



Public participation in EIA: A comparative study of the projects run by government and non-governmental organizations

Md Arif Hasan^{a,*}, Kh Md Nahiduzzaman^b, Adel S. Aldosary^b

^a School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, Kelburn Parade, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

^b Department of City and Regional Planning, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Dhahran 31261, Saudi Arabia



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ABSTRACT

Assuring public participation in different stages of environmental impact assessment (EIA) is essential since the success of a project largely depends on its type, nature, and process. Before starting a development project in Bangladesh, both government organizations (GOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) need to conduct an EIA. However, in most of the governmental projects, there is still no significant influence of public participation in EIA. Contrarily, under NGO administered projects, the systematic participation in EIA is quite unknown and often goes without being acknowledged. This paper, thus, studies public participation practice in EIA through an investigation of two NGO governed projects (i.e., BRAC's fisheries and sericulture project and CARE's integrated food for work program) and compares with two projects by GOs (i.e., Rampal coal-based thermal power plant project and Jamuna multipurpose bridge project) to critically understand the prevailing differences. As well, pivotal factors responsible for differentiated nature and type of public participation being practiced within a certain institutional context are examined. The study indicates that NGOs tend to ensure participation of the pertinent stakeholders at different stages of an EIA while harnessing their inputs to successfully complete a project. By contrast, public participation in government's run projects is mostly found to be carried out towards the end of an EIA exercise, which severely limits the stakeholders' ability to contribute and questions the legitimacy of such attempt. This process of neglect systematically overlooks stakeholders' concerns, critics, and suggestions while *pre-emptive* motive of the project gets glorified and implemented. By tapping these voids, this study attempts to offer an insightful understanding of the gap between conventional 'practice' and formal 'pledge' when comes to ensuring public participation in various stages of EIA. This study expects to benefit other countries where NGOs are considerably involved in development projects.

1. Introduction

The success of any environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedure largely depends on the level of public participation (Clark, 1994; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). Therefore, it is the most important and integral part of any EIA exercise (Fischer et al., 2008; Glucker et al., 2013; Hartley and Wood, 2005; Jay et al., 2007; Nadeem and Fischer, 2011; Palerm, 2000; Wood, 2003). Appropriate design and the process of execution of a particular public participation program in EIA vary from one project to another. Nevertheless, the fundamental needs and associated steps of any public participation program in EIA are to a certain extent universal (Chavez and Bernal, 2008; Cooper and Elliott, 2000; Daneke, 1983; Doelle and Sinclair, 2006; Hanchey, 1998; Hartley and Wood, 2005; Lemon et al., 2004; Lockie et al., 2008; Vanclay, 2003). It attempts to include stakeholders' ability to positively influence project

development decision (Barton, 2002; Carely and Christie, 2000; Del Furia and Wallace-Jones, 2000; Glucker et al., 2013; Hartley and Wood, 2005), create scope for them to develop citizenship skills (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010), seek help from them to bridge-up environmental and social information gap (Momtaz and Gladstone, 2008; Morrison-Saunders and Early, 2008), validate secondary source of information (Wassen et al., 2011; Webler et al., 1995), generate legitimacy (Hughes, 1998; Lawrence, 2003; Morrison-Saunders and Early, 2008; Petts, 2003) and resolute conflicts (Del Furia and Wallace-Jones, 2000; Devlin and Yap, 2008; Lawrence, 2003; Petts, 2003). Addressing these needs while assuring public participation in EIA helps successfully implement a project, maximize stakeholders' benefits and enhance project's credibility.

By principles, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are non-profit, non-political and non-religious that work at the local, national,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: arif_hasan_urp@yahoo.com (M.A. Hasan), khmd_nahiduzzaman@biari.brown.edu, nahid@kfupm.edu.sa (K.M. Nahiduzzaman), asdosary@kfupm.edu.sa (A.S. Aldosary).

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regional or international domains (UNCED, 1992). They have no affiliation with the governmental organizations (GOs) and are commonly known to be working for welfare and socio-economic development of the grass-root communities living in both urban and rural areas (Latif and Williams, 2017). Being the legitimate partners of the United Nations (UN), they have been significantly contributing to the implementation of various global mandates, including Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Seeberg et al., 2017). However, the real proliferation of the NGOs was observed after the 1980s when they engaged themselves in services and humanitarian functions, notably relief, education, health, human rights, environment, rehabilitation, and community development initiatives (Gauri and Galef, 2005; Latif and Williams, 2017; Makoba, 2002; Martens, 2002). Their development approach aims at (i) bringing people's concerns to the government, (ii) advocating and monitoring policies, and (iii) encouraging political participation on human rights, environmental degradation, basic health, or educational affairs. This approach brought a major change in the attitude of the funding agencies while experiencing a phenomenal growth at the local, national and international realms (Makoba, 2002). NGOs have now become an integral part of EIA study as they were able to turn the decision making processes more inclusive, transparent, inviting for citizens' engagement, and accountable (Fowler, 1996; Ryu et al., 2004). Involvement of NGOs in EIA often found to guarantee effective stakeholder participation to achieve the fundamental goals of performing an EIA exercise (Ryu et al., 2004).

Over the years, while NGOs' seem to have a proven record to serve the marginalized rural people of Bangladesh, their presence and functional premises are on the rise. Nationwide, a total of 2604 NGOs were working in various fields, including education, health care, water and sanitation, microfinance, and disaster resilience, among others (Murata and Nishimura, 2018; NGO Affairs Bureau, 2018). In 2016, the total number of people employed in NGOs was around 334,000 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In the fiscal year 2016–17, they spent about 715.06 million US\$ in 1037 projects which was about 106.6 million US \$ and spent in 464 projects in the fiscal year of 1990–91 (NGO Affairs Bureau, 2018). In parallel to NGOs, the total number of employees in various GOs was about 1.91 million in 2016 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In 2014–2015 fiscal year, the total development expenditure in 4103 governmental projects (e.g., transportation and communication, agriculture, fuel and energy, education, health, public services etc.) was nearly 10 billion US\$ (Ministry of Finance, 2018). This trajectory of information demonstrates the fact that both GOs and NGOs have significant role in nation-wide development projects.

Both GOs and NGOs carry out EIA in their respective development projects. Most of the large international NGOs, notably BRAC, CARE-Bangladesh, Action Aid-Bangladesh, and Grameen Bank have strong rural institutional (governance) foundation to execute any development projects of local, regional or national importance (Ahmad and Rahman, 2011; Davis, 2006; Lorch, 2017). On most occasions, NGOs as well as the government are either entirely or partially funded (in the forms of loans, grants, etc.) by the international donor agencies where they are required to comply a set of abiding terms and conditions, among which effective public participation at various stages of EIA is marked as a mandatory exercise (Momtaz, 2002). Nevertheless, many researchers found public participation practice in GO-run EIA exercise rather weak and is often marked with the questions of efficiency and adequacy (Ahmed and Harvey, 2004; Momtaz, 2002; Shakil and Ananya, 2015). Contrarily, NGOs' contributions to the development of rural marginalized population have helped them secure an unparalleled social acceptance at the grassroot communities. However, their rigorous participatory steps of EIA is neither duly acknowledged nor adequately documented in the academia (Lorch, 2017). This sets out the key context of this paper. Thus, all the pertaining endeavors are put forward to scientifically address this in order to offer a concerted understanding on the functional co-existence and at same time, seemingly understudied

and undervalued contributions of the NGOs in EIA process.

This stems the need for a critical insight on the nature, types, and process of public participation in EIA that NGOs administer while comparing the same in government-run projects. As such, the context of the seemingly contrasting difference emanates from two fundamental questions: (i) how does public participation vary across NGOs and GOs? and (ii) why do these organizations choose to implement varying participatory approaches within a similar development context? In order to address these, this study attempts to evaluate the EIA procedure and guidelines developed by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) to understand the actual nature of opportunity for public participation at different stages of an EIA. In so doing, four projects – two GO-run and two NGO-run projects – are chosen to thoroughly examine the nature and type of participation along with its efficiency against the fundamental rationales. While investigating the state-of-affairs and nature of participation, this study also attempts to advocate policy prescription, aiming to improve the effectiveness of EIA process and maximize the communal benefits.

This study is divided into six sections. In the first section, a background is presented to portray the context, question and argument of the paper. The next section contains literatures on effective public participation, major participatory activities in an EIA study, public participation practice in EIA in the third-world countries, and roles of NGOs in EIA studies across the world. The third section presents a methodology where the evaluation framework, case study method, and data collection techniques are thoroughly explained. Public participation practices in EIAs in government and NGO-run projects are assessed in the fourth and fifth sections respectively. Finally, in the sixth section, the research findings are critically analyzed and discussed with concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

This section presents a critical review of the concept of effective participation, its practice in EIA exercise, in general, and in the third world nations, and NGOs' role and involvement in EIA.

2.1. Effective public participation

In general, public participation refers to the meaningful involvement of the relevant members of the target populations in different stages of a policy development process e.g., involvement in the agenda-setting activities, decision making process, policy forming activities, etc. (Rowe and Frewer, 2004). The term effectiveness refers to “...the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result” (Pagatpatan and Ward, 2018, p. 517). However, a general or universal definition of effective public participation is quite difficult to come up with as the aims and its formation are diverse (Pagatpatan and Ward, 2018; Rowe and Frewer, 2004). Given a certain circumstance and based on the focus of a particular study, researchers attempt to conceptualize public participation's effectiveness which turns out to be different than others. From a democratic perspective, a public participation process can be called effective if the process is inclusive and fair along with other evaluation criteria. On the other hand, a decision-making perspective might look for the inclusion of people's choices, values and ideas while an economic perspective might be more concerned about cost-effectiveness to call it an effective public participation (Rowe and Frewer, 2004). This is more so, when ‘effective according to whom?’ becomes the key question that need to be addressed while defining its effectiveness. This is because what effective public participation means or what are the criteria of effective public participation varies largely based on whose perspectives are being considered and what their perspectives entail (Pagatpatan and Ward, 2018). Actors in a public participation process are generally diverse, including government officials, company representatives, NGOs, community based organizations (CBOs), local populations, etc. These actors often have different

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