

Policy briefing

Women's participation in EIAs in Vietnam: what are the benefits?

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Issue

Since 1993, the Government of Vietnam has required environmental impact assessments (EIAs) of development projects and large-scale infrastructure after the National Law on Environmental Protection (LEP) was enacted. LEP's decrees and circulars mandate public consultations in the EIA process. In the 2014 amendment of LEP, the government required public consultations during the preparation of the EIA report until its completion, in order to minimize negative impacts on people and the environment. Project proponents are required to organize public consultations with organizations and affected communities.

These legal provisions for enhanced public participation however do not specify the need to be socially inclusive, specifically to include women and other social groups in the public consultations.

What can EIAs gain from women's participation?

Center for Environment and Community Research (CECR) conducted policy research to investigate the nature, extent, constraints and outcomes of women's participation in two development project sites in Vietnam. These project sites were the Trung Son Hydropower Project funded by the World Bank and the Phu Hoa Landfill Project supported by the Asian Development Bank. Both projects have undergone EIA processes.

Research Findings

Findings show that women's participation was virtually absent in the screening, scoping and baseline study stages of the EIA processes in both study sites. Both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank did not have explicit guidelines to include diverse women's groups in these consulta-

tions. Women attended public meetings on the social and environmental management plan, but specifically with reference to resettlement plans in both study sites. The participation of women in consultations at the Trung Son hydropower project generated positive and important change: One of the important results of the consultation with the community in the preparation phase led to a change of the resettlement sites in 2 of the 4 communes. The new sites are located in a smaller area but with more fertile land and cleaner water resources.

The women who participated seemed to have very specific views on environmental issues such as drinking water quality and sources, air pollution and other health issues, while the men are more concerned about land and assets compensation, which were considered the "big" issues.

In the meetings around the Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) of the Phu Hoa Landfill Project, men dominated consultations in both physical presentation and influence. Interviews with both women and men indicated that public participation was perceived as largely a job for men. Women comprised 30% of the participants in this meeting, but they did not voice any opinions.

The barriers to women's participation in EIA processes in Vietnam are as follows:

- Cultural views that define women to occupy a backseat role in both family and public concerns
- Low awareness on the rights of and need for women's participation among local authorities, EIA experts and consultants, investors, and donors
- No explicit guidelines on women's involvement in public participation as well as lack of practices and criteria for inclusive consultation

- Lack of gender and social specialists in consultant teams
- Women in project areas lack skills in discussion, presentation, judgment in consultation
- Access to adequate and thorough information on environmental impacts of a project and other projects in the same area is important to community

Policy recommendations

- **Inclusive public consultation processes.** Vietnam's National Law on Environmental Protection's (LEP) decrees and circulars on public consultation in EIA should be amended to explicitly require the inclusion of all social groups likely affected by development projects, including women.
- **Full and meaningful participation of women's representative bodies and gender specialists in scoping and assessment phases of EIA processes (EIA steps 2,3,4,5; refer to Figure 1) and in the preparation of social and environmental management plan (EIA steps 7,8).** Women's perspectives are crucial for impact prediction and mitigation. Inclusive baseline studies that identify natural resources, ecosystems and their local livelihood implications can reveal potential gender-specific vulnerabilities so that particular attention be given to vulnerable or disadvantaged groups of women and men and identify potential risks arising from involuntary resettlement and displacements. Social and environmental management plans should engage women from different social and community groups so that they can participate collectively in making the best decisions for their environment and social well-being once the project is implemented.
- **Participatory gender impact assessment (GIA).** When the EIA team does not have gender expertise or when there is absence of gender analysis in EIA report, GIA should be conducted by gender specialists together with community groups to inform the process or as an important annex of the report.

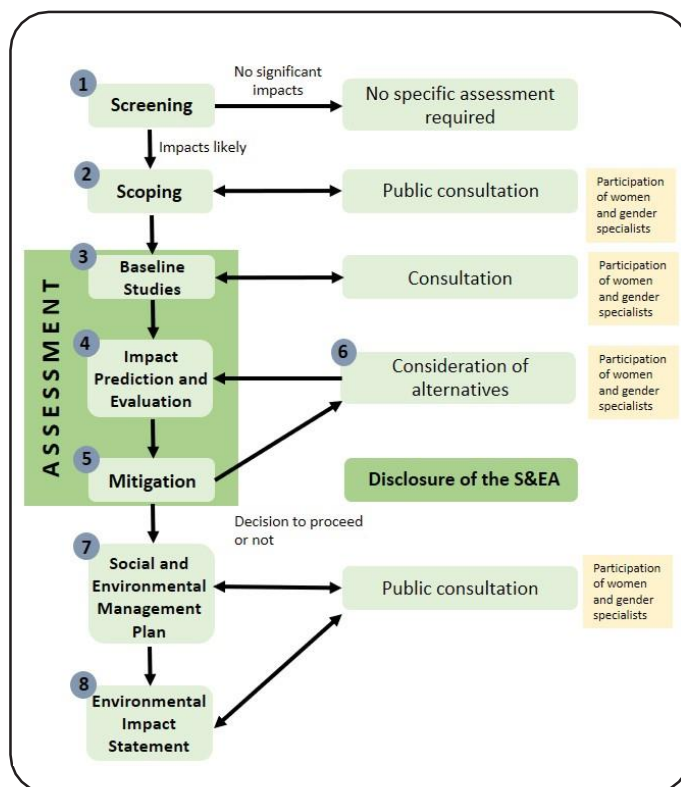


Figure 1: EIA Steps and Entry Points for Gender Mainstreaming

- **Participation of women as citizens and stakeholders.** Local authorities and gender specialists should make concerted efforts to enable the full and meaningful participation of women – not just as mothers or wives – but as citizens on their own right who can influence decision-making and their livelihood futures.

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