

# PUBLIC PARTICIPATION International Best Practice Principles

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MAY BE DEFINED AS THE INVOLVEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS THAT ARE POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY, OR THAT ARE INTERESTED IN, A PROPOSED PROJECT, PROGRAM, PLAN OR POLICY THAT IS SUBJECT TO A DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.

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*Including comments from the IAIA Publications Committee*

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### Introduction

This IAIA *Public Participation Best Practice Principles* document aims to promote a meaningful practice of public participation (PP) amongst impact assessment (IA) practitioners.<sup>1</sup> It:

- Defines the prerequisites for an effective and appropriate public involvement in IA.
- Identifies the conditions required to make the participation process credible and to maximize interest and commitment from the stakeholders.

This document collates the principles for a state-of-the-art public participation practice. It is primarily designed for reference and use by those involved in public participation in IA. It is built on the experience in PP of many IAIA members, and has been written for IAIA members from different backgrounds and IA domains to improve ethics and quality in their practice. Accordingly, the principles presented here are broad, generic, and non-prescriptive. They emphasize PP as a pillar of IA, and are intended to be applicable at all levels and types of planned interventions (including at the strategic level), and with respect to the constraints of time, information and resources.

Public participation, as well as IA generally, is expanding in use all around the world. This evolving context enables more and more IA practitioners from the humanities, medicine and social sciences, and applied and natural sciences to get involved or even to coordinate public participation. IAIA hopes that these principles will be used for improving the practice of PP in IA, as well as to stimulate discussion between stakeholders that will result in better projects, better development, collaborative governance and ultimately a more sustainable world.

This document comprises three main sections which:

- Define the concept of public participation.
- Emphasize PP objectives in IA.
- Provide principles of PP best practice.

### What is Public Participation?

Public participation may be defined as the involvement of individuals and groups that are positively or negatively affected by a proposed intervention (e.g., a project, a program, a plan, a policy) subject to a decision-making process or are interested in it. Levels of participation in IA vary, from passive participation or information reception (a unidirectional form of participation), to participation through consultation (such as public hearings and open-houses), to interactive participation (such as workshops, negotiation, mediation and even co-management).<sup>2</sup> Different levels of PP may be relevant to the different phases of an IA process, from initial community analysis and notice of the proposed intervention, to approval decision making, to monitoring and follow-up.<sup>3</sup>

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## Objectives of Public Participation

Public participation is essential for good governance and may empower local communities. IA is *multi-purposive*, aiming specifically to:

- Invite the affected and interested public into the decision-making process to foster justice, equity and collaboration.
- Inform and educate the stakeholders, (which includes the proponent, public, decision-maker(s) and the regulator) on the planned intervention and its consequences.
- Gather data and information from the public about their human (including cultural, social, economic and political dimensions) and biophysical environment, as well as about the relations (including those related to traditional and local knowledge) they have with their environment.
- Seek input from the public on the planned intervention, including its scale, timing and ways to reduce its negative impacts, to increase its positive outcomes or to compensate impacts which may not be mitigated.
- Contribute to better analysis of proposals leading to more creative development, more sustainable interventions and consequently greater public acceptance and support than would otherwise be the case.
- Contribute to the mutual learning of stakeholders and to improvement of the PP and IA practice for a proposal.

## Principles of Best Practice

Three tiers of PP Principles are included in this document: *Basic Principles*, *Operating Principles* and *Developing Guidelines*.

*Basic Principles* apply to all stages of PP in IA processes from strategic to operational levels. It is important to recognize that these levels are interdependent and, in some cases, may conflict. A balanced approach is critical when applying the PP Principles to ensure that IA fulfills its purpose and is carried out in what would constitute best practice.

*Operating Principles* describe how the Basic Principles should be applied to the main steps and activities of the IA processes.

*Developing guidelines* identify key directions for the improvement of public participation in IA. It is envisaged that subsequent tiers of Principles could evolve, e.g., “activity-specific,” “state-of-the-art” or “next generation” PP principles. However, their development would constitute a separate effort, building on and extending the Basic and Operating Principles presented here.

## Basic Principles

Contemporary public participation practice in IA should be:

- **Adapted to the context** – Understanding and appreciating the social institutions, values, and culture of the communities in the project area; and respecting the historical, cultural, environmental, political and social backgrounds of the communities which are affected by a proposal.
- **Informative and proactive** – Recognizing that the public has a right to be informed early and in a meaningful way in proposals which may affect their lives or livelihoods. Increased interest

and motivation to participate occur by diffusing simple and understandable information to the affected and interested public.

- **Adaptive and communicative** – Recognizing that the public is heterogeneous according to their demographics, knowledge, power, values and interests. The rules of effective communication<sup>4</sup> among people, in the respect of all individuals and parties, should be followed.
- **Inclusive and equitable** – Ensuring that all interests, including those non-represented or underrepresented are respected regarding the distribution of impacts, compensation and benefits. The participation or defence of the interests of less represented groups including indigenous peoples, women, children, elderly and poor people should be encouraged. Equity between present and future generations in a perspective of sustainability should be promoted.
- **Educative** – Contributing to a mutual respect and understanding of all IA stakeholders with respect to their values, interests, rights and obligations.
- **Cooperative** – Promoting cooperation, convergence and consensus-building rather than confrontation. Engaging conflicting perspectives and values as well as trying to reach a general acceptance of the proposal toward a decision that promotes and supports sustainable development should be pursued.
- **Imputable** – Improving the proposal under study, taking into account the results of the PP process; including reporting and feedback to stakeholders about the results of the PP process, especially how their inputs have contributed to decision-making.

## Operating Principles

With respect to the Basic Principles previously identified, public participation should be:

- **Initiated early and sustained** – The public should be involved early (before major decisions are made) and regularly in the IA process. This builds trust among participants, gives more time for PP, improves community analysis, improves screening and scoping of the IA, increases opportunities to modify the proposal in regards to the comments and opinions gathered during the PP process, reduces the risk of rumors, and improves the public image of the proponent. It can also give the regulator more confidence in the approval decision they must make.
- **Well planned and focused on negotiable issues** – All IA stakeholders should know the aims, rules, organization, procedure and expected outcomes of the PP process undertaken. This will improve the credibility of the process for all involved. Because consensus is not always feasible, PP should emphasise understanding and respect for the values and interests of participants, and focus on negotiable issues relevant to decision-making.
- **Supportive to participants** – The public should be supported in their will to participate through an adequate diffusion of information on the proposal and on the PP process, and a just and equitable access to funding or financial assistance. Capacity-building, facilitation and assistance should also be provided particularly for groups who don't have the capacity to partici-

pate, and in regions where there is no culture of PP, or where local culture may inhibit PP.

- **Tiered and optimized** – A PP program should occur at the most appropriate level of decision-making (e.g., at the policy, plan, program or project level) for a proposal. The public should be invited to participate regularly, with emphasis on appropriate time for involvement. Because PP is resource consuming (human, financial, time) for all the IA stakeholders, PP optimization in time and space will ensure more willing participation.
- **Open and transparent** – People who are affected by a proposal and are interested in participating, whatever their ethnic origin, gender and income, should have access to all relevant information. This information should be accessible to laypersons required for the evaluation of a proposal (e.g., terms of reference, report and summary). Laypersons should be able to participate in relevant workshops, meetings and hearings related to the IA process. Information and facilitation for such participation should be provided.
- **Context-oriented** – Because many communities have their own formal and informal rules for public access to resources, conflict resolution and governance, PP should be adapted to the social organization of the impacted communities, including the cultural, social, economic and political dimensions. This shows respect for the affected community and may improve public confidence of the process and its outcomes.
- **Credible and rigorous** – PP should adhere to established ethics, professional behavior and moral obligations. Facilitation of PP by a neutral facilitator in its formal or traditional sense improves impartiality of the process as well as justice and equity in the right to information. It also increases the confidence of the public to express their opinions and also to reduce tensions, the risk of conflicts among participants, and opportunities for corruption. In a formal context, the adoption of a code of ethics is encouraged.

## Developing Guidelines

For improving the outcomes of public participation, all actors should actively promote:

- Access to useful and relevant information for the public. Even if information is actually generally available, it might need some improvement to be useful to laypersons, or more focused and relevant to the decision-making process.
- High-level involvement and participation in decision making;
- creative ways to involve people.
- Access to justice and equity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Since 1999, IAIA, as the premiere organization in the field of impact assessment, has prepared a collection of documents of best practices in different domains of IA (e.g., Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Impact Assessment and Social Impact Assessment). These documents are intended to provide widely-agreed guidance to IAIA members and others involved in the practice of IA.

<sup>2</sup> “Arnstein (1969, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35: 216-224) was the first to identify the ‘ladder of citizen participation,’ which ranged from persuasion at the one end of the spectrum to self-determination at the other end. This is the strongest form of public participation where the process is directly undertaken by the public with the proponent accepting the outcome.” (Roberts, 2003, *Involving the public*, in H. Becker and F. Vanclay (eds) *International Handbook of Social Impact Assessment*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar: pp. 259-260).

<sup>3</sup> PP does not include the manipulation of public opinion by public relations techniques or by limiting the freedom to participate.

<sup>4</sup> To be effective, communication between IA actors (e.g., public, proponent, decision maker, regulator) should give attention to active listening and to the different actors’ frame of reference and connotation of terms, their attitudes towards others, their roles and relationships between roles, and the general situation in which the communication takes place and its goal, as well as their state of preparation. Effective two-way communication needs the respect of others, and of their culture, tradition and personalities.

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The IAIA *PP Best Practice Principles* project started at the IAIA’03 meeting in Marrakech (Morocco) during the Public Participation Section meeting. On this occasion, the participants recommended to the meeting co-chairs (P. André and B. Enserink) and to IAIA to develop principles for PP best practice, in collaboration with interested IAIA members. Pierre André (Université de Montréal, Canada), Bert Enserink (TuDelft, The Netherlands), Des Connor (IAIA’s former PP section chair, Connor Development Services, Canada), and Peter Croal (Canadian International Development Agency, Canada, and previously Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment, Namibia) jointly accepted to coordinate this exercise. Many other members have been involved in the process by reacting to successive drafts. The 2nd draft document was discussed during PP workshops and PP section meetings at the IAIA’04 Annual Meeting held in Vancouver (Canada) and at the IAIA’05 Annual Meeting held in Boston (USA). Many comments and suggestions were proposed during these discussions, and have been integrated within this version.

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