Typologies of expected and idealised futures of environmental impact assessment (EIA) practice

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The Future of EIA Practice

the 20th century’s most successful environmental policy instrument – will it hold prominence in the coming decades of rapid change and global megatrends?

* Indispensable to the 1960s
“Forward-looking”: the future of EIA practice

Knowledge gap: what do we understand about the future of EIA practice?

EIA Context

Global megatrends
A fast-changing world
Novel obligations for development
Persistent challenges

EIA Research Focus [general]

“Looking back”
Progress reviews
Evaluation of effectiveness
Methods and processes
Challenges for practice
Auditing & conduct, etc.

Why is this useful?

Identifying risks & future-proofing
a critical step towards identifying risks for EIA practice, and opportunities for future-proofing.
Problem Statement

A world that is developing with equal consideration for prosperity, human well-being and environmental factors remains elusive; hence the intended outcomes of EIA are not manifesting.

EIA objectives are not isolated from global megatrends and novel obligations –

environmental and climate change
societal transformation
functioning of economies
green recovery
sustainable investment
taxonomies of investment

Can the EIA practice’s past performance in a static context, imply future influence in a fast-changing context?
Expected vs. ideal futures

**expected**
*adjective*
1. regarded as likely; anticipated
   “write down your expected monthly income”

**idealised**
*adjective*
1. satisfying one’s conception of what is most suitable
   “in the ideal world, we might have made a different decision”
2. existing only in the imagination; desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality

*Definitions from Oxford Languages (2023)*
Methodology

The “Q-method” was applied to generate typologies of EIA perspectives.

What will the future world look like?

What are the expected and idealised future of EIA practice?
Typologies of the future EIA across emerging and developed economies

**Developed Economies**
- Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Europe, Scandinavia, Israel, Portugal

**Emerging Economies**
- South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, Brazil

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EIA will be challenged by beliefs about the need for economic growth.

EIA will be improved by automated assessments and automated datasets.

EIA will have limited ability to prevent environmental degradation outside of protected areas.

EIA will face environment–economy conflict against substantial political pressure.

EIA will remain unchanged.

EIA will standardise financial innovation – i.e. payments for nature-based solutions, climate finance, etc.

EIA will become redundant to boost economic activity.

EIA mandating new technologies through EIA will make development economically unfeasible.

Sustainable development will be determined by green and sustainable finance taxonomies, including climate risk financial disclosures in EIA.

Green and sustainable finance taxonomies will advance the EIA system for better environmental protection.

Lengthy and complex EIA regulatory processes will remain a key barrier to green economic investments.

EIA will be streamlined to deal with emergency and disaster events.

EIA will rely on greater implementation of economic instruments to guide sustainable development.

EIA will be guided by new progress indicators, shifting away from GDP growth as main socio–economic indicator.

EIA will be a collaborative space for alternative futures.

EIA will prioritize alternative development models – i.e. socio-technical innovation.

EIA will become a collaborative space for alternative futures.

The range of EIA regulating activities will expand – such as assessing the impacts of crypto mining and its impacts on climate goals.

EIA will apply new dynamic EIA tools to engage with exponential change.
EIA practice perceives the ‘Future Of EIA’ according to three expected typologies, and two ideal typologies:

1. Conflicted Policy Instrument
   - Fulfill its Potential as Policy Instrument

2. Aligning with New Finance Environment
   - Contribute to Social and Environmental Value

3. Support Alternative Futures
   - Idealise …
Findings: Typologies on the expected future EIA

Conflicted Policy Instrument
- Economy-environment conflict
- Substantial political pressure
- EIA remaining prominent but with a loss of influence, particularly against its initial role and function

Functioning in a New Financial Environment
- EIA aligning investment with climate & sustainability objectives
- EIA alignment with green/sustainable finance taxonomies
- EIA making provision for sustainability assurance
- Integration: environmental outcomes & financial investment

Supporting Alternative Futures
- Cohort of change & collaborative space
- New EIA procedures – changing how development is designed & appraised
- Novel environmental impacts – impact of blockchain technology
Findings: Typologies on the idealised future EIA

Future EIA Fulfilling its Potential
- Inherent potential to advance environmental protection and equitable distribution of benefits, impacts and risks
- Drastic change in environmental regulation
- EIA capability to increase its role in environmental impact prevention outside of protected areas
- Shift in focus: from mitigation hierarchy to focus on positive contributions of development

Future EIA for Social & Environmental Value
- New generation EIA guided by multiple novel tools, instruments and approaches developed to give effect to sustainability, human well-being and nature-based solutions
- New progress indicators guiding EIA decisions
- EIA policies will guide alternative economic objectives: well-being, equity, environmental boundaries
Consensus

“A shared vision for a desirable future may be the most critical task facing humanity ~ Robert Costanza

Consensus: Expected Future EIA

“EIAs will not become redundant, but the way we do EIAs will change..... on its current trajectory, it will likely lose influence, if not engaging with the alternatives of taking up a more pragmatic role, away from end-of decision-making instrument to integrate more meaningfully with investment and sustainability objectives in a new financial environment...”

- EIA will face environment-economy conflict against political pressures
- EIA will be streamlined to deal with emergency and disaster events
- De-regulation of environmental protection will affect EIA
- EIA will not become redundant to boost economic activity
- EIA will be challenged by the need to shift from economic to ecological sustainable development
- Green and sustainable finance taxonomies will change how alternatives are assessed in EIA
Consensus: Idealised Future EIA

“The ideal is to advance EIA practice, to gain influence...

The ideal future EIA gains influence by expanding its capability. It responds to a new financial environment. It responds to the future shift in what developers/investors consider ‘value’ - from economic to social and environmental value... it is a critical future tool for environmental outcomes...”

- Green and sustainable finance taxonomies: changing how alternatives are assessed in EIA
- Green and sustainable finance: strengthening environmental outcomes of EIA
- EIA giving effect to green economic development
- EIA decisions will be guided by new progress indicators, shifting away from GDP as main socio-economic indicator
- EIA serving a role of aligning financial investments with climate and other sustainability goals
- Green and sustainable finance taxonomies advancing the EIA System for better environmental protection
Key take-away

EIA practice needs ‘future-proofing’ to avoid a loss of influence.

‘Ideal future’: plausible and practical focus areas for EIA future-proofing.

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Let’s continue the conversation!
Post questions and comments in the IAIA24 app.

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