

# ABS Africa: advising the continent on sustainability

*Leadership* talks to Paul Furniss and Fanie Coetzee, founding partners and directors of ABS Africa



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**Please can you share with us the background on how and why ABS Africa was started, and what the business experience of the partners and key advisers is?**

The founding members of Advisory on Business and Sustainability Africa (ABS Africa) have been involved in providing sustainability advisory services since the mid-1990s. Our individual work experience has included various appointments, from site management to sustainability assurance engagements with multinational organisations. We decided to bring this experience together into a single service offering at ABS Africa. Through this experience, we identified the need for an independent sustainability advisor who could offer customised sustainability solutions across the value chain of a business. We realised that, to avoid any

perceived conflict of interest with other service offerings in a business, sustainability advisory services needed to be provided by an independent organisation not influenced by other interests in the business or group.

We have offices in Cape Town and Johannesburg, but work in most parts of Africa. Our business experience ranges from working with small, emerging entities to multinationals across various sectors, including mining, energy, and infrastructure. Depending on the assignment, we find ourselves working with professionals at all levels of the organisation and often in multidisciplinary teams including engineers, natural and social scientists, economists, and town planners.

**What services do you offer, and what is your competitive advantage?**

We offer a variety of sustainability advisory services including strategic and spatial planning (GIS), environmental permitting and licensing, management planning and feasibility studies. Our more specialised sustainability services include greening of buildings, climate change advisory services and mine closure planning.

Our competitive advantage, we believe, stems from our value system, which includes honesty, integrity, and excellence. Based on this value system we have developed a focused range of services that add value to organisations. ABS Africa works in a flexible, transparent manner, while ensuring a relationship is developed with the client and stakeholders we interact with.

**What are the key challenges for Africa in terms of sustainability?**

Africa is a diverse continent in terms of geography, people and climate and therefore the challenges vary across the continent. With its continued population growth, as well as expected economic growth in the next few decades, there will be significant pressure on the available natural resources. If there is to be long-term benefit for the people of Africa, development must be based on sustainability principles. Key challenges include food security, water supply, sanitation, energy, health, land degradation and the associated ecosystem service losses, climate change, and urbanisation.

**Are organisations receptive to your recommendations and responsive to the importance and benefits of sustainability, or do you need to work hard to win them over?**

Compared with a decade ago, sustainability awareness has matured and sustainable development has become more entrenched in most businesses. There are a number of forces driving business to integrate sustainability across their activities. These include international

agreements like the Paris Climate Conference Agreement (COP21) the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda and in-country legal and policy reform.

A shortage of resources is another important driver. We've seen the latter in the recent energy and water supply challenges in SA. In response to these challenges, business has rapidly moved to alternative supply options and placed more focus on managing their demand for these resources. Equally as important has been the dramatic increase in community expectations, including insistence on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) which has prompted government, civil society and companies to revisit the way they go about making decisions and operate. Generally, individuals and organisations are more aware of the sustainable development challenges we face as a global community and that continuing to do things the way we are accustomed to doing them will exacerbate the challenges we face.

**What are some of the projects you have most enjoyed or in which you have the greatest pride?**

We are very grateful that, through our projects, we have been able to work in more than 20 countries in Africa. It's difficult to single out one project from another. Because we work across the project lifecycle, we sometimes get to visit places which are relatively undisturbed and where there is a strong connection between community and natural resources. These projects, although often the most challenging, are also the most rewarding.

**What is the state of infrastructure in Africa and what are the business opportunities for the sector over the next decade?**

The state of infrastructure varies significantly in terms of standards, both within and between different countries. The type of infrastructure is also important to consider.

In the next decade, sustainable infrastructure development is going to be driven by the most efficient way in which to move people and products from one place to another. There is a trend

towards greater collaboration between countries on the development of regional transportation corridors. Smarter ways of delivering goods and products by using technology instead of building capital intensive infrastructure like roads and railways is also a focus.

**Energy is a massive sector—but could you define the African situation in terms of sustainability and also where you think the challenges and opportunities are?**

In general, energy supply is limited and unreliable on the continent, although there are exceptions.

At a project-level, many mining and industrial operations are forced to rely on diesel-powered generators to power their operations or act as back-up power supply. The same also applies for the commercial, retail and residential sectors, due to the unreliable nature of the supply. This discourages investment and adds capital expenditure to new projects and operations, while also adding to the carbon footprint of these organisations.

Sustainable development within the energy sector is already prompting a gradual move away from power generation, which is utility-scale and state-owned, to small/medium-scale and individual/business owned operations.

**You have projects throughout Africa.**

**What are the challenges you have found in investigating and implementing projects throughout the continent?**

Challenges we often encounter relate to the accessibility or remoteness of site, lack of infrastructure to support the project, funding in the current global economic climate, policy uncertainty, limited available local skills, red tape and a lack of market-based incentives for the private-sector to transform or adopt sustainability principles at the project-level.

**What do you see as the greatest potential for growth through Africa across all industries?**

Many sectors, including renewable energy, resources, finance, retail, agriculture, transportation and telecommunication have significant

potential in Africa and can drive revenue for the continent.

Resources may well be the driver, in the immediate future, for economic growth, with renewable energy the key enabler assisting rapid economic growth. Opportunities for growth exist in most sectors, and for Africa that means that economic policies based solely on natural resources for economic growth are unnecessary.

**What are the sustainable development opportunities that you have seen, especially opportunities that were unexpected (ie perhaps perception breaking)?**

In general, opportunities in the sustainability space are increasing at an incredible pace.

What has really been remarkable in South Africa is the innovation by the private sector in response to water and energy resource shortages. Ethical investing is also rapidly on the rise, due to greater awareness and a demand for transparency in all spheres of business and an increasing demand by receiving communities to ensure that the environmental and social costs are internalised.

The rise and success of manufacturers who only use recycled materials to produce their products has also been impressive. The overarching opportunity right now is that Africa can avoid the sustainable development mistakes made by some countries in the developed world.

**Why did you help raise funds for Rare Diseases South Africa in 2015?**

This is one of a few organisations that we have assisted in terms of fund raising, thanks to all the volunteers and fundraisers of the Pedalling 4 Pompe initiative.

The opportunity to contribute to this initiative came to us via a friend who is working in the health care industry.

They made us aware of the challenges facing families living with a person diagnosed with rare diseases.

The lack of financial or market incentives to treat or cure rare diseases makes this a significant global health challenge. ▲