



Consideration of Social, Economic and Political Inclusion in Environmental and Social Assessments – A Tipping Point?

Jane E. Obbagy
Managing Director, Obbagy Consulting

An Environmental and Social (ES) Assessment is an incredibly valuable tool for identifying potential risks and benefits associated with proposed project designs. As history has shown, the development community utilizes ES assessment data to reshape proposed interventions. In fact, the best ES assessment reports enable the project developer to quickly and easily understand risks, consequences of proposed actions, and hidden benefits so as to modify designs to achieve break through or quantum intervention outcomes.

As part of the intervention planning process, ES assessments initially focused on potential environmental impacts associated with a project's design and relied heavily on environmental management experts to assess risks. Overtime the scope of assessments increased to include environmental and economic impacts, marginalized populations, climate risks, safety and health and gender issues. The number of experts on the team increased as did the length of time to complete an ES assessment.

More recently, risk assessors acknowledge that social, economic, and political inclusion issues could have a significant impact on the attainment of proposed program outcomes. As such, ES assessment teams have begun to include this topic in risk profiles. For instance, Obbagy Consulting conducted an ES assessment for an energy project and sought information on inclusion by reaching out to marginalized groups and communities to learn how about potential project impacts and suggestions for improving the design of the project to reduce unintended consequences. We utilized a workshop to validate the information received and obtained sufficient data to document in an ES assessment report.



Although we had some success in reviewing social, economic, and political inclusion, increasing the scope, duration and team size of an ES assessment to review a broad range of issues most likely is not viable pathway forward. The return of investment begins to diminish as a function of the time required to schedule and manage assessment team member activities. An alternative approach may be needed.

Professional assessors have a unique set of skills that provide a basis for reviewing a broad set of topics, including social, economic, and political inclusion. They have an ability to quickly absorb a great deal of raw data and transform it into meaningful insights. As data are analyzed, assessors prioritize topics so as to identify high risk issues that may impact the success of the project so that project developers can revise proposed plans or to develop appropriate mitigation plans.

Professional assessors excel at asking questions, listening, and are proficient at identifying and communicating the data gaps that need to be addressed to more fully understand the relationship between scope issues and project outcomes. Overstating a potential concern or benefit runs counter to the value placed on the assessment report over time and the credibility of the team.

These particular attributes provide a pathway forward to maintain the value of ES assessments as part of the development process, as the need to increase the scope increases to improve a project's return on investment. The assessment team needs to:

1. Focus on maintaining / improving quality of proposed project, and not on undertaking a complete and detailed evaluation of scope issues.



2. Invite key players to attend a workshop to review current reality, proposed project risk, benefits and outcomes, and identify key leverage opportunities for moving forward with the intervention. In other words, assessment teams should conduct a structured deliberation exercise to identify critical issues and pathways ensuring equal consideration of stakeholder expectations to minimize oversight of key risks or benefits. Collective feedback may point out risks and perceptions that need to be addressed or changed, better ways the project could be implemented, or previously unrecognized mutual interests.
3. Compile best practices information for proposed project from experts. Rank potential risks and benefits using a scale that highlights short term and long term outcomes, and probabilities of occurrence. This assessment tactic helps facilitate the identification of potential issues associated with a broad assessment scope.
4. Determine if any “Unwritten Rules” create unintended side effects that adversely impact proposed project performance outcomes.
5. Focus recommendations on true aspirations—a shared vision of future project benefits future, not just relief from identified problems.

The time is now to be bold and embrace discussions about new approaches for conducting ES assessments. Practitioners can help ensure ES assessments create value by doing things differently or simply allowing all issues “discovered” an equal opportunity to aired and discussed. The goal is to achieve effective project risk management so that development dollars create opportunities, better living conditions, and security for people around the world.