



PRESS RELEASE

CIVIL SOCIETY GEARS UP FOR OIL & GAS

A workshop sponsored by the Policy Forum Guyana (PFG) under the umbrella of the Shared Resources Joint Solutions programme of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) earlier this week saw a range of civic bodies, official Agencies and business representative exposed to Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA). This technique aims to ensure that the transformative potential of new gas and oil discoveries for decades to come is positive for the country as a whole, rather than for the already well-placed sectors of society.

The workshop was led by a team of Dutch experts from the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessments (NCEA) which has conducted similar initiatives in many countries of the world. The NCEA is part of regulatory system in the Netherlands since 1987. However, while subsidized by the Government of the Netherlands it operates with complete independence.

The aim is to launch a broad-based structured conversation on the type of transformation suited to Guyana becoming the society in which all Guyanese can enjoy the type of life they value. Transformation as a result of gas and oil is inevitable. Positive and constructive transformation is not inevitable and will be most unlikely unless planned for carefully.

SEAs are particularly suited to generating the environmental and social policies needed to ensure that oil and gas revenues work for the benefit of the country as a whole. Unlike Environment Impact Assessments which are a well-established requirements for all new ventures to be carried out by the investors themselves, SEA focus on policy level decisions - not specific projects – and seek to engage as wide a range of stake-holders as possible, not simply the company undertaking the venture.

A major message of the workshop was that the desired transformation is beyond the reach of government alone and requires concerted and cooperative forms of governance open to all interested sectors. An approach must be fashioned in which all groups see some benefit in being involved and, equally important, that all sectors realise what they will lose by not being engaged.

The importance of the society engaging in environmental and social *thinking* before it starts *doing*, was emphasized, in order to mitigate risks and allow solutions to be considered in advance of problems arising. It also cuts costs and will result in better transparency practices. Other lessons learnt included incorporation of SEAs into the Environmental Protection Act, particularly in light of the country's Green State goals.

During a visit to the workshop Minister of Natural Resources Raphael Trotman welcomed the initiative to increase levels of public participation. He also re-iterated his support for release of the 1997 Exxon contract as a step in the direction of public education and participation.

Participants in the workshop, were taken through the various phases of undertaking SEAs. These included:

- Identifying stakeholders
- Determining the scope of the SEA
- Determining Strategic alternatives.

Determining strategic alternatives introduced a kind of thinking in short supply in Guyana, whereby participants look at different ways of achieving what they want. These include exercises in assessing an issue from the point of view of what the government might want and what the opposition might want; or assessing a goal from the two extremes of the best and worst outcomes, then assessing realistically what is achievable within those limits. Advantages of the Strategic Environmental Assessments were summarized as:

- Integrating environmental, social and economic considerations and their inter-linkages into one framework;
- Allows understanding of the sum of impacts rather than of a myriad of impacts from many projects;
- Helps to focus discussion on strategic decisions;
- Helps prevent conflict;
- It helps obtain stakeholder commitment
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Next steps envisaged by the Policy Forum Guyana are to assist a broader range of civil society organizations and key Government Agencies better understand ESAs as a technique for mobilizing public interest in decision-making on gas and oil issues. Such activities will initially include briefings with various civic sectors, particularly faith-based, indigenous, trade union and NGOs and Heads of Government Agencies.

Of particular interest the PFG will explore is the potential for introducing the concept of SEAs into the recently-launched national consultation on the Green State Development Strategy.

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