

Public Participation in Social Impact Assessment

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What is the difference between SIA and PP in the SA context?

Social Impact Assessment	Public Participation (NEMA definition)
Process of analysing, monitoring and managing intended and unintended social consequences, positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, project) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions.	Process where potential interested and affected parties are given the chance to provide comments or raise concerns relevant to an environmental authorisation application.
Not mandatory for every EIA process unless requested by authorities	Explicit legal requirement for every EIA process

A bit more on SIA...

- SIA is a research and analytical process which intends to influence decision making and the management of the social issues.
- Requires genuine community engagement
 - Meaningful interaction
 - Good faith dialogue with interested parties
 - IAPs must have real ability to influence the management of social issues.

Relationship between PP and SIA

- Not the same thing, but interdependent.
- PP is an important ingredient of scoping, building trust and relationships with affected communities, qualitative data gathering and meaningful analysis of how change processes will be experienced.
- SIA practitioner may coordinate PP for the SIA or complement what a company has already done by using methods such as key informant interviews, workshops or values mapping.
- Ideally, there should be a level of collaboration.

Public participation vs stakeholder engagement vs community engagement

The core difference lies in the target audience and the purpose/level of influence in the decision-making process.

- **Public participation** is often a legal requirement for government decisions, targeting the general public.
- **Stakeholder engagement** targets specific, often influential, groups.
- **Community engagement** focuses on building ongoing relationships with the local population.

Target audience

Public participation	Stakeholder engagement	Community engagement
The general public, including any potentially interested and affected parties (I&APs)	Specific individuals, groups, or organisations that have a direct interest or "stake" (influence or impact) in a project (e.g., government bodies, industry associations, landowners, specific interest groups).	Groups of people based on common geography or interest (residents, local business owners, community groups)

Primary purpose

Public participation	Stakeholder engagement	Community engagement
To meet legal and constitutional mandates for inclusive governance and democracy by allowing the public to provide input on government decisions and policies.	To build and manage relationships, incorporate expertise, and align goals with influential entities to ensure project success and mitigate risks.	To build trust, foster a sense of ownership, and ensure project outcomes align with the needs and aspirations of the local community.

Nature of interaction

Public participation	Stakeholder engagement	Community engagement
Typically formal, project-specific, and often a required legal procedure (e.g., as part of an EIA process under NEMA).	Can be a continuous, ongoing process, often involving targeted, high-level communication and collaboration.	A front-facing, collaborative approach that can range from informing to empowering the public, building long-term, two-way relationships.

Timing

Public participation	Stakeholder engagement	Community engagement
Often has defined start and end dates tied to a specific project or decision-making phase.	Can be an ongoing, iterative process throughout the entire project lifecycle and beyond.	Usually a strategic, project-based approach with specific timelines, though it can contribute to long-term community relations.

How involved should SIA practitioner be in the PP process?

- Depends on:
 - Client's internal capacity and resources.
 - Value placed on input from independent social research.
 - Client's understanding of steps and processes of SIA.
 - Stage at which social impact assessment consultants are engaged.

It is critical to align these processes to ensure consistent messages are given and stakeholder fatigue is minimised.
Failure to do so can create problems!

PP for EIA vs PP for SIA (i)

PP for EIA (NEMA)	PP for SIA
Legislative mandate	
Driven by NEMA's broad requirement to consider all environmental impacts (including social aspects). The process is formally defined in the EIA Regulations.	No separate legal process; it operates within the NEMA EIA framework. It ensures the social aspects of the mandatory public participation are fulfilled.
Focus	
Primarily aims to inform the broader public about the project and gather input on a wide range of potential biophysical and social concerns.	Focuses specifically on the "human environment" – local communities, their way of life, values, livelihoods, and social structures

PP for EIA vs PP for SIA (ii)

PP for EIA (NEMA)	PP for SIA
Methodology	
Often involves formal methods like public notices, advertisements, general public meetings, and comment periods for technical reports.	Relies more heavily on qualitative and participatory methods, such as key informant interviews, focus groups with specific affected groups, and accessible, socially-friendly communication to ensure full participation.
Objective	
To ensure transparency, accountability, and a comprehensive understanding of all potential impacts for the final decision-maker.	To ensure that the voices of directly affected communities (the "winners and losers") are heard, understood, and integrated into the decision-making process, especially vulnerable groups.

PP for EIA vs PP for SIA (iii)

PP for EIA (NEMA)	PP for SIA
Timing and depth	
Follows a structured, time-bound process within the EIA phases (scoping and assessment).	While also part of these phases, the SIA aspect of PP often requires more in-depth and continuous interaction with specific local communities to understand nuanced social dynamics and potential changes to their way of life.

The success of the SIA is highly dependent on effective, meaningful public participation that goes beyond the minimum legal checklist.

Risks of “tick box” engagement

- Stakeholders feel PP is an attempt to legitimate pre-determined outcomes or conform with regulatory requirements only.
- People are likely to become disillusioned and cynical about the process and the project.
- People consider participation is pointless - energy will be better invested in protest actions against project rather than in participating in seemingly flawed and/or unjust assessment process.

What is meaningful engagement?

- Meaningful engagement entails truly listening to your stakeholders and giving a voice to people and providing proponents a window into the hearts and minds into the people that will be affected by the proposed project.
- Not only meet any legal requirements, but to respect local communities and provide co-learning opportunities that arrive at useful outcomes and deliver shared value.

Typical tools used for consultation in SIA

- Focus groups
- Key informant interviews (formal and informal)
- Observation (sometimes what is not said is important!)
- Immersions
- In-the-moment discussion groups
- Workshops
- Surveys
- Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Techniques: (e.g., community mapping, seasonal calendars, wealth ranking exercises etc.)

Benefits of participatory methods and consultation

- Provide better understanding of local values, knowledges and experiences of different stakeholder groups.
- Provide opportunity to validate data.
- Help impacted communities understand planned intervention and its implications, assist them to plan for and adapt to and cope with change
- Help resolve conflicts over resource use.
- Help enhance the design of the project.
- Help win community support for project objectives and for implementation (i.e. a social licence to operate) - avoiding protest action against the project.

Limitations of participatory processes

- Can be more costly (at least in the short term)
- More time consuming (Time frames of EIA processes are often not community friendly)
- If not deemed necessary by the intended participants will be avoided by them.
- Respondent burden (the amount of ask of a community to participate)
- Respondent fatigue (when participants become over-consulted and lose interest)

How to deal with limitations

- More likely to occur when people feel their contributions will not make a difference.
- Design the engagement process to align with expectations of stakeholders and with significance of the issue.
- Be flexible to cater for changing interests of the various stakeholders. Interests and willingness to be engaged frequently vary over time depending on the way events unfold.

Why do people hesitate to participate?

- People afraid of ramifications.
- People think SIA practitioner are representative of government/client.
- Cultural protocols have not been followed.
- Divisions in a community – suspect that we want to divide and conquer.
- Political interference
- Lack of understanding of proposed project and impacts.

Some considerations

- Consultation done for the PP process in SA is not enough to inform an SIA.
- PP process important tool to assist with identifying stakeholders and issues.
- SIA is a scientific process that uses scientific methods and should be done by a suitably qualified person.
- Participation means more than soliciting the views of a few select people and then ignoring them.

Final thoughts

- This is HARD!
- Community consensus is a unicorn
- Be flexible, adapt and be very, very patient
- It is a process – or a dance?