

IDASA IN ACTION

Democracy rules in Eastern Cape

DEMOCRACY rules at last in the Eastern Cape Regional Economic Development Forum, which held a fully representative conference in Port Elizabeth in the middle of March, with delegates from the whole of the Eastern Cape.

The presence of representatives from rural areas was in part the result of Idasa's continuing commitment to promoting grassroots democracy. When the Eastern Cape forum was formed in Port Elizabeth early in 1993, it was assumed that policy could be planned from the capital city simply because that was where the regional leadership lived.

With ANC candidate premier Raymond Mhlaba as its vice-chairperson, and three other of the region's top ANC leaders on its management committee, the forum was perceived by many to be fully representative.

However, Idasa pointed out the inadequate representation of the more rural sub-regions, and the Port Elizabeth office began designing a programme to include these areas. The forum accepted the process-design and asked Idasa to implement the programme, with funding provided by the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

In December 1993 the first series of workshops was held in Humansdorp, Graaff-Reinet, Cradock and Grahamstown, the centres of the four sub-regions of the Eastern Cape.

These workshops consciously avoided creating the impression that they simply wanted to introduce the development forum. Instead they embodied a process aimed at facilitating sub-regional inputs to the shape of the forum, in terms of both structure and objectives.

In the interim, the forum commissioned a R260 000 research study to establish a clear development profile of the Eastern Cape. This study was co-ordinated by the Institute for Planning Research at the University of Port Elizabeth, but subcontracted to academic institutions throughout the region.

It covered 11 interrelated subjects - demography; the economy; inter-regional linkages; human resource development (education); welfare and health; housing and services; transport; water and energy; the environment; tourism and recreation; and labour.

When this study was completed in March 1994, Idasa's local office took its findings to

the rural areas.

Workshops in the four sub-regions were designed to ensure an adequate understanding of the study documents and the relevant development concepts.

After reaching agreement on their own area's "key development issues", each sub-region elected 20 delegates to attend the mid-March forum conference. A strong delegation from the PE/Uitenhage metropole also attended.

Conference delegates set "development objectives" in 10 of the subject areas of the study. Building on these, interim recommendations were also determined, which will be brought to the attention of the new provincial legislature as soon as it takes office after the election.

Idasa's message to participants throughout the process was that, in the new Eastern Province at least, development policy should contain no more surprises! People on the ground, even in dispersed communities, should be part of the information-gathering process, part of the prioritising of needs, and part of final decision making.

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