

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) ACROSS AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *Effective stakeholder communication remains one of the most persistent challenges in EIA practice across Africa. Despite formal regulatory frameworks in most African countries, public participation is frequently tokenistic, poorly resourced, and inaccessible to project-affected communities. Drawing on comparative analysis of Southern, Western, and Eastern African regulatory frameworks, peer-reviewed literature, and practitioner knowledge generated through the IAIA Africa Coalition webinar series convened by AEIAN (IAIA Nigeria), IAIA Ghana, and IAIAAsa, this paper proposes a five-pillar reform agenda for strengthening EIA communication practice across the continent.*

Keywords: *EIA Communication; Stakeholder Engagement; Public Participation; IAIA Africa Coalition; AEIAN; Africa; Regulatory Frameworks; Indigenous Knowledge; Digital EIA; Environmental Governance*

1. Introduction

EIA is formally established across Africa through landmark legislation from Nigeria's EIA Act (1992) to Kenya's EMCA and South Africa's NEMA yet a fundamental communication gap persists between EIA as inscribed in statute and EIA as experienced by project-affected communities. Effective EIA communication is not peripheral: it is the mechanism through which communities exercise rights-based participation, through which local and indigenous knowledge enters analytical processes, and upon which the social legitimacy of development decisions rests (Bond et al., 2024; Nadeem & Fischer, 2010).

Across all three sub-regions, the evidence is consistent: consultations in some areas are conducted as pro-forma exercises; reports are produced in technical registers inaccessible to affected populations; regulatory agencies lack verification resources; and rural women, pastoralists, subsistence farmers, and fishing communities are systematically marginalised (Sibale & Fischer, 2023; Adetarami et al., 2024). This paper argues this deficit is neither inevitable nor acceptable, and that the IAIA Africa Coalition webinar series convened by AEIAN, IAIA Ghana, and IAIAAsa towards IAIA26 provides a concrete platform for translating the reform agenda proposed here into policy change.

2. The IAIA Africa Coalition: Practice-Led Reform

The Coalition has convened three webinars constituting both a knowledge-sharing mechanism and distributed practice-led research directly informing this paper:

- African Session Towards IAIA26: Back from IAIA25 Bologna (5 June 2025) — inaugural session with Prof. Giuseppe Magro, Engr. Dr. Salau Ibrahim, Mr. Ebenezer Appah-Sampong, Mr. Kojo Ofori Amoyaw-Osei, and Dr. Abbas Suleiman; moderated by Dr. Lawal Adegboyega. Exemplified South-South practitioner knowledge exchange constructing an African voice in global EIA governance.
- AI in Impact Assessment (November 2025) — Raymond Wong (Director, ODEN System) explored AI-driven data analysis, NLP, and automated reporting to streamline EIA preparation, enhance accessibility, and support real-time environmental monitoring. Moderated by Dr. Lawal Adegboyega.
- African Session Collaborative Research Towards IAIA26 (18 July 2025) — Prof. Thomas Fischer (Liverpool University; Editor, JIAPA) provided scholarly frameworks directly informing comparative analysis of Malawi and Botswana case studies, moderated by Dr. Lawal Adegboyega.

Together, these webinars demonstrate that the Coalition has become a substantive platform for African EIA knowledge production synthesising practitioner experience, scholarly analysis, and policy dialogue in ways that can accelerate reform.

3. The Communication Gap: Evidence from Three Sub-Regions

3.1 Southern Africa

South Africa's NEMA framework is the continent's most institutionally developed, yet empirical research documents systematic exclusion: rural and peri-urban communities are bypassed by consultation designs privileging urban-educated, English-speaking stakeholders; language-minority groups in an eleven-official-language country face information barriers (Leonard, 2017). Across SADC, Mubanga & Kwarteng (2020) identify enforcement gaps in Zambia; governance instability in Mozambique and Zimbabwe creates incentives for regulatory capture and truncated processes (Aljareo et al., 2023).

3.2 Western Africa

Nigeria's EIA Act (1992) one of Africa's earliest faces persistent constraints from political unwillingness in passing an updated EIA Act that addresses emerging issues from 30years plus of implementation. Adetarami et al. (2024) document how rural residents' perceptions of EIA utility are shaped by direct exclusion experience. Ghana's EPA system demonstrates more consistent enforcement, but consultation processes remain elite-mediated, with rural women, ethnic minorities, and customary land-users systematically under-represented (Fischer et al., 2024).

3.3 Eastern Africa

Kenya's NEMA system requires public notification and comment periods, yet consultation is widely characterised as a legal hurdle rather than a genuine knowledge-generation process (Mwenda et al., 2012). Sibale & Fischer's (2023) landmark empirical study of Malawi discussed directly at the July 2025 Coalition webinar provides the most granular African evidence on participation exclusion: urban-educated males over-represented; rural women and smallholder farmers substantially under-represented. Malawian EIA is characterised as 'consultative rather than integrative': comments received but rarely changing outcomes.

4. Cross-Cutting Barriers to Effective EIA Communication

Analysis across all sub-regions reveals five structural barriers transcending national boundaries:

Barrier	Evidence Base
Capacity Asymmetries	Technical literacy gaps systematically advantage well-resourced proponents over marginalised communities (Simpson & Basta, 2018).
Political Interference	High-value projects face regulatory capture risk, producing predetermined EIA outcomes across all three sub-regions (Deng, 2024).
Information Inaccessibility	Lengthy technical reports in colonial languages, distributed through channels that bypass rural populations (Adetarami et al., 2024).
Exclusion of Indigenous Knowledge	Expert-quantitative paradigms marginalise community environmental knowledge, reducing both accuracy and legitimacy (Mackay et al., 2023).
Institutional Resource Deficits	Under-resourced regulators cannot verify participation quality, de facto delegating compliance to proponents (Pauline & Lema, 2024).

5. Emerging Opportunity: AI and Digital Technology

The Coalition’s November 2025 AI webinar placed African practitioners at the frontier of technology-enabled EIA reform. Three opportunity areas are identified:

AI-Enabled Accessibility: Natural language processing tools can reduce the time and cost of producing plain-language, multi-lingual EIA summaries. AI-driven document review systems can assist under-resourced regulators in identifying gaps in submitted EIAs, partially compensating for institutional capacity deficits.

Mobile Participatory Platforms: With mobile subscription rates exceeding 80% across sub-Saharan Africa, mobile-based platforms can distribute simplified impact summaries via SMS, enable real-time feedback during consultation periods, and support community-based environmental monitoring and grievance reporting (Davids et al., 2021).

Preconditions and Risks: Realising these opportunities requires investment in digital literacy alongside platform development, regulatory recognition of electronic participation channels, and attention to gendered digital access divides. The risk of substituting algorithmic processing for genuine community dialogue must be actively guarded against.

6. A Five-Pillar Reform Agenda

This paper proposes a five-pillar agenda grounded in the comparative evidence base and practitioner insights from the IAIA Africa Coalition:

PILLAR 1	Regulatory Reform	Enforce communication standards: local-language translations, minimum notice periods, post-consultation response statements, and proponent penalties for pro-forma consultations.
PILLAR 2	Community Capacity Building	Co-fund environmental literacy programmes, independent advisory services, and community liaison training. Adapt the IAIA Africa Coalition webinar model down to community level.

PILLAR 3	Indigenous Knowledge Integration	Embed community-held environmental knowledge as recognised evidence via participatory baseline tools, community mapping, and explicit incorporation of local indicators into impact models.
PILLAR 4	Digital & Mobile Access	Regulatory recognition of electronic participation; mobile platforms for information dissemination and grievance reporting; AI-assisted local-language summaries funded by development finance institutions.
PILLAR 5	Institutional Investment & Regional Harmonisation	Resource regulatory agencies adequately; adopt harmonised EIA communication standards through ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC to eliminate regulatory arbitrage and enable shared capacity.

7. Conclusion and Call to Action

Improving EIA communication across Africa is simultaneously an ethical imperative, a technical necessity, and a political challenge. It is ethical because project-affected communities hold rights-based claims to meaningful participation. It is technical because assessments excluding local and indigenous knowledge are demonstrably less accurate. And it is political because structural barriers capacity asymmetries, political interference, information inaccessibility, and under-resourced regulation are embedded in governance systems that have resisted reform for decades.

The IAIA Africa Coalition, in bringing together African EIA practitioners and scholars to share knowledge and build the research agenda towards IAIA26, is itself a form of communication practice demonstrating that African EIA practitioners can and do engage as knowledge-producers. The test of the five-pillar agenda proposed here will be whether AEIAN, IAIA Ghana, IAIAAsa, and their partners can translate IAIA26 momentum into concrete regulatory advocacy, capacity-building programmes, and practitioner standards that change EIA communication practice on the ground.

8. Reflections from Questions and Contributions during Conference Presentation

During the paper presentation participants agree that data gaps exist within Africa and misinformation has shaped how the global north has viewed and reacted to African based activities, there is urgent need for African based researchers to collaborate on a study that provides correct and ground trothed data on the regional specific requirements, customs, tradition, practice and peculiarities for stakeholder's consultation within countries and regions across Africa.

African based retrofitted consultation methods are more effective and relatable than generic consultation methods and concepts that has been proven to be more effective at Europe and the Global North.

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