Effective engagement with stakeholders makes the Impact Assessment process accessible to all and more likely to achieve a sustainable outcome.

Effective Stakeholder Engagement

Impact assessment (IA), the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action, involves many stakeholders from various backgrounds and with different interests and attitudes. It makes a great deal of difference when and how people are involved in the IA process. While the means and tools of engagement will be different for different groups, and may vary in the course of an impact assessment, all stakeholders appreciate fair, prompt, and respectful engagement.

This means that:

■ Stakeholder engagement in the IA process must be planned: a plan must be developed for even the most simple and straightforward impact assessments.

■ The engagement of stakeholders is not something that happens towards the end of the IA procedure; it needs to be part of the whole process from onset to conclusion. An engagement strategy and plan should therefore be integral to the IA process.

■ Stakeholder engagement is about conducting the IA process in a way that ensures all relevant information is captured and is not distorted.

■ There is a need to target and tailor-make engagement. This means accommodating and adjusting to different stakeholder roles and interests, types of knowledge, and cultural differences.

PLANNING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In planning stakeholder engagement it is necessary to balance broadcasting (informing) and receiving (listening, understanding, discussing) information. Different stakeholders need to be involved in different ways using different communication tools. The essential ingredients of engagement planning:

■ Determining and profiling stakeholder groups.

■ Selecting the rules of engagement and the etiquette that will be observed.

■ Describing the events that will occur throughout the IA process—stating places, times, goals, involved groups, content, and medium of communication.

■ Allocating essential resources: budget, communication tools, technical support, spokespersons, and suitable premises.

■ Creating a strategy and plan.

The essence of a strategy is to articulate an organized way of meeting objectives and needs. The purpose of the strategy in an IA process is to ensure that important but often complicated messages related to social and ecological values are conveyed to, and between, all involved parties in an unbiased way. The ultimate goal is not to provide information but to promote understanding and mutual learning.

The plan sets out a clear framework of activities, and allocates roles, tasks, and goals to individual members of a team. It serves as a guiding document throughout the IA lifecycle by specifying objectives, audiences, messages, tools and budget available. The plan must:

■ **Define target groups.** The target audiences are the groups of people that communication activities are aimed at. A target audience could be people of a certain age group, profession, gender, marital status, educational background, or geographic area.

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FASTIPS

- **Specify objectives.** What outcomes are intended? Examples might be creating awareness, changing public opinion, promoting a positive attitude toward the IA process, and capturing the preferences of multiple target groups.
- **Determine main messages** about both the project and for each target group. A message is a simple and clear statement that captures the essence of the program or project.
- **Select appropriate tools.** Once the main target groups and messages have been identified, which tools of communication will be used and what activities will be most appropriate.
- **Identify spokespersons.** Who and in what capacity will speakers present the plan or project to the media and in public meetings?
- **Review action steps.** The plan must be a live document that is reviewed and updated regularly. The plan must respond to incoming information and to new people joining the process. It is important that the plan promotes an emphatic attitude, ensures prompt responses, and ensures that information is of high quality. These are key elements for a successful IA process.

DIFFERENT TOOLS FOR DIFFERENT GOALS: SOME EXAMPLES

Conveying generic messages

- Radio or TV broadcasting
- Leaflets
- Lectures

Interacting with stakeholders

- Meetings
- (Phone) help desk
- Social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Web forums

Providing complex information

- Reports
- Web site
- Scientific articles

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. Timely profiling of target groups/stakeholders is essential to ensure successful contact and mutual understanding.
2. Trust can be earned despite stakeholders' having differences of opinion on the plan or project.
3. The content and presentation of the message is as important as its actual content and requires attention, experience, and skill.
4. Be patient; some groups need time to process the data and ideas communicated to them.
5. There are no insignificant groups in the process; be empathetic but neutral.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Identify all stakeholder groups and their interests and information needs .
2. Develop a strategy and make a detailed plan with events and goals for both specific stages and for the whole IA process. Review the plan frequently.
3. Choose spokespersons for their content knowledge, empathy, presence, and experience in communication
4. Avoid mass gatherings: smaller focused meetings (site visits, round-tables, focus groups) catering to the needs of specific audiences are preferable.
5. Prior to meetings, ask participants to put forward any matters or questions they wish to have addressed in the meetings.

FURTHER READING

IAIA FasTip "Non-Technical Summary."
http://www.iaia.org/fasttips.php

Want to know more?
www.iaia.org/fasttips.php
IAIA.org > Resources > Publications > FasTips

Do you have a suggestion or a request for a FasTip on a different topic?
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