



Communiqué: Impact Assessment Symposium

BACKGROUND

How can Impact Assessment deliver better environmental and social outcomes? This was the focus of EIANZ's annual Impact Assessment (IA) Symposium, held on the 26 August 2025 in Sydney. The symposium was attended by over 200 professionals from a wide range of industries to explore and find answers to this important question.

The symposium was set against a backdrop of IA practitioners coming under increasing pressure to increase efficiency, with decreased resources and tighter timeframes. It also comes at a time when outcomes-based assessment is quickly becoming the industry standard, providing improved avenues for achieving high-quality environmental and social outcomes.

This communiqué highlights the main themes of the Symposium, focusing on how IA can be improved and what actions IA practitioners can take to achieve better environmental and social outcomes.

THE SYMPOSIUM DISCUSSED:

Greater data sharing and open access to data

Greater data sharing and open access to government-held data enables practitioners to access required data at increased speed and reduced cost. However, the benefits of this extend beyond cutting costs and timeframes. Engagement fatigue is a growing concern in communities that are frequently asked to engage with multiple proponents simultaneously. Increased data sharing could limit the times the community is called upon to provide comment, reducing engagement fatigue and resulting in higher quality engagement. Scoping and planning would also greatly benefit from data sharing, with more information available to inform initial IA processes.

Using emerging technologies to improve accessibility, assessment and planning

New technologies, such as visualisation software, are developing rapidly and have the potential to improve IA processes. These technologies have the ability to greatly improve accessibility and engagement with the community. Visualisation technologies communicate scale significantly more accurately than 2D models. This gives communities a much better sense of the project's impacts and allows them to respond to the project with increased confidence and knowledge. This technology also enables IA assessors and planners to identify issues early and find solutions without incurring delays or extra costs.

In the future using AI to process data, highlighting opportunities for IA specialist input, will reduce time and costs of focussing the IA on key areas for investigation.

Undertaking regional assessments; particularly in regions under high development pressures

Case by case IA is currently very poor at dealing with cumulative impacts of successive and past projects. Regional assessment involves assessing impacts within a defined region and looks at how past, current and future potential projects will impact the surrounding social, economic and natural environments. If applied in regions with high development pressures, it can provide insights into possible cumulative impacts, as well as provide a firm foundation for subsequent individual project assessments. Documenting historical and current regional context provides assessors with a basis to undertake social and ecological assessments in a more targeted manner.

Enabling First Nations-led and active involvement in IA; ensuring greater recognition and use of Indigenous knowledge.

First Nations Peoples have a rich and deep understanding of place, with knowledge passed down and developed through generations. Empowering First Nations Peoples with the resources to be actively involved in IAs will enable more holistic assessments. This will not only



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ensure First Nations' interests are protected, but also the interests of the wider community and the environment. These IAs will also contribute to assessing and mitigating cumulative impacts, as First Nations peoples can draw on deep generational knowledge to examine the changes that have occurred in the region.

Embedding processes for considering cumulative impacts

IAs in Australia and New Zealand are carried out on a project-to-project basis. This means cumulative impacts, which occur because of multiple past, present and reasonably foreseeable future projects are often neglected. IAs must change to place greater importance on understanding cumulative impacts, ensuring that cumulative impacts from other projects are taken into consideration, and mitigation efforts address cumulative impacts on environmental and social values.

Improving post approval processes to ensure IA is delivering on outcome

Following up on the IA implementation progress allows mitigation methods to be verified and potential improvements made where impacts are worse than predicted. Mitigation methods may not work as intended, as the IA is often based on modelling, making follow-up assessment on effectiveness crucial. Robust monitoring and reporting frameworks embedded in the post approval process are particularly important when employing outcomes-based IAs due to the onus placed on the proponent to mitigate to deliver the specified outcome. Transparent post approval reviews can contribute to IAs providing improved social and environmental outcomes, with learnings informing future assessments of similar projects.

Targeted and high-quality scoping

A high standard of scoping will establish a robust foundation for all subsequent IA assessment and engagement steps. Using clear scoping criteria can ensure that the IA does not include assessment of areas or aspects of the project that are unnecessary and focusses in on important elements likely to

cause the most significant impacts. Effective scoping will ensure a more streamlined process, resulting in more targeted and relevant IA. In addition, targeted scoping will facilitate the appropriate level of investigation, for informed decision making.

Practitioners must advocate for IA

Practitioners know the power IAs have to provide better social and environmental outcomes, and appreciate what changes are needed in IA systems to deliver improved outcomes. However, processes and attitudes often stand in the way of this knowledge being fully implemented. IA practitioners are well placed to work with policy developers, regulators and project proponents to advocate for effective IA, through understanding potential environmental impacts and applying the mitigation hierarchy. With this advocacy, the benefits of improved practice can be highlighted, prompting change and ensuring *Impact Assessment delivers better environmental, economic and social outcomes*.

LOOKING AHEAD

The path to delivering genuinely improved environmental and social outcomes through Impact Assessment requires fundamental shifts in current practice. How can we effectively embed cumulative impact considerations into project-by-project assessments? What mechanisms will enable meaningful First Nations leadership in IA processes? How do we ensure post-approval monitoring translates into tangible learning and improvement? The insights shared at this symposium provide EIANZ with a clear mandate to advance these critical areas of practice.

Many thanks to the EIANZ Impact Assessment Special Interest Section for coordinating such a thought-provoking and timely symposium.