



Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE)
Plot 96 Kanjokya Street, P.O. Box 29836 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256 312 812 150 | Email: acode@acode-u.org



For Immediate Release

23rd July, 2019, Kampala

Use Environmental and Social Impact Assessments for enhancement of Transparency and Accountability in Uganda's Extractives Industry

Over the last two years, the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD), Petroleum Authority of Uganda (PAU) in conjunction with the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) have undertaken the review and subsequent approval of Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) for oil developments. The Environmental and Social Impact Assessment is a process for predicting and assessing the potential environmental and social impacts of a proposed project, evaluating alternatives and designing appropriate mitigation, management and monitoring measures. From the experience of the Tilenga and Kingfisher Development Projects respectively, we have noted that the ESIA reports are detailed and comprehensive, and the process of reviewing these reports has been found to be participatory and involves disclosure of important information about the projects in question, to the general public.

As advocates for sustainable exploitation of natural resources, and Transparency & accountability in Uganda's Extractives Industry, who have actively informed the past ESIA processes, we commend NEMA and PAU for the open process of ESIA Review and the highly participatory public hearings. We however believe that beyond the procedural formalities of complying with the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations in conducting ESIA's, the process can be used to enhance transparency and accountability in Uganda's Petroleum and Mining Sectors. To this end, we urge government through its mandated agencies-NEMA, MEMD, and PAU to:

1. Provide detailed and simplified information to the project host communities prior to the public hearing in order to achieve effective participation of the communities. Our experience in the past has shown that participants at the public hearings usually have very little understanding of what the process is about and are unable raise issues that relate to the impacts of the projects on the environment and livelihoods of the project affected persons.
2. Create a feedback mechanism through which the stakeholders get information relating to how the issues raised before and during the public hearings have been addressed. A feedback mechanism to stakeholders is one of the tenets of accountability.
3. Ensure that the focus of analysis of trans boundary issues in the ESIA report produced by developers go beyond social, economic and security issues, to cover environmental impacts of the projects which could impact on the neighboring countries and in this case the Democratic Republic of Congo.
4. Subject the ESIA's for mining projects to public hearings. The mining projects in Uganda have equally far reaching environmental and livelihood impacts. However, the practice of holding public hearing for ESIA's has not been extended to the Mining Sector. Whereas the petroleum subsector has embraced the practice, the mining sector continues to operate without subjecting the ESIA's to public hearings.

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For more information about this statement, please call Mr. James Muhindo at +256782 134 708 or email at james.muhindo@acode-u.org