



Communiqué: Impact Assessment Symposium

BACKGROUND

Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand have committed to two significant global environmental pacts: the Paris Agreement and Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework¹²³⁴. Together, these agreements represent a commitment to both transition to a clean, low-carbon environment and to halt and reverse the loss of nature.

In August 2024, the [Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand](#) (EIANZ) held its annual Impact Assessment Symposium to prepare impact assessment professionals for the challenges of the transition to a nature and socially positive, clean economy. More than 220 environmental professionals attended the event which included 34 presentations, a debate and two workshops.

This communiqué outlines key takeaways from the symposium regarding the role of impact assessment (IA) in this transition.

The communiqué uses the term 'environment' and 'environmental' as defined in EIANZ's [Rules of Association](#), to include 'all aspects of the surroundings of human beings, whether affecting human beings as individuals or in their social groupings'. IA considers the environment in this broad context and includes biophysical, social and cultural impacts.

¹ New Zealand Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022. Global agreements. [Online] Available at: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/environment/climate-change/working-with-the-world/building-international-collaboration>. [Accessed 7 August 2024].

² Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022. International cooperation on climate change. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/climate-change/international-cooperation-on-climate-change>. [Accessed 24 July 2024].

³ New Zealand Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023. Biodiversity and species conservation. [Online] Available at: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/environment/biodiversity-and-species-conservation>. [Accessed 13 August 2024].

⁴ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2024. Draft National Roadmap for protecting and conserving 30% of Australia's land by 2030. [Online] Available at: <https://consult.dcceew.gov.au/draft-national-roadmap-for-protecting-and-conserving-30-of-australias-land-by-2030>. [Accessed 13 August 2024].

THE SYMPOSIUM HEARD THAT:

Note: text in inverted commas represents direct quotes from the symposium.

- **There is an urgent need for a clean energy transition to mitigate worsening climate change.**

The world is facing a "climate, nature and resilience crisis" which is nothing short of a "hair-on-fire" situation. Climate change impacts both biodiversity and human wellbeing, disproportionately affecting vulnerable areas/regions, including the Pacific Islands, and people with minimal resources to adequately respond.

"The time for action is now."

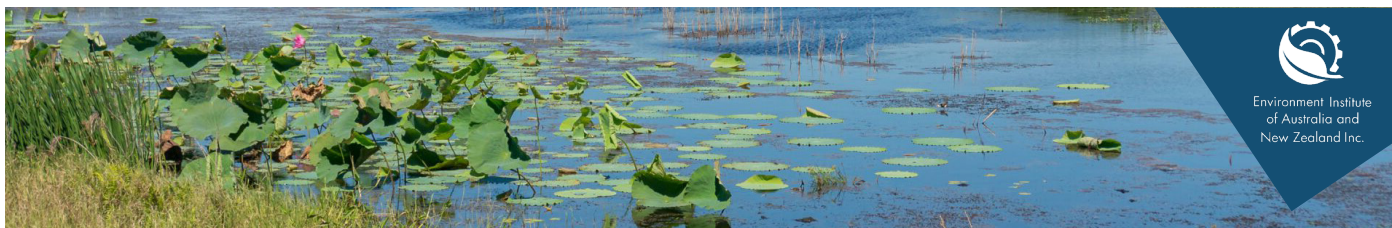
- **IA professionals are well placed to provide input.**

The procedural function of IA is to inform regulator decisions, support the planning of development and infrastructure, and provide a transparent assessment of matters so that stakeholders have sufficient information to make informed decisions. As specialists in this area, IA professionals have the knowledge and tools to undertake robust and defensible environmental assessments and contribute to well-informed decision-making.

Conferences such as the EIANZ IA Symposium promote knowledge exchange, while initiatives like the [Certified Environmental Practitioner Impact Assessment Specialist certification](#) and the [Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner module](#) (NSW) provide assurance of competence and ethical practice to industry and regulators. Both are important for improving the processes and outcomes of IA and should be expanded into other jurisdictions.

- **There is potential for tension between the need for a fast transition to a clean energy network, and biodiversity conservation, community interests, cultural heritage and other values.**

To meet carbon reduction targets, renewable energy projects are being planned or expanded at a rapid pace. However, this infrastructure can encroach on ecologically sensitive areas, farmland, Indigenous title holdings and socially and culturally significant landscapes, leading to biodiversity loss and social unrest.



Depending on jurisdiction, some renewable energy projects may also be assessed against lesser statutory requirements, meaning impacts to sensitive environmental values are not considered. To achieve a net positive impact, renewable energy projects must be planned and communicated in such a way to consider and minimise impacts on the environment and community.

- **Balancing development with nature positive outcomes during IA is a key challenge in the transition to a clean energy economy.**

The potential for tension across social, environmental and cultural perspectives and the cumulative impacts of new projects may result in trade-offs. An ethical approach to managing trade-offs is to ensure that actions taken “are based on the maxim that, if they were adopted universally, would sustain human society, and all forms of life indefinitely”.

- **Robust project IAs are vital to adequately quantify impacts and plan for minimisation of harm. There are opportunities to make these processes more streamlined and efficient without fast-tracking assessments and lowering standards.**

Careful planning and comprehensive IAs are key to navigating the transition. IAs assist in quantifying impacts and generating risk minimisation plans. There are areas for improvement in ensuring IAs adequately factor in social, cultural and natural environmental effects. Early interactions with key stakeholders and attention to scoping allow for a more efficient, effective and holistic review of impacts. Robust analysis of alternatives can optimise project design from environmental, social and technical perspectives.

However, standards and best practice must be upheld to produce robust and defensible assessments.

- **Strategic environmental assessments should play a larger role in quantifying cumulative impacts of clean energy developments and understanding broader regional sustainability trends. They enable tiering of IAs to create more efficient project approval processes.**

Project IAs may not adequately address cumulative impacts and broader ecosystem trends due to their narrow, site-specific focus. This limitation makes it difficult to quantify trade-offs and understand the regional or landscape-scale impacts of energy projects.

Strategic environmental assessments (SEAs) offer a more holistic approach by evaluating clean energy developments (including plans and programs) at a regional level. SEAs, usually undertaken by governments, proactively identify potential impacts of proposed developments, reduce consultation fatigue, and involve communities in developing effective mitigation strategies at a regional scale. They also provide an opportunity to streamline project approvals by creating clear, informed roadmaps, derisking the area for industry to invest, and integrating socio-economic and environmental objectives. However, challenges remain in implementing these strategic mechanisms effectively, particularly in complex, multi-industry precincts.

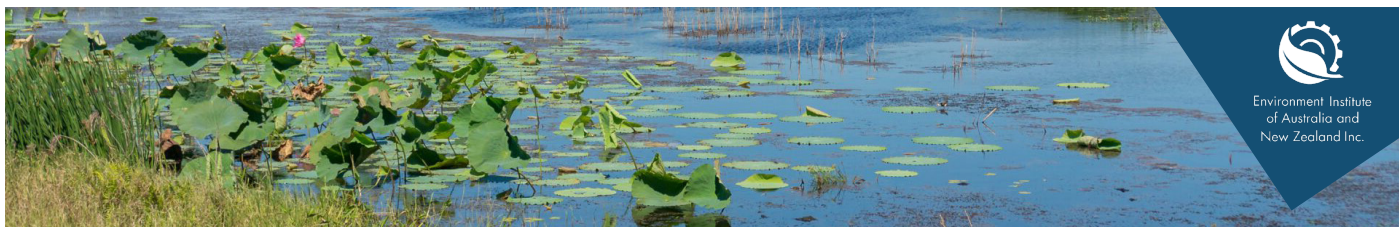
- **Regional planning and SEA should include community engagement, alternatives analysis and constraints analysis.**

SEA and regional planning require clear, respectful and effective channels of communication with stakeholder and community groups including Indigenous Peoples. Early and high-level engagement with affected communities is vital to reduce uncertainty and create collaborative plans.

Good practice SEA and regional planning includes robust alternatives analysis to consider development options from environmental, social and technical perspectives. Environmental constraints to development and preferred outcomes need to be clearly identified in regional land use planning. Effective SEA and regional planning assist in directing clean energy proponents to areas that are most suitable and minimise conflict with environmental and community values by providing a robust decision-making framework.

- **The right type of community engagement is vital in transitioning to a renewable energy economy and requires significant effort.**

IAs can fail to adequately incorporate the breadth of community voices, leading to mistrust and resistance. The disparity in knowledge resources and influence between traditional community networks and the incoming project proponents creates a power imbalance. Early and inclusive engagement with host communities, individual landholders, Indigenous Peoples, and other impacted groups must be prioritised to facilitate co-learning, build trust and learn about and protect community rights.



Respectful engagement prioritising longevity, collaboration, inclusion and patience, and remaining open to the possibility of changes, builds trust and a foundation for achievement of project outcomes and nurtured social contracts. There is a clear opportunity for co-designed initiatives, particularly with Indigenous Peoples, increasing the chance of mutual benefits and successful project outcomes.

"Listen local, speak local. Failing to engage means failing to achieve project outcomes."

- **Community engagement also involves acknowledging procedural fairness and distributive justice. Active listening and early, respectful interactions are vital for an equitable transition.**

There is a distributive disconnect between the impacts and net benefits of the transition, particularly with regards to clean energy. Clean energy sources have numerous benefits from both economic and environmental perspectives that are shared across a nation-wide population. Negative impacts, including land usage, community disruption and amenity impacts, by contrast occur on a smaller scale and disproportionately affect rural communities, who bear the brunt of short-term socio-environmental costs. Communities must be actively listened to and "see demonstratable changes as a result of their input" to uphold procedural fairness and distributive justice.

Further, there must be trust in the planning decision process from all parties, including the community and industry. If there is no trust in the process, there is significant risk that a project will result in mistrust to outrage, further leading to time delays.

- **The issues arising are not necessarily new. Similar problems have been encountered in different sectors and countries and we can learn from these.**

The Paris and Kunming-Montreal Agreements are global pacts, meaning that other nations are also facing similar issues. Learnings from other nations, such as the United Kingdom for offshore wind aspirations, can provide useful insights to help pave an improved way forward in managing the transition. IA, SEA, regional planning and stakeholder engagement in other fields can provide key learnings and help shape a way forward that prioritises best practice.

This symposium provided a valuable opportunity to raise and explore these issues and debate best practice.

LOOKING AHEAD

The transition to a clean energy economy and nature positive future requires navigating an intricate maze of potential conflicts and long-term benefits. How can we best manage the approach to achieve global goals and minimise impacts on the environment and affected communities? The discussions that occurred at this symposium will allow EIANZ to consolidate better practice to inform IA processes and public policy crucial for balancing environmental protection with sustainable development.

Many thanks to the EIANZ [Impact Assessment Special Interest Section](#) for their efforts in putting together such a valuable, informative and successful symposium. A position statement to be released in coming months will detail recommendation actions for EIANZ, policymakers and the general community.