The Human Environment in EAs/IAs: Areas for Building and Valuing Relationships

A Path to Inclusive and Sustainable Decision-Making

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Introduction

- **Objective**: Discuss how Environmental Assessments (EAs) / Impact Assessments (IAs) can be made more flexible and culturally sensitive while fostering trust with Indigenous communities and the broader public

- **Key Questions**:

  1. Why is flexibility important in IAs/EAs?
  2. How can trust and collaboration with Indigenous communities be built?
  3. What strategies can be used to gain public buy-in?

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Importance of Flexibility in EAs/IAs

- **Environmental Variability:** EAs must account for regional, ecological, and cultural differences.
- **Legislative Flexibility:** Regulations need adaptability to local contexts while ensuring rigorous environmental protection.
- **Indigenous Knowledge Integration:** Traditional knowledge systems often conflict with rigid EA structures; flexibility enables blending of scientific and Indigenous perspectives.
- **Adaptation to Emerging Challenges:** Climate change, new technologies, and evolving social values require adaptive EA processes.

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Principles of Flexible EA/IA

- **Community-Led Engagement:** Involve communities in defining the scope, methods, and outcomes.
- **Iterative and Adaptive Process:** Allow for reassessment as new information becomes available.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Respect the cultural values, practices, and governance systems of Indigenous communities.
- **Transparency:** Clear communication of project impacts, risks, and benefits throughout the assessment.

> *I am a* [person] *of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times.*
>
> - Everett Dirksen, American politician, (2001)

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The Role of Trust in EA/IA

- **Trust as a Foundation:** Trust between proponents, governments, Indigenous communities, and the public is essential for the acceptance of EA outcomes.
- **Building Trust Through Transparency:** Open communication about methods, data, and uncertainties fosters credibility.
- **Inclusion and Co-Design:** Engaging Indigenous communities and the public early and continuously in the process ensures their concerns and values are integrated.

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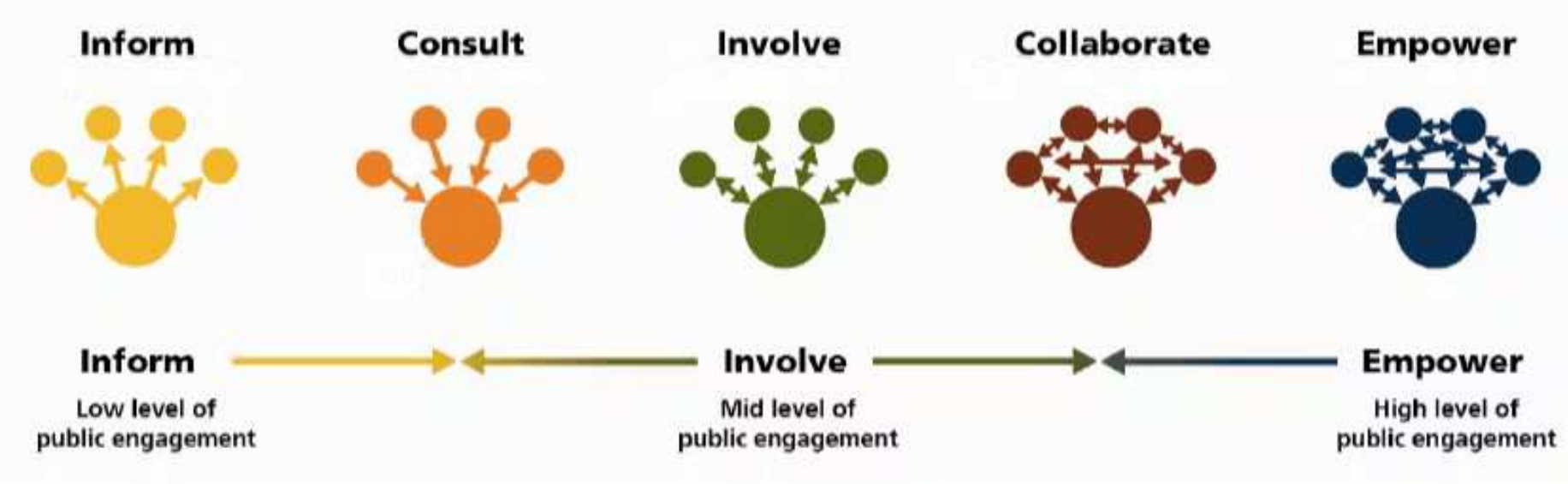
Rightsholder/Stakeholder Engagement

- Identifying rightsholders/stakeholders to be engaged/consulted:
  - Indigenous peoples and governance bodies
  - Members of the general public potentially affected by the project
  - Community-based organizations
  - Government entities and regulators
  - More – such as academics

- Resource constraints – time, budget
  - What is the proponent hoping to achieve?
  - How is the regulator determining appropriate level of engagement?
  - Crown's Duty to Consult
  - What is level of public concern
  - What type of engagement is needed for public buy-in and to develop trust?



The ‘who’

- Identify if there are populations at risk or those who may be disproportionately impacted – the GBA Plus approach
  - Indigenous peoples
    - Impacts to Treaty rights and traditional territories
  - Racialized groups/individuals
  - Children
  - Youth
  - Women
  - Older adults
  - Lower socioeconomic status individuals or families – so environmental justice
  - Immigrants

Intersections between these identities

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The ‘how’

- Focus groups (Elders/older adults, women, men, youth, land users, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals)
- Surveys (online and/or in person) – training communities to administer surveys and using survey tools to evaluate results
- Community engagement with individuals and groups through public information sessions/open houses, town hall meetings
- Community visits, and speaking with community representatives
- Conversations with subject matter experts and community group representatives (e.g., Women and Child services and 2SLGBTQ+services representatives)
- Websites, radio and social media to share updates about the policy or project with contact info to provide feedback

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The ‘how’

- Effective communication – establishing clear and consistent communication channels, methods, and frequency
  - Appropriate language for communication
  - Methods – fact sheets, story boards, Q&A opportunities, webinars, activity-based engagement
- Considering cultural, linguistic, ethical aspects of communication to avoid misunderstandings or conflicts
  - Trauma-informed approaches
  - Culturally-sensitive approaches
- Trying to align many different points of view
  - Can we look at them side-by-side?
- Resource constraints – time, budget
  - What is the proponent hoping to achieve?
  - How is the regulator determining appropriate level of engagement?

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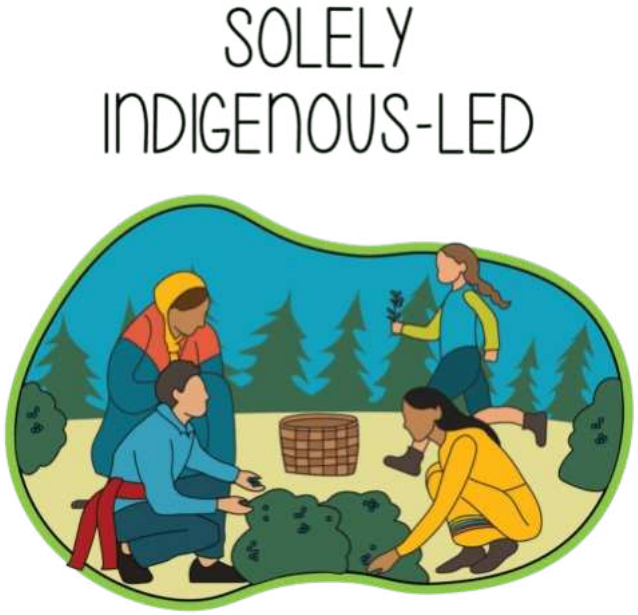
Indigenous-Led Environmental Assessment

- **Self-Determination:** Indigenous peoples can lead or co-lead assessments on their lands, respecting their governance and legal systems.
- **Two-Eyed Seeing:** An approach that respects both Indigenous and Western scientific perspectives in environmental management.
- **Capacity Building:** Provide resources and training to empower Indigenous communities to fully participate in EAs.



Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) (2023): https://ipcaknowledgebasket.ca/resources/ipca-governance-scan/

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Steps to Building Trust and Buy-In with Indigenous Communities

- **Early Engagement:** Involve Indigenous communities from the project's inception, respecting their timelines and decision-making processes.
- **Respect for Traditional Knowledge:** Integrate Indigenous ecological and other knowledge into environmental assessments.
- **Shared Decision-Making:** Create joint advisory boards or working groups where Indigenous representatives have meaningful decision-making power.
- **Mutual Benefits:** Ensure that project outcomes provide tangible benefits to Indigenous communities (e.g., employment, resource sharing, environmental stewardship).
- **Long-Term Relationships:** Foster ongoing relationships, not just project-specific interactions.

Strategies for Public Buy-In

- **Clear Communication:** Provide accessible information about the EA process, outcomes, and rationale for decisions.

- **Public Participation:** Offer multiple opportunities for public input, such as town halls, surveys, and open forums.

- **Address Concerns:** Respond to public concerns directly and transparently. Clearly identify the potential adverse impacts and the strategies in place to address them, and the compliance and monitoring systems to be put in place.

- **Local Benefits:** Emphasize how the project will benefit local communities, including economic, environmental, and social impacts.

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Challenges and Solutions in Building Trust

- **Challenge 1:** Historical distrust due to past exclusion from decision-making processes.
  - **Solution:** Acknowledge past injustices and work toward reconciliation through concrete actions.
- **Challenge 2:** Conflicting interests between project proponents and Indigenous or public values.
  - **Solution:** Facilitate negotiation and mediation processes that respect all viewpoints.

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Challenges and Opportunities

- Find the right balance in rightsholder/stakeholder engagement and demonstrating how this information shaped and informed the HIA
  - From the initial stages, and thorough meaningful engagement
- Balance the scope and timeline of the assessment with the available budget
- Available data
- Timeline constraints
- Collaborate with other teams
- Meaningful engagement – incorporate feedback and input from rightsholders/stakeholders, community-based organizations, etc.
- Vehicle to listen to and address community concerns
- Improve overall health and wellbeing of communities

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Recommendations for Future Environmental Assessments

- **Collaborative Approach:** Ensure collaboration between Indigenous peoples, public, and government stakeholders.
- **Policy Reform:** Advocate for policy changes that allow for more flexible and inclusive EA processes.
- **Continual Learning:** Adapt and improve EA practices based on lessons from previous projects and feedback from communities.

BC EAO, 2018: https://shorturl.at/8YYfQ

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Conclusions

- **Key Takeaways:** Flexibility in EAs/IAs, combined with genuine efforts to build trust and foster collaboration, can lead to more sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

- **Final Thought:** Environmental assessments should not just be regulatory exercises but opportunities for meaningful community engagement and long-term environmental stewardship.

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THANK YOU!

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