Clearing the ground in the Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs): analysing 'process' on South Africa's Wild Coast

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This article, which is based on a case study of the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape, explores the challenges that confront the implementation of SDI projects. It is argued that, in order to encourage active participation of potential beneficiaries in such projects, 'the ground has to be cleared', which necessitates the delineation of the core social dynamics that go hand in hand with the technical aspects of the inputs and outputs of such projects. The two areas in which the SDI fell short of achieving its main objectives, and which this article seeks to address, are the communication and the conflict management strategies. The perception that local social dynamics are seen as a problem rather than as part of a dynamic process of development requires fresh assessment. In conclusion, emphasis should be placed on human resources, patience and willingness to learn about local dynamics, in addition to the great financial commitment in the project cycle.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been the goal of the South African government to improve the welfare of the country's poorest people, especially rural dwellers, since the election of the first democratic government in 1994. To achieve this, the government aims at developing policies that will reduce social inequality, while at the same time creating opportunities for economic growth. Thus, in 1996, the government adopted a macroeconomic policy framework in the form of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, which emphasises private sector investment, with the state playing a 'facilitating' role. As an integral part of GEAR, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and other partners are promoting Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs) that are meant to target areas of the country that have both unrealised economic potential and great need (Jourdan, 1998). The Wild Coast SDI in the former Transkei in the Eastern Cape province has been officially launched by the government, which publicised widely that investors in ecotourism, forestry and agriculture are showing great interest. (The Fish River SDI is another SDI in the Eastern Cape province.)

When the SDIs were first introduced in 1996, it was envisaged that rural people from the disadvantaged areas would become the primary beneficiaries in a number of ways, including employment, partnerships with external investors, income from leasing out their land and the improvement of the local and regional infrastructure. For this reason,

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concepts such as 'community-based development', 'empowerment', 'participation' and so forth became familiar rhetoric within the SDI (see, for example, Anderson & Galt, 1998; Koch et al, 1998a; Mahlati, 1999). However, since development is about people, concepts have to be translated into practice in ways that will eventually benefit those people. It is therefore argued that viewing development as a process should be a key requirement for all projects.

This article aims to complement earlier arguments for a process approach to development projects by exploring the unfolding of the processes and the impact of the social dynamics, such as the communication and conflict management strategies employed by the SDI in its relations with potential beneficiaries. The focus is on dynamics at the local level, but the analysis also draws on processes at regional, provincial and national levels. This article does not attempt to evaluate the merits of the SDI as a strategy for improving the welfare of poor rural people. It seeks rather to make a positive contribution by highlighting areas that are often underemphasised during project implementation, but which are crucial in both the foundational and subsequent stages of the development process.

The article draws from long-term field research by the author in selected SDI 'anchor project' areas on the Wild Coast. Since 1996, a range of research methods was employed over a four-year period. First, the author lived in a village falling within one of the SDI target clusters (Mkambati) for a period of nine months while conducting a study on rural livelihoods and resource rights. He was therefore able to observe personally the introduction of the SDI into the area. Following this initial period, regular monthly visits of approximately one week each were made to three anchor project areas between April 1997 and December 1999. During this time the author sat in on numerous community meetings, observed presentations to villagers about the SDI by government officials or consultants, and posed questions about the SDI to different social actors. Secondly, the author consulted various documents on the SDI, including newspaper reports, SDI consultants' reports and critiques of the strategy (eg Terblanche, 1997). Thirdly, provincial and national workshops or conferences where the SDI was discussed in detail provided useful sources of information.

Following the introduction, the second section of the article briefly reviews the conceptual basis for process approaches to development by drawing on relevant literature. The third section provides a brief background on the Wild Coast SDI, including a discussion of some critical issues that are beginning to emerge in certain areas. The fourth section discusses local experiences with regard to project-related communication processes and conflict management strategies employed within the Wild Coast SDI. This section also draws briefly on related literature in its discussion on emerging dynamics. The article concludes by drawing lessons and implications for policy, and emphasises the central role of social processes in development.

2. DEVELOPMENT AS A PROCESS

Process approaches to development gained prominence as a reaction to the ineffectiveness of development projects that took the blueprint or top-down approach to development (Bond & Hulme, 1999). Over the last two decades, a rich body of literature has been devoted to process approaches in development (eg Korten, 1980; Hulme, 1989; Chambers, 1997; Mosse, 1998; Bond & Hulme, 1999). According to Bond & Hulme (1999), there are two main schools of thought involved. The purists, on the one hand,

propose the abandonment of the concept of 'project' and see 'process' as synonymous with local institutional development in which the role of the external agent and resources is kept to a minimum. The managerialists, on the other hand, still see the role of external agents as the key to the process but argue that projects, managers and management systems should be more flexible and adaptive.

Some writers have played it safe by making arguments that fuse both schools of thought. For instance, Mosse (1998) indicates that viewing development as a process means being aware that all projects have permeable boundaries and are influenced by a wider social and institutional environment. This could then lead to development projects being treated as flexible systems with dynamic procedures and processes. Mosse (1998) further argues that this conception of development as a process marks an important shift away from the focus on project inputs and outputs and the assumed mechanical link between them. Instead, it provides a device for thinking and talking about the complex social realities in new ways. Mosse's line of thought has met with popular interest and it is acknowledged that a more plausible approach for analysing development projects at microlevel is to view them as a dynamic concept of interaction between strategic groups (Bierschenk, 1988). Thus, project implementation becomes less of a planned programme, but more of a constant process of negotiation between social actors who have their own respective 'projects'. A similar view is offered by Crehan & Von Oppen (1988), who argue that development projects should not be seen only in terms of the goals and their achievement or non-achievement, but rather as a social event and an arena of struggle between different groups with diverse interests. While the role of the outsider (the development agent) may be influential, it is not the only role.

Arguments for a process approach are based on the declaration that it is not *what* is done but the *way* in which it is done. Bond & Hulme (1999) extend this by stating that it is not only the way one does it, it is also *whom* one does it with. Thus the process approach to intervention does not merely incorporate the participation of beneficiaries, it also entails rearranging the involvement of stakeholders in the objective-setting, design, implementation and monitoring of the programme. This should entail a redistribution of power and influence over decision-making. Therefore, the strategic involvement of external agents becomes a necessity if social dynamics that could make or break a project are to be taken seriously.

In spite of increased efforts in encouraging process-orientated approaches to development over the last few decades, many projects in South Africa are characterised as lacking in understanding of key social processes and their vital role in development. Instead, social dynamics are often underrecognised, treated lightly or viewed as sources of problems that delay or disrupt project implementation (Mosse, 1998; Kepe, 1999a). This is not to say that project planners and implementers are not concerned about the people for whom development projects are initiated; the fact remains that project deadlines and technical notions held by external agents of successful implementation are often at the expense of attention to the social dynamics in development projects. The contributing social factors, such as the poor social training background of project planners and implementers, lack or improper use of relevant social research findings, political pressure, and lack of coordination of activities by the agencies involved in the project, are understated. It cannot be overemphasised that the agencies that initiate development projects should stress interest in people's participation in them. An array of attitudinal factors at external and local levels can directly or indirectly affect the

quality of people's participation in projects. It is therefore obvious that with good and honest intentions on the part of development agents, the participation of the beneficiaries is not a factor to be treated lightly. Both financial and human capital investments, even at frustratingly minimal returns, should not lose sight of the many challenges involved in encouraging fair participation of people in projects so as to clear the ground for effective development. This 'clearing of the ground' throughout the life of the project should be seen as a way of enhancing the chances of success.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The Wild Coast and the Spatial Development Initiative

The Wild Coast covers a coastline area of about 300 km between the Great Kei River to the south and uMtamvuna River to the north. This area was part of the former Transkei bantustan which, since 1994, has been reincorporated into the Eastern Cape province. The area is characterised by a poorly developed infrastructure and the stark poverty of its rural residents. Ironically this is an area that, since the late 19th century to today, has attracted much attention and praise from travellers, explorers, government and non-government organisations and researchers alike as an area of great natural beauty. Some observers have even labelled it as an 'unspoilt' (Schmidt & Doonan, 1997) or 'undisturbed' coastal area. Among its main attractive features are its rare species of vegetation, including endemic plants, and its rugged rocky shores with violent waves that can reach heights of up to 10 metres.

These two contrasting features of the extreme poverty and the natural beauty of the Wild Coast have resulted in the area being declared a focal point for economic development, owing to its potential and need. It is expected that the natural beauty will present a window of opportunity to encourage ecotourism-related investment, which in turn will result in the improvement of infrastructure and services as well as the quality of life in general. The current Wild Coast SDI was initiated by the Department of Trade and Industry in 1996 while similar plans, which were initiated by the former Transkeian government but never implemented (Government of the Transkei, 1982; Nicolson, 1993), provided a basis for the initiative. As recently as 1995, a document outlining similar plans was produced by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Environment and Tourism of the Eastern Cape province, with the intention of gaining financial backing from the national government, parastatals and the private sector (Government of the Eastern Cape, 1995). For the current initiative, three baseline reports were commissioned to focus attention on the environmental (Nicolson et al, 1996a), tourism (Nicolson et al, 1996b) and land issues (LAPC, 1996).

The Wild Coast SDI has identified several development nodes, including Dwesa/Cwebe/Nqabara, Coffee Bay/Hole-in-the-Wall, the Port St Johns projects, and the Magwa and Mkambati areas. The aim is to attract ecotourism ventures in these 'anchor' project areas, in the hope that the improvement in infrastructure and other investments will encourage a range of economic initiatives in the surrounding areas. It is hoped that the five nature reserves (Dwesa, Cwebe, Hluleka, Silaka and Mkambati), together with areas such as Hole-in-the-Wall, will attract both national and international tourists to the Wild Coast.

While the main focus of the Wild Coast SDI is tourism, agriculture and forestry have also been identified as enterprises that can contribute to development. In 1997, for

instance, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry began a drive to encourage forestry in the Eastern Cape province. This department estimates that there are at least 120 000 ha of land that can be afforested, mainly in the communal areas of the Wild Coast. Private companies are encouraged to enter into partnerships with communities in these areas, with the government acting as facilitator of the process. These plans have been discussed and publicised at several consultative meetings for forestry development and investor conferences focusing on the Wild Coast SDI. These consultative meetings and conferences attracted media attention, which has added to the ongoing debate on some of the challenges faced by the Wild Coast SDI.

3.2 Debates on the Wild Coast SDI

Like many other development projects all over the world, the Wild Coast SDI has attracted both optimistic and sceptical reactions from different sectors within the country. The supporters, mainly politicians of the ruling African National Congress government at both provincial and national levels, clearly put their weight behind the project, seeing it as part of the answer to the economic woes of one of the poorest regions of the country. This positive outlook stems largely from the perceived successes of similar endeavours in countries such as Kenya, India and Dominica (Koch et al, 1998a). Secondly, various departments and agencies tasked with planning and implementing the project (eg Department of Trade and Industry, Development Bank of Southern Africa, etc) are displaying enthusiasm that is shared with the public through the media, public gatherings and other promotional activities. Interestingly, this optimism – whether genuine or otherwise – is shared by people in, or close to, the immediate anchor project areas (eg local government officials and potential beneficiaries).

On the other hand, the sceptics raise doubts about the concept of the SDI itself, with both opposition politicians and independent economists such as Marais (1998) arguing that very few people will actually benefit from the Wild Coast SDI. Bantu Holomisa, a leading opposition politician, was even quoted as labelling the concept ‘neo-colonialism of a special kind’ (Bishop, 1997a). Some are even more concerned about the negative impact that the proposed large-scale investments will have on the environment of the Wild Coast (Bishop, 1997b; Schmidt & Doonan, 1997; Webb, 1997;). Most of these concerns, however, are raised by or through the media largely by journalists who spend little time or effort in gathering sufficient details about the real issues. Consequently, most of the sceptical views surfacing in the media have concentrated on the basic concept of SDIs, with little attention being paid to the process of implementation. Nevertheless, since the SDIs arise from and are embedded in a macroeconomic policy that is fully supported by the government, and since resources have already been invested in planning and marketing the idea, criticism of the SDI concept is unlikely to yield any positive results. The alternative view is that efforts should rather be directed at making positive contributions to the processes of implementation in the targeted areas. Thus, current challenges in the Wild Coast SDI in relation to the interest of the potential rural beneficiaries are more about practical details that are related to local social dynamics and the way in which outside development agents respond to them. These challenges are evident throughout the Coast, but not all of them are fully acknowledged by those attempting to implement the SDI. In elaborating on these process-related challenges, this article focuses on experiences in three anchor project areas: Port St Johns, Magwa and Mkambati.

3.2.1 Port St Johns

Port St Johns is situated in the centre of the Wild Coast area and falls in the Umzimvubu magisterial district. Established in the late 19th century as a natural seaport of the Transkeian Territories (Henkel, 1903), Port St Johns is the only town with a municipality along the Wild Coast area (Ntsebeza, 1997). It receives more than 1 200 mm of rainfall per annum, mainly in spring and summer. It is an area of exceptional plant diversity, with some 80 areas of state forests, some as large as 934 ha each, and numerous patches of headmen's forests (Cawe & Ntloko, 1997). It could be argued that this vegetation, together with the shore and estuaries that are endowed with a range of marine resources, enhances Port St Johns' attractiveness as a tourist destination. Like many other areas in the former Transkei, most residents live in poverty. Some combine agriculture, fishing and basketry with external sources of income (eg pensions and remittances) to provide subsistence. With the exception of the commercial state farms, most of the land outside the town of Port St Johns that is targeted by the SDI is not controlled by the town's Transitional Local Council, but by the Umzimvubu Transitional Council, with traditional authorities still making their presence felt. While there is a possibility that the two transitional councils may unite into one local government, the tensions and mistrust between democratically elected councillors and traditional authorities over control of this area are a cause for concern. Land claims by the Caguba tribal authority for Mt Thesiger and residents of Sicambeni for sections of iSilaka Nature Reserve have posed a challenge for the SDI. Tensions also exist between the town's local council and a significant portion of the Mtumbane Township's residents, mainly over who represents whose interests in the SDI.

3.2.2 Magwa

Magwa Tea Estate is situated in north-eastern Pondoland in the district of Lusikisiki, along the Wild Coast. Its 12 215 ha of land is situated in the Lambasi administrative area, under the Qawukeni tribal authority. Until recently, Magwa was one of several parastatal projects of the Eastern Cape province, inherited from the former homelands of the Transkei and Ciskei. In July 1997, the government liquidated all these parastatals. A worker's cooperative has been formed to operate the tea plantation. The Magwa Land Company, a body representing landholders (many of whom were removed from their land to establish the plantation), leases the land to the cooperative rent-free for the first 10 years, with a percentage of the profits being paid to the land company thereafter (Winberg, 1999). As a way of diversifying sources of income, commercial forestry partnerships, a golf course and a holiday resort feature prominently in future plans. These are seen as a way of providing much-needed employment in the area. Challenges include gender imbalance (favouring males) in the project management, uncertainty over land rights, and lack of clarity on the role of traditional leaders in the economic development of the land.

3.2.3 Mkambati

Mkambati is also situated in north-eastern Pondoland. Administratively it falls under the Thaweni tribal authority, which is situated in the district of Lusikisiki. It comprises three areas that fall under three different tenure regimes: communal tenure settlements to the west, 11 000 ha of state land used as a parastatal agricultural project in the middle and the 7 000 ha state-owned Mkambati Nature Reserve to the east. The communal area under the Thaweni tribal authority comprises six administrative areas,

each of which is headed by a headman. The headmen are all responsible to Chief Zwelibongile Mhlanga. Mkambati Nature Reserve is the main focus of the SDI for ecotourism in this area. Private sector investment plans include the upgrading of, and additions to, the existing tourist facilities. The government's contribution is aimed at improving infrastructure in the reserve area, including roads, telephones and so forth. Outside the nature reserve, forestry companies are being encouraged to plant commercial forests. Conflict over land rights in Mkambati Nature Reserve and other (former) state land has existed for several years between different social groups, but has re-emerged with the introduction of the SDI in the area. This conflict has been coupled with the contestation over who the community of beneficiaries are.

3.2.4 Issues debated

Two issues can be singled out as having resulted in intense debate about the SDI process on the Wild Coast. The first one concerns land rights of local people in the targeted project areas. In addition to the numerous land claims with regard to targeted areas along the coast, the delays in the implementation of the government's tenure reform programme have resulted in many uncertainties as regards who holds what kind of land rights, and whether these rights are secure or otherwise. This uncertainty has made the establishment of deals between communities and investors difficult. However, the issue that has most affected the implementation of the projects and that is closely tied with land reform in these areas, is the definition of 'community' of beneficiaries (Kepe, 1999b). In its statements, the SDI emphasises that primary benefits will go to communities that are the rightful owners of the land that is being affected by the projects. Consequently, conflicts have arisen among potential beneficiaries in certain localities, deeply affecting the implementation of the SDI. This is not to say that all conflicts in these areas are related to land issues. A host of other issues, including political affiliations, are responsible for SDI-related conflicts. What has become clear is that conflict management within the SDI is crucial if any success is to be achieved.

The second issue that has been debated intensely, albeit at a very general level, is the question of the communication strategy employed by the SDI to make people aware of the planned development. Newspaper reports that have insinuated that people are not well informed about the SDI (Schmidt & Doonan, 1997; Webb, 1997) have been fiercely denied by SDI personnel and have been labelled as uninformed and irresponsible (see Mahlati, 1998). As mentioned earlier, the limited time spent by journalists in any particular area may indeed be the cause of the unfair picture being presented. Hence, a closer look at the dynamics in the selected case study areas through social research could shed some light. It is only on the basis of such (research) efforts that one can make well-informed statements about realities on the ground. The next section will explore local experiences of the communication strategy of the SDI that have affected the consultation process, as well as the way in which conflicts are dealt with.

4. COMMUNICATION IN THE WILD COAST SDI

Reiterating that information constitutes one of the most important links in the development chain is an understatement. If it is agreed that knowledge is power (Davies, 1994), then adequate information should both be given and received in the development arena if any empowerment and participation of people are to take place. In the context of development projects such as SDIs, planners and implementers need physical and social information about the geographical area of the planned intervention.

Similarly, social actors in that particular locality need as much information as possible about the project, both before and during implementation. Giving information to local social actors is even more crucial in cases where, like in the SDIs, the project did not originate from locality-specific needs assessment, but from a national strategy that makes assumptions about the needs of people in general. (In fairness, it needs to be acknowledged that the origins of the SDI are based on a well-documented history of the racially based marginalisation of black rural people in South Africa. The need to rectify this situation is known to most South Africans. In other words, no new research is needed to tell us that these rural people are poor and that their welfare situation needs to improve. But this is at a general level; each area has its own dynamics.)

Gow & Vansant (1983) correctly point out that information is a necessary ingredient in encouraging local people to participate in and embrace a development project. One may ask: How will local people benefit if they do not participate actively in the project? If inadequate information is considered one of the barriers to active participation, how can they participate if they do not have adequate knowledge about the project? How will they gain adequate knowledge about the project if they have not been adequately informed? This list of questions could be expanded, but the main focus of this section is to establish whether or not local social actors were adequately informed about the SDI and what were the consequences.

While the Wild Coast SDI was conceived by the Cabinet in 1995 (Jourdan, 1998) and groundwork in the form of background studies began seriously in 1996, it can be argued that the actual potential beneficiaries in the rural areas did not hear about the SDI until 1997. Like any other process within the development arena, the initial communication strategy of the Wild Coast SDI faced numerous constraints. Even in a case where the main objective was simply to inform people about the already planned intervention in the Wild Coast, two categories of constraints – the message and the channels of communication – were evident.

4.1 Initial constraints to effective information sharing with people in the project areas

4.1.1 The message

Other than senior government officials, relevant project personnel and other consultants, very few people knew about the origins and detailed plans of the SDI at first. The baseline reports on land, environment and tourism, which were produced in 1996, were somewhat technical and lacked basic information on the SDI. In addition, these reports were never widely available to the public. Even civil servants within the government sectors affected by the Wild Coast SDI (eg conservation officials) have confessed their limited knowledge of the project plans. The two investor conferences in November 1997 and April 1998, and several consultation meetings organised by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, provided packages of information that were mainly targeted at potential investors. These meetings served to introduce opportunities that existed for investment in the Wild Coast, and provided information on how investors might be involved. In other words, the message for this audience was ‘investment opportunities exist on the Wild Coast’. Other than this, and until a website for the Wild Coast SDI was introduced in May 1998 and a special issue on the SDIs in general was published by the journal *Development Southern Africa* in December 1998, the public knew very little about the Wild Coast SDI. Nevertheless, before these attempts at publicity were made, the process of implementation was already at an advanced stage.

Not surprisingly, then, even those who were tasked with informing or consulting with inhabitants of the anchor project areas did not have much information about what the SDI on the Wild Coast would mean for the people. In July 1997, for example, a facilitator who was supposed to inform people living in the vicinity of an anchor project area confessed that 'I have not heard from the people who sent me for about a month now and I have no clue about what to say to people about this SDI'. When specific plans about particular projects were eventually communicated to some people in the affected localities, further developments in these projects did not always reach the same people. A good example of this is the plan to build a tollroad between Port St Johns and Port Edward, which was shelved in late 1997. By June 1999, there were still villagers in the affected areas who were not aware of the change of plan.

At times, the content of an SDI message to affected communities would be detailed, but transmittal was quick, ill-placed in terms of process and had minimal follow-up. An example of this is the presentation of models for promoting local empowerment in a tourism-led SDI. These were detailed models that included several options from which local people could choose (see, for example, Koch et al, 1998b). SDI consultants used a Power Point presentation with slide projectors, offered primarily in English, with limited translation into local languages. In most cases, only a morning or an afternoon would be devoted to the presentations, resulting in people having to make hasty choices. However, of most concern was the timing of these information sessions. In some areas (eg Mkambati) they presented the first opportunity for the people to hear about the Wild Coast SDI. Nevertheless, the presenters presumed that people had prior detailed knowledge about their concept and nature. Consequently, the sessions fell short of achieving their objectives as people were left confused or had to rush their decisions. In other words, on the rare occasions when information was detailed, it failed to serve the desired purpose because of questionable planning of the process, and the inappropriateness of the channels through which information was provided.

4.1.2 Channels of communication

The channel through which information is shared is crucial to the effectiveness of any communication strategy. It should be borne in mind, however, that the choice of the communication channel often depends on who is communicating what message to whom (Bembridge, 1991). In the case of the Wild Coast SDI, community facilitators seconded from the Independent Development Trust (IDT) and the provincial Department of Local Government and Housing were seen as key to the communication strategy for this development project. Consultants were hired to manage the facilitators and the entire community consultation process. These facilitators were to introduce the Wild Coast SDI to local people and assist in establishing local committees to deal with subsequent SDI-related issues.

Direct contact between the beneficiary communities and the facilitators was to be the main channel of communication. However, a study by Anderson & Galt (1998) has shown that reliance on radio (37 per cent) takes precedence over direct communication (17 per cent) as a means of engagement among the actors. The functional ability of these facilitators to effectively engage the communities was inhibited by two main factors – first, the lack of understanding of the prevailing local social dynamics by virtue of being 'outsiders'; and second, an apparent lack of knowledge of SDIs in general and of the SDI process in the Wild Coast, in particular.

In Port St Johns and Mkambati, tensions existed between the local government officials and the traditional leaders. Supporters of traditional authorities, therefore, viewed these facilitators with great suspicion. The situation worsened as the facilitators reneged on their duties using the excuse of hostility from the local people and lack of transport to the widely dispersed settlements.

Secondly, in cases where no apparent hostility existed between local social actors and the facilitators, there were problems related to the organisation of meetings. Scheduled meetings were not well advertised, notices were often put up only a day or two before the scheduled meeting and, in most cases, meetings would be cancelled at short notice, often because there were too few people. Poorly planned (and advertised) meetings (Terblanche, 1997) reduced the effectiveness of the entire consultation strategy.

In a few cases where a fair amount of advertising took place well ahead of a facilitator's meeting, encouraging people to attend a meeting was a challenge, unless they had a vested interest in the issues at stake. This situation becomes worse during the growing season, where people often pass comments such as '*abantwana bam abatyi zintlanganiso, batyi' umbona*' (my children don't eat meetings, they eat maize).

Political affiliations also tended to affect participation in the Wild Coast SDI meetings. In cases where political parties were used to organise a meeting, people belonging to opposing parties would either not be informed or not feel welcome at the meeting. This has been a major problem in certain areas where local people were divided between the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Movement (UDM), such as in Port St Johns and Mkambati. For fear of intimidation and, in some cases, as a means of safeguarding themselves, facilitators would identify with the dominant party. In the run-up to the second democratic elections of 1999, it was rumoured that certain organisations used some community facilitation meetings for campaigning, rather than for consulting on the Wild Coast SDI.

It is therefore not surprising that only 23 per cent of households on the Wild Coast had ever heard of the SDI, most of which were in the anchor project areas (Anderson & Galt, 1998). Most importantly, 'access to information about the SDI is dangerously low' (ECSECC, 1998: 4), confirming observations discussed in this article.

The effects of this inept communication on the Wild Coast SDI are likely to be felt for a long time to come. Improved information exchange would have had positive effects at any stage of the process, but this would have required better planning and proper utilisation of available information on local dynamics. Dealing with these constraints requires a unified effort from both local and external social actors.

Even though the importance of information and knowledge has been emphasised as being crucial for encouraging active local participation in the Wild Coast SDI, it should also be emphasised that there are numerous other developmental processes that require similar attention. Managing conflicts related to projects is another area of concern. The next section reviews experiences of the Wild Coast SDI in this regard.

5. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE WILD COAST SDI

Conflict within development contexts has become a force to be reckoned with, because it is complex, dynamic, widespread and often destructive (Swift, 1996). As the three case studies have shown, conflict has been part of life in the Wild Coast rural areas for many decades. However, developments such as land reform and the SDI have resulted

in new dynamics. Conflicts that have confronted the Wild Coast SDI include those between the social actors who claim rights to the same piece of land; who redefine, for reasons of benefit, the boundaries of the 'local community'; who have unequal representation in structures, which is perceived to benefit the individuals concerned directly; or who have different political affiliations. All these conflicts have made it impossible for the SDI to proceed smoothly, and individuals working within the Wild Coast SDI have developed strategies for dealing with them. Some of these strategies have worked; others have not. In cases where conflict management strategies used by the SDI team have not achieved much success, the intervention and expertise of other actors, including government departments and consultancies, have been solicited. Conflict management strategies that have been employed are discussed below.

5.1 Strategies for managing community conflict

5.1.1 Denial

When the SDI was first introduced to the villagers of the Wild Coast, it appeared that the project planners and implementers were not prepared for potential conflicts. It was only after the provincial Department of Land Affairs commissioned studies to look at the land situation in the anchor project areas (eg Kepe, 1997; Manona & Manona, 1997; Ntsebeza, 1997), that the conflict situation was brought to the attention of the SDI team. Their initial response to the evidence of conflict in these areas was to deny its existence. This suited the 'fast-track' approach that had been adopted by the SDI very well. Denying that real conflict existed in these areas would allow plans to be implemented as if things were normal.

As Howard & Baker (1984) point out, denying the existence of conflict will not make it go away. However, they also argue that when the issue in conflict is not a crucial one, denial may be the appropriate choice. Assuming that the SDI team was fully informed on when and why conflict issues could be denied, it could be concluded that land issues were initially not regarded as a serious source of conflict in the Wild Coast.

Unfortunately, the strategy of denying the existence of conflict arising from land-based issues on the Wild Coast proved to be unsuccessful, as the conflict escalated instead. Other strategies were thus needed.

5.1.2 Playing down the conflict

Following the failure of the denial strategy, the SDI team adopted a 'play-down' approach. For instance, some community facilitators and officials from the Department of Land Affairs working in areas with conflict were so anxious to see progress in their work that they made passionate pleas to conflicting groups to put their differences aside and work together so that all could benefit from this development. These pleas, however, were not accompanied by any serious effort to address the causes of the conflict. Howard & Baker (1984) argue that where people who are involved are not in a position to handle the conflict positively (as was the case with the facilitators), this strategy may be the best choice. However, on the Wild Coast this approach did not work either.

5.1.3 Mediation

In areas where the conflict did not diminish, such as in Mkambati where different

groups are contesting the same land for restitution, the SDI resorted to independent mediation. Under the auspices of an independent mediator, the conflicting groups in Mkambati reached certain agreements meant to allow for unity of purpose and togetherness. The SDI team and facilitators failed to enforce the implementation of the agreed resolutions, however, with the result that no meaningful inroads were made in resolving the conflict.

In some cases, however, the SDI team encouraged other departments that have responsibility for issues that are directly related to the causes of the conflict to become involved. In all three case-study areas, departments such as Land Affairs and Local Government and Housing were brought in to deal with specific conflicts. This seemed to work very well.

5.1.4 Use of power

Power, whether political or economic, was sometimes used to 'manage' conflicts that appeared complicated. While the SDI team cannot be directly implicated, they have on many occasions continued to work in situations where they were aware that political power was being used to either intimidate or marginalise certain groups that were part of the conflict. This was the case in Port St Johns and Mkambati. In both cases, groups or individuals opposed to certain actions related to the implementation of the SDI were labelled by their opponents as having 'political motives' or being 'anti-development'. During the run-up to the elections, political leaders from different political parties were invited by the conflicting factions as a way of strengthening their own positions. Unfortunately, this seemed convenient to several SDI personnel, who capitalised on the labelling, probably seeing it as an opportunity to get rid of the conflict once and for all. This seemed to work for a while, as some opposing factions simply withdrew from participating in the SDI-related activities in their areas. The question that remains to be answered is why sustainable strategies for resolving conflicts were never put in place.

More recently, some SDI and Department of Land Affairs personnel were alleged to have told conflicting factions that if they do not stop the in-fighting, they would lose out on development. Villagers have allegedly been told that investors will look for alternative sites where people are not fighting over control of resources (eg land) or who should represent whom. In this way, conflicting groups were forced to work together without resolving the conflicts.

There is no doubt that, in all these examples, the main goal of the SDI and partners has remained that of speeding up the delivery of benefits to residents of one of the poorest areas in South Africa. Unfortunately, this honest intention has not translated into problem-free processes. Commitment of financial and human resources, patience and willingness to learn from existing information on local dynamics could contribute positively to the processes of dealing with conflict. In a situation such as this, where groups do not always see eye to eye, Bierschenk (1988) points out that projects represent arenas of negotiation for strategic groups, who act according to their own interests, using different frames of reference for social interaction. He therefore argues that projects are never complete failures or complete successes. Appreciation of this fact by project planners and implementers could lead to a positive view on how to deal with conflict.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, the government's efforts to redress past inequalities by implementing economic development programmes to improve the welfare of the poor are acknowledged. It is evident, however, that greater commitment is needed if people's participation in projects such as the Wild Coast SDI is to be more than a trendy slogan (Cernea, 1985). This can be achieved through seeing development as a process, where the social relationship dimensions of a project are not always treated as a second fiddle or viewed as a source of problems. National strategies such as the SDI, whereby initial planning is undertaken based on general perceptions of need, rather than site-specific needs, should realise the shortcomings of this approach, and invest more effort in facilitating the processes that will have greater impact on national as well as local interest in sustainable SDI projects.

In this case, investing in intensive local consultation or information dissemination about the project and how people can become involved, as well as a serious commitment to managing conflicts that may arise, is seen as a worthwhile endeavour. These two aspects of the development process are seen as crucial if the ground is to be cleared for people to participate fully in the project.

While the hasty pace at which the Wild Coast SDI seems to have been implemented could be justified in many ways, there are no real excuses for overlooking crucial issues in the development process. While poor infrastructure in the area has contributed to poor communication, better planning and coordination of resources (including those made available by other government departments) could, and still can, improve information flows about the Wild Coast SDI. Similarly, as Mahlati (1999) puts it, conflict arising from the communities should be seen as part of both the solutions and the problems. This can change the over-negative attitude to conflict in the development process. Needless to say, it should be realised that not all conflicts can be resolved, but all of them can be managed in such a way that progress can be ensured without alienating any social actor from the development process.

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