

# ICM as a Transformational Practice of Consensus Building: A South African Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

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Efforts to promote sustainable development are paradoxically degrading the natural systems essential for life on earth. Furthermore, despite these efforts, global poverty and inequality persist. The result is a cruel dilemma that is manifested in pervasive environmental conflict. This dilemma is readily apparent in coasts around the world. Increasing attention is being focused on Integrated Coastal Management as a means to promote coastal sustainability. But the sustainable development dilemma persists. A transformational practice of consensus building is proposed as a solution to this dilemma. Three distinguishing characteristics of environmental conflict are identified and a transformational practice of consensus building is proposed to: (i) promote meaningful public participation through participatory democracy; (ii) advance knowledge and understanding through 'post-normal' science and social learning; and (iii) build collaborative, coevolving institutions and foster a stewardship ethic. The South African coastal management experience is briefly summarized because it reveals the transformational potential of this approach. It demonstrates that conceptualizing coastal management as a transformational practice of consensus building has the potential to resolve coastal conflict and foster coastal sustainability. This article is the first in a series exploring the adoption of this new approach to coastal management in South Africa.

**ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS:** *Sustainable coastal development, environmental conflict, consensus building.*

## INTRODUCTION

The quest for sustainable development is the preeminent challenge for humankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But well-intentioned efforts to achieve this goal are paradoxically degrading the natural systems essential for life on earth, and poverty and inequality are deepening. The result is a cruel dilemma that is evident in widespread intractable environmental conflict (GLAVOVIC 2000a). This dilemma is readily apparent in coasts around the world and there is an urgent and compelling need to resolve it. Traditional coastal management efforts have failed to resolve this conflict and increasing numbers of organizations and nations are turning to the concept of Integrated Coastal Management (ICM) to promote sustainable coastal development (SCD) (CICIN-SAIN and KNECHT 1998; SORENSEN 2000; OLSEN 2002). Yet the sustainable development dilemma persists. A transformational practice of consensus building is proposed as a solution to this dilemma. South Africa's coastal management experience is summarized as a case study in transformational consensus building. A national coastal policy was developed through a process of negotiation, public deliberation and collaboration, introducing a new approach to coastal management (CMPP 2000; GLAVOVIC 2000b). This experience reveals that progress can be made towards the elusive ideal of SCD if ICM is conceptualized as a transformational practice of consensus building.

This is the first of three articles focusing on the South African coastal management experience. Subsequent articles analyze perceptions of the policy formulation process and the lessons learned from this experience (GLAVOVIC, 2006a, b). As a point of departure, attention is focused on a pivotal but neglected question: How can environmental conflict be resolved to achieve human development with ecological integrity?

## TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICE OF CONSENSUS BUILDING

Environmental conflict has become a pervasive and pernicious global phenomenon (HOMER-DIXON, 1991; HOMER-DIXON *et al.*, 1993; MYERS, 1993; SJO STEDT, 1993). It is driven by divergent views about how best to allocate and use land, water, air, and living resources. More fundamentally, it reflects contrary viewpoints about how to reconcile the ethical, economic, social, ecological and other dimensions of life of earth: it raises probing questions about human relationships and our relationships with nature. Legal and administrative mechanisms have traditionally been used to address such conflict but, since the mid-1970s, their limitations have prompted a move towards more collaborative approaches, especially in North America (SUSSKIND and CRUIKSHANK, 1987; CANADA GOVERNMENT, 1993; DANIELS and WALKER, 2000; O'LEARY and BINGHAM, 2003). Environmental dispute resolution, as a field of study and practice, has evolved rapidly over the last three decades, drawing to large extent on the principled or interest-based negotiation approach developed by the Harvard Program on Negotiation, and FISHER and URY (1981) in particular. A transformational practice of consensus building goes beyond the narrow goal of satisfying disputant interests to a more encompassing social agenda - the 'higher ground' - of building engaged communities, responsive governance and enhanced capacity to solve public problems (DUKES, 1996; DUKES *et al.*, 2000). It promises to build social, political and intellectual capital (PUTNAM, 1993; INNES, 1995; FORESTER, 1999a) and retain and restore natural capital. It offers the potential to resolve environmental conflict by: (i) enabling **disconnected parties** to become empowered people through participatory democracy; (ii) deepening and extending understanding of **incomprehensible environmental issues** through 'post normal' science and social learning; and (iii)

<sup>1</sup>This section summarises Ch. 3 of GLAVOVIC (2000a).

converting **fragmented settings** into 'reconnected communities' by building collaborative, coevolving institutions and nurturing civic responsibility and stewardship.

### Disconnected Parties: Rethinking Democratic Practice

Environmental disputes involve and affect many parties with widely varying characteristics, including diverse ideological, cultural, educational, socio-economic and organizational features. Their capacity, or power, to influence the outcome of conflict varies markedly. The risks and burdens of environmental conflict are not evenly shared and awareness of its implications varies markedly. Some parties have extensive experience in dealing with environmental conflict; others are novices. Some are part of highly structured and well-resourced organizations; others are part of loose coalitions and ad hoc or amorphous groups that may be ephemeral. Parties may come and go at different stages of a dispute and their prior relationships can significantly influence their interactions. They may adopt very different approaches to dealing with conflict- from avoidance to overt confrontation. The prevailing social setting also influences what tactics are deemed acceptable for addressing a particular dispute. It is also important to note that groups are not homogenous: individual members have different interests, attitudes and ways of working. The relationships between and within parties are therefore intricate and change over time. Parties are thus **diverse and mutable**: they share a common interest in resolving environmental conflict but seem unable to do so because they are **disconnected** or alienated- a feature of human relationships in modern democracies (BARBER, 1984; DUKES, 1996). Notwithstanding this disconnectedness, parties involved in environmental conflict are fundamentally **interdependent**: people are social beings and the quest for sustainability demands a reinvigorated community life (GOULD, 1988; DALY and COBB, 1989). Overcoming this alienation requires a fundamental reexamination of the prevailing practice of representative democracy, with its philosophical underpinning of liberal individualism and reliance on economic growth (BARBER, 1984; GOULD, 1988; FUKUYAMA, 1995). The challenge is to find ways of retaining the benefits of individual freedom whilst building a vital and engaged community life. Extending participatory democracy into all spheres of life offers a potential means of reconciliation. Individuals, groups, communities and society can be reconnected and transformed by 'strong' or participatory democracy (BARBER, 1984; BOHMAN, 1996; DUKES, 1996). A more direct, deliberative participatory practice of democracy provides a cornerstone for resolving environmental conflict and making the transition towards sustainability. It is a practical necessity because collective decisions are required to address environmental problems in a meaningful way. It also provides a foundation for enabling people to realize their potential: by promoting dialogue amongst equals, it opens up opportunities to develop new solutions to long-standing problems in a way that builds social capital and fosters civic responsibility and pride (PUTNAM, 1993, 1995; YAFFEE, 1999).

### Incomprehensible Issues: The Nature and Role of Science and Social Learning

Environmental issues encompass intertwined natural and human dimensions of the earth system: they involve complex, evolving multi-scalar systems. Proposed solutions may generate irreversible impacts, new problems or simply displace a problem from one locality, timeframe or environmental medium (land, air, water) to another (DRYZEK, 1987). Not surprisingly, environmental issues seem to be incomprehensible, and understanding varies widely between the parties involved in environmental disputes. Prevailing views and practices of science in the public policy arena do not facilitate meaningful understanding of these issues and even exacerbate conflict. There are three reasons for this

predicament. Firstly, the 'wrong' science is applied to environmental problems. Rather than the dominant linear, equilibrium-centered view of the world, a non-linear, multi-equilibrium view - a 'complexity' science approach - is needed (CAPRA, 1982, 1996; WALDROP, 1992). Secondly, science is not 'value neutral', and scientific and local knowledge need to be integrated. With regard to the former, value neutrality, there is growing acceptance that scientific knowledge involves inherently subjective dimensions, whether in the form of prevailing paradigms (KUHN, 1962) or influences on the practice of science (e.g., funding, media, etc.) (HISKES and HISKES, 1996). With regard to the latter, understanding can be improved by drawing from and integrating scientific knowledge with local and indigenous knowledge (AGRAWAL, 1995; BERKES and FOLKE, 1998). Thirdly, science is misused as an adversarial weapon rather than as a tool for collaboration. Science is too often assigned the role of 'provider of the truth': a supposedly 'objective authority' that can resolve political or other disagreements (NELKIN, 1987). In practice, scientific evidence per se seldom provides resolution, frustrating and confusing scientists, policy-makers, disputants and the general public (COLLINGRIDGE and REEVE, 1986). Using science as an adversarial weapon in the policy arena fails because it does not provide a comprehensive review of relevant data, and perpetuates scientific disputes - it does not promote good science. It also isolates technical information from the public arena, hiding the values and political differences underlying different policy choices - it is anti-democratic (OZAWA, 1991). Uncertain facts, value disputes, high stakes and an urgent need to make decisions characterize environmental conflict. Under these circumstances, complexity or 'post normal' science applies (FUNTOWICZ and RAVETZ, 1995). This view of science underpins 'adaptive management', which involves collaboration and social learning, and views policy interventions as experiments that facilitate learning and policy revision (LEE, 1993; GUNDERSON and HOLLING, 2002; BERKES *et al.*, 2003). This approach is practically necessary for obtaining relevant information because no one organization has access to all information pertinent to resolving environmental disputes. It also offers the potential of deeper understanding by recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed, and that, by learning collaboratively, parties can begin to comprehend each other and environmental issues in entirely new ways.

### Fragmented Settings: Coevolving Institutions and a Stewardship Ethic

Environmental conflict takes place in a 'fragmented setting'. Firstly, the boundaries of governance systems do not coincide with ecological boundaries: human institutions are fragmented and are not linked to the spatial, temporal or functional scale of ecosystems, making coordination difficult and the pursuit of human development with ecological integrity problematical. The challenge is to build governance institutions that enable people to live in harmony with each other and nature. Communities need to become more responsive to ecosystem 'signals' and changing environmental conditions (NORGAARD, 1994). Collaboration offers the potential to build bridges across this divide constructed by cultural differences, organizational divisions and relationships of power that are superimposed on the human-dominated landscape (HEALEY, 1997). It has the potential to develop new relationships and even transform social structures and governance institutions, building political or institutional capital.

Secondly, this institutional-ecological boundary incongruity is exacerbated by the misconception, particularly in Western society, that humans are separate from and independent of nature. It is further compounded by the fundamentally different and seemingly irreconcilable environmental values of disputants. Parties are understandably opposed to compromising their cherished values. There appears to be no 'middle ground' in environmental disputes; and the notion that one could negotiate deeply held values is seen by some to be abhorrent. Others argue that values need to be discussed and

debated so that parties develop a better understanding of their own values and those of others, and, in the process, be enabled to reconcile differences and assume individual and collective responsibility for shared problems (GLENDON, 1991; GUTMAN and THOMPSON, 1996). A collaborative approach is thus necessary for making and implementing decisions that cut across the boundaries of different institutions. More fundamentally, it can facilitate a better understanding of deeply held value differences, and foster civic responsibility and even promote more caring human relationships and ecological stewardship (YAFFEE, 1999). It can help to reconnect the fragmented human and ecological dimensions of communities.

In conclusion, a transformational practice of consensus building provides a foundation for converting environmental conflict into sustainable development. It can: (i) metamorphose disconnected parties into empowered people through participatory democracy; (ii) advance understanding of incomprehensible environmental issues through 'post normal' science and social learning, integrating societal values, science and local knowledge; and (iii) reframe fragmented settings by recognizing the coevolving character of governance institutions and ecological systems, as well as inculcate a civic culture, caring human relationships and ecological stewardship. A transformational practice of consensus building provides the foundation for resolving the sustainable development dilemma. But can this 'concept' be put into practice? The formulation and adoption of a collaborative and integrated approach to coastal management in South Africa reveals the practical and transformational potential of this approach.

## THE EVOLUTION OF COASTAL MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA<sup>2</sup>

Decades of coastal management efforts culminated in Cabinet approval of a new coastal policy in December 1999. The policy aims to promote SCD and is rooted in a partnership approach to coastal management. The policy represents a profound shift from earlier efforts that virtually ignored issues of justice, democracy and poverty. How did this volteface occur?

### From *ad hoc* Sectoral Management to a Dedicated National Effort: The 1970s and 1980s

A dedicated national coastal management effort has been developed over the last three decades. Previously, a variety of Government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressed coastal issues through nature conservation, fisheries management, land-use planning and other sectoral efforts. But these activities were carried out in an *ad hoc* manner and little attention was focused on the distinctive character of the coast and the interrelationships between these activities. The need to coordinate these efforts became obvious and, by the end of the 1970s, concerted efforts were made to develop expertise in coastal zone management (CZM).

The Department of Environment Affairs (DEA)<sup>3</sup> assumed a lead CZM role from the early 1980s. Together with the provincial administrations and the Committee for Coastal and Marine Systems (CCMS) of the Council for the Environment (CE), attention was focused on three main groups of activities. Firstly, township and resort developments needed to be controlled because of their serious negative environmental impacts. Regulatory controls were judged to be the most effective way of protecting sensitive coastal ecosystems. Secondly, a substantial investment was made in coastal research and building CZM expertise. But the research was focused on basic science and nature conservation issues, virtually ignoring human concerns and management requirements. Progress was made in developing CZM expertise, but was focused on the natural dimensions of the coast. Thirdly, a concerted effort was

made to formulate a CZM policy. Principles and objectives for CZM were defined and guidelines for coastal land-use were developed by the CCMS. The policy adopted an ecological view of the coast and stressed the need to avoid development in ecologically sensitive or high-risk areas of the coastal zone. Progress was made in CZM in the 1980s. But coastal management was viewed as a biophysical endeavor, independent of the political, social and economic realities of apartheid.

### Participatory Policy Formulation: The 1990s

The CCMS policy had little impact. Although it was technically sound, it did not address prevailing social, economic and political realities. With the unbanning of liberation organizations in February 1990, it soon became clear that a new participatory approach to public policy-making was needed.

It took five years before a participatory policy formulation process was initiated in 1997 under the Coastal Management Policy Programme (CMPP). This protracted delay was the result of administrative and logistical obstacles mainly relating to the political negotiations and transition to a new government. Important progress was nonetheless made during this hiatus. In 1993 and 1994, key stakeholders were brought together and agreements reached that laid the foundation for the CMPP. It was agreed that an independent Policy Committee should be appointed by the Minister responsible for environmental matters after democratic elections in 1994. The Policy Committee would guide the policy formulation process and prepare a draft coastal policy based on extensive public participation. The Policy Committee was to constitute a partnership between Government and civil society, with five members representing central Government and each of the four coastal provinces, and the five civil society members representing business, labor, community based organizations (CBOs), environmental NGOs, and the sport and recreational sector. Policy Committee members were to have equal status and decisions were to be made by consensus. The politics of coastal management was clearly recognized for the first time in over two decades!

Donor funding was secured from the British Government and the CMPP was launched in April 1997. It was completed in a two-year period through the following stages: (i) The program was launched with a media event and the distribution of 17,000 CMPP newsletters. (ii) A series of workshops, 'one-on-one' meetings and capacity building sessions were held to identify issues and define visions for each distinctive coastal region. The regional findings were translated into a national vision that was strongly endorsed by stakeholders. A cycle of local, provincial and national stakeholder participation was integrated with specialist input, and the Minister endorsed the vision. (iii) Further workshops and meetings were held to develop policy options. More than 5,000 people had been directly involved in the CMPP at this point, and many more were aware of the program through the media and distribution of CMPP information. A new way of thinking about the coast and its management was developed during this stage. It involved a deliberate move away from the dominant nature-centered view of the coast to a people-centered approach focused on unlocking SCD opportunities. (iv) The Coastal Policy Green Paper (a precursor to a White Paper) was drafted during this stage, and attention was focused on ensuring the successful transfer of 'ownership' from the Policy Committee to DEAT at the end of the CMPP. (v) The Green Paper was distributed to more than 15,000 people. Public meetings and workshops were convened to assess preferred policy options. Positive feedback on the document was received. Stakeholders thought a credible foundation had been laid, and there was growing pressure to finalize, adopt and implement the emerging policy. (vi) The Draft White Paper was handed to the Minister in March 1999. It

<sup>2</sup> This section summarizes more extended accounts in GLAVOVIC (2000a, b, c).

<sup>3</sup> The DEA was restructured after the 1994 elections to become the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT).

was then distributed and information sessions were held with stakeholders. The Policy Committee had thus fulfilled its obligations. The DEAT then sought formal Government and Cabinet approval. (vii) The policy was strongly supported by all spheres of Government and by all sectors of society in all coastal regions. Cabinet approved the recommended policy on 1 December 1999, and the official White Paper was released on 6 June 2000.

### ICM AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICE OF CONSENSUS BUILDING

The South African coastal management experience presents a practical example of transformational consensus building. The White Paper is the culmination of the CMPP, introducing a new way of thinking about the coast and a new approach to coastal management; an approach that is best described as 'collaborative and integrated coastal management'. The White Paper defines a set of principles, goals and objectives, and more specific guidelines, to translate the vision into practical reality. It also includes a Plan of Action detailing initiatives relating to: institutional and legal changes, awareness, education and training; information management; and practical projects to address priority issues and initiate local demonstration projects. The key elements of the Plan of Action are seen to be interconnected, constituting an integrated whole: a governance process that needs to be reviewed and revised continuously (CMPP, 2000). The White Paper calls for an unprecedented investment in ICM to realize the coast's potential. It seeks to unlock development opportunities to reduce poverty, meet basic needs and improve livelihoods.

The policy has several distinguishing features compared to earlier coastal management efforts. It draws attention to the value of coastal ecosystems as a cornerstone for human development, and highlights the development potential offered by coastal regions that were marginalized under apartheid. It is people-centered, emphasizing the important contribution that SCD can make to reconstruction and development, provided that the diversity, health and productivity of coastal ecosystems is maintained. It conceptualizes the coast as a system and advocates a holistic way of thinking by promoting ICM. It introduces a new facilitatory style of management that is based on cooperation and shared responsibility between coastal stakeholders, is responsive to diversity and learns from experience (CMPP, 2000).

The CMPP thus represents a radical departure from earlier coastal management efforts. This 'sea change' in thinking and approach came about because the CMPP constituted a transformational practice of consensus building. Firstly, the CMPP promoted meaningful public participation to transform disconnected coastal stakeholders into empowered people. Secondly, it fostered scientific integrity to improve knowledge and understanding about seemingly incomprehensible issues by viewing the coast as a complex, evolving system, integrating science, societal values and local knowledge, and by investing in social learning. Thirdly, it promoted ICM in order to reframe the fragmented setting, creating partnerships to improve coordination and providing a common ethical foundation for building sustainable coastal communities through the White Paper's vision principles, goals and objectives. Finally, it provided a practical foundation for implementing the policy, recognizing that the pursuit of SCD is an ongoing process that requires reflective practice and ongoing refinement together with a strategic focus on priority issues.

In conclusion, the CMPP transformed stakeholder relationships, fostered a new understanding of the coast and its management, and stimulated new partnerships between Government, civil society and the private sector, and cultivated a new commitment to building sustainable coastal communities. Subsequent articles explore the extent to which the CMPP objectives were achieved and the lessons learned from this experience.

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