

GREAT EXPLORATIONS

Integrating global expertise with local capabilities is one of the key elements of Fugro's comprehensive geoscience and survey services, says its chairman of the board of management and CEO, Paul van Riel.

BY KERRY DIMMER

IN Africa, the geographical gradient of discoveries, on- and offshore, is seemingly endless. Fully comprehending the millions of years of landscape evolution requires the application of a number of geosciences and other earth-related services.

These essential technical activities offer an understanding of the sequential processes of how minerals and carbons are trapped and emerge as resources – most notably those required for energy, water and infrastructure – and inform us about what opportunities exist for extraction.

Such sciences are also a crucial element for those pursuing commercial enterprises that will provide Africa with much-needed economic development.

Africa's natural resources may be abundant but the same cannot be said of the indigenous skills and expertise required to ensure the extreme care and comprehension needed to extract minerals. This is why international firm Fugro is so successful on the continent: its focus is not just in the provision of skills but in developing them.

Specialising in exploration, geotechnical, environmental, hydrological and geological

and survey services, the firm's global footprint in energy and infrastructure markets is spread over 70 countries. Its half-century presence in Africa means it is substantially invested in the continent, evidenced by its more than 20 offices in 14 nations.

In its early African days, Fugro acquired pre-engineering data for land-based foundation design in Nigeria and provided positioning services for seismic companies in Gabon and Congo. It was also the first company to establish a fully certified geotechnical laboratory, permanent surveying and positioning operations. Such services have been expanded, with the focus now on five major sectors: oil and gas; mining; sustainable energy; the public sector; and building and infrastructure.

Such expansion of services was necessary, says Paul van Riel, chairman of the board of management and CEO of Fugro.

'One of our guiding imperatives was to take into account the interesting dynamic in Africa of the visible interdependence of different market sectors.

'For instance, currently there is a downturn in the oil and gas industry, which

impacts on the revenue stream in countries that are heavily reliant on it to help fund infrastructure developments. This creates a conundrum because the growth of the oil and gas sector is itself limited by the lack of infrastructure.'

A further imperative was to build a strategy that exceeds customer expectations, and promotes standardisation and delivery excellence. By continually increasing its footprint in Africa, the firm is building capacity and does so as close to its clients' projects as possible so that its range of services across the markets it services is synchronised.

In this way, it also bridges multi-project dependency and when adding in the crucial component of a 'local content' mandate, Fugro's presence is all-encompassing.

For van Riel, this aspect is personal. From the age of eight to 13, as a result of his father being contracted to the oil industry in Kenya, van Riel lived and was schooled in the region. Selected for their potential, Kenyan boarders readily mixed with the 10% expat students.

Van Riel was deeply affected by the team camaraderie among his peers and cherishes this multi-cultural experience. It also explains

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PHOTOGRAPHY KAREN KAPER



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his love for Africa and support of indigenous skills development.

'Local content as a key element of our growth plan translates into the integration of global expertise with local capabilities,' says van Riel. 'We have invested enormously in defining the priorities in Africa so that our teams integrate easily with regional structures and compliances.

'We do realise that this is only sustainable if local authorities and our client base commit to the same ethos of development.'

Fugro and van Riel clearly understand the basic element of any African market activity, especially the need to be cognisant of the social, environmental and economic needs of a community in which a business operates. They also understand that Africa is not one country. 'The western world is often blinded by its perspective that Africa is a single entity. Fugro's attitude is different, largely because of our long presence on the continent,' says van Riel.

'We understand that many African nations operate more independently than we see in Europe and the United States.

'There are obviously operational market differences and, generally speaking, West Africa operates differently to East Africa. We see the West as the more mature of the two, with Eastern Africa considered an emerging market. Funding is less certain in the eastern region, for example, but that has not stopped Fugro investing in the growth of entities in Mozambique and Tanzania.'

When the firm enters a market, it looks to create sustainability. Aside from the provision of geotechnical, geoconsultancy, survey and subsea services, it seeks to build a hub from

which a complete portfolio of expertise can be provided. This has included engaging and merging with local enterprises, a process that was used most effectively in Angola, Ghana and Mozambique.

All three nations have experienced further Fugro growth as the company continues to build on its existing presence by embracing local content imperatives.

'Most recently, we opened an office in Ghana, with Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal next in line to have a permanent Fugro presence. The feedback from our clients is very positive but two aspects really stand out: being able to access Fugro services for local projects is not just cost-effective but also thorough, including the provision of in-depth site investigation, the latter of which is crucial to ensuring financial sustainability and eliminates the need for remedial work in the construction phase.'

The Fugro Academy and 'Team Fugro' are two in-house initiatives that play an important role in the company's commitment to Africa. The latter's mandate is to constantly improve on service delivery and tailor its offerings to meet client demands and expectations.

'Being responsive to the concerns and aspirations of customers means adapting to changing business conditions,' says van Riel. 'When Fugro enters a market, it takes a long-term view of what's needed over a five- to 10-year period.

'Standardisation is therefore a leading theme in the company. Our clients, be they local or global, must be provided with the same level of quality deliverables anywhere in the world. To account for this we ensure

we deploy best practices and share the extensive experiences we have gained across our global centres of excellence.'

The Fugro Academy is also a result of the company's focus on staff development. Offering more than 1 000 courses, it provides detailed training programmes for individuals – the results of which are measured and monitored by local Fugro managers.

For Africans this is good news because the firm also encourages leadership and entrepreneurship, regardless of the scale of projects or operations, and further ensures that its best-performing staff have opportunities to work in well-established company offices outside of Africa.

By so doing they experience and adopt the global Fugro way of working and can disseminate this culture among their peers locally.

So important is education to the firm that its operations, including staff, contribute to the curriculum of educational programmes in the areas in which it works. Such is the case in Angola where it has provided state-of-the-art equipment to one of the local universities for use in geopositioning training.

Despite Africa's challenges, van Riel says that working in Africa is a choice, for both Fugro and its staff.

'Overcoming challenges means our staff need to be resourceful and creative in finding fit-for-purpose solutions. We find the rewards far outweigh the difficulties. Being prepared to work in frontier areas requires thorough preparation and the right mindset.

'We have both, while simultaneously finding the right solutions to deliver projects safely, on time and, in many cases, exceeding client expectations.' **AD**