

The role of public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment: a case study from Egypt

Le rôle de la participation citoyenne dans l'Évaluation d'Impact Environnemental : une étude de cas en Egypte

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Abstract

This paper reviews the terms of reference of EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) and highlights the importance of promoting public participation (and not only consultation) to make this process open, transparent and robust. Lessons learned from the application of EIA in Egypt have clearly shown that successful EIA studies should involve the public participation during the early phase of "Scoping" in order to gain the confidence of the public, to reduce possible conflicts through the early identification of the related issues and to avoid late opposition of the public that can have dramatic economic effects.

Résumé

Le présent travail synthétise les termes de référence de la procédure EIA (Évaluation d'Impact Environnemental) et souligne l'importance de la participation du public (et pas seulement sa consultation) pour assurer que l'EIA constitue une procédure ouverte, transparente et robuste. Les leçons tirées de l'application de l'EIA en Egypte ont montré clairement que, pour maximiser leurs chances de succès, les études EIA devraient impliquer la participation du public pendant la phase initiale de définition du champ du projet et ce, afin de gagner la confiance du public, de limiter les conflits potentiels par l'identification rapide des aspects concernés et d'éviter l'opposition tardive du public qui peut avoir des conséquences économiques désastreuses.

Public involvement is a fundamental principle of the EIA process. Timely, well planned and appropriately implemented public involvement programmes will

contribute to EIA studies and to the successful design, implementation, operation and management of proposals. Specifically public involvement is a valuable source of information on key impacts, potential mitigation measures and the identification and selection of alternatives. It also ensures the EIA process is open, transparent and robust, characterised by defensible analysis.

Most EIA processes are undertaken through consultation rather than participation. At a minimum, public involvement must provide an opportunity for those directly affected by a proposal to express their views regarding the proposal and its environmental and social impacts.

The public has various rights: right to access to information, right to contribute to information and right to challenge decisions. Therefore, communication between the assessment team and the public is the key to public participation. So, the assessment team is well advised to communicate with the public as early as possible, to communicate with as many people as possible and to communicate through as many means as possible.

Public participation is an active and constructive exchange of information, meanings, and opinions. The public has many roles such as:

- Provide data and information that is essential for the assessment of impacts on the physical and social environment
- Reduce conflicts through the early identification of contentious issues
- Help to identify local citizens and groups with special expertise
- Identify local and regional issues
- Provide historical perspective to current environmental conditions
- Help to generate field data
- Provide criteria for evaluating the significance of identified impacts
- Suggest forms and help organizing mechanisms for public participation
- Help to define the scope of work and schedule for the overall assessment process
- Provide a link between the assessment team members and key organizations
- Identify and evaluate potential mitigation measures
- Increase public confidence in the EIA process.

Public participation can be achieved through several techniques:

1. Media techniques: radio, television, newsletters, and advertisements
2. Research techniques: sample polls, community profiles
3. Political techniques: citizen referenda
4. Large-group meetings.

The levels and forms of public involvement may include:

5. Informing – one way flow of information from the proponent to the public;
6. Consulting – two way flow of information between the proponent and the public with opportunities for the public to express views on the proposal;
7. Participating – interactive exchange between the proponent and the public encompassing shared analysis and agenda setting and the development of understood and agreed positions on the proposal and its impacts;
8. Negotiating – face to face discussion between the proponent and key stakeholders to build consensus and reach a mutually acceptable resolution of issues, for example on a package of impact mitigation and compensation measures.

The range of stakeholders involved in an EIA typically includes:

- The people – individuals, groups and communities – who are affected by the proposal
- The proponent and other project beneficiaries
- Government agencies
- NGOs and interest groups
- Others, such as donors, the private sector, academics etc.

CASE STUDY

Agrium Egypt for production of urea and ammonia - A petrochemical company denies relocation after local opposition.

In early 2007, Calgary-based Agrium announced a joint venture with three Egyptian state corporations to construct a plant with the capacity to produce 1.4 million tonnes of fertilizer. The plant, which is due for completion in 2010, is a nitrogen facility which should consist of two ammonia and urea trains working at a combined capacity of 1.3 million tons of urea and 100,000 tons of net ammonia.

Agrium petrochemical plant was proposed to be established in the governorate of Damietta in an area known as New Damietta near Ras El-Bar. It will be relocated because of the strong local opposition to the project. Inhabitants of the area are concerned by the risk of pollution the plant would generate. In this area the environment not only consists of residential housing, but is also the subject of a study to determine whether it will be considered as a protected site.

The plant was being built by “German technology, and has more safety features than any other petrochemical plant in Egypt. It is 6 km away from any residential area and contains all the necessary safety procedures” (EIA study Report).

The EIA report of this plant was reviewed and approved by academic reviewers. But due to the lack of public participation in the early stage of EIA procedure, the local people of the Damietta governorate was contradicted during the

implementation phase of the project. Finally, the plant building was stopped and its location may be moved to a nearby area.

In Alexandria-Egypt, numerous industrial projects were approved and implemented with a good acceptance level because their EIA process have been achieved in cooperation with the public (e.g., Carbon Black, Sidpec, Alexfiber, etc).

CONCLUSION

It is shown that benefits can be expected with an approach where the local people have the right to access to information, the right to contribute information and the right to challenge decisions. Successful EIA studies should then involve the public during the early phase of "Scoping" in order to avoid local opposition, to gain people confidence and reduce conflicts through the early identification of the related issues.