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Perspectives on geoheritage research and promotion for African geological survey organizations

Díaz-Martínez, E.

Geological Survey of Spain – Instituto Geológico y Minero de España, Madrid, Spain - e.diaz@igme.es

The project PanAfGeo, developed between EuroGeoSurveys (EGS) and the Organisation of African Geological Surveys (OAGS), promotes “Geoscientific knowledge and skills in African Geological Surveys”. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of geological survey organizations (GSOs) in Africa, as well as of the OAGS organisation itself. A feasibility study was launched in 2013, which identified a series of gaps to be targeted by the PanAfGeo project, including a preliminary analysis of the status of geoheritage studies developed by African GSOs. We herein summarize some key aspects of this gap analysis on geoheritage studies, and provide several guidelines for future steps to be taken towards geoconservation in Africa.

A questionnaire was sent to all African GSOs, obtaining 22 responses. The overall conclusion was that GSOs’ knowledge and responsibilities regarding geoheritage varies significantly, but there are some common trends that still may be identifiable. Some GSOs are not aware of what has been done or what needs to be done in their country regarding geoheritage. This is actually still normal throughout the world, as the methodologies for geoheritage studies and management aimed at proper conservation and public use are seldom applied globally, with concepts and specific techniques developed only during the last two decades. The questionnaire identified wide differences between GSOs: some with apparently no interest in the subject and no personnel dedicated to it, and others with plenty of interest and good inventories already completed or on their way. More than half of the respondent GSOs plan to participate in the geoconservation activities of the PanAfGeo project, already have a department or personnel responsible for this subject, and have proposed specific needs or expectations (gaps) to be covered by the project. Only six GSOs already have a national inventory of geoheritage. Nevertheless, some of those not yet engaged in an inventory, have personnel dedicated to geoheritage. The most important need identified by GSOs was training on geosite inventory (including mapping and value assessment) and geosite management (including planning, restoration and public use).

In general, most African GSOs are not aware of geoconservation concepts and methodologies, and even less of recent advances on geosite value and vulnerability assessment, geoheritage management, and use of geosites towards local socioeconomic development, whether as part of geoparks or natural protected areas. Hence, the potential for future development of geoconservation in Africa is very high. With proper geoheritage inventories and assessment, GSOs can advise the public and special interest groups like local communities, travel agencies or protected areas, towards the sustainable use of geosites. The traditional division of Government agencies between the industrial and business sector on one side, and the environmental and nature conservation sector on the other side, is losing its meaning. Initiatives aimed towards regional socioeconomic development can reconcile mining with geotourism, particularly when historical mining of world-class deposits has resulted in mining heritage coinciding with type-localities for mineral deposits and geologic processes. New tourist products are yet to be developed herein.

As in other parts of the world, Africa is only beginning to discover its rich geoheritage and geodiversity (see for example [1]). African governments and international organizations must support GSOs in their much needed task of setting the path towards geoconservation by characterizing the geodiversity and identifying the geoheritage to be preserved for future generations and to be sustainably used for local, national and regional socioeconomic development.

References:

[1] Errami et al. 2015 *From Geoheritage to Geoparks: Case Studies from Africa and Beyond*. Springer, 269 pp

