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Assessing Environmental Impacts - What about People?

Abstract

The report discusses the realisation of the Finnish Act on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Procedure in terms of impacts on people (Social Impact Assessment [SIA] and Health Impact Assessment [HIA]) in different types of projects where the EIA procedure was implemented. The entire EIA procedure of the projects was especially analysed from the viewpoint of the quality of social impact assessment. The documents used in the assessment procedure consisted of the EIA programme, EIA report and written comments issued at two different stages. Based on these documents, quality analysis was made through the qualitative criteria developed for the present study.

The analysis made through the qualitative criteria was divided into general and specific criteria, which were used to examine the various stages of the EIA procedure from the social and health impact viewpoints. The main phases of the analysis were the stages of the EIA procedure, participation and general evaluation. In addition, a questionnaire and interviews concerning the quality of social impact assessment were made among experts, authorities and people at grass-roots level participating in the EIA procedure. The interviews and questionnaire were made and analysed by using qualitative methods. The study yielded an accurate picture of the opinions of various actors and resulted in material on developmental needs and ideas to enhance assessment of the quality of social impacts.

The results of the qualitative criteria, questionnaire and interviews showed that in most projects, assessment of impacts on people was done on a narrow scale. Health impacts were understood to comprise the measurement of noise and emissions. Surveys made among residents were understood to involve social impact assessment, which only covers a part of the detection and assessment of social impacts. The use of methods during assessment was one-sided, and little attention was given to suitable methods. Social expertise was not employed, a fact that is partly attributable to the absence of collaborative networks and a need for training. Opportunities to participate during the EIA procedure were in most cases provided, but this participation had a minor effect on the assessment procedure. . Many developmental ideas and innovations emerged especially from the interviews. Further training is required particularly in the field of social welfare and among assessment consultants. Arranging joint meetings between different sectors and actors was considered one way to enhance co-operation. More attention should be paid to improving the ways in which participation is organised, e.g. in active contact with local residents as actors providing discussion forums. Because money may be one obstacle to participation, it was suggested that a fund be established for this purpose. The need to develop methods was pointed out by experts in particular. They emphasised that the use of methods requires expertise in order to yield productive results. They regarded expertise in the social sciences as particularly important in this connection.

Social and health impacts, i.e. impacts on people, constitute parts of a larger entity and should not be studied detached from other environmental impacts. An overall view of the impacts of a given project on people, nature and e.g. the economy will convey a more realistic picture of the effects than an examination consisting of separate parts would.

Key words: social impact assessment, health impact assessment, environmental impact assessment, participation, quality