International Association for Impact Assessment

Connecting people's wellbeing and biodiversity in impact assessment

Interdependencies among people and ecosystems, through ecosystem services, must be explicitly recognized and addressed in impact assessment.

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FASTIPS
No. 23 | March 2021

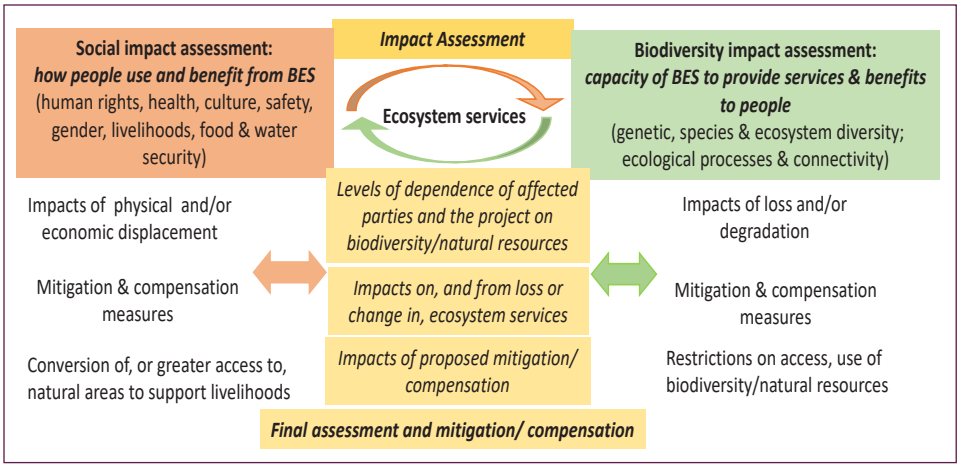
Setting the scene

Human wellbeing and survival depend on biodiversity and ecosystem services. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals recognize that efforts to eliminate poverty and inequality must go hand in hand with strategies to tackle climate change, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, food and water insecurity, and spread of disease. Fundamental human rights may depend on access to, and benefits from, natural resources.

What is the issue?

Loss of nature puts people at risk; e.g., pollination by wild insects underpins global food security. Interdependencies between ecosystems, biodiversity, and people must be recognized and embedded in impact assessment (IA) practice through collaborative, integrative approaches to ensure that project design delivers the best outcomes for biodiversity, ecosystems, and people. Although this is well recognized in theory, it is not implemented in IA practice.

Terms of Reference (ToR), baseline surveys, impact assessments, mitigation strategies, and management plans (e.g., Resettlement Action Plans, Livelihood Restoration Plans, and Biodiversity Action Plans) are typically developed within separate specialist fields, as shown in the figure below. They are not sufficiently integrated or coordinated to ensure that intentions and outcomes are aligned and mutually supportive. "Invisible" trade-offs between disciplines occur because specialists in IA fail to collaborate or lack the opportunity to do so.



A comprehensive social-ecological baseline, including stakeholder engagement and assessment of vulnerable groups' rights and values at the start of planning, is essential, to understand:

a) How men, women, youth, and different community groups in the project's area of influence, in areas affected by resettlement, involuntary displacement of people or in-migration, and society in a wider context, use, depend on and benefit from biodiversity.
b) Thresholds of resilience[1] to sustain biodiversity and ecosystem services, livelihoods and human rights, and rights of nature.

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[1] https://www.resalliance.org/thresholds-db

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. Direct, indirect, induced, and cumulative impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity from pollution, destruction of habitats, unsustainable resource use, and climate change affect people's livelihoods, health, safety, food and water security, wellbeing, and human rights.
2. Explicit consideration of affected parties' values, rights, levels of reliance on ecosystems and biodiversity, and willingness to accept alternatives or substitutes is essential in IA.
3. A social-ecological systems approach, with clearly defined goals for biodiversity and people, can provide a common framework to guide project development and IA. It will also encourage collaboration and synergies among specialists.
4. Development of integrated livelihood and biodiversity plans, with sufficient time frames and duration to assure the sustainability of outcomes for people and biodiversity, and contingencies in place to address unanticipated results, is critical.
5. Tangible commitments to adaptive and corrective management to achieve explicit outcomes, monitoring, and independent audits of biodiversity and ecosystem services in supporting people's wellbeing and livelihoods are essential to effective implementation and stakeholder accountability.

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c) Conflicts over resource use and drivers of social-ecological change which could lead to tipping points or exceedance of resilience thresholds, leaving people and biodiversity increasingly vulnerable.

Special attention must be paid in stakeholder engagement, impact assessment, and the design of appropriate mitigation (including compensation), to vulnerable (including ethnic minority and indigenous community) groups and women, their levels of dependence on and rights of access to use and manage biodiversity, and ecosystem services. These parties may rely heavily on, and play a central role in, sustainably managing natural resources, particularly in rural areas. Culture- and gender-appropriate approaches are needed to enable their effective participation in IA.

Want to know more?
www.iaia.org > Resources > Publications > FasTips

Do you have a suggestion or a request for a FasTips on a different topic?
Contact Maria Partidário (mpartidario@gmail.com), FasTips Series Editor.

FasTips Task Force: Maria Partidário (Chair), Charlotte Bingham, Richard Fuggle, Peter Croal, Jos Arts, and Anita Mosby.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Set explicit objectives and outcomes for biodiversity and ecosystem services and people at the start of developing a proposal and respective IA to ensure that the current conditions are maintained, and preferably improved, relative to the current status, recognizing the interdependencies between people and biodiversity. Improvements should involve restoring degraded areas, investing in resource conservation, and prioritizing nature-based solutions to sustain and boost human wellbeing.
2. Design the IA process, scopes of work, ToR, and budgets for specialists to allow for collaboration among social and ecological specialists and to ensure that mitigation outcomes and implementation plans are aligned and mutually supportive.
3. Develop a reliable social-ecological baseline, which details social and livelihood issues and dependencies on ecosystem services, and takes stakeholder views, rights and knowledge into account.
4. Hold interdisciplinary workshops at key points: during scoping to identify impacts and links, and after impacts have been assessed to identify feasible alternatives and compatible mitigation strategies, and align implementation checks in relevant plans.
5. Produce an integrated monitoring and evaluation plan with performance objectives for biodiversity and ecosystem services and affected people, and clear provision for adaptive and corrective management aimed at sustainable outcomes.

FURTHER READING

IAIA 'Best Practice' Series (see in particular Social Impact Assessment Guidance, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Health, Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Knowledge, EIA follow up). https://www.iaia.org/best-practice.php

IAIA FasTips Series https://www.iaia.org/fasttips.php (see in particular No 5: Biodiversity Assessment, No 12: Indigenous knowledge, No 15: Involuntary resettlement, No 17: Induced impacts)

World Resources Institute (2013), http://www.wri.org/publication/weaving-ecosystem-services-into-impact-assessment

Virapongse et al. (2016). A social-ecological systems approach for environmental management, http://soilhealthfeedback.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Virapongse-et-al-2016.pdf

Overseas Development Institute (2007). Human Rights and Livelihood Approaches for Poverty Reduction, https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2297.pdf