



Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

Good Practice Statements

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) is a tool to inform decision making in development proposals, and can be defined as:

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. (IAIA 1999)

To be of maximum benefit to all stakeholders, ESIA needs to be conducted well. The following statements set out the characteristics of good practice ESIA.

To achieve its purpose, good practice ESIA:

1. Is based on a thorough understanding of the environmental and social values and resources in the receiving environment. Baseline studies are of sufficient geographic and temporal coverage to provide for an understanding of seasonal and regional variations in environmental values. Description of the existing environment includes documentation of the interrelationships between different elements of the physical, biological and social environment.
2. Produces succinct and well-structured documentation that provides the information required for stakeholders to understand the environmental outcomes of the action, and for regulators and decision makers to make informed decisions regarding the action.
3. Clearly states data and information sources, methodologies, assumptions, uncertainties and judgements used in identifying baseline environmental and social values and in predicting environmental outcomes.
4. Includes mechanisms for incorporating new or unforeseen issues that may arise during the course of the investigations.
5. Is undertaken in a framework of sustainability, considering effects of the action on the ability of the physical, biological and social environment to support human life both now and in the future.
6. Is integrated into project development and delivery such that the outcomes of studies undertaken for the ESIA can influence design and maximise opportunities to avoid and minimise impacts and enhance positive outcomes. This includes assessment of alternatives such that the action is optimised from an environmental, social, technological and financial point of view.

To assist with orderly development, good practice ESIA:

7. Occurs in the context of a broader strategic planning and policy framework that, among other things, provides guidance in relation to orderly planning and development, thresholds for project level and cumulative impacts and core values and resources that are to be protected.
8. Clearly states the extent to which an action and the associated environmental outcomes are consistent with legislation, policies, guidelines and plans and provides justification where the action is inconsistent or non-compliant with legislation, policies, guidelines and plans.

To rigorously evaluate impacts, good practice ESIA:

9. Focuses effort on the potentially significant impacts of an action with the depth and scope of the assessment proportionate to the values that are potentially impacted and the scale and significance of potential impacts.
10. Presents impacts and overall environmental outcomes in a logical and objective manner, with quantification of impacts wherever possible and, where impacts are presented qualitatively, sufficient context to support evaluation of the significance of impacts.
11. Distinguishes between impacts, which are the planned and foreseeable outcomes of an action, and hazards, which are the unplanned or unforeseeable outcomes of an action.
12. Analyses the significance of each impact using a robust, rigorous and replicable methodology that reflects the magnitude and consequence of the impact and the importance and resilience of the affected value or resource.
13. Clearly sets out cause and effect relationships and explores the indirect and flow on impacts that may occur, highlighting impact pathways that exist due to the interconnectedness that exists in physical, ecological and social systems.
14. Explicitly states the extent to which the action contributes to cumulative impacts and proposes mitigation measures that the proponent will implement in response to cumulative impacts. Proponent's mitigation measures are commensurate with the scale of contribution to cumulative impacts.
15. Explicitly states the overall environmental outcomes that are predicted to occur, taking into account the likely effectiveness of mitigation measures. Predicted environmental outcomes are compared to legislation, policy, guidelines and standards.
16. Explores both the likely and worst case environmental outcomes and explains levels of uncertainty in relation to predicted outcomes.

To gain acceptance, good practice ESIA:

17. Facilitates public involvement and provides for response to issues and concerns raised by stakeholders. In this regard the “consult” or “involve” levels of engagement described in the IAP2 spectrum of public participation (<http://www.iap2.org.au/resources/iap2s-public-participation-spectrum>) are considered appropriate for most ESIA processes. Engagement approaches and effort is proportional to potential impacts on stakeholder groups, however, all interested parties are provided with opportunity for full participation, even if not directly affected.
18. Supports transparency in decision making by clearly setting out the positive and negative outcomes that can be expected if an action proceeds.

To achieve desired performance outcomes, good practice ESIA:

19. Leads first to development of measures to avoid or minimise adverse impacts and maximise positive impacts and then, where impacts cannot be avoided or minimised, proposes measures to manage, repair, compensate for or offset impacts.
20. Leads to development of effective mitigation measures specific to the action, location and identified impacts and does not defer to future studies or management plans to be developed in the future.
21. Proposes performance standards in relation to environmental outcomes that are consistent with legislative and policy requirements and stakeholder expectations and protect important environmental values and resources. These performance standards will provide the basis for monitoring actual outcomes and effectiveness of proposed mitigation measures, and as a benchmark in the event that there are later changes in the action.
22. Proposes contingency measures in the event that monitoring indicates that actual outcomes are more significant than predicted outcomes or that proposed mitigation measures are not effective in controlling impacts and achieving performance standards.
23. Leads to a monitoring program that will allow validation of the accuracy of predicted outcomes and the effectiveness of mitigation measures and will check for unforeseen impacts.
24. Includes clear, quantitative and accountable commitments from proponents that are appropriate to the significance of impacts.
25. Provides a basis for concise performance-based conditions to be imposed by decision makers. This in turn provides a basis for future compliance.

These statements were developed by:

Claire Gronow, Jon Womersley, Peter Jones, Jayne Rutter, Penn Lloyd, Toivo Zoete and Chris Milligan

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