



Prof. dr. Rudy Rabbinge, outgoing vice-chair of the NCEA

'Independent evaluation is important in a time where pronouncements are often judged more in terms of their political correctness than of their content and rationale.'

By Joost van Kasteren

Over the years, environmental assessment has developed into a powerful instrument for critically examining various aspects of sustainable development – not only ecological but also social and economic. “But at the same time this critical stance makes you vulnerable”, says Rudy Rabbinge, the NCEA’s outgoing vice-chair, “because nowadays pronouncements are often judged more in terms of their political correctness than of their content and rationale”. This phenomenon means there continues to be an important role for environmental assessment and for its evaluation by the NCEA’s independent experts.

What were your experiences during your nine years’ involvement with the NCEA?

“The growing authority of the NCEA, not only with project proposers but also with the Directorate-General for International Cooperation at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are widely accepted. This was far from matter-of-course in 2011, during the consultations about prolonging our cooperation with the Ministry. Then, the environment was not a priority. By clearly demonstrating that environmental assessment entails more than the environment and that it is uniquely suited to contribute to sustainable development, we succeeded not only in having our subsidy agreement renewed but also in expanding to include a programme of sustainability advice. This programme assists both the Directorate-General and Dutch embassies to mainstream sustainable development. Last year, during the most recent discussions about our cooperation with the ministry, the budget was increased again. This is primarily an acknowledgement of the significance of the expertise we at the



Rudy Rabbinge, emeritus professor of sustainable development and food security, has been vice-chair of the NCEA since 2009. In addition to his work he has always fulfilled many administrative and advisory roles in the public and private sectors in the Netherlands and abroad.

The NCEA was established by decree in 1987 as an independent advisory body on environmental assessment for The Netherlands. In 1993 the NCEA also started to operate internationally. The core of the NCEA's international work is to support environment and sectoral ministries, environmental assessment professionals and non-governmental organisations to improve their environmental and social assessment practice. It advises on the quality of the process and content of these assessments, at both project level (ESIA) and strategic level (SEA).

NCEA can offer: for each project we can draw on a pool of international experts supported by well-informed and motivated technical staff."

And in developing countries specifically? I can imagine that Western experts who drop by and give an opinion are viewed with some suspicion.

"Our approach is not that of an expert who points out all the things that are wrong. We start out from the perspective of the country in question. In Senegal, for example, at the request of the Senegalese government we are engaged in a possible strategic environmental assessment (SEA) of the question of how to deal with their extensive oil and gas reserves. As a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement, Senegal is committed to achieving the aim of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. We're not going to say, 'leave the oil and gas reserves in the ground and go for solar and wind power'. But we are advising the government on how environmental assessment can be deployed to arrive at a well-considered decision about which of the available courses of action to opt for. For example, one such option could be to optimise the use of the fossil fuel reserves so as to transition to a more sustainable energy supply. The criterion remains sustainable development, but in this case, as seen through Senegalese eyes".

Can the NCEA's work be seen as a form of conflict resolution? Authoritative experts defusing a conflict's political charge?

"Environmental assessment itself is already a form of conflict resolution. For example, we're engaged in discussions with the governments

of Kenya and Ethiopia in order to advise on an SEA for the construction of a series of dams in the Omo river. These dams are important to enable Ethiopia to meet the growing demand for electricity at home and for export to neighbouring countries. The Omo river is also an umbilical cord for Lake Turkana, a large



desert lake in the arid north of Kenya that local Kenyans are dependent on. The possible consequences of the dams on the water supply are causing concern, especially because of the long drought in this area. These concerns can be analysed in the SEA. As good participation is one of the three mainstays of environmental assessment, it creates support together with transparency and quality of information, which results in fewer conflicts. The NCEA can indeed play a role in this. Our independence, the fact that we do not have a stake in the projects we advise on, helps ensure that our recommendations are accepted by all parties.”

Have stakeholders ever rejected the NCEA's judgement?

“No, I can't recall our recommendations ever being rejected by stakeholders. They're not always welcomed, but that's a different story.”

Environmental assessment is most effective if governance is good, but in many countries, this is often not the case. So, is it worth doing?

“Correct: the presence of good governance is important, but in previous years I’ve also seen that people in countries where governance is less good have called the government to account with the help of environmental assessment. In almost all countries environmental assessment is legally regulated: the legislation specifically mentions certain obligations, such as providing information about an initiative’s environmental and social impacts, stakeholder participation and the publication of decisions. People can insist on these obligations being met – indeed, they are increasingly doing so. And so, governments have to do something about this, which is gratifying.”

How would you describe the NCEA?

“I think the NCEA is best characterised with the words that were used when I was recently awarded the Rachel Carson prize by the VVM, the Dutch network of environmental professionals. According to the jury I am averse to dogmas, I am transparent and don’t shy away from debate. I think these qualities apply to the NCEA too. They don’t always make you popular, but you shouldn’t want to be. At the same time, this critical stance makes you vulnerable. When the big questions of our time – food security, energy supply, poverty reduction – are involved it sometimes seems that arguments no longer matter. Wishful thinking has taken the place of critical analysis, and pronouncements are judged more on their political correctness than on their content and soundness. That poses the risk of being unpopular for an organisation like the NCEA that stresses soundly-based arguments.”

So does the NCEA have a future?

“Undoubtedly. Precisely because there is a great need for the judgement of independent experts who are not swayed by the political issues of the day.”

And what of the future of environmental assessment itself in developing countries?

“In the context of the UN we have committed to achieving a number of sustainability targets by 2030. Environmental assessment can play an important role in developing countries for testing the initiatives of companies and organisations and government policy against these Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, developing countries profit from a ‘tortoise and hare’ phenomenon, as technical advances enable them to leapfrog certain stages. A prime example is mobile

telephony, which does away with the need for a fixed network. But developing countries can also profit from technological advances in agriculture through which increased productivity is accompanied by a lower impact on environment and biodiversity. Countries can also be seen leapfrogging towards a sustainable future in industry, mining and energy supply. A tool such as environmental assessment that is required to always highlight the most ecologically far-reaching alternative is unbelievably important for channelling developments in the right direction.”

At some point in time will these countries be able to do this themselves?

“That is ultimately the intention – after all, capacity development is one of our aims – but I think that our independent advice in particular, will still be sought for a while. Demand for an impartial assessment of the environmental and social impacts of large, complex and politically sensitive projects remains great for the time being, particularly in Africa, but also in South-East Asia. Think of the trans-boundary projects, for example. The NCEA has built up so much prestige in the last 25 years that for the foreseeable future governments of developing countries will be happy to continue to call on us.”