

Landmark workshop maps the way forward for climate change atlas

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Researchers and decision-makers from various government sectors concerned with global and climate change met in Pretoria last week for a landmark workshop aimed at bridging the gap between global change science and global change policy.

The South African Risk and Vulnerability Atlas (SARVA) workshop was aimed at stimulating engagement between the two groups to determine the information requirements of potential users of the Atlas in the government sector. The first version of the Atlas is due for release in January 2010, in electronic and hard-copy format.

In his welcoming address Dr Bob Scholes, CSIR systems ecologist and principal investigator in the Southern African Millennium Assessment, said that risk and vulnerability represented a “common currency” between the research and application domains, and that the Atlas is set to improve access to global change information.

“The Atlas will not only contain continually updated maps – it will be an easy-to-navigate, interactive spatial product at many scales, and will include case studies and other narratives to inform global change adaptation responses and planning,” he explained. “The end product will be a widely encompassing storehouse of information about global change.”

Dr Emma Archer, principal climate change scientist on the Atlas project, said that it is widely acknowledged that South Africa’s climate change research is world-class. “We now need to make sure that this world-class science is put to good use to inform policy,” she told workshop participants.

In his presentation the Department of Science and Technology’s Imraan Patel, General Manager - Science and Technology for Economic Impact, said that the Atlas was one of the key components in a scientific bureau that the department was establishing for global change.

“The bureau will draw together the best of South Africa’s global change research and will act as a high-level knowledge broker between researchers and policy-makers in parliament,” Patel said. He called for an Atlas User Forum to be established and to have regular meetings to keep this vital conversation going. He challenged workshop participants to “push the limits of innovation” in global change.

SARVA project manager Dr Rebecca Maserumule told workshop participants that South Africa has learnt a valuable lesson from one of its neighbouring countries. “Despite the fact that the country produced a truly admirable risk and vulnerability atlas, they face a huge challenge in persuading decision-makers to use it. With our Atlas we want to create a platform for researchers and potential users to walk hand in hand from the outset to make doubly sure that the Atlas meets user requirements,” she said.

As an introduction to the workshop, six case studies were presented by global change researchers to illustrate how the Atlas information could potentially be used in decision-making. These highlighted issues such as environmental health - bridging the gap between traditional health concerns and a changing climate; potential impacts of climate change on the coastal zone; adapting to climate change in a diverse landscape, focusing on the case of the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve; building resilience to climate variability and change in the City of Joburg; climate change and water resources; and climate change implications for water and land use within the agricultural sector of the Garden Route.

A lively debate followed where the decision-makers representing local, provincial and national government shared their expectations and requirements with the researchers. Issues raised included the fact that there were gaps in existing climate change research, and that in many cases climate change research findings were still inaccessible.

Maserumule explained that the Atlas was set to contribute to efforts to coordinate research and identify gaps. The Atlas should be seen as a living platform - as new information becomes available it will be added to the body of knowledge.

“The Atlas will become a one-stop shop for relevant climate change findings, which would inform projections of global change, land cover change and biogeochemical change for the region,” she said. “It will facilitate value-addition to “raw” research data to make the resulting information accessible to decision-makers in a practical application format.,” she explained. The Atlas is being designed as a ‘distributed’ system, linking to outlying databases, to build a community engaged in spatial data provision in global change and risk and vulnerability.

Discussion in the workshops focused on important features to include in the Atlas. These were identified as mapping of climate extremes; risk indices; links to other important databases; and base maps of population growth, economic activities, physical parameters which influence coastal sensitivity, coastal zones, land-use and environmental resources. Participants also mooted that the Atlas should provide a platform where environment impact assessments can be shared to allow lesser resourced municipalities access to this information and drive down costs.

Stakeholders also requested that the Atlas should function as a decision support tool in aspects such as risk associated with specific developments, land reform vulnerability, highly sensitive areas which preclude development such as mining, and vulnerability of different sectors such as forestry and tourism.

In conclusion Maserumule challenged decision-makers to feed the findings of their own case studies into the Atlas system to enable researchers and decision-makers to come to a mutual and more comprehensive understanding of global change and its impacts.

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Note to Editors

South African Risk and Vulnerability Atlas (SARVA)

Climatic and other environmental changes are set to impact many sectors of South African society. Decision-makers in these sectors need information on the impact and risk of climate change.

SARVA, a new atlas of local risk and vulnerability in global change context, will be launched in January 2010. The Atlas is aimed at equipping decision-makers with information on the impact and risk associated with climate change in the region. It will provide easily understood climate change sensitivity and vulnerability information at regional, national, provincial and municipal levels. It will also support national initiatives such as the National Disaster Management Framework.

The Atlas will provide an electronic geographical information system and will involve SA researchers from various disciplines to continuously update the content with new research. It will capture data related to aspects such as groundwater, surface water, forests, biodiversity, human health, crops, demographics, economics and social dimensions.

The SARVA project is sponsored by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and is project managed by the CSIR, with key inputs from South African institutions and research groups.

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