
Environmental impact assessment

Network meeting: January 2014

Problematic

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been a standard tool in use for several years, internationally recognized and approved by a large number of institutions involved in emergency and development aid. If the tool seems so far to have been little used by humanitarian organizations, it could turn out to be a structuring tool that will enable the environmental challenges these organizations face to be better identified.

Note that the EIA is an analysis of the natural environment, sometimes incorporating a social dimension; it is then called an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). It is a tool for communication and decision support that enables the potential impacts (effects) of a project's activities on the physical, biological and human environment to be measured by an analysis of problem data (challenges). These impacts can be positive and should therefore be maximized, or negative, and therefore be minimized. The assessment then proposes corrective actions to avoid, minimize or compensate for adverse effects on the environment.

Should the ESIA now be an indispensable tool for supporting sustainable development? It is undeniable that this logic makes sense in ensuring an optimal place for international solidarity projects and, at the very least, respect for the humanitarian principle of "do no harm". However the structure of the standard tool does not always seem appropriate to the specific contexts in which humanitarian organizations intervene and some adjustment may be required so as not to impede the laudable goals of such actions.

Experiences and feedbacks

- **Introduction to the Environmental Impact Assessment by Thibaut Dartus**

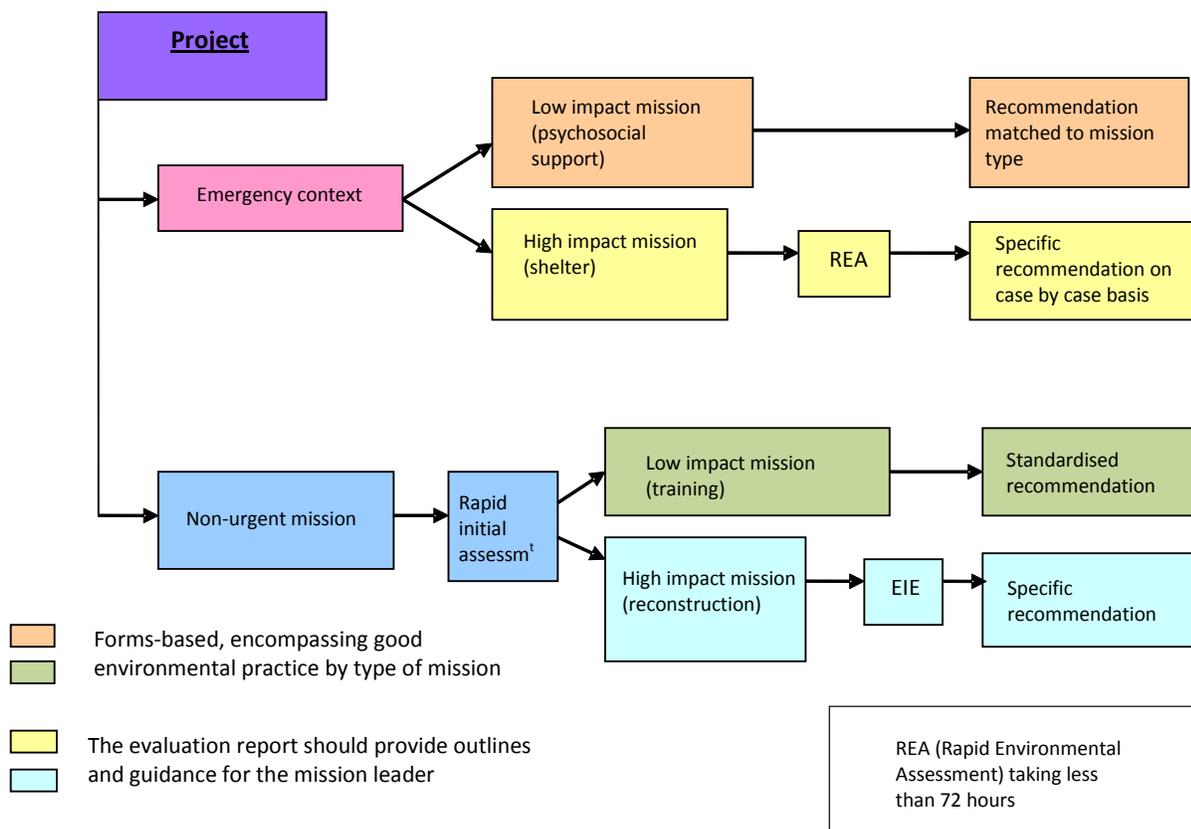
Thibault Dartus has worked in the French Red Cross and prepared a **paper on the Environmental Impact Assessment** which is available on the humanitarian environment network's shared library. It presents a detailed history, definition and inventory of the EIA as well as some proposals to facilitate its use in the humanitarian sector.

It was noted that an E(S)IA, which enables action to be anticipated more effectively, **must be made prior to the decision** to set up the project. Sometimes such an assessment cannot be carried out during the initial diagnostic phase when constructing the project proposal; if so, then it must be included, if necessary, at the earliest possible moment during the project's implementation. It should be noted that in situations of emergency assistance

with a potentially strong negative impact on the proposed actions a rapid environmental impact assessment should be carried out (using a Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA)), offering a less detailed analysis but one that will not hinder establishing the activities.

US and Canadian institutions were the first to implement EIAs and they usually require the completion of these assessments on their soil and abroad if the required actions demand them. Note that many countries have legislated in favour of EIAs because the World Bank has made its support conditional on the implementation of these regulations. However, these laws seem poorly enforced and the associated secondary legislation does not always exist.

Many EIA tools have been developed for usage that is more appropriate to development aid or emergency aid, predominantly by anglophone organizations. The diagram below summarizes the different types of assessment tool in use, depending on the time factor and the probability of impact.



- **French Red Cross: Matthieu Jost shares his experience**

An E(S)IA is an **open and participatory process that requires consultation with the local population and other key stakeholders** as well as a public presentation of the results of the assessment. This process can be integrated into the participatory approach more widely, led by the organization and it requires a certain level of accountability. An E(S)IA brings elements of discussion and structuring, facilitating an exchange of views with the public and a common understanding of the issues, activities and potential impacts of the project concerned.

Conducting an E(S)IA **provides insight into its environment**, but requires a good prior knowledge of the area of intervention. Carrying out a socio-anthropological study, an epidemiological investigation, a KAP (Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices) study or a mapping investigation enriches an E(S)IA and yields a better understanding of the issues to be analysed. The E(S)IA must be carried out in advance of any decisions about implementation activities so as to mitigate, as early as possible, any sources of potential adverse impact.

The **methodology must be integrated and modified to fit in with the way in which the organization functions**. If the classical framework is modified to fit in with the development project and can be easily integrated into its financing, it nevertheless requires that the organization is able to decide when this assessment should be carried out. Consideration of how to adapt the methodology to better harmonise with the French Red Cross's operation will continue in 2014 in coordination with SIFÉE (see below in *Sites and shared documents*), particularly on the challenges of structuring.

- **Oxfam Quebec: Lessons learned by Nicolas Montibert (via E. Khlif)**

Scope: An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is one of the tools and resources used to take the environment into account during activities. Development projects are subject to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA). In an emergency, the CEAA does not apply, but Oxfam-Quebec has developed its own checklists based the CEAA's criteria and SPHERE and WHO standards to ensure that immediate risks are identified, evaluated and considered.

How the CEAA works: The CEAA is decomposed into three stages depending on the magnitude of impacts: 1- Applicability Form, to assess whether an environmental assessment is required / 2-Evaluation Report with a matrix of environmental issues / 3- Strategic Evaluation for large-scale projects. The majority of Oxfam-Quebec projects stop at Stage 1 in part because **they anticipate the risks they could generate and the project is built so as to avoid or reduce them**. Only six projects in 3 years have required an Environmental Assessment Report (Stage 2).

EIA contents: this examines the **direct and cumulative impacts** on the **physical** (climate, air, water, soil, noise, natural hazards, etc.) and **biological** (ecosystems, biodiversity, forest resources, protected species and areas, etc.) **aspects** in order to avoid, reduce or offset them. The main criteria for analysis are: functions, technical characteristics, location of **facilities** and **infrastructure**, **discharges** of polluting substances, **water and energy supply**, **public concerns**.

Sources of information: Impact assessments require information to be collected in the field: reading and analysing the landscape, gathering collective memories, empirical knowledge of the people, institutions, local and national governments and local NGOs.

Implementation effort: In an emergency, the "rapid checklist" requires 3 to 5 working days. For development projects, the assessment takes about 5-7 days of field visits then a further 5 days of compiling information and writing (about 30 pages).

Use the EIA to: **Align** activities and building structures: technical characteristics, materials, and location and management arrangements. Specify the **implementation plan** and plan the avoidance, mitigation and compensation measures. Define the **roles and responsibilities** of all the stakeholders and draw up a **plan for evaluating and monitoring**

environmental risks throughout the project cycle (starting from the baseline taken from the environmental analysis).

Main lessons:

- The EIA is not a **“one-shot” activity**; it enables impacts to be monitored throughout the project and thus corrections can be made in the implementation phase.
- Technical solutions that respect the environment can be identified and used again repetitively (e.g. mud dams rather than cement ones to prevent sedimentation and silting).
- EIAs are considered an unnecessary burden by international cooperation and humanitarian professionals whereas, if they are executed properly, they can **reveal the real issues and risks in terms of sustainability and social acceptance**. They are a tool for improving the quality of interventions.
- **Including an EIA in the design and project budget** enables the project manager to monitor the implementation phase and ensure funding. The majority of donors do not refuse an EIA proposed as part of a project. If it is not planned initially, it then becomes difficult to finance and the project manager will experience it as an obstacle to the smooth running of the project.
- An EIA is a **participatory process** and Nicolas Montibert stresses the importance of **closely involving communities, authorities and local partners** in identifying potential impacts and choosing the environmental measures to be implemented.

❖ **Sites and shared documents:**

The 3 presentations and a certain number of tools mentioned in the presentations are available in the shared library of the Humanitarian Environment Network.

The international francophone secretariat for environmental assessment (*Secrétariat International Francophone en Évaluation Environnementale (SIFÉE)*) promotes experiences and expertise sharing among more than 2,000 practitioners, so as to develop appropriate tools¹.

Outlook

• **Good practices and recommendations**

The presentations and discussions led to a better understanding of the content of an EIA and to a better understanding of the objectives of this tool. It came to be understood that this tool is widely disseminated and used, particularly in the context of direct bilateral cooperation. Some international agencies and countries overseas have already established EIAs as an essential tool in projects for anticipating environmental impacts, such as those arising from the construction of large infrastructure items but also, increasingly, in the context of humanitarian interventions.

¹ <http://www.sifee.org/ressources.html>

European organizations and donors are gradually taking the environment into account, but a few humanitarian donors are still restrictive in this regard and few French humanitarian organizations seem to use EIAs at the moment. Nevertheless, the progressive integration of sustainable development as part of humanitarian actions seems to indicate that EIAs are certainly destined to be developed; this will require adapting its format to integrate humanitarian actions' objectives and the context of their intervention.

The sharing of experiences has led to some general recommendations that must be contextualized and matched to each organization. The main points that could be considered are the following:

- The EIA is a tool that enables **issues to be structured and the understanding of the bio-physical and human environment in which the intervention is occurring to be improved**. It also improves understanding of the potential impacts that planned activities may have on the environment. The EIA means that targeted projects can include various actions to avoid, minimize or compensate for possible adverse impacts identified earlier.
- It is also important to note that the EIA lays **equal importance on analysing negative impacts that need to be minimized as well as positive impacts that need to be maximised**. The tool can thus put forward the organisation's positive actions, as well as identifying criteria and qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure them. These should be included in the logical framework for monitoring the action and its consequences more effectively.
- The EIA is a **participatory tool** enabling the analyses carried out by populations, authorities and partners on the project's activities and challenges to be communicated and gathered. The EIA is a **decision support tool** enabling a common understanding of the issues and potential impacts of the project to be shared, and thus the choices being made to be accepted both consciously and collectively.
- The EIA should be conducted **at the start of the project** in order to possibly modify activities, based on the results of the assessment and the consultation. **The EIA can be included in the framework of activities and financed by the project sponsor**. While the assessment can be carried out by an external consultant, the organization must understand the EIA's objectives and fully integrate and adapt into its operations.
- The EIA does not map perfectly onto the humanitarian context or, at least, its **format must be adapted to the context of the intervention and to the content of the project concerned**. The official format of the EIA is more suited to development projects where there will be easier access to information about the area of intervention; there will also be more time available to conduct the assessment and to discuss adapting the proposed action. However a more flexible format, the Rapid Environmental Assessment, can be used in emergency contexts where the potential adverse impacts are often known but neglected through lack of time, sometimes with serious medium- and long-term consequences for the populations.

- **Proposed actions**

The thoughts on EIAs of those members of the Environment & Humanitarian Network who wish to facilitate the use of this tool and its application in humanitarian contexts have been included in the proposed actions. At the moment there is no commonly agreed action plan but it is suggested that network members work on the following points:

- Improve the understanding of the content and objectives of the EIA tool, in particular through the dissemination of this report and any feedback/consultations from within each organization. The aspects of risk analysis, issues, consultation, communication and decision support can highlight the appropriateness of the method within the principles of humanitarian action.
- Provide proposals suitable for humanitarian contexts and facilitate their adoption within each organization. For example: a simple tool to determine the need for an EIA; the integration of environmental considerations in initial assessments; or the format of an EIA appropriate to an emergency situation.
- Persuade donors to take the environment into consideration more seriously in the projects they fund. Encourage organizations to integrate an EIA into their proposals for action when it appears necessary in view of the fragility of the bio-physical and human environment (its resilience), and of the importance of any planned activities, so as to set limits on them.