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Water and Sanitation Workshop Addresses Capacity Building In South Africa

By Mark Fitzgerald

Engineers and policy makers from 15 countries gathered March 6–8 in Johannesburg, South Africa, for a workshop entitled “Capacity Building and the Use of Best Practices in Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation Projects within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region.” Organized by the South African Institution of Civil Engineering (SAICE), a group committed to creating reliable infrastructure to improve the quality of life in South Africa, the workshop focused on the need for training and capacity building and for the development of best practices in the SADC region. It also considered the roles of the SADC—a coalition aimed at achieving development and economic growth and enhancing the standard of living and quality of life of the peoples of southern Africa—and of the African Engineers Forum, an outreach organization formed by SAICE to build capacity throughout southern Africa.

“Much of Africa doesn’t have potable water,” explains Russel C. Jones, Ph.D., P.E., an honorary member of ASCE who attended the workshop on behalf of the World Federation of Engineering Organisations, a nongovernmental international body that brings together engineering groups from more than 90 nations. “So a good part of the workshop considered questions such as, how do you systematically move toward capturing rainfall, drilling wells, redirecting rivers—whatever it takes to get potable water within the reach of the huge populations in southern Africa?”

The discussions at the workshop also focused on sanitation and the need to implement sewage systems in various villages throughout the region. “Basically pit latrines are the norm in Africa,” adds Jones. “Of course, they’re not very sanitary, so we explored such alternatives as spot sanitation—not big, city-sized sewage systems, but

how to deal with a village of about five thousand people and provide sanitation for them. So this dealt a lot with the technology that might do this.”

Funded by the SADC, the workshop also addressed the availability of resources in various SADC countries and the need for progress reports and future meetings. The countries represented at the workshop included Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana, and each representative distributed current educational materials on water supply and sanitation. A book about managing water for African cities (prepared in collaboration with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, an agency set up by the U.N. General Assembly with the mandate to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities) entitled *Water Demand Management Cookbook* also was circulated to participants.

“It was a very well done conference,” adds Jones. “Primarily because of the enthusiasm and desire of the engineers there to help their countries—they want to get involved in trying to help their governments put the right priorities on water supply and sanitation.”