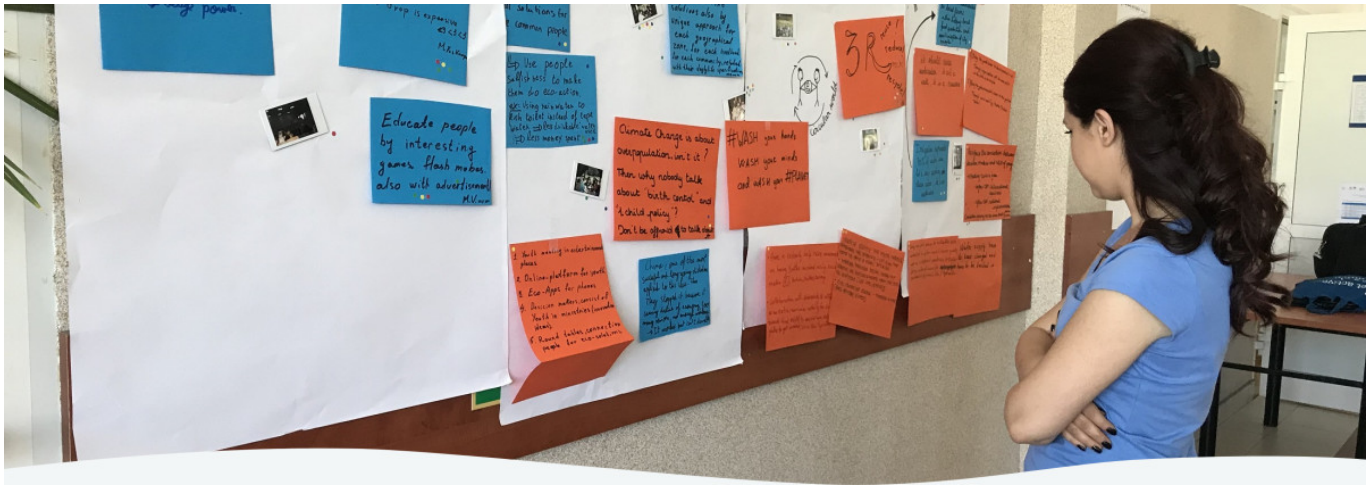
IWRM Action Hub

IWRM TOOL - B1.04

Impact Assessment Committees



Summary

Impact Assessment Committees (IACs) estimate the wide range of consequences derived from proposed infrastructure projects on water and its related environment informing sustainable decision-making and ensuring participation of all the stakeholders. This Tool provides an overview of regulatory and institutional framework for Impact Assessment Bodies across Global North and Global South, details the impact assessment process with a focus on public participation, and outlines the major challenges to be addressed.

Defining the Concept and the Role of Impact Assessment

Impact assessment refers to identification of the future consequences of a current or proposed action. Impact in itself is a measure of the changes made which makes impact assessment seek a causal relation between inputs and changes. It is recognised as a planning and decision-making instrument utilised to conduct assessments of the prospective positive and negative effects of proposed projects. Pertaining to the water sector, the projects might include provision of WASH services, water storage and transfer, including dams, irrigation schemes, inter-basin water transfers, as well as policy making relating to the sector. (Partidário, 2012; Gertler et al., 2011; Government of Canada, 2022). Within IWRM context, impact assessment builds upon rigorous data collected by various institutions responsible for monitoring and evaluation (Tool B1.03), facilitating various types of assessments (Tools C1).

Impact assessment procedure has several purposes, including:

- **Helping decision-makers develop policies, plans, and projects:** these should address the issue of sustainability in its multi-dimensional nature, fostering favourable economic, social, and environmental conditions. In order to enhance opportunities, eliminate risks and mitigate adverse effects, impact assessment should be embedded in the decision-making process on an early stage while development actions are still being conceptualised.
- **Ensuring that all the stakeholders are engaged (Tool C1.03)**: their interests being recognised and relevant regulations addressed.

Regulatory and Institutional Framework

Impact Assessment Committees across the world function within different legal and institutional settings. These bodies are usually perceived as ad-hoc organisations. For instance, according to Moroccan Law, drinking water supply projects are not subject to an environmental and social impact assessment. However, conducting these assessments is in line with the African Development Bank requirements for financing one of the country's water access programmes (AfDB, 2018).

In some countries impact assessment is required by law (Government of Canada, 2019) and can be institutionally set following various approaches (UNEP, 2018):

- **Specialised agency is responsible for impact assessment oversight:** Impact Assessment Agency of Canada coordinates assessments of projects impact with varying degree of decentralisation (federal and province level); Peruvian National Environmental Certification Service for Sustainable Investments (SENACE) was established to make impact assessments more credible; Service of Environmental Assessment in Chile provides guidance on environmental impact assessment, citizen participation, and indigenous consultation.
- **Centralised decision-making:** Kenyan Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources is in charge of conducting/coordinating relevant assessments (World Bank, 2016); Swedish Ministry of the Environment established an Environmental Assessment Division, which is responsible for processing administrative matters under the Swedish Environmental Code.
- **Sectoral approach:** in Egypt, sectoral agencies consult environmental agency for the review of the environmental impact assessment report (Badr, 2009).

In a transboundary context (Tool B3.01), impact assessments should be carried out jointly, taking into account the legislations of all the parties involved (UNECE, 2004).

Given the above-mentioned legislative and institutional frameworks, impact assessment may be carried out by various stakeholders:

- Accountable entity (federal agency, ministry or its division, sectoral agency)
- Independent experts, consultants with knowledge, experience, and expertise relative to a project
- Non-governmental organisations and associations, such as Iranian Association for Environmental Assessment, Impact Assessment Association of Zambia, Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment.

Impact Assessment Process

The process of impact assessment includes the following steps organised into phases:

- **Screening phase:** determining whether a project proposal should be subject to an assessment where a project proponent is responsible for providing relevant information.
- **Planning phase:** the assessment is planned where the public should be invited to provide the information and contribute to planning.
- **Impact analysis:** this considers potential environmental, health, social and economic impacts, including negative and positive ones, of proposed projects. Impact assessment report may be provided on this stage (Tool C1.06).
- **Decision-making:** impact assessment results in the form of a report inform decision-makers on project's adverse impacts, putting public interest at the centre of decisions and providing transparency and accountability (Tool B1.05).
- **Post-decision/follow-up:** impact assessment body will be verifying compliance and correcting non-compliance together with community members, who will be involved in monitoring programmes.

Public Participation

Informing and facilitating public involvement at all stages of the impact assessment process can foster the community engagement and support to make sure the decisions are politically and environmentally sustainable. A lack of understanding of the people may result in projects and policies that have negative consequences. Divergence between macroeconomic interests and those of the local population may occur (Dougherty and Hall, 1995). Dam construction may aim at sufficient electricity generation on a national level but also result in population resettlement because of the construction process (Singto et al., 2022).

Given the diverse nature of the stakeholder groups involved, it is crucial to plan stakeholder engagement properly (Kalle and den Broeder, 2015):

- Defining target groups: the range of groups outside the formal structure may include indigenous peoples, technical and scientific societies, Water User Associations, NGOs, religious groups, as well as minorities and women (Tools B5).
- Specifying objectives: consulting with the named stakeholder groups capturing their preferences, creating awareness, as well as changing public opinion.
- Selecting appropriate tools: these range from open debate, which might not always be constructive, to conducting surveys, workshops, community meetings and interviews, focus group discussions, force field and trend analyses. To ensure that the information provided and gathered is of high quality, triangulation method may be applied to promote cross-checking of data (Fig. 1) (Dougherty and Hall, 1995; Gomme, 2002).

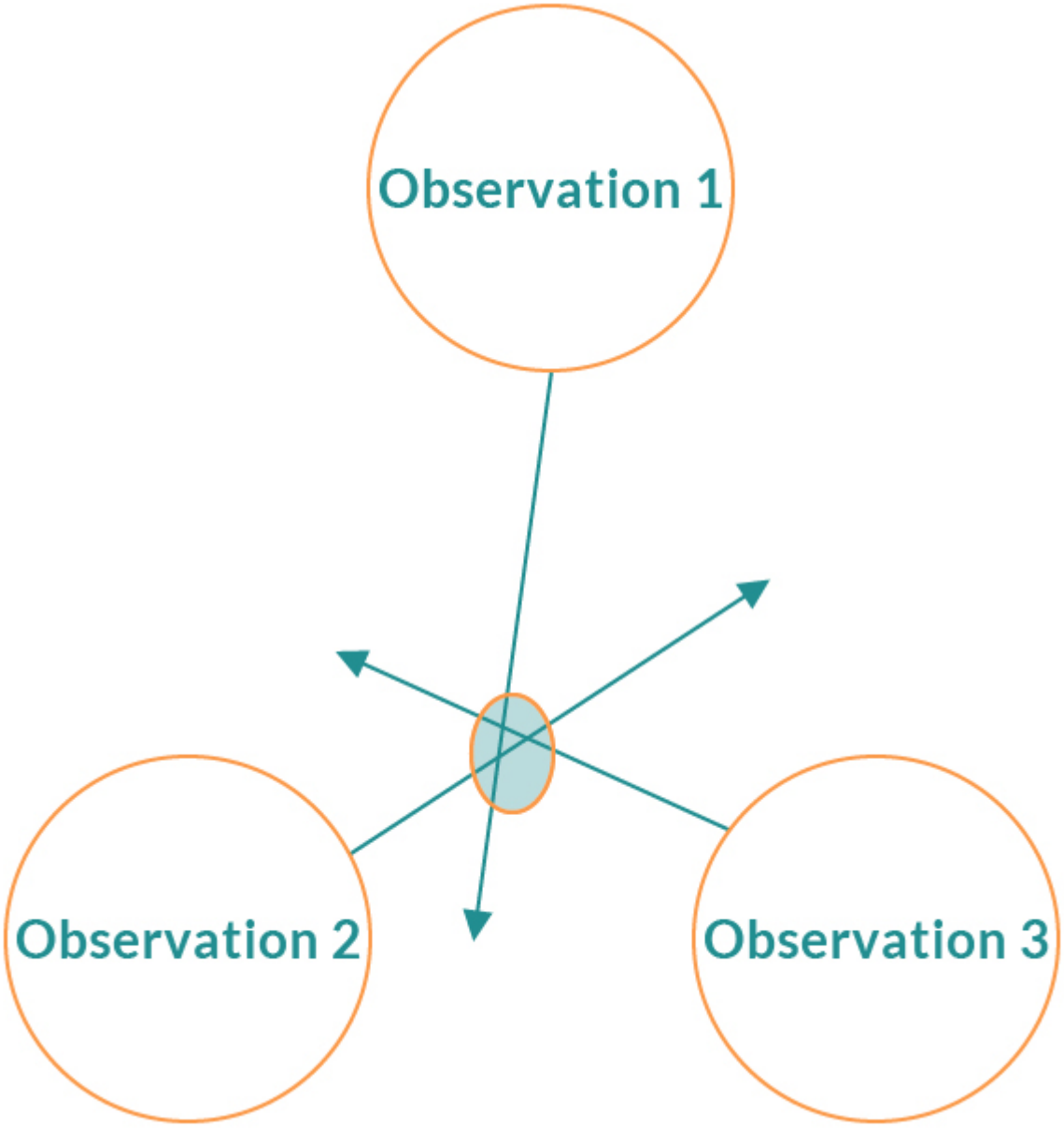


Figure 1. The principle of triangulation (Adapted from Gomme, 2002)

Overview of Challenges

Successful implementation and functioning of impact assessment committees is a resource-intensive process, which needs to take into account the following challenges:

- Impact assessment may be perceived as an additional hurdle for project implementation whereas it should be taken as an integral part of decision-making that considerably shapes environmental outcomes (Pope et al., 2013).
- Gaps in the impact assessment systems coverage hinder efficiency of the process. Impact assessment system in Brazil is highly centralised, which eliminates its effectiveness by not delegating the opportunity to deal with environmental issues to municipal level (Tool B1.02) (Glasson and Salvador, 2000).
- Low public participation prevents proper stakeholder engagement and creates risks of

vested interest.
- Lack of trained personnel (Tools B4), reliable data and financial constraints should be addressed to guarantee high-quality impact assessment.
- Coordination among the various organisations involved in environmental decision making and of adequate infrastructure is needed to ensure proper EIA (Momtaz, 2002).
- Overlaps and duplications might happen as some projects may in addition also require a provincial/territorial environmental assessment according to respective legislation (UNEP, 2018). In such a case, cooperation and coordination action between jurisdictions is allowed striving for the objective of “one project, one assessment” (Government of Canada, 2022).

Thematic Tagging
Ecosystems/Nature-based solutions , Water services

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