

# SOME PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING EFFECTIVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENT WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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*These principles are not meant to be exhaustive. Theory and practice will change over time, and so will these principles. Nothing herein is intended to limit Indigenous rights and interests.*

1. **Socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA) should be participatory to community-led along the developer-community engagement spectrum.** Traditional “outside-in” SEIA’s, where indigenous communities are treated as a research subject by groups from outside that have limited knowledge of the social, economic or cultural context (and little time or acumen to learn it) are no longer acceptable.
2. **Indigenous demographic and other baseline data should be properly disaggregated from the overall local and/or regional population.** Significant differences between the socio- economic conditions and ability to take advantage of potential economic benefits of Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous populations, can be masked by regional level or even aggregated community level assessments in some cases.
3. **The SEIA recognizes and is tied to Indigenous community or culture group goals, values and aspirations – in other words, it incorporates culture group appropriate Valued Components, criteria, and indicators.** Sometimes, indicators that are easiest to count (jobs, income, taxes) don’t actually **count** for the most sensitive receptors (indigenous communities) as much as those elements of quality of life that are more difficult to quantify (ability to pass knowledge on, sense of community, connection to land, sense of control over your life, family relations). When scoping an SEIA with an Indigenous community, using community meetings, focus groups, interviews, and gray literature to help capture “what matters most” to the specific culture group is essential.
4. **Include Indigenous group representatives in all six steps of SEIA.** This includes a meaningful level of involvement in 1) Scoping; 2) Baseline data collection and analysis; 3) Initial impact characterization including pathway analysis; 4) Identification of appropriate mitigation; 5) Significance estimation; and 6) Design and implementation of follow-up and monitoring programs.

5. **Include examination of impacts of the proposed development on Indigenous, Aboriginal and Treaty rights, including subsistence and mixed harvesting.** Often discussed solely as cultural activities, these constitutionally-protected rights are central to the past, present and desired future mode of life of Indigenous people, and have social and economic implications for health and quality of life in addition to cultural implications.
6. **Include an appropriate social component.** Most of what passes for socio-economic impact assessment is actually economic impact assessment with little or no meaningful social component. For example, social relations, family, community and inter-generational relations, while sometimes difficult to quantify, often play a role equal to or greater in importance than access to housing or recreational facilities, which are among the more commonly assessed social criteria.
7. **A draft version of the SEIA findings should be vetted by the community according to its protocols, prior to submission to an assessment body or other decision-maker.**
8. **Agreed upon monitoring and adaptive management mechanisms are included in the final report.** This is important so that greater (or lesser) than expected change can be identified and, as necessary, agreed upon adaptive management systems put in place to either maximize benefits or minimize impacts. There also needs to be a role for the Indigenous community in this monitoring and adaptive management.
9. **SEIA should be conducted within the boundaries of Indigenous laws, norms and values, and includes recognition of same.** This is a two-part principle. The first principle is that the methods of data collection, analysis, and decision-making (e.g., on significance) must be conducted respectfully within the protocols that guide the particular Indigenous group. The second is that the impact assessment itself – the frame through which change is assessed – should include questions like, “Will the development impact on peoples’ ability to continue to adhere to Indigenous laws and values (e.g., sharing, respect for elders, etc.)?”
10. 11. **The SEIA should be inclusive of a broad cross-section of the culture group.** One reason to proactively gather a broad cross-section of information is that often those most vulnerable to adverse impacts of a proposed development and least likely to take advantage – this can include elders, women and youth– have been among the people least likely to be approached by SEIA practitioners in the past.

11. **SEIA should include assessment of potential psycho-social effects of the proposed development, in the community and on the land.**
12. **SEIA should recognize a broader concept of what constitutes population health than merely biophysical inputs.** A Social Determinants of Health Model is a useful starting point. A population health framework recognizes that factors such as ability to practice one’s culture, socio-economic status, community cohesion, and other factors all play extremely important roles in individual, family and community mental and physical health.
13. **SEIA should reject the primacy of the “personal choice” explanation model that puts the bulk or responsibility for adapting to change on the shoulders of the Indigenous community and its members or on governments.** The proponent should adopt a proactive – “what can we do to promote good change and avoid bad changes” – rather than reactive – “that is a government responsibility”– stance to mitigation.
14. **The assessment of economic benefits should include realistic, rigorous and defensible assessment of impact equity and the ability of Indigenous groups to take advantage of business and employment benefits.** Impact equity considerations (who wins and who loses if a proposed development proceeds) should be a fundamental element of impact assessment and of development planning. Too often, Indigenous groups feel the brunt of negative impacts without commensurate benefits. Where possible, Indigenous community SEIA should use a “Net Gains” approach to examine whether there is an appropriate balance over all appropriate time scales (including into the far future and in light of any futures that may need to be foregone if a given project proceeds now) between benefits accruable and adverse impacts sustained.
15. **The assessment of employment should be broad enough to capture recruitment, retention and advancement issues, and incorporate relevant case studies from existing similar operations and/or communities.**
16. **Whenever possible, SEIA itself should be an avenue to capacity building of social and human capital in the potentially-affected community.** First Nation communities should be encouraged and supported to actively participate in the socio-economic assessment study, and to build capacity in socio-economic data collection and reporting. This requires training and employment of community members as part of the SEIA team, which may assist in developing key skills and replicable systems for future assessments.