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EIA scoping in England and Wales: Practitioner approaches, perspectives and constraints

Research Review

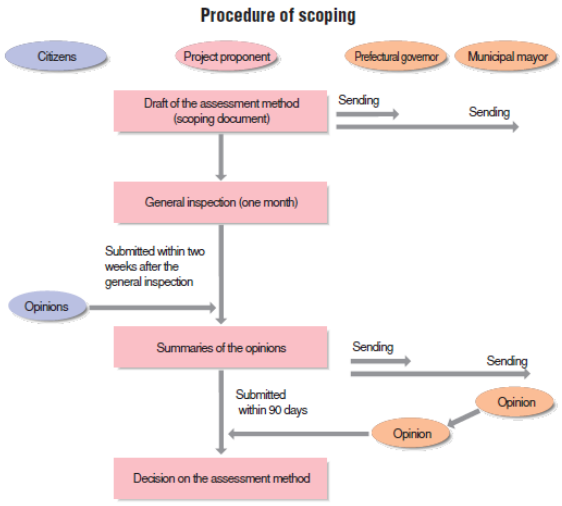
William Steimel
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT
B1778102
PROFESSOR HUANG

Background on Environmental Impact Assessment/Scoping

Before reviewing this paper, it is important to provide a background on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Scoping to further understand the research.

Environmental Impact Assessment is defined as "a systematic identification and evaluation of potential impacts or proposed projects, plan, programs, or legislative actions relative to the physical, chemical, biological, cultural, socioeconomic components of the total environment." EIA has been a paramount tool to ensuring that any type of project or proposal limits damage to the environment through the utilization of a logical decision framework.

Scoping is the second step of EIA after screening and often called the blueprint of EIA as it serves as a plan for how the EIA will be conducted. The scoping process includes identifying concerns to be addressed in the EIA, development of time and space boundaries of the study, gathering of information necessary for decision-making, and the compilation of significant effects and factors to be studied. The introduction of this paper heavily covers the elements of scoping and it is often seen to be an area of weakness for EIA. Despite that, scoping can have a huge impact on projects as failure to properly do so can lead to excessive resource expenditure and time delays. Scoping is an important element of EIA vital for a project's success which will be further reviewed in the research.



Source: G.W Huang (2012)

Research Methodology

This paper first provides a background on the scoping process, then discusses EIA regulatory frameworks in England/Wales, and finally reviews the scoping process within England and Wales from the perspective of practitioners including LPAs, statutory consultees, and environmental consultancies. It evaluates current scoping practices through a questionnaire and asks practitioners questions such as their approaches to scoping, how they assess significant impacts, the characteristics and influence of consultation, and their perceived constraints to scoping for their most recent project. The results are then compiled and summarized in which the authors provide recommendations for improvement as well as the current challenges.

Results

The Analysis of research findings section of the paper discusses results on the above-mentioned survey. Of the 408 LPAs, 510 Environmental Consultancies, and 171 statutory consultee offices that were sent questionnaires an overall response rate of 27 % was returned. The below summarizes some key findings within the survey by section.

Practitioner Engagement in scoping and ranking of important issues

The first section of the survey referenced practitioner engagement and how they ranked issues in terms of importance in regard to scoping. In regard to time spent scoping, consultants spent approximately 31-40 hours a week, while LPA's and statutory consultees spent around 6-10 hours on scoping. Issues that ranked highly in importance for all three groups included site characteristics, geographical issues, and impact magnitude.

Approaches to Impact Identification

This section then referenced the actual tools and approaches used by practitioners while scoping. In summary, professional judgement was the most commonly used approach as well as consultation within their own organizations. Community consultation seemed to have a very limited use in terms of impact Identification. Lastly, it seemed that there was really no mechanism for sharing of best practices from one case to another.

Relative Concern of specific impacts

The next portion of the survey allowed practitioners to rate their concern with respect to different impact themes. The most concerning seemed to be landscape and visual impacts, along with traffic/transport, flora/fauna, noise/vibration, water resources, and air quality following closely behind. The least concerning among practitioners seemed to be related to accidents and climatic factors.

Methods employed for determination of significant impacts

The next survey question reviewed how practitioners evaluated significant impacts in the scoping process. The most common methods of determination included professional judgement and experience, consultation, followed by the creation of check lists. It seems that Consultants employed more quantitative methods and were more likely to measure their data against pre-determined standards and guidelines.

Characteristics of Consultation

This part of the research then moves on to discuss the characteristics of stakeholder consultation from the perspective of all practitioners. It is well known from research literature that stakeholder consultation has benefits that can include good public relations and the acquisition of information about the local area. One key finding from the research is that there is very limited community consultation in scoping which means that community members have very little say about impacts in the early stages of EIA. However, one concern by developers is the potential risk of opening up the process to the public.

Resources and Constraints in scoping process

The last section of the questionnaire details constraints faced in the scoping process by practitioners. A common theme amongst all three practitioners was the challenge they all face with time frame in scoping as well as a lack of understanding of the process. LPA's and Statutory consultees also cited a lack of resources.

Opinion

This research indeed shows that the EIA process is a constantly evolving process that is always adapting to the current regulatory requirements. This paper is incredibly useful as it helps provide a future direction in improvement of EIA. It is increasingly important for researchers to review these processes in conjunction with actual practitioners to create an EIA which serves its intended purpose of protecting the environment while creating limited regulatory burden. These survey results seem to be reflective on the current regulatory environment in the United Kingdom/Wales and it is likely depending on country the EIA takes place scoping concerns may also differ considerably.

Works Cited

Wood, G., Glasson, J., & Becker, J. (2006). EIA scoping in England and Wales: practitioner approaches, perspectives and constraints. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, *26*(3), 221-241.

G.W. Huang. (2012). EIA-L3 *[PowerPoint slides]*
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