

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA)

More than ticking the box?



Photo: Dam under construction in Sri Lanka, by Lakshman Nadaraja/World Bank ©

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) is a key component of sustainable investment. They are supposed to make ex-ante predictions of the expected impacts on the environment as well as on people's livelihood to inform decision-making. However, there are concerns on how well they are achieving this goal. Therefore, this paper will explore the concerns about ESIA and identify how the ESIA process can be improved.

ESIA experts identify the following concerns

ESIA reduced to a compliance tool

One problem with ESIA is that it takes place too late in the decision-making process. When ESIA's are reduced to a compliance tool, they are only seen as a last step to be taken or 'ticking the box' instead of a tool to create better projects.

"For me, it's a view generally about the ESIA instrument, it's a lot of times a done deal. The decisions have been made; it is going to go ahead." – ESIA practitioner

Social impacts are underestimated

Social issues such as displacement and loss of cultural heritage have gained more attention the last decades, but they are still underestimated, and their complexity is misjudged. Incorporating social impacts is seen as nuisance by project proponents and technical staff, resulting in limited social experts and allocated time and budget to investigate these social issues.

"The technical scientists think that because they got numbers, they do the important stuff, and got the real answers. While social scientists know nothing, they don't have numbers, you know, all you do is talk to people." – Academic

Not enough is done to avoid displacement

There is a similar concern about displacement because of infrastructural projects. Because resettlement is very complex and restoring livelihoods

Key insights

> ESIA is seen as an important instrument, with a solid position in worldwide environmental legislation.

> Concerns about ESIA from the perspective of ESIA experts relate to ESIA's being reduced to a **compliance tool** and 'ticking the box'.

> The position of social issues has strengthened within ESIA, but not enough. Social impacts are still **underestimated**.

> For ESIA to reach its potential, several **changes** should be made:

- The ESIA process should be an **integrated** and **ongoing process**, earlier in the project cycle.
- Stronger **commitment** of project proponents toward ESIA is necessary to use ESIA as a tool to create better projects.
- There is a need to further include **perspectives of social experts and local community** within the ESIA process.

This study is part of the applied research project 'Ten years after: A reality check on impact assessments of infrastructural projects', which aims to learn about how impact assessments can be made more accurate, and to reflect on what we may and may not expect of this instrument.

takes years, it should be avoided. However, this is not always the case and not enough is done to avoid displacement. The complexity and the accompanying costs of resettlement should be better understood.

Inadequate monitoring and managing

Lastly, a general concern is about what happens after finishing the ESIA. Not all can be predicted beforehand, therefore there is a need for strong monitoring and managing of issues.

“Writing a report is one aspect of the process, but managing issues is even more important, and there is a big gap.” – Academic

Also strong monitoring of the implementation of mitigation measures is important. However, there are now too little resources and capacities available to do this in an adequate manner.

How to improve ESIA's?

Some ESIA experts suggest that we should rethink ESIA in its entirety and move towards another instrument, but there is no clear vision on this yet. Others suggest multiple changes to the current ESIA process. Changes that should be made are:

- ESIA should be an ongoing and integrated process which takes place earlier in the project cycle to be able to still influence decision-making and deal with emerging impacts during implementation. This could be supported by also incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).
- The motivation of primary actors should be strengthened to enhance the commitment of using ESIA as a tool to create better projects, instead seeing it as a compliance tool. The reason for conducting an ESIA should be to 'do good' instead of 'do no harm'.
- To make ESIA more transparent and independent we could consider moving away from the commercial model of drafting ESIA's towards more independent bodies that conduct and review ESIA.



Photo: Construction workers on site, by Arne Hoel / World Bank ©

- ESIA should include a stronger social perspective to address social issues. Also, more local perspectives should be involved in the process, focussing on what the community needs are.
- Monitoring and evaluation should include community participation to ensure mitigation measures for social impacts are executed adequately and unforeseen issues are identified at an early stage.
- To establish all this, it is important that enough resources are allocated to take social issues into account, together with a strong commitment of the project proponent to take social issues seriously, as this will in the end benefit society as a whole.

Conclusion

ESIA is still regarded as an important tool to guide infrastructural projects. For ESIA to reach its goal of informing decision-making and to fulfil their purpose of creating environmentally and socially sustainable projects, social issues should be taken seriously. Furthermore, it is important that a local perspective is taken into account when designing infrastructural projects, as these should contribute to local needs. Lastly, commitment of all actors involved to use ESIA as a tool to create better projects instead of a compliance tool is necessary for ESIA to reach its purpose.