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20 JUL 2001

**THE CONSIDERATION OF SOCIAL
ISSUES IN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
ASSESSMENTS OF AGENCY FLOOD
DEFENCES SCHEMES**

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Executive Summary to Report 40 June 2001

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The revision of the *National Environmental Assessment Handbook for Agency Works and Activities* (Environment Agency, 1998) ('the Handbook') has highlighted the need for the inclusion of guidelines for practitioners regarding the consideration of social issues. The requirement to carry out an appropriate level of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as part of the development of Agency flood defence schemes is well established and documented. The need to consider 'social issues' is less well recognised although there are a number of clear statutory and non statutory drivers for this that can all be linked to an overall objective of sustainable development.

The term 'social issues' is used to refer both to social impacts (positive and negative), particularly non-quantitatively measurable ones, and to participation in the EIA process.

The overall objective of this study was to inform policy and to develop good practice guidelines, and in particular to contribute to the revision of the Handbook. Appropriate consideration of social impacts constitutes 'good practice', which the Agency aims to apply in its work.

The work was also intended to identify areas where further work is required, that may become the subject of future Agency Research and Development work.

This report examines to what extent and how social issues are dealt with in the EIA of Agency flood defence schemes. The study looks at the views and understanding of social issues of Agency staff involved with the planning of flood defence schemes. It also examines current practice in this area and suggests reasons for the inclusion in or exclusion of these issues from flood defence EIA. The need for further action for the Agency to ensure that its duties and responsibilities are met with regard to the consideration of social issues is considered. The research also seeks to identify examples of "good practice" which can be learned from and built upon in the future.

The study was based on a small number of semi-structured one-to-one interviews, and a separate group discussion with five participants. A targeted sampling strategy was adopted to select the interviewees, who included Area, Regional and National staff, principally working on EIA and flood defence. A prompt list of social issues likely to arise in the context of Agency flood defence schemes was prepared for use in the interviews.

The major findings of the research can be summarised as follows:

- Staff have different opinions regarding the need to include social issues within EIA.
- Current practice:
 - Most interviewees had some experience of consultation processes in the context of EIA.

- There were differing evaluations of the effectiveness of Agency consultation in the context of flood defence EIA.
- Examples were given of good practice consultation procedures.
- Human related impacts are considered in EIA of flood defence schemes, but these are not necessarily recognised as social impacts.
- Reasons for the limited consideration given to social issues:
 - Social issues are not considered relevant or consideration is only given to impacts on the physical environment.
 - Flood defence schemes are considered in all cases to have positive social impacts.
 - Lack of internal expertise in the assessment of social impacts.
 - Difficulties in justifying the relevance of social impacts within the current framework for the evaluation of flood defence schemes.

Most of those interviewed felt that the consideration of social issues would make a positive contribution to EIA, but also referred to the need for case studies and guidance.

Participants indicated that the prompt list of social impacts used in the interviews was helpful as a reminder of these issues, though they felt that the list presented required some modification.

As a result of these findings, a modified prompt list of social issues related to flood defence projects (see Appendix 3) is to be incorporated into the revised Handbook. This provides an aid to identifying social issues and a link to relevant social progress indicators (DETR, 1999), contributing to a more robust assessment of social issues involved in flood defence schemes. This approach is also being used to inform the development of guidance on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in the Handbook.

A number of examples of 'good practice', where participation and social impacts have been included in EIA, were identified. It is recommended that further research on this topic be carried out, employing qualitative methodology and focusing in particular on how and the extent to which social and environmental issues have been addressed and incorporated in EIA.

The report suggests that guidance is required on the appropriate level of assessment and methodologies for considering social issues. Furthermore, there is a case for ensuring that expertise in social and behavioural sciences is applied to the EIA of Agency flood defence schemes. This may involve ensuring that external consultants who prepare the EIAs possess appropriate social science skills. This would contribute not only to addressing social issues more comprehensively, but also to achieving the Agency's aims regarding sustainable development.