



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss how far Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) has been useful for our environment as well as society? (250 words)

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Approach

- Write a few introductory lines about the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA).
- Discuss the importance of EIA for the environment as well as society.
- Discuss the shortcomings of the EIA process.
- Provide solutions to remove such shortcomings.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

- UN Environment Programme (UNEP) defines Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as a tool used to identify the environmental, social and economic impacts of a project prior to decision-making.
 - It aims to predict environmental impacts at an early stage in project planning and design, find ways and means to reduce adverse impacts, shape projects to suit the local environment and present the predictions and options to decision-makers.
- Environment Impact Assessment in India is statutorily backed by the Environment Protection Act, 1986 which contains various provisions on EIA methodology and process.

Body

Importance of EIA for environment as well as society

- EIA links the environment with development for environmentally safe and **sustainable development**.
- EIA provides a **cost effective** method to eliminate or minimize the adverse impact of developmental projects.
- EIA enables the decision makers to analyse the effect of developmental activities on the environment **well** before the developmental project is implemented.
- EIA encourages the adaptation of **mitigation strategies** in the developmental plan.
- EIA makes sure that the developmental plan is environmentally sound and within the limits of the capacity of **assimilation and regeneration of the ecosystem**.

Shortcomings of EIA

- **Applicability:** There are several projects with significant environmental impacts that are exempted from the notification either because they are not listed in schedule I, or their investments are less than what is provided for in the notification.
- **Lack of experts:** It has been found that the team formed for conducting EIA studies is lacking the expertise in various fields such as environmentalists, wildlife experts, Anthropologists and Social Scientists.

- **Public hearing:** Public comments are not considered at an early stage, which often leads to conflict at a later stage of project clearance.
 - A number of projects with significant environmental and social impacts have been excluded from the mandatory public hearing process.
 - The data collectors do not pay respect to the indigenous knowledge of local people.
- **Quality of EIA:** One of the biggest concerns with the environmental clearance process is related to the quality of EIA reports that are being carried out.
- **Lack of Credibility:** There are so many cases of fraudulent EIA studies where erroneous data has been used, same facts used for two totally different places etc.
 - Often, and more so for strategic industries such as nuclear energy projects, the EMPs are kept confidential for political and administrative reasons.
- Details regarding the effectiveness and implementation of mitigation measures are often not provided.
- Emergency preparedness plans are not discussed in sufficient details and the information not disseminated to the communities.

Way forward

- **Applicability:** All those projects where there is likely to be a significant alteration of ecosystems need to go through the process of environmental clearance, without exception.
 - No industrial developmental activity should be permitted in ecologically sensitive areas.
- **Public hearing:** Public hearings should be applicable to all hitherto exempt categories of projects which have environmental impacts.
- The focus of EIA needs to shift from utilization and exploitation of natural resources to conservation of natural resources.
- It is critical that the preparation of an EIA is completely independent of the project proponent.
- **Grant of clearance:** The notification needs to make it clear that the provision for site clearance does not imply any commitment on the part of the impact Assessment agency to grant full environmental clearance.
- **Composition of expert committees:** The present executive committees should be included with expert people from various stakeholder groups, who are reputed in environmental and other relevant fields.
- Citizens should be able to access the authority for redressal of all violations of the EIA notification as well as issues relating to non-compliance.
- **Capacity building:** NGOs, civil society groups and local communities need to build their capacities to use the EIA notification towards better decision making on projects.

Conclusion

- Recently, the government has drafted new rules for EIA, 2020, the most controversial rule being reducing the time for public scrutiny.
- EIA is essentially a useful component of sound environment management and the government must understand that reducing the time for public scrutiny is essentially diluting the EIA process.