



## Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) - More than ticking the box?

*Effectiveness, concerns and prospects*



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July 2021

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**Cover photo:** Dam under construction in Sri Lanka. © Lakshman Nadaraja/World Bank

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For more information about this project or our other work, please contact LANDac’s coordinator Ezra Litjens via [landac.geo@uu.nl](mailto:landac.geo@uu.nl) or visit our website [www.landgovernance.org](http://www.landgovernance.org)

***This research assignment is part of the applied research project ‘Ten years after: A reality check on impact assessments of infrastructural projects’, which aims to establish how impact assessments can be made more accurate and to reflect on what we may and may not expect of this instrument. The project reflects, along with specialised agencies, on what might be done to close the gap between the real and projected impacts of investments in infrastructure. It is a collaboration between LANDac, SDC at Wageningen University and Royal HaskoningDHV.***

***LANDac – the Netherlands Land Academy – is a partnership between Dutch organisations and their Southern partners working on land governance for equitable and sustainable development. The LANDac network brings together actors, conducts research and distributes information, focusing on new pressures and competing claims on land and natural resources.***

***SDC Wageningen University (the Sociology of Development and Change group of Wageningen University) focuses on the structures and practices of development and change with a particular scientific interest in inequality, marginalisation and political agency. It is a politically engaged and interdisciplinary research and educational centre in development studies, political ecology, anthropology of law, and crisis and disaster studies.***

***Royal HaskoningDHV is an independent international engineering and project management consultancy leading the way in sustainable development and innovation. Their professionals deliver services in the fields of aviation, buildings, energy, industry, infrastructure, maritime, mining, transport, urban and rural development, and water.***

## Foreword

Since its introduction over 50 years ago, environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) has seen an incredible uptake. It is now applied all over the world to help steer projects towards a more sustainable future. Practically every country in the world has a set of ESIA requirements. In some places, it is the principal legally embedded instrument available to integrate the environmental and social impacts of development into decision making. In addition to these country-specific requirements, financial institutions have increasingly embraced ESIA in their risk management approaches. Sector organisations in the areas of mining and fisheries, for example, are incorporating ESIA into their best practice benchmarks. As a result, ESIA practice is now considerable and widespread. There are countries where several hundreds of ESIA's are undertaken every year. It thus seems clear that ESIA is here to stay.

However, it is not without its critics – and even ESIA enthusiasts are regularly confronted with ESIA's that disappoint. It takes effort to ensure that ESIA lives up to its potential. We need to vigilantly analyse the effectiveness of ESIA to highlight what works and what doesn't. It is especially important to collect and share cases that convincingly demonstrate how ESIA leads to better development, as these can inspire practitioners to elevate their practice and provide a reference on the basis of which better performance can be demanded where ESIA application is found lacking. And we should be demanding improved ESIA, as part of the more general push for sustainable development, in the continual search for a better balance between economic interest and environmental and social interest.

The findings in this study echo the calls for ESIA strengthening that have come from both practitioners and researchers over the years. I appreciate the spotlight that the study puts on these challenges and look forward to participating in the dialogue it may spark.

**Dr Bobbi Schijf**

**Senior technical secretary at the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment**

## Executive summary

Environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) is primarily an instrument to predict projects' potential adverse environmental and social impacts in order to maximise benefits and minimise such adverse impacts. It is used all over the world and incorporated in environmental legislation. The ultimate goal is to create better projects and contribute to sustainable development. However, there are some concerns regarding ESIA as to the extent that projected and real impacts are in line with each other and whether it helps in reaching sustainable development. Therefore, the present study focussed on exploring and identifying the key concerns and debates in the field of ESIA, and on identifying ways to improve ESIA and enhance its potential to contribute to sustainable development and reduce negative social impacts.

First, a literature study was conducted to bring together what has been written concerning the effectiveness of ESIA and how well the instrument is working, and then interviews were held with 13 ESIA experts. This report presents the findings of this explorative study and identifies the main concerns and ways to improve ESIA's.

Four themes were identified regarding the main debates and concerns about ESIA's: *effectiveness; consideration of social impacts; displacement; and importance of implementation and monitoring.*

In regard to possible ways forward and improvements, the recommendations are classified into three main categories: *changes to the ESIA process; fostering commitment; and including multiple perspectives.* Many of the suggested ways to improve ESIA focus on the ESIA process and procedures. Although good procedures can help in reaching good processes, we must be careful not to focus only on improving the process and thus lose sight of the overall goal of creating sustainable projects. To reach this goal it is suggested that the ESIA process should have an integrated approach that is applied earlier on in the project cycle, not only to identify alternatives but also to establish whether and, if so, why a certain infrastructural project is necessary and how it can benefit society as a whole. To do so, a more inclusive approach to community participation is needed, one that puts the needs of and challenges for local communities at centre stage.

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## Abbreviations

EIA	-	Environmental impact assessment
ESIA	-	Environmental and social impact assessment
HIA	-	Health impact assessment
IFC	-	International Finance Corporation
NCEA	-	Netherlands Commissions for Environmental Assessment
RAP	-	Resettlement Action Plan
SEA	-	Strategic environmental assessment
SIA	-	Social impact assessment



# 1. Introduction

Environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) is a key component of responsible investment. It is an instrument to make ex-ante predictions of the expected impacts on both the environment and people's livelihoods. The aim is to inform decisions about whether or not to pursue specific interventions, what measures might improve the project design and implementation, and what compensation measures would be needed in the case of displacement. Even in best-case scenarios, where there is a commitment by the government and investors to take impact assessment and compensation seriously, there are questions about the extent to which the ex-ante predictions are accurate and the measures proposed sufficient.

## Explorative study on ESIA

There were two aims behind this research, namely to identify key concerns in the debates around ESIA and to explore in what ways ESIA can be improved and what ways forward can be identified to create better impact assessments that reach the goal of sustainable development. The research was conducted based on literature and interviews with experts in the ESIA sector.

The aim of the literature study was to analyse the literature on the effectiveness of ESIA's. A special focus was put on the social impacts of infrastructural projects. The goal was to find out what has been written about this particular topic and what the urgent questions and debates are in the literature. The following two questions were addressed during the literature study:

- *What are the urgent questions in the debate around social impact in ESIA and how well is this instrument working?*
- *Can ESIA mitigate the negative effects on people's livelihoods, especially when projects involve displacement?*

After the literature study, interviews were conducted with 13 experts in the field of ESIA in order to clarify issues that remained unclear from the literature study. The interviews focussed on the perspective of the experts and what they experience as challenging in the ESIA process and what kind of improvements they would like to see in the future for ESIA to reach its potential.

## Overall applied research project

This report is intended to be the first step in a larger applied research project on ESIA. LANDac, Wageningen University and Royal HaskoningDHV combined their efforts in the project 'Ten years after: A reality check on impact assessments of infrastructural projects' in order to examine how effective ESIA is and what can be done to improve its impact. This project zooms in on the gap between projected and real social impacts so as to improve the practice of impact assessment. Core issues in land governance, and on the LANDac agenda in particular, are concerns about the limited development impact of infrastructural projects and the multiple dispossessions suffered by the populations affected by them.

The aim of this applied research project is to learn how impact assessments can be made more accurate, and to reflect on what may and may not be expected of this instrument. One of the reasons why projected impacts are not always in line with real impacts is the complexity of the individual life choices involved and the differentiated ways in which compensation measures impact people's options and challenges. Additional problems are related to the implementation of



compensation measures for displacement, which may be poorly managed and fail to honour the initial promises.

## Methods

### *Literature study*

A semi-systematic literature review combined with the snowball method was conducted to bring together what has been written about how well ESIA is working. Using a semi-systematic review is useful to contribute to the state of knowledge on a certain topic or to identify themes within the literature on a certain topic (Snyder, 2019). The snowball method entails using a key document as the basis from which to retrieve other relevant sources (Snyder, 2019).

The grey literature reviewed mostly comprised guidelines and best practices for ESIA or social impact assessment (SIA) from, for example, the International Association for Impact Assessment. Literature on environmental impact assessment (EIA), environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) and social impact assessment (SIA) was included as the boundaries between these impact assessments are blurred. In some countries, EIA also includes a social element, but this is not reflected in the name of the instrument. Therefore, literature on ESIA, EIA and SIA was incorporated in this study. The findings informed the rest of this research and helped identify key issues in the debate around ESIA.

### *Semi-structured interviews with ESIA experts*

Semi-structured interviews were held with experts in the field of ESIA from financing agencies and with reviewers and consultants. The semi-structured format allowed changes to be made during the interviews and to follow up on leads provided by the respondents. Eight individual interviews and one group interview (with five ESIA practitioners) were conducted. All interviews were held in May-early June 2021 via video calls in accordance with the health and safety regulations of the Dutch government regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

### *Composing the topic list*

A topic list was used to enhance the reliability and comparability of the qualitative data from the interviews. The list was based on the findings of the literature study. Issues that had not yet been touched upon or remained unclear guided the composition of the list, for example, what kind of mitigation measures are effective and what could make them effective. The ESIA experts were therefore asked whether lessons had been learned regarding measures for mitigating negative social impacts. Furthermore, the perspective of EIA/ESIA practitioners appeared to be understudied. In addition, a debate that arose from the literature review is whether ESIA is still useful considering its imperfections. To explore this issue, one topic focussed specifically on the future of ESIA's. The full topic list including some sample questions can be found in Appendix 1.

### *Interviewees*

The interviewees were selected from among the connections of LANDac and its partners. In March 2020, there had been a gathering of people interested in the applied research project. They were brought together via the LANDac network. Amongst these people were various parties with expertise in ESIA. This group of people formed the basis for the interview participants. Furthermore, the snowball method was used to find more participations with specific knowledge of ESIA's; that is, the interviewees were asked to provide the names of other people who could be approached (Bernard, 2011; Boeije, 2009).

The 13 interviewees had a diversity of expertise related to the field and including ESIA practitioners, ESIA reviewers, an employee of a civil society organisation, employees of a financing agency and academics.

To enable the interviewees to speak freely, they are anonymised in this report. Interviews were conducted in both Dutch and English. Therefore, some quotes that are used in this report have been translated. All quotes used in this report are from the interviewees unless otherwise indicated.

### Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed intelligent verbatim style and coded based on several themes and subthemes. The data were then analysed using thematic content analysis, which is a method for analysing qualitative data by analysing, organising and reporting on themes that are found in the data (Boeije, 2009). This type of analysis was chosen as it can help to compare the answers of participants and to discover whether there are any shared or contradicting experiences or understandings. After all data had been gathered, preliminary codes and sub-codes were created. During the analysis, some of the themes and codes were altered, deleted or added where necessary, using a bottom-up approach.

### Structure of the report

This report brings together the results of the literature study and interviews in one integrated analysis. The findings are organised per theme where the findings of the literature study and interviews complement or contradict each other. In the next section (section 2), the history of ESIA is briefly described. Next, the main debates and concerns are described per theme, namely *effectiveness; consideration of social impacts; displacement; and importance of implementation and monitoring*. Subsequently, the findings on how to improve the ESIA process are divided into three main categories: *changes to the ESIA process; fostering commitment; and including multiple perspectives*. Finally, the results are discussed and put into a wider context, and ways forward for the overall 'Ten years after' research project are indicated.

## 2. Exploring the origins and purpose of ESIA

The history of environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) starts with environmental impact assessment (EIA), as ESIA evolved from EIA into the instrument it is today. EIA has its roots in the United States, where it was introduced by the US National Environmental Policy Act about 50 years ago (Arts et al., 2012). The Act was established to guide the activities of federal agencies that had the power to affect people and the environment in a significant way (Morgan, 2012). EIA is now a universally recognised instrument for environmental management and is embedded in environmental law (Morgan, 2012). According to the principles of the International Association for Impact Assessment, EIA is:

*The process of identifying, predicting, evaluating and mitigating the biophysical, social, and other relevant effects of development proposals prior to major decisions being taken and commitments made. (Senécal et al., 1999: 2)*

Scholarly literature states that the general goal of EIA is to anticipate the environmental impacts of development proposals before a commitment is made to a particular action or decision (Cashmore, Gwilliam, Morgan, Cobb & Bond, 2004). In the longer term, the objective should be to contribute to sustainable development, with equitable attention paid to economic, social and environmental impacts (Cashmore et al., 2004). This is also described as the 'substantive purpose' of EIA, namely the extent to which the EIA process contributes to achieving the EIA objectives (Cashmore et al., 2004; Kolhoff et al., 2016).

As a response to various EIA weaknesses, such as the failure to incorporate social and health impacts in an adequate way, other forms of impact assessment arose, for example social impact assessment (SIA), health impact assessment (HIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) (Vanclay, Esteves, Aucamp, & Franks, 2015). These other forms gained ground because of dissatisfaction with EIA and how it was practised, focussing merely on environmental impact (Morgan, 2012). As EIAs/ESIAs pay serious attention to economic and social as well as environmental impacts (Cashmore et al., 2004), this should help to mitigate the negative effects on people's livelihoods. Impact assessments provide not only mandatory guidelines for project development, but also advice that informs the decision-making process of granting a permit or license to operate.

### From EIA towards ESIA

Over the years, EIA has been transformed and often replaced by ESIA, as the relevance of the social dimension of projects becomes increasingly acknowledged (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). There is a need for an integrated assessment approach to evaluate both biophysical and social impacts (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). According to the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA), the process of ESIA is to:

*identify and evaluate the potential risks and impacts of a project;*

*develop a mitigation strategy to avoid or minimize these impacts, to compensate for residual impacts and to improve the social, environmental and financial outcome of the project (optimized sustainability);*

*effectively engage local stakeholders in the development of the project through consultation and disclosure of project-related information. (NCEA, 2016)*

While ESIA has been widely applied by international agencies and donors, there have been only a few scientific publications on ESIA in contrast to the multiple publications on EIA and SIA, as ESIA is less used than EIA and SIA (Dendena & Corsi, 2015).

### How to study effectiveness of ESIA?

Although the effectiveness of EIA and ESIA systems is widely studied, there is no agreed definition of 'effectiveness', as the definitions adopted by authors depend on their perception of the roles and goals of EIAs/ESIAs (Momtaz & Zobaidul Kabir, 2013). Evaluating the effectiveness of policy instruments is both conceptually and methodologically problematic as it is dependent on whose interpretation of effectiveness is the basis for the analysis (Cashmore et al., 2010). The present study was mainly interested in the degree to which ESIAs are accurate in predicting social impacts and contributing to sustainable development. According to Cashmore et al. (2004) 'it is unrealistic to expect EIA to act as a tool for sustainable development unless its role within this concept has been comprehensively considered and incorporated into its theoretical foundations' (p. 296). Furthermore, an evaluation of the effectiveness of EIA is only meaningful when it is made in the socioeconomic, political and cultural context of the country concerned (Arts et al., 2012; Morgan, 2012). As one's view on effectiveness depends on one's understanding of the nature and purpose of an EIA, there will always be a plurality of views on what an effective EIA is (Morgan, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a common understanding in the literature of what ESIA should at least accomplish, namely inform decision-making.

Furthermore, an evaluation of the effectiveness of ESIA is not yet available in scientific literature (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). An extensive amount of the available literature focusses on the procedural effects of EIA (Cashmore et al., 2004; Kolhoff et al., 2016; Loomis & Dziedzic, 2018) using the 14 EIA criteria of Wood (1993) and the mechanisms of control proposed by Ortolano et al. (1987). These criteria have a strong focus on the procedural and legal sides of EIA. The procedural effectiveness focusses on whether formal EIA procedures have been followed (Cashmore et al., 2004). However, in the present research a broader approach to effectiveness was employed, with a focus on the social impacts. The goal was to explore how ESIAs contribute to creating better projects and sustainable development.

### 3. Main debates and concerns regarding ESIA

As mentioned, four themes emerged from the research regarding the main debates and concerns regarding ESIA, namely *effectiveness; consideration of social impacts; displacement; and importance of implementation and monitoring.*

#### Effectiveness of ESIA lower than expected

During the literature review it became clear that there is some dissatisfaction with ESIA, as its effectiveness is lower than expected regarding the goal of informing decision-making (Cashmore et al., 2004; Momtaz & Zobaidul Kabir, 2013; Morgan, 2012). This was echoed by most of the interviewees. ESIA was described as a tool that looks good on paper, but in practice has effects that are less than expected. Most of the interviewees described ESIA as a tool that should inform decision-making and create alternatives that need to be considered before making a decision. The goal of informing decision-making is often perceived as self-evident for making rational decisions (Cashmore et al., 2004). However, most of the interviewees had a broader understanding of 'effectiveness' than only informing decision-making. They pointed out that ESIA is ultimately about doing better projects and striving for sustainable development. There are several reasons why ESIA does not always reach its full potential, which are listed below.

#### ESIA comes in too late

One of the most frequently mentioned problems is that ESIA is performed too late in the project cycle, often after the important decisions have already been made.

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*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*

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Instead of proposing alternatives and influencing decision-making within projects, thereby creating better projects, ESIA often investigate the projected negative impacts of projects that will be realised anyway. One interviewee said that this is partly to do with how the procedures around infrastructural projects are organised: within a project cycle, one generally has to go through several procedural steps – for example technical and financial feasibility studies – before one comes to the ESIA phase. Multiple interviewees said that this means that crucial decisions have already been taken and ESIA do not really inform about alternatives.

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*A lot of projects are developed and they actually only look at technical and financial feasibility, and only after that do we look at ESIA. – Employee of a financing agency*

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#### Politics and power in decision-making

During the initial development of EIA as a decision-making tool, rationalist decision theory was dominant (Cashmore et al., 2004), but this has been criticised by several authors. The main critique is that, based on the rational and technocratic assumptions in EIA, it was assumed that planners and professionals are neutral actors and provide independent evaluations (Morgan, 2012). Critics argued that this assumption led to failure to recognise the political and value-based nature of decision-making (Morgan, 2012). For example, according to Vanclay (2020) companies and projects

are guilty of overstating the benefits of development projects, while understating the negative impacts. Also, the ESIA practitioners pointed out that ESIA can be biased as there is a commercial model of drafting ESIA. Consultants are hired by a project proponent to conduct an ESIA for a project that the proponent wishes to execute, and this might put pressure on the ESIA practitioners. However, the proponent has the intrinsic and legal responsibility to manage the environmental and social aspects of their project.

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*Often consultants are hired by a client to make a project feasible, to approve it. It leads to bias, unavoidably. You are hired to make your client smile, make your client happy, to get paid. – ESIA practitioner*

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Several studies have shown that instead of informing and influencing the decision-making process, EIA can become a political tool to legitimise decisions that have already been made (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2021; Ho, Nor-Hisham, & Zhao, 2020). Morgan (2012) describes this from a Marxist perspective and argues that EIA serves only capitalism by justifying environmental decision-making instead of informing the decision-making process.

One interviewee used the example of the case of a hydropower dam in Ghana. The project was rejected several times because of the severe environmental impacts that it would cause. However, a few years later, the project proceeded anyway. It is most likely that people in high positions used their power to realise the dam. Especially in countries where the integrity of the political system is limited, the effectiveness of ESIA is low (Kolhoff et al., 2016; Vanclay, 2020). Furthermore, a lack of political will and too much bureaucracy play roles in the low performance of EIA (Khan, Chaudhry, Ahmad, Saif, & Mehmood, 2020). Interviewees said that in these cases, an ESIA will most likely not have the intended effect of informing decision-making and creating better projects.

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*Sectoral ministries like energy or infrastructure, especially infrastructure, have so much power. And so much money is involved. They all have to conduct an ESIA, but often they will be cutting corners. – ESIA reviewer*

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### **ESIA reduced to a compliance tool**

In the literature it is argued that politics and rent-seeking surrounding infrastructural projects and EIA can lead to the failure of EIA to safeguard the sustainability of the project, and make EIA a mere formality instead of an instrument that guides the decision-making process (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2021; Ho et al., 2020). EIA is then reduced to 'ticking the box'. This feeling was shared by the ESIA experts interviewed. As also illustrated by the quote below, there was a feeling that ESIA is seen merely as a hurdle or the last step to be taken before receiving the permits to continue the project. Thus, ESIA is reduced to a compliance tool instead of a tool that can support developing better projects.

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*If you look at ESIA as a compliance tool, where you have to do it to get the right permits [...] it's just 'ticking the boxes' in the end anyway. – ESIA practitioner*

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One interviewee even said that the problem is that in far too many countries, the regulatory agencies just want certain projects to happen instead of really caring about the environment and communities. They see ESIA as part of the process that is necessary to execute their projects, and they do not want ESIA to stand in the way of them.

### **Too few resources for implementation and monitoring or mitigation measures**

Another point of dissatisfaction regards the implementation of mitigation measures and the monitoring of social issues. An important outcome of ESIA is the mitigation measures that should be taken during the implementation (construction and operation) of the project to prevent or minimise adverse impacts. To implement these measures, sufficient resources should be available and the relevant parties should have sufficient capacities. The low performance and effectiveness of EIA systems can be caused by a lack of capacities or a lack of resources in the department that is responsible for the environment and regulating EIA (Khan et al., 2020). A case study on three infrastructural projects in Bangladesh showed that in all three cases, more than half of the mitigation measures suggested by the EIA were either only partially implemented or not implemented at all (Momtaz & Zobaidul Kabir, 2013). Besides, the Department of Environment did not adequately track the implementation of mitigation measures, arguing that they did not have the resources to do so (Momtaz & Zobaidul Kabir, 2013).

The monitoring of social issues is also important. A study on Eritrea's EIA system showed that weak monitoring was mainly caused by the lack of local experts or a legal mandate to prosecute non-compliance (Zeremariam & Quinn, 2007). Based on a case study in Australia, Mottee et al. (2020) argue that in project evaluations greater emphasis should be given to follow-up and monitoring. Chadwick and Glasson (2018: 782) write that the monitoring of social impacts is limited, and that to enhance monitoring it is useful to ensure local participation in the monitoring system. During the interviews it came to the fore that too little resources are available to adequately monitor social issues.

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*What we see often is that the local government just does not have the capacity, in terms of people and expertise, to monitor this properly. – Employee of a financing agency*

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### **Consideration of social impacts within ESIA's**

From the literature it became clear that social impacts have attracted attention in recent decades. EIA was initially created to assess environmental impacts; however, in many countries social impacts gained importance over the years and there was a shift from EIA to ESIA (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). However, the literature also suggests that a lot could be improved regarding how social aspects are addressed. In general, the interviewees expressed great dissatisfaction with the representation of social issues in ESIA. They acknowledged that although things have changed in recent decades, there is still a long way to go. That social impacts are still seen as less important and are being underestimated became apparent in several ways.

### **Social issues seen as a nuisance**

Interviewees said that project proponents need to undertake an ESIA primarily because there might be negative environmental impacts and that this point of departure already shows an imbalance between environmental and social issues in ESIA. It is not possible to completely ignore social issues in EIA/ESIA, but they do not always receive much attention from project proponents and developers. Social issues are seen as a nuisance or hindrance. One interviewee said that



involving communities in assessing possible negative impacts on them is seen as troubling and delaying the project. The quote below illustrates how social issues are seen as a nuisance and are avoided rather than incorporated.

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*There is this mindset of 'community people are just emotional people who just try to exploit us, all we should do is just compensate them and they should go off and be quiet.' I do see that on a day-to-day basis. – ESIA practitioner*

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The field of impact assessment is still dominated by engineers and technical staff (Vanclay, 2020). In the interviews it became clear that some of the participants felt that their technical team members do not entirely value the importance of adequate social assessment. Some do, because they experience their projects being delayed due to social issues. But others do not see the importance of taking social impacts seriously, leading to assessments being more oriented towards the environmental side of projects.

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

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### **Complexity of social impacts underestimated**

Another recurring issue is that because social impacts are complex and multifaceted they are often underestimated. When conducting an ESIA, on the environmental side there are specialists in water quality, air quality, soil quality, etc., whereas there is often only one social expert to investigate the social impacts. It was said during the interviews that 'the social' is seen as just one thing, instead of being multifaceted. While there is a great commitment among social experts to include social impacts as best as they can in impact assessments, it is difficult.

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*We, as social specialists, sometimes feel as if we've got the whole world on our shoulders, because we are meant to tackle so many issues. The 'social' – it's broad. And ESIA's in themselves are inadequate. [...] Particular social issues that come to mind relate to health, security, GBV [gender-based violence], human rights and more. Exactly all of these things fall under the social domain. But it's all lumped together into 'social'. – ESIA practitioner*

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Furthermore, during the interviews it was pointed out that as social impacts are about people, one can never predict all social issues beforehand. Local community people are active agents who interact with others and make personal choices every day. One interviewee said that therefore social issues should be seen as fluid situations that need continuous assessment and monitoring. In addition, social impacts happen the moment rumours about a project begin to circulate, which can, for example, cause land prices to go either up or down.

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*Projects affect people before you even commence the project. There are pre-impacts. People feel that their lives have been cut short or that there is loss of income, employment, all such things. – Academic*

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This makes social impacts very complex and sometimes hard to anticipate. By lumping all social facets together and having little social expertise in ESIA teams, the complexity of social issues is undermined. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' assessment of social impacts or solution to social issues.

### **Fewer experts and resources available for assessing social impacts**

Logically, a result of seeing social impacts as a nuisance and underestimating their complexity is that fewer resources are available for adequately assessing them. Besides, a team often has fewer social experts than, for example, environmental experts. The frustration of ESIA practitioners about this is clearly illustrated by the following quote.

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*You have an ecologist, a specialist in marine ecology, another specialist... and then you have only one social specialist! Who, in many cases, is not even from a social background! Don't let me talk about it further! – ESIA practitioner*

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One interviewee described the feeling of always having to fight against a certain prejudice as a social scientist. Furthermore, there is a general view that leading and managing infrastructural projects is a technical task, while it became clear from the interviews that managing relations with the local community is a social task.

### **Displacement should be avoided**

After 50 years of SIA, there remain complex issues regarding land and resources in development projects that involve resettlement, place attachment, cultural heritage and similar issues (Vanclay, 2020). It is estimated that every year 15 million people are displaced by economic development (Smyth, Steyn, Esteves, Franks, & Vaz, 2015). Involuntary resettlement refers to both physical displacement (relocation) and economic displacement (loss of/loss of access to assets, leading to a loss of income) (IFC, 2012). Resettlement can be defined as:

*... the comprehensive process of planning for and implementing the relocation of people, households and communities from one place to another for some specific reason, together with all associated activities, including: (a) the provision of compensation for lost assets, resources and inconvenience; and (b) the provision of support for livelihood restoration and enhancement, re-establishment of social networks, and for restoring or improving the social functioning of the community, social activities and essential public services. (Vanclay, 2017: 6)*

### **Guidelines for involuntary resettlement**

Being resettled is a traumatic experience and has a significant social impact (Vanclay, 2017). Tripathi (2017) argues that the trauma of displaced people is beyond the adequacy of any sort of compensation. To best organise the resettlement and compensation process, international organisations have produced performance standards and guidelines. For example, according to

the International Finance Corporation's 'Performance Standard 5: Land Acquisition and Involuntary Resettlement', there should be community engagement in the resettlement process and grievance mechanisms should be made available to the community (IFC, 2012). However, there is limited experience in how to achieve successful resettlement. Furthermore, there are few examples of long-lasting successes and improved livelihoods of communities following resettlement (Smyth et al., 2015).

### **Resettlement is complex and underestimated**

To manage the resettlement process, a resettlement action plan (RAP) is made (Rowan, 2017). A RAP is a document in which the responsible actor specifies the procedures and actions that will be taken to mitigate adverse effects and provide compensation and benefits to the affected communities (IFC, 2002). However, RAPs are not always implemented properly (Smyth et al., 2015). According to Vanclay (2017), resettlement planning as part of a development project is a project in itself regarding the size, costs and severe social impact of the resettlement process. This was also stated by an interviewee working on infrastructural projects. However, it is still often underestimated.

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*What we often see in our work is that resettlement is underestimated. It is not regarded as a topic that needs specific expertise. – ESIA reviewer*

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This underestimation leads to poor resettlement processes. According to Van der Ploeg and Vanclay (2018), it is rare for companies to deliberately harm communities, but they often do as a result of neglect or a lack of proper consideration of social issues.

Resettlement processes are even more complex when people are resettled within another community. One interviewee said that in RAPs there is often more of a focus on the people who are to be resettled than on the community that is to receive them. The resettlement process also has a severe impact on the host community, as natural resources must be shared and the social dynamics undergo change (Vanclay, 2017). One interviewee described a case where the local authorities of the host community were not included in the resettlement process, while the process had an impact on the natural resources and the social services available for the host community.

### **Not enough is done to avoid displacement**

One important reason to avoid displacement and resettlement is that it can lead to the further impoverishment of communities (Smyth et al., 2015). When displacement is unavoidable, it can be difficult to find replacement land. Moreover, the compensation offered to displaced communities is often inadequate, which can lead to the further impoverishment of the displaced persons (Smyth et al., 2015; Vanclay, 2020). According to two interviewees, displacement is not avoided as often as it could be. One of them said that there are opportunities to mitigate negative social impacts in infrastructural projects, and that there would be even opportunities if displacement were avoided. She talked about 'wasted opportunities' to consider alternatives to resettlement.

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*Resettlement is not often avoided and this avoidance needs to be considered much earlier on, not by the time it gets to ESIA. – ESIA practitioner*

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One interviewee said that if the complexity of the resettlement process and the extent of time and resource allocation were really understood, this could lead to fewer displacements, as choosing another location might be less complicated than restoring livelihoods.

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*We should look at resettlement at an early stage. Looking at how extensive it will be. Who should be included? What kind of means are necessary to talk about compensation? If you were to do that earlier on in the project, I think we would more often choose to execute an alternative. – ESIA reviewer*

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### Importance of monitoring

While monitoring is expected to track implementation and identify gaps and new issues, it is sometimes the case that local-scale issues are ignored or obscured (Mottee, Arts, Vanclay, Miller, & Howitt, 2020). Multiple case studies have shown that especially at this stage of a project, improvements could be made to ensure the mitigation of negative social and environmental impacts (Khan et al., 2020; Momtaz, 2003; Toro, Requena, & Zamorano, 2010; Zeremariam & Quinn, 2007).

### **Not everything can be predicted**

The interviewees stressed the importance of adequate implementation of mitigation measures and monitoring. The monitoring of social issues was seen as especially important because one can never predict all impacts. People's needs change, the project plan changes, and several other changes may occur during the implementation process.

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

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It is therefore important that monitoring is an ongoing process and is taken seriously. One interviewee even said that when she reviews a monitoring plan, she does not focus on how well predicted the social issues are, as she knows that they will most likely be underestimated. Instead, she looks at how robust the monitoring plans can be and how in-depth they are.

### **Lack of resources and a social/local perspective in monitoring**

One of the major issues in monitoring is the overall lack of capacity. This especially applies to resettlement processes. There are only a few resettlement experts and there is a lack of capacity within companies and governments to manage and monitor resettlement procedures (Vanclay, 2017). One of the interviewees said that you can have a great project design, but if you do not have the resources to monitor it properly, you will still have a poor project. As described earlier, impact assessments are still seen as a mere engineering task and this view is also present in the monitoring of issues.

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*And yet it is actually standard in infrastructural projects... an environmental engineer, and not a social engineer, is asked to monitor the environmental and social aspects. – Employee of a financing agency*

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However, some interviewees said that monitoring is a social rather than an engineering task. To enhance monitoring, community participation can help identify potential impacts of the project and is needed to fully implement mitigation strategies (Momtaz & Zobaidul Kabir, 2013). Interviewees also stressed that community involvement in monitoring is important. Such involvement could help to improve the relationship between project proponents and the local community, as it can create more trust if the latter feels that its concerns and needs are taken seriously.

## 4. How to improve ESIA?

This explorative study started by investigating how well ESIA is working in the eyes of professionals. When talking about the gaps in ESIA, the conversation automatically moved on to how current practice can be improved. In the literature, much has been said about how ESIA could be improved and some authors even suggest that perhaps we should move away from ESIA towards another form of impact assessment (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2021; Morgan, 2012). During the interviews, the future of ESIA and impact assessment was an important topic. Some of the improvements proposed are applicable not only to the ESIA process, but also to the project cycle as a whole.

During the interviews, the participants were asked whether they thought that ESIA will still be important in the future. Almost all the participants answered this question in the affirmative, primarily because if we were to abolish ESIA we would be worse off. This effect of ESIA was also described as the 'prevention effect'.

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*At some point in Georgia, approximately 30% up to 40% of the projects that should have an environmental license, did not have one. But when EIA was taken seriously that percentage dropped. That is what we call the prevention effect. It prevents cowboy projects. – ESIA reviewer*

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Some interviewees said that because of the solid position of ESIA in environmental legislation, projects that are not likely to measure up to environmental and social standards can be filtered out. This is regarded as one of the important workings of ESIA, but its result is not always visible as in general there are no data available on which projects were not executed because they did not comply with ESIA standards. In contrast, some interviewees said that ESIA is not often the reason why projects are cancelled, which is echoed by Enríquez-de-Salamanca (2021). Still, ESIA is seen as an important instrument that will still be used in the future.

### Ways to improve ESIA's

The literature contains a considerable number of suggestions on how to improve ESIA's. Some of these were echoed during the interviews and supplemented by further suggestions. Three main categories of improvements were identified during the analysis: *changes to the ESIA process; fostering commitment; and including multiple perspectives.*

### Changes to the ESIA process

#### Timing

One of the issues that was raised many times is that ESIA is performed too late in the process. Therefore, a first step towards improving ESIA's would be to conduct them earlier in the project process, namely when critical decisions are being made (Morgan, 2012). It was also suggested that as part of the assessment process, a pre-feasibility study that includes social, environmental and economic impacts could be carried out before starting the formal process (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2021). The interviewees shared this view of looking at environmental and social aspects at an earlier stage.

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*When we do come in, it is a matter of trying to fix issues that have not been attended to, but it is very difficult to actually attend to social issues in retrospect. Particularly in terms of land acquisition and resettlement. – ESIA practitioner*

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Some of the interviewees also suggested overcoming this problem of timing by moving towards strategic environmental assessment (SEA), which is another form of impact assessment that is performed before projects are determined. SEA focuses on policies, plans and programmes that may result in projects at a later stage.

#### Integrated and ongoing process.

One of the most frequently mentioned improvements is that ESIA should take a more integrated approach instead of assessing technical, financial, social and environmental impacts separately, as they frequently influence each other and there is a connection between them. Several interviewees said that it is therefore important to bring together people from different backgrounds and create a more holistic approach to impact assessment, one where there is collaboration between multiple scientific fields.

In addition, ESIA should be seen as an ongoing process. Nowadays, it is regarded as an end point where you deliver an ESIA report and get your license. It is often seen as 'ticking the box'. However, not everything can be predicted and changes may occur during the project cycle.

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*You are not done with managing social and environmental aspects from the moment you take a decision; these will be going on. – ESIA reviewer*

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As some social impacts may only occur long after the implementation of a project, it is important to continue assessing possible new impacts. An issue frequently mentioned by the interviewees is that ESIA should be seen more as a process than a deliverable. For this, continuous strong monitoring is needed.

#### Independence and transparency

Another way to make assessments more effective is to create more independence among actors involved in the process and reduce political control (Enrriquez-de-Salamanca, 2021). This can help to obviate the need for assessment agencies to pronounce on projects that are promoted by the same department or ministry (Enrriquez-de-Salamanca, 2021). Although the independence of actors is important, actors are never neutral and have their own interests (Morgan, 2012). During the interviews it was suggested that a solution could be to discard the commercial model of drafting ESIA's and create more independent bodies to conduct and review ESIA's, as there is now too much dependence on the project proponent, who has an interest in moving the project forward and pays consultants to do ESIA's. However, alternative set-ups bring new challenges. In the end, the proponent is the owner of the project and has the intrinsic and legal responsibility to manage its environmental and social aspects.



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*Consultants are hired by a client to make a project feasible, to approve it ... to make your client smile, make client happy, to get paid. – ESIA practitioner*

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Consultants should be free to report on what is going on in the field, not just what authorities want to hear. This should be a transparent process as there will always be conflicting interests. It was suggested also in the literature to create more transparency by, for example, improving communication to the public about why certain decisions are made and on what grounds (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2021; Toro et al., 2010).

### **Fostering commitment**

#### **Commitment of key actors involved**

Kolhoff et al. (2016) argue that the substantive performance of EIA is predominantly dependent on the motivation and means of the primary actors, project proponent and EIA authority (Kolhoff et al., 2016). To foster the commitment of the primary actors, first their environmental awareness would need to be increased (Zeremariam & Quinn, 2007). This is in line with Arts et al. (2012), who argue that the effectiveness of EIA is based on, for example, whether the powerful decision-makers are open to environmental values and revising their plans. A commitment to involving the community in the process is also important.

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*Ultimately it comes down to the commitment of the proponents to monitor and have good quality relations with the community. – ESIA practitioner*

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However, it is difficult to enhance the motivation and means of a project proponent. A start could be to continue training local experts, consultants and officials in assessing EIA practices objectives (Zeremariam & Quinn, 2007). According to the interviewees, it is important to make project proponents realise that they can benefit from managing social issues well in the first place, as this can lead to greater social acceptance and help obviate situations where projects are blocked by civil society or NGOs. This in turn can lead to greater commitment and viewing ESIA as a useful tool instead of a compliance tool and just 'ticking the box'.

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*I think much more is achieved by increasing awareness in the proponent that having a social license is useful and that they should be managing their social issues anyway. And that managing the social issues is actually going to reduce their costs and improve their reputation and relation with the community. It is going to improve all sorts of things. So actually it a positive thing for them to do in terms of their own business. – Academic*

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#### **Commitment to strong monitoring and follow-up**

Based on an a case study in Australia, Mottee et al. (2020) argue that in project evaluations greater emphasis should be given to follow-up and monitoring. The social impact assessment guide produced by Vanclay et al. (2015) states that monitoring plans should be developed in a

participatory way and that this is vital for executing the monitoring plan successfully. Chadwick and Glasson (2018: 782) aver that the monitoring of social impacts is now limited and that to enhance such monitoring it is useful to ensure local participation in the monitoring system.

It is also important that ESIA practitioners ensure that they are adequately resourced to assess the issues before they agree to take on a project (Vanclay, 2020). They need to have the right capacities to effectively manage and monitor the resettlement process (Vanclay, 2017). A challenge for the future is to ensure that companies know their human rights responsibilities and have the grievance mechanisms in place, and to also ensure that their suppliers abide by human rights requirements (van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017). One interviewee said that to ensure strong monitoring and follow-up, it is important that sufficient budget is allocated to this phase of the project. For this to happen, project proponents must be more strongly committed, as described above.

### Shift commitment from 'do no harm' to 'do good'

Vanclay (2017) maintains that resettlement can become an opportunity for development when there is an effective process of resettlement and benefit-sharing mechanisms are implemented. This will need the perspective of proponents and lenders to change from 'do no harm' to 'do good'. One interviewee suggested that a project should look at what problems are at play at the local level and what is needed to tackle them – and for which groups (e.g. women, youth, elderly) these are problems and how the project can help build solutions to these problems. For this interviewee, ESIA should be more about what opportunities and possible benefits there are, than about mitigating negative impacts.

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*I think more and more you see a shift to look at benefits. Not only 'do no harm' but 'do good', and that shift is also something that I think should be more in the impact assessment process in the future – ESIA practitioner*

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Additionally, when you commit to 'doing good' instead of 'doing no harm', this can help to build trust between project proponent and the local community and have a positive influence on how the latter views the project. This, the interviewee suggested, will lead to better projects. On the other hand, the interviewee pointed out that sometimes you have to move on with your project and you have to do some harm to ultimately do good. This is an interesting view that requires debate on the question who decides how much harm is tolerable and who is harmed, and the unpacking of possible power relations in such decisions.

### Include multiple perspectives

#### Local perspective

It is important to involve the local perspective in the ESIA process as it is most likely that the local community will experience at least some impact from an infrastructural project. In the literature it is argued that international social impact assessment guidelines are based on experiences in Western societies and prioritise Western, individualistic, rational ways of thinking (Vanclay, 2020). ESIA guidelines do not always reflect the local culture and context (Momtaz, 2003). Hence, it is important for impact assessment staff to be open to other ontologies and epistemologies (Vanclay, 2020).

Public participation issues should be addressed to ensure that an EIA contributes to decision-making and that public participation during the EIA is not reduced to 'ticking the box' (Omeng, 2017).

Obwoyere, Eshiamwata, Makindi, & Nathwani, 2020). However, public participation is still often seen as a nuisance that delays projects. Sometimes 'community participation' is then reduced to the project proponent simply providing information to the community.

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*We need to move to a situation where during ESIA's all parties involved are taken seriously and included in the process. – ESIA reviewer*

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When it comes to resettlement, it is essential that local communities can participate throughout the process (Vanclay, 2017). There is evidence that when people are involved in discussing when, where and how they will be resettled, they are more likely to adapt to the new situation (Reddy, Smyth, & Steyn, 2017). It is argued that resettlement should be approached as a negotiation process in which the people to be resettled are treated as an equal partner (Reddy, Smyth, & Steyn, 2017). This is an ambitious aim that might be difficult to achieve because of power imbalances and the political situation.

How far community participation should go is a moot point. While some interviewees said that communities should be included in every step of the process and should decide on the purpose of the project, others said that at some point the project has to take decisions and move forward. Often, not all views can be incorporated, and the risk of consultation fatigue needs to be considered.

### Social perspective

Likewise, it is argued that to overcome the technocratic mentality in projects, which causes the undervaluing of social issues, we need to increase technical staff's awareness of the significance of social issues (Vanclay, 2020). This can be done by including more social scientists in projects, something that was echoed during the interviews in reaction to the statement that social issues should be taken more seriously within the ESIA process.

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*Especially with engineering agencies, more attention is paid to the environment, because they have engineers for that. The social engineers, actually they are not there. – Employee of a financing agency*

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The interviewees said that there are not enough social experts involved in the ESIA process and that this should change in the future. One added that the people responsible for the social issues often do not have the knowledge or expertise to deal with them.

### Moving beyond ESIA?

In the literature, some authors hint at moving away from ESIA towards another form of assessing environmental and social impacts. Instead of improving the existing ESIA system it might be necessary to create a new integrated and holistic approach. The concept of an integrated assessment approach has gained ground within the impact assessment spheres, in order to evaluate biophysical and social impacts in a balanced and equal manner (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). According to Enríquez-de-Salamanca (2021), we need to address how projects can be justified even before they are subjected to EIA, and by implication ESIA. Projects whose economic, social and environmental justification is highly questionable can still obtain a favourable EIA; projects are

rarely rejected. EIA should be able to ask whether a project is actually required (Enrriquez-de-Salamanca, 2021).

One measure could be to conduct pre-feasibility studies that include social, environmental and economic impacts before subjecting projects to EIA (Enrriquez-de-Salamanca, 2021), a point equally relevant to ESIA. This suggests that environmental and social impacts should be incorporated earlier on in project development. This aligns with the argument of Morgan (2012) that EIA thinking should shift away from the licensing stage and closer to the stage where critical decisions are made. He argues that EIA should be integrated in the design process of projects and not just be a final legal step. This is in line with Vanclay et al. (2015), who argue that assessing social impacts is relevant in every phase of a project.

During the interviews this wish to move away from ESIA was less clear and ESIA was still seen as an important instrument, partly because for most of the interviewees ESIAs are part of their profession and they showed great commitment to the instrument. A few interviewees suggested that perhaps we need an approach other than ESIA, for example, strategic and environmental impact assessment, which is performed at an earlier stage.

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*We see that more and more attention is being paid to SEA. It is a participation tool, principally to come together with as many parties as possible. – Employee of a financing agency*

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One interviewee said that because SEA is conducted earlier on in the planning phase, it could help planners to identify and consider alternatives. Another interviewee said that incorporating SEA in the planning of development cannot replace ESIA, as SEA is about plans and programmes that will turn into several projects at a later stage and an ESIA should be conducted for each of these projects. Adopting SEA might help planners to identify alternatives earlier on, but it will not be an instrument that replaces today's ESIA system.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

The experts interviewed regard ESIA as an important instrument that has a solid position in worldwide environmental law and they do not expect it to be replaced or discarded in the near future. However, there are improvements to be made to reach the goal of informing decision-making and thereby mitigating possible negative social and environmental impacts and thus contributing to sustainable development.

This explorative study identified several concerns and points of dissatisfaction in regard to how the ESIA process functions. One frequently mentioned point of dissatisfaction is that ESIA is conducted too late in the process to influence decision-making and that it is often considered a compliance tool at the cost of achieving the goal of contributing to sustainable development. Furthermore, there is a feeling among the social scientists that their perspective is still regarded as less important, and this results in less social expertise, fewer resources and less time to investigate the possible social impacts of infrastructural developments. This lack of resources and capacities also plays a role in the monitoring of social issues, which many interviewees regard as inadequate. Although monitoring should be an ongoing process, as new impacts will arise and not all can be predicted, it is often an overlooked or neglected part of the project cycle.

To realise the potential of ESIA, it should be moved to earlier in the decision-making process and be an integrated and ongoing process. Furthermore, it is important to strengthen the commitment of primary actors to the ESIA objectives. To make the ESIA process more transparent and independent, one option is to move away from the commercial model of drafting ESIA's and establish nonpartisan bodies to conduct and review ESIA's. In addition, ESIA should become a more inclusive process that incorporates local perspectives and focusses on what the community needs. Therefore, a stronger social perspective is needed in the ESIA process. To achieve this, it is important to have enough resources available to research both the social impacts and the commitment of the project proponent to take social issues seriously, as this will ultimately benefit the project as a whole. Lastly, more attention should be paid to monitoring and evaluation and to creating inclusive mechanisms for follow-up to ensure that mitigation measures for social impacts are fully implemented.

When zooming out and reflecting on the overall goal of ESIA – namely to create environmentally and socially sustainable and beneficial projects – one of the most important outcomes is that ESIA should be an integrated approach that is applied earlier on in the process, not only to identify alternatives but also to question whether and, if so, why a certain infrastructural project is necessary, who will benefit from it and how it will contribute to the lives of the people on the ground. Furthermore, it is interesting that many of the suggestions on how to improve ESIA concerned changes to how an ESIA is conducted. Although adequate procedures and processes can help in reaching desirable outcomes, we must be careful not to limit ourselves to procedural aspects at the expense of substantive issues. Ultimately, the goal of the ESIA is to create better projects that contribute to sustainable development and serve to society and the environment as a whole. To establish this, a more inclusive approach to community participation is needed whereby the needs of and challenges for local communities are at centre stage.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

There were some limitations to this explorative study, which lead to recommendations for future research. First, the literature study focussed only on scholarly and grey literature on the effectiveness of EIA and ESIA's. Due to time limits and the chosen focus, the evaluation reports on infrastructural projects by, for example, the World Bank were not analysed. For further research

it would be interesting to analyse these evaluation reports and see what outcomes of ESIA's proved to be successful.

For the interviews with ESIA experts, mostly the LANDac network was used to find interview participants. This could have led to biased information, as these are all professionals who already had an interest in equitable land governance. Nevertheless, the aim was to include the multiple perspectives of academics, consultants and NGOs. However, the perspectives of, for instance, project proponents, lenders, technical staff, local consultants and communities were omitted, because it was not possible to include them all in the short time period that was available for this research. The perspectives of local consultants and local communities could be incorporated if the applied research project were to study several cases on the ground.

During a seminar discussion in the light of this research project, it was highlighted, especially by people who have evaluated infrastructural developments in the global South, that more community involvement should be the starting point for improving ESIA's. First, their perspectives and needs should be included; they should be involved in decision-making instead of being informed about decisions that have already been made. There was a call to start developing projects from their point of view and based on their needs. Further research could focus on cases where community involvement was incorporated from the beginning in order to look at how these projects turned out in comparison to projects where the community was hardly involved. Successful projects can then be used to strengthen the plea for community participation in infrastructural projects.

For the continuation of this applied research project, one recommendation is to explore the experiences of project proponents and engineers who take part in the project design, and what they perceive as barriers to inclusive and effective ESIA processes. It is also recommended to include more local perspectives by interviewing local consultants, local authorities and affected local communities. We can work towards creating more inclusive and effective ESIA processes only if it is clear to us what their needs and challenges are in the ESIA process.



## Epilogue

We end this paper with a brief personal reflection on the origins of the study, what it uncovered and what comes next. The study was a rich encounter of different perspectives and the dialogue it sparked is ongoing. We are grateful to all who took part in it and to LANDac for making it possible.

This study was inspired by the discussions Margriet and I had, in the framework of the LANDac network, around the practice of impact assessment and how it relates to people's lived realities. I came at this topic from a different angle than Margriet and most of the people interviewed for this study. Being a development sociologist with an interest in competing claims to natural resources, my starting point was the many sad stories of people all across the globe whose lives are turned upside down by megaprojects, "crushed" – as WUR students Evita Ouwerkerk and Ezra Litjens put it, quoting Ugandans reflecting on the impacts of the Bujagali dam – by the "bulldozer" that "development" turned out to be.<sup>1</sup> As far as I could see, governments and developers could do as they pleased: no-one would get in their way. If impact assessments were done at all, they were not serious obstacles. And then I met Margriet and realised: there is a whole world out there of professionals who are committed to making ESIA work for better outcomes. This started our conversation about *if* impact assessment is taken seriously, does it make a difference to people's lives? Can it prevent the multiple losses that people suffer? And can we actually expect any impact assessment to adequately factor in the many and complex ways in which people's lives are affected? The idea for what we came to call the 'Ten years after' project was born. It was inspired by the research that Evita Ouwerkerk, Ezra Litjens and Annemarie van der Meer (all students at Wageningen University) did around the Bujagali dam in Uganda. What struck me in the stories they shared was how strongly and deeply the effects of the dam construction were still felt more than a decade after the fact, and how it was only in hindsight that people realised the true extent of these effects, which were not limited to the loss of fishing grounds and farmland, but also extended to eroded family relations and a sense of disorientation.

This study leaves me with mixed feelings. Although it was encouraging to find so many committed professionals and such a high degree of critical reflection and debate, it was disconcerting to learn what a struggle it is to get adverse social and economic impacts duly recognised.

**Dr. Ir. Gemma van der Haar**

**Assistant Professor, Disaster, conflict and society, Wageningen University**

I entered the LANDac community some four years ago to learn more about the latest approaches to sharing limited resources among different groups in society in the name of 'development'. I wanted to see the different perspectives when addressing this imbalance in 'development'. Being a consultant my whole working life, I wanted to have time to reflect on the actual impact of the impact assessments I do for various infrastructure projects. In our work there is often little time to reflect – and that is what I found in LANDac. We, as consultants, are often involved in infrastructure projects for a short time, often in the preparation phase (also with the ESIA), and we rarely see or learn from the actual physical and social outcomes of these projects, let alone what impacts they have on people's lives in the long term (the 'Ten years after'). My goal is to enhance the effectiveness of our ESIA's by learning from the actual long-term impacts on the ground of the

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<sup>1</sup> Please find the links to their thesis work here.

Evita Ouwerkerk: <https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/theses/2307069>;

Ezra Litjens: <https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/theses/2293973>



construction and operation of infrastructure, so we can better anticipate them in the preparation stage.

Talking with Gemma and learning about Charlotte's research provided a reflection from different sectors on the effectiveness of ESIA's. Gemma and Charlotte challenged me to look at the purpose and impacts of ESIA's from outside the world of ESIA professionals. That was refreshing and we had some fruitful discussions.

**Margriet Hartman, MSc. PG Cert**

**Team Leader and Environmental and Social Expert, Royal HaskoningDHV**

### Ways forward

Our initial ideas for the field research component of this project were put on hold by the pandemic. We are now relaunching the project in a more corona-proof fashion. LANDac will be financing a series of case studies on – in line with the original intent – the gap between the real and the projected impacts of infrastructure projects involving displacement and resettlement. We hope, in due time, to be able to share lessons with you concerning what went wrong and what went right with the projection of impacts, and what can and cannot be expected of impact assessments. For more information, please see the LANDac website: <https://www.landgovernance.org/>

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## Appendix 1: Topic list

- **Relation to ESIA**
  - What is your relation to ESIA as an instrument?
  - What experiences do you have with ESIA?
    - How are those experiences different from each other, and why?
- **Goal of ESIA**
  - What, in your opinion, is the goal of ESIA?
    - What should ESIA do?
    - Does this work?
  - In which respects does / does not ESIA achieve its goal?
- **Social impact in ESIA**
  - How much attention is paid to social impact within ESIA?
    - Is this enough? If not, why not? What are we missing?
    - How can more attention be paid to social impact?
  - How do you translate in a technical way what the impact is on people's lives?
    - How can you foresee the consequences of developments on people's lives?
- **Results and implementation of ESIA**
  - What happens to the outcome of an ESIA?
    - What should be done with this?
    - How should this be monitored?
    - How can we learn from ESIA for new projects?
  - To what extent is ESIA advice enforceable in practice?
  - Does the predicted impact as described in an ESIA reflect the actual impact?
  - Are the measures that are advised in the ESIA report also effective in practice?
- **Improve ESIA**
  - What challenges do you face during the ESIA process?
  - What should change to make ESIA more effective, especially for mitigating negative social impacts?
  - What role is there for ESIA experts in improving ESIA?
    - To what extent are ESIA experts responsible for this?
- **Future of ESIA**
  - What can we expect from ESIA in the future?
    - What can we not expect?
  - Are ESIA still important?
  - How would you like to see the ESIA system develop?
  - How can we ensure that both environmental and social aspects are fully incorporated in the development of projects?

### Topics that are expected to be put forward (if not: ask about them)

- Local participation
- ESIA and displacement / resettlement
- Politics / interests of actors involved in ESIA