



Social impact assessment

FACT SHEET

When a social impact assessment is required

A social impact assessment is conducted as part of the environmental impact statement (EIS) process in Queensland.

A social impact assessment is required for all projects declared significant under the *State Development and Public Works Organisation Act 1971* and for projects requiring an EIS under the *Environment Protection Act 1994*.

The Department of Infrastructure and Planning's Social Impact Assessment Unit is involved in all resource development projects requiring an EIS under either Act. Proponents must consult with the department's EIS project manager when conducting an assessment.

Social impact assessments assist decision making on new or expanded infrastructure or resource developments. Through these assessments, government and proponents are able to:

- collect and analyse information about key social and cultural issues, population change and community and social relationships that are likely to occur as a direct or indirect result of a development project
- develop strategies for mitigation, management, monitoring, and review.

The social impact assessment process

When a project has a social impact, it usually occurs in the form of changes in five possible areas. Assessments should be sensitive to these factors and to the way they might interrelate.

1. **Demographic**—size and composition of the resident population, influx of temporary workers, recreational users, tourists, community facilities and social infrastructure requirements
2. **Economic**—new patterns of employment or income distribution, local economic effects, real estate speculation, crime and public safety, accommodation and housing
3. **Health and well-being**—cultural, family, leisure, recreation and community health issues, needs of social groups, heritage and social amenity issues
4. **Environmental**—alterations to land use, natural habitat and hydrological regimes
5. **Institutional**—structure of local government or traditional leadership, zoning by-laws or land tenure, legal reforms

The social impact assessment process, for all projects requiring an environmental impact statement (EIS), involves:

- **Understanding local and regional settings which may be affected by the project**

Understanding regional setting requires stakeholder mapping and analysis and collating baseline information of local and regional communities.



- **Developing a stakeholder engagement plan**

A stakeholder engagement plan should support open and transparent dialogue with stakeholders. It requires identifying and working with all potentially affected individuals and groups from the beginning of the planning and design stages. It includes affected local and state government agencies and the community. A full range of community engagement techniques—accounting for literacy levels, language barriers and cultural differences—are to be utilised.

- **Scoping key elements of the social environment**

Key elements are those likely to be significantly affected by the proposal. Scoping includes identifying key social and cultural issues, giving feedback to project planners, selecting key social and cultural variables to measure and explain any issues identified.

- **Developing a robust methodology**

A robust methodology ensures tactics and assumptions are clear, data collection and analysis is appropriate, and social equity considerations are accurately identified and described. Particular attention must be given to the distribution of impacts on vulnerable and at-risk populations. Quantitative data must be gathered from sources acknowledged by government as being accurate and consistent—for example, the Office of Economic and Statistical Research or the Australian Bureau of Statistics. All sources should be referenced.

- **Forecasting social changes that could result from the project**

Forecasting includes case study comparisons, research, trend projections, population multiplier methods, statistical analysis, and scenario building with expert panels. Impacts may be specific to a particular project stage—for example, planning and project development, implementation and construction, operation and maintenance or decommissioning.

- **Assessing and estimating the significance of predicted changes**

In assessing and estimating the significance of predicted changes, the responses anticipated from affected parties and communities should be considered. This requires comparative analysis, interviews, expert judgements and field investigations.

- **Identifying and managing potential impacts**

Managing identified impacts may be achieved by avoiding or reducing impacts, or by compensating for irreversible impacts by providing substitute facilities, opportunities and resources.

- **Developing a monitoring plan to track implementation**

Work with the community and governments to develop a monitoring plan to track implementation. Monitoring allows any variations from mitigation actions or unforeseen social impacts to be identified. Thus, further steps can be taken if larger than predicted impacts occur.



Measuring social impacts

Both qualitative and quantitative data is collated and analysed during a social impact assessment. This data helps build a social profile of the area in which the project may proceed. It allows the existing, or baseline, social conditions to be measured and provides a basis for measuring future impacts.

Types of data include:

- population characteristics
- community and institutional structures
- political and social resources
- community and family changes
- community resources.

Impact measurements include:

- positive (desirable)
- negative (adverse)
- scale (size)—for example, 50 or 1000 jobs
- time duration—for example, short or long term
- intensity or severity
- cumulative affects of impacts
- social equity or distribution of impacts across different groups—for example, vulnerable groups such as underprivileged, aged, youth, unemployed and women; minority groups such as ethnic or culturally distinctive; or occupational, cultural, political or value-based groups for whom use of the environment is important
- meaning, perceptions or social significance of proposed changes.

Specific impacts may occur at particular project stages such as planning and policy development, implementation and construction, operation and maintenance or decommissioning.

Criteria for determining if an impact is significant or not can vary. It involves estimating how likely it is for an impact to occur and calculating how severe that impact may be. It considers the:

- number of people that will be affected
- duration—short or long term
- economic impact of benefits and costs to affected groups (intensity of impacts)
- extent to which the impact is irreversible or can be managed
- extent of multiple or consequent impacts
- relevance of the impact to current and future policy and project decisions
- level of certainty about the possible effect of the impacts
- presence of controversy over the issue.

The social impact assessment must include a description of the social impact issues and provide copies of relevant data. This can be presented on an issue-by-issue basis including the significance of the issue. The requirements of the people affected and the connections between impacts must be clear.



Managing social impacts

When managing social impacts and conducting a social impact assessment the proponent should adopt a similar approach to an environmental impact statement. The strategy below is intended as a guide.

For negative impacts:

- take action to avoid or minimise negative impacts for the project, host community or affected region
- compensate affected stakeholders according to type, severity, longevity and location.

For positive impacts:

- identify the potential to capitalise on or maximise positive impacts in order to achieve optimum benefits for the community.

The assessor for a social impact assessment is required to rank the level of importance of each impact variable.

Social impact management plan

At the end of a social impact assessment process, a thorough and well-researched social impact management plan should be prepared by the proponent. The plan should:

- be a plain-English standalone document
- summarise for all stakeholders the potential positive and negative impacts of the project, proposed mitigation and management strategies, and implementation actions
- reflect the findings and recommendations of the project's social impact assessment, including results of community engagement
- present a concise summary of the findings of the social impact assessment
- be developed for the life of the project
- promote an active and ongoing role for communities, local authorities and all levels of government through construction, operation and decommissioning.

A guideline to preparing a social impact management plan has been developed by the Queensland Government with the Queensland Resources Council and the Local Government Association of Queensland.