EIA content should enable all interested and affected parties to judge its adequacy.

# What should an EIA contain?

**Background.** Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), also known as Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), refers to a formal and systematic process that includes *identifying, predicting, evaluating, and mitigating the biophysical, social, and other relevant effects of development proposals prior to major decisions being taken and commitments made* (IAIA, Principles of Environmental Impact Assessment, 1999). This globally-recognized process is meant to ensure that proposed projects minimize and remedy harm, deliver benefits, and promote sustainable development. The term "EIA" is used here in lieu of other similar terms, which vary by institution and in languages other than English.

**FasTips purpose.** The intent of this FasTips is to offer plain-language guidance to external stakeholders (community groups, journalists, non-governmental organizations, community service organizations, and affected persons) who are not impact assessment professionals. The purpose is to help them judge whether the EIA process and report follows good practice. A related aim is to help stakeholders frame questions for consultations and write comments on a draft EIA when it is publicly disclosed. The purpose is to inform decisions and improve a project, rather than stop one, although a decision may be a refusal.

## A good EIA process

- EIAs analyze project proposals. They should be informed by relevant laws and policies, as well as Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs), which consider broader sectoral, regional, or spatial opportunities and risks within policies, plans, or programs, as conditions for project development.
- The process should engage interested and affected parties in the earliest stage of the project, to enable concerns to influence design, consideration of project alternatives, and inform the scope of the EIA. Scoping is a formal step to ensure stakeholders are involved and the EIA focuses on key issues.
- Relationships among biophysical impacts (water, biodiversity, air, soils) and impacts on people (social, cultural heritage[1], economic, livelihoods, health, safety, human rights, and gender) must be identified and evaluated, and must also recognize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specialist assessments must identify and evaluate all potentially significant impacts and ensure that the links between biophysical impacts and people through ecosystem services—nature's contribution to people—are made clear.
- The project and the acceptability of impacts must be assessed in the light of predicted climate change.
- EIAs should address the chain of direct, indirect, and induced effects, as well as cumulative effects (additive and synergistic effects of multiple projects on the same environmental resources and people).
- The EIA must describe measures to prevent, minimize, and/or remedy harm or enhance project benefits, and explain any tradeoffs (i.e., losses in some areas, gains in others). It should analyze the distribution of negative and positive impacts—who benefits, who loses or suffers, and whether it is fair.

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[1] Including sites and structures with historic, archaeological, paleontological, religious or other significance and intangible heritage, such as skills, artifacts, and objects.

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# FASTIPS

## A good EIA report

■ The report should reflect the size/scale and location of the project. It must be objective and give a non-technical summary of the findings. It should state if the specialist studies have been peer reviewed. Baseline studies and methods of assessing impacts should be clearly explained.

■ Impact predictions must make sense and be supported by data. For biophysical, climate change, and health impacts, there are models and proven scientific relationships between cause and effect. Context, history, trends, and location will affect the interpretation of social, cultural, and economic impacts, especially impacts on indigenous peoples, the disabled, men, women, or vulnerable groups. In every situation, the EIA must base the certainty and predictability of impacts on thorough and accurate baseline information and probable future scenarios.

■ The approach to evaluating impact significance (based both on science and human values) should be set out. Relevant international agreements (e.g., Convention on Biological Diversity), SDGs, national laws, customary laws, and national or local standards should be cited. Because acceptability of impacts to affected parties is important, stakeholder engagement is crucial. Impacts that cause loss of resources that are unique, scarce, under threat or irreplaceable, are irreversible or are unacceptable to affected parties, would all be considered significant.

### FURTHER READING

Assessing Environmental Impacts - A Global Review of Legislation. UNEP 2018.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. FasTips (all available from https://www.iaia.org/fasttips.php). See: No. 1: Impact Assessment (April 2012), No 3: Climate-smart Decisions (February 2013, No. 5: Biodiversity Assessment (June 2013), No 9: Non-Technical Summary (March 2015), No. 11: Alternatives in Project EIA (November 2015),No. 14: Assessing Significance in Impact Assessment of Projects (November 2016), No. 16: Cumulative Effects Assessment (November 2017); No. 17: Induced impacts (October 2018), and No. 18: Scoping (November 2018).

Want to know more?
www.iaia.org > Resources > Publications > FasTips

Do you have a suggestion or a request for a FasTip on a different topic?
Contact Maria Partidário (mpartidario@gmail.com), FasTips Series Editor.

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## FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. The EIA must describe and evaluate all project phases and components, and the associated infrastructure or activities on which the project relies, e.g., access roads, quarries, construction camps, powerlines or water sources.

2. The EIA must reference and address the potential impacts identified through early scoping.

3. The EIA must consider all relevant valued environmental resources (threatened or rare biodiversity, water, ecosystem services), tangible and intangible cultural heritage, health and safety, displacement of population and effects on livelihoods, as well as climate change effects.

4. The EIA must consider feasible alternatives that have fewer adverse impacts and more benefit.

5. The EIA must provide a realistic plan to mitigate (avoid or prevent, minimize, restore or rehabilitate, offset or compensate) adverse impacts and enhance positive impacts of the best alternative, as well as monitor and adapt management of the project to achieve desired results.

## FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Check that the EIA documentation is online or at a public place (e.g., library). If not, request this to occur. Find out about public hearings, consultations, or information sessions and attend them. Circulate this information to other stakeholders you know.

2. Familiarize yourself with applicable EIA regulations and policies and plans relevant to the project.

3. Make sure that the EIA lists the preparers (persons, firms, or both) with their credentials, and reassure yourself that they are credible and preferably professionally registered.

4. Check that the EIA uses up-to-date and reliable information, recognizes all stakeholders, addresses all concerns raised during scoping, and is not biased or prejudiced in its findings.

5. Prepare questions and comments when the governmental or international agency or a private entity discloses the document publicly for comment. Ask questions and insist on responses, preferably in writing. Be prepared to call for independent review or approach the decision-making authorities if you are not satisfied that the EIA process and report are sufficient.

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