the powerful elite are willing to accept new activities happening 'in their backyard' because they do not experience direct effects. This finding is in line with earlier studies reported by Côté and Gagnon (2005), who argued that, in the ESIA process, where economic stakes are dominant, there is less opposition and they take precedence over critical questioning. When attending, citizens and powerful elites have financial stakes (socio-economic impacts); they strategize to secure their financial stakes by participating in the hearings and taking control of the process. This is likely to bias public hearing outcomes as it hinders equitable trade-off of interests and stakes.

This finding is not in line with earlier studies reported by Heather and Koontz (2004), who argued that contributing to a public hearing related to environmental impacts will probably remain a low priority for most citizens in developing countries, where people are struggling to meet day-to-day needs. It is fair to say that hearings in Cameroon attest to the growing willingness to challenge ESIA reports that may be fully backed by the government. Public hearings are opportunities for local chiefs, local CSOs and local populations to provide critical insights and perspectives:

the west coast chiefs issued to the Minister of the Environment a memorandum on the ESIA (request for traditional ritual before the commencement of activities) during the public hearing for exploration/Appraisal drilling Iroko Block;

Councillors of Idenau and service heads of the west coast district presented a memorandum on the ESIA (taking into account the social perspective) during the public hearing for exploration/Appraisal drilling Iroko Block;

Representatives from Song-Mbengue presented to the Minister of the Environment and to Rio Tinton Alcan a memorandum on the ESIA during the public hearing for the Song Mbengue/Sakbayeme dam project;

the Network for Associations for Environment and Clean Energy (RAEEP) presented to the Minister of the Environment a critical analysis of ESIA reports for Lom-Pangar dam project, Mekin dam project and Song Mbengue/Sakbayeme dam project.

The public hearing reports analysed do not show how pertinent suggestions from these memoranda were considered, but it is fair to say that, in settings without strong legal, constitutional and civil infrastructures, hearings may provide a formal opportunity and valuable

experience for individuals and organizations who otherwise may not feel empowered to express their opinions to government officials (McKilip 1987; Shapiro 2001). According to Appah-Sampong (2003), public hearings in Ghana have been beneficial in terms of: providing an avenue for public information and interaction between the proponent and all interested groups and allowing people to articulate their views about a given project and make inputs which eventually enhance the quality of the project's environmental assessment. As Rakowski (1995) argues, in evaluating Social Impact Assessment in developing countries, an important result is 'more subtle outcomes, such as increasing awareness of social issues or generating public debate'. Such awareness and debate can encourage the evolution of public participation from government domination to institutionalized guarantees of an independent social sphere. Yet the public hearings, and the ESIA process more generally, have contributed to progress in information access, public knowledge of rules, and the 'opening' of authoritative bodies.

Constraints and opportunities for improving public hearing practices in Cameroon

While many constraints are evident in public hearing practice in Cameroon, opportunities do exist for improvement. First, there is a crucial need to ensure that information around ESIA decisions and opportunities for comments on ESIA reports match the technical understanding, literacy levels and native languages of hearing participants. Bilingual non-technical summaries made mandatory during public hearing events but specific focus discussion groups for women, youth and the illiterate, non-technical and technical pre-information sessions with simple explanations and illustrations, and radio programmes in indigenous languages may significantly offset the information challenge and add value to the project design process.

Second, citizens are motivated to participate in public hearings when they are certain that their contributions will be considered. To expect significant and active participation, there is a need to build credibility and mutual trust among stakeholders. This is very important bearing in mind the fact that, where decisions are not justified, trust is lost and decisions lose legitimacy. Public hearing reports are not publicly available and participants do not know the extent to which their contributions have an influence over ESIA report and decisions. They rather consider this exercise as another political game involving poor people. In order to maintain continuity and for trust building, public hearing reports, together with key outcomes from

the process, need to be reported to all stakeholders. In addition, for confidence building, public hearing practice should shift from reading rooms to forum where mutual agreement and consensus (facilitated by a neutral and impartial parties) can be reached between the stakeholder groups, the regulatory bodies and the proponents.

Third, public hearing processes are hampered by the inability of the affected communities, certain CSOs and ESIA administrators to easily understand project proposals owing to low levels of literacy and technical skills. In order to increase interest in environmental issues, the government must take the necessary steps to increase public awareness of environmental issues and moreover the public hearings. Capacity building efforts need to be broadened and target local communities. This would help the actors closest to the project better understand the purpose behind environmental and social mitigation issues and measures prescribed in ESIA documents. In addition, facilitating participation by providing personnel, logistical support for technical guidance, legal advice, transport and travelling expenses for participant attendance, information and training (Brenneis and M'Gonigle 1992; Beresford and Croft 1993; Smith 1993) could enhance public hearing outcomes.

Fourth, public hearing events are not currently addressed as social learning processes, or knowledge building processes. It is considered merely as a procedural step. In this way, it is difficult to build on experience and draw lessons for improvement. Public hearings need to be designed as a process in which stakeholders work together, share information to identify unearthed issues, and also identify effective measures to mitigate environmental and social impacts. The Ministry of the Environment should also have an organized set of information on hearings. This would facilitate the analysis, an essential step towards the identification of key learning points.

Fifth, in the current public hearing practice in Cameroon, there is minimal time to read the document, time for public comment is limited and there is an unrecognized resource imbalance between proponents and the public. However, an increase in time without technical and financial resource provision for voiceless, vulnerable groups and unskilled affected families and CSOs will hardly enhance public hearing outcomes.

Lastly, there is no universal approach for undertaking this type of process, but a manual should be developed to provide general guidelines for the public hearing process.

Conclusion

Public hearing critics analysed in this study, for the most part, correspond to the critics of hearings in general that have been articulated by numerous scholars. Hearings in Cameroon are characterized by many shortcomings which include limited access to information, low literacy of local communities, gender imbalance and inadequate location of reading rooms.

Our findings suggest that, where economic stakes are dominant, there is less opposition. This is likely to bias

public hearing outcomes as it hinders equitable trade-off of interests.

Public hearings seem to be an administrative formality, but they attest to the growing willingness to challenge ESIA reports that may be fully backed by the government in that 17.4% of participants expressed opposition to the HFO-Logbaba project whereas public hearings were opportunities for local chiefs, CSOs and populations to provide critical insights and perspectives.

Access to information that matches the technical understanding, literacy levels and native languages of local populations is essential and should be considered in the hearing process in Cameroon. While ESIA reports and bilingual non-technical summaries were available through reading rooms, focus discussion groups for women, youth and uneducated groups, non-technical and technical pre-event information sessions with simple explanations and illustrations (video, audio, blogs, etc.) and radio programmes in indigenous languages would greatly facilitate public access.

In order for public hearings to be worthwhile events in Cameroon, credibility and mutual trust among stakeholders must be established. Finally, the public hearing needs to move from an administrative requirement to a strong and powerful tool that is able to guarantee sustainable investments projects in Cameroon.

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