



Alternatives are essential to a sound decision-making process and central to an effective EIA.



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Alternatives in Project EIA

EIA is a tool to support decision-making—if there is no choice among options, there is no reason for a decision. The consideration of alternatives is central to sound decision-making; it increases public participation and improves transparency, thus ensuring better accountability of the decision—in short, alternatives are important for better governance and sustainability.

The generation of alternatives is a complex process, ranging from minor decisions from the technical team to major decisions by the developer or the regulator.

The United States National Environmental Policy, the first national EIA system adopted, states that alternatives are “the heart of the environmental impact statement.” Today, almost all EIA systems have some provision for the consideration of alternatives.

The International Principles of EIA Best Practice (IAIA/IEA, 1999) states as a basic principle that “EIA should be systematic” and that “the process should result in full consideration of all relevant information on the affected environment, of proposed alternatives and their impacts (...).” And, as an operational principle, that “specifically the EIA process should provide for the examination of alternatives—to establish the preferred or most environmentally sound and benign option for achieving proposal objectives.”

This FasTip on alternatives is not restricted to EIA; it also applies to social, health, cultural heritage, visual and other forms of project impact assessment.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. Alternatives in project EIAs require consideration of projects of a similar technical character or functionality that will meet the specified objective. Alternatives could be different locations, sizes, technologies, design, time frames, or operational procedures. The alternatives process should consider different ways of achieving the same objective (e.g., alternatives to building a hydro-electric scheme might be to import power or build wind farms). It should also document the alternatives addressed at earlier strategic levels or in any strategic environmental assessment (SEA) that has been conducted.
2. Full consideration of alternatives requires understanding of the issues and assessing their feasibility (environmental, social, technical, economic, regulatory, jurisdictional).
3. The no-action (or zero alternative) should be part of the analysis but should not be unduly emphasized if it is not a realistic alternative. The no-action alternative is not the same as the baseline (or existing situation)—the no-action alternative is the future situation without the project, but taking into account the evolution of the baseline conditions, including other projects, approved or reasonably foreseen in the future.
4. Alternatives consideration should be part of the scoping phase of EIA. Alternatives generation and evaluation must involve the public, affected communities, and other stakeholders. The information contained in previous documents that have evaluated alternatives, including siting studies, master plans, and SEA, should be used in scoping.
5. Application of methodologies for alternatives evaluation, such as multi-criteria analysis, should be transparent and participative (e.g., stakeholders should contribute to the selection and weighting of decision factors).

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FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Be proactive and creative in the generation of alternatives, taking into account their feasibility and the consideration of related environmental and social impacts. Encourage the proponent and the regulator to consider a range of alternatives, including the no-action alternative and major feasible alternatives. To avoid an excessive number of alternatives, those with minor implications should not be considered.
2. Involve the affected communities and other stakeholders in the process of alternative generation and selection during the scoping phase of the EIA
3. Do not include “false” alternatives in the analysis simply to justify the alternative preferred by the proponent or the regulator.
4. Apply methodologies for evaluating alternatives in a transparent and participative way.
5. Keep the process accountable by documenting in the EIA report both the process for alternative generation and the range of alternatives that were considered during successive phases of project development.

FURTHER READING

Canter, L. (1996) *Environmental Impact Assessment*, 2nd Ed., New York: McGraw-Hill (Chapter 15: “Decision Methods for Evaluation of Alternatives”).

Council on Environmental Quality (1978) “Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Policy Act.” *Code of Federal Regulations*, pp 1500-1508.

Jones, C.E. (1999) “Screening, Scoping and Consideration of Alternatives” in Petts, J. (Ed.) *Handbook of Environmental Impact Assessment*. Oxford: Blackwell Science, Vol. 1, Chapter 10: 201-228.

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