South Africa: An Environment for Reconstruction

by Andrea Weiss in South Africa

In winter 1994, an oil spill off Cape Town, South Africa threatened breeding colonies of the endangered Jackass penguin. At roughly the same time, hundreds of shacks were flooded by rain in the Cape Flats, an area that qualified for wetland status, but which under apartheid was a place to live, however vulnerable.

The first disaster became international news and volunteers - mainly white - offered to scrub oiled birds. The second disaster went largely unnoticed, except by the Red Cross, which handled relief operations for residents of Cape Flats. The two incidents generated heated debate about whether endangered species count more than people in environmental matters.

This question finds a response in an international environment mission that puts people back on the environmental agenda in South Africa. Funded largely by CIDA and managed by IDRC, the mission enjoyed sponsorship from the African National Congress and other national organizations. Mission members - South Africans as well as representatives from Canada, India, Malaysia, Uganda and Zimbabwe - travelled throughout South Africa in February 1994 to gather information to guide policy initiatives in the enormous task of reconstruction and development.

One of the most important themes to emerge was that without action to redress the environmental toll of apartheid, South Africa's efforts to right the wrongs of the past would run to nothing. "Reconstruction and development in South Africa will only succeed if environmental considerations are built into all sectoral policies and into all economic research programmes including international trade and competitiveness," said mission leader Anne Whyte, speaking at the launch of the mission report last September in Cape Town.

Whyte, who is also director general of the environment and natural resources division of IDRC, noted that the "accounts" of national wealth versus national debt were written in the distance women had to walk to collect firewood, in the diarrhoeal diseases that rural children suffered because of dirty water, in the loss of fishing and misallocation of national water resources and in people's exposure to toxic waste.

These effects of environmental decline are not felt equally by all South Africans, as the mission observes: "The environmental costs owed by society are almost always paid for by those least able to do so: the poor. In this way, environmental degradation is a visible expression of social inequity."

Meaningful participation

One of the key issues for the mission was the lack of public participation in previous environmental policy. Mission member Chris Albertyn felt that its strongest recommendation was the need for structures to allow meaningful participation in government.

However, environment minister Dawie de Villiers, one of a handful of National Party ministers in the
Government of National Unity, expressed "wariness" about creating too many new structures given that the country had to create nine new provincial environmental structures. But this view is at odds with one of the mission's main thrusts, which is to strengthen the existing department of the environment and to involve civil society in keeping watch on the environment.

The involvement of ordinary people in the mission's research efforts was regarded as "unique" by Forestry and Water Affairs Minister Kader Asmal who praised the mission's efforts to elicit grassroots, community concerns regarding the environment.

Encouraging further public involvement is one objective of a mission recommendation to establish provincial and national Environmental Advisory Forums to act as channels for business, civics, trade unions and NGOs. These forums are intended to replace the existing Council for the Environment, which fails to represent all sectors of South African society.

The mission also calls for a "commissioner for the environment," similar to an ombudsman, placed in the office of the president and reporting annually to parliament. It also calls for a single environmental monitoring and assessment agency to enforce environmental standards and to work with industry and local communities. At present, environmental "policing" in South Africa is spread across a multitude of departments - thus putting one department in charge of the water in a river, another of the soil on its banks, and a third of the air around it.

The country can no longer afford such an uncoordinated response to urgent environmental problems. Indeed, the mission makes the following observation: "What we have seen for ourselves and have heard from South African experts, has convinced us that the environmental room to manoeuvre has already been largely used up."

The message is clear. South Africa can either turn toward environmentally sustainable economic growth, or choose an environmentally destructive path as the pressure for land, housing and jobs builds up. In the mission's view, there is only one way to go. Let's hope, for the sake of all who live in it, the new South Africa is listening.

**The Human Toll of Apartheid's Environmental Legacy**

Almost 20 years ago, Grissel Masiza travelled to Cape Town from her birthplace Cofimvaba in the Transkei, a tribal homeland on the Eastern Cape coast, to look for work. Her husband had earlier migrated to the city but had died of a lung complaint while working at a fish factory. At the time, African people were not welcome in the Western Cape. Women particularly had no security of tenure due to laws aimed at keeping Africans away from the city, forcing the majority to survive off 13 percent of rural land allocated to them. One of seven children, three of whom died young, Grissel spent her childhood looking after sheep and goats, and managed to complete seven years of school. Her family were subsistence farmers and her mother earned extra cash by weaving mats and baskets. In the Transkei, people were faced with diminishing water supplies, increasingly eroded land and dwindling pastures. "More and more people were coming but there was no place to stay," Grissel recalls.

Life in the city was not exactly a step up. Grissel found herself sleeping on a cement slab in a single-sex hostel. But at least there was work. "After a time I heard about a place called Crossroads and I went there to make my own place," initially a plastic shelter that she had to abandon in 1986 when Crossroads erupted in political violence.

Her next - and current - home was in Site B, Khayelitsha, a sprawling shackland of over a million people. Grissel built a corrugated iron home on a "site-and-service" scheme that provides water and an outside toilet. She lives there with her son, a grandson, a nephew and a little girl sent to the city for schooling. Today, at 58, Grissel works full-time as a childminder in a leafy suburb that she travels to by train. She is resigned to her fate, hoping only to return home to the Transkei when she retires. For now, she wishes something could be done about the filthy city streets, the lack of trees, and the water that floods her shack.
in the wet season. Until this interview, Grissel had never heard the word "environment," yet her story epitomizes the environmental concerns of ordinary South Africans.

* The full report of the environment mission was published jointly in October 1995 by IDRC Books and Ravan Press (South Africa) as Volume Four in the series Building a New South Africa. ISBN 0-88936-759-0 (order@idrc.ca)

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