Need for Creative-Info-Graphics (CiGs) in EIA/ESIA Reporting

Naushad Tahsildar

**ERM discusses the issues around large and complex EIA/ESIA reports and the opportunities for greater use of digital and visual presentation to explain complex information. Can ‘creative info-graphics’ be used to make EIA/ESIA reports more accessible and understandable, and thus more effective in informing consultation and consent decisions for new development?**

The role of environmental impact assessment (EIA) also referred to as environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) has been crucial to the development control process in most parts of the world since its inception in the 1970s. EIAs are formally required for certain types of development projects in most countries to inform consenting decisions and thus development control.

Over time, EIA reports have had to cover a widening scope of technical topics and to deal with increasingly technical and complex information. We are seeing a trend over time whereby EIA reports are becoming much larger. EIA reports can sometimes be very long and wordy and include technical and scientific language which can make the documents ‘inaccessible’ to many of their intended audience (ie those potentially affected by, directly or indirectly, a new development - consent authorities, regulators, businesses, NGOs, community groups and members of the public).

In the last decade we have also made tremendous advancements in digital information and communication technologies. With the rise of the visual culture of the web, images, photos and videos are becoming a form of social currency to be shared and curated\(^{(1)}\). There is a pressing need for us to think about how we could embrace this increase in visual digital literacy in our EIAs.

Improving EIA effectiveness across the globe has been a widely debated topic for a long time and in almost all published research papers and studies the quality of EIA reports is identified as one of the main concerns and has always been questioned. We are seeing EIA reports that can span 50,000 pages in extremis and stakeholders raising concerns that it is sometimes not feasible to properly digest and understand these large reports within time limited consultation periods.

In July 2009, the European Commission published a report on the application and effectiveness of the EIA Directive \(^{(2)}\). The report highlighted the main areas where improvements are needed and provided recommendations, where relevant. Following a consultation process the amended EIA directive (2014/52/EU) which came in force on 15\(^{th}\) May 2014 adopted a number of amendments which included the need for EIA reports to be made more understandable.

This raises a key question - could we make better use of illustrations, infographics and maps or, in short, creative info-graphic (CiGs) to make reports more concise and more easily understood by technical and non-technical readers alike? Shouldn't this be an aim for all those involved in EIA?

With the rise in digital technologies and a highly visual online culture, we need to revisit our approach to the EIA reporting style and approach. Professionals with expertise in creative visualisations and infographic software should work closely with EIA technical teams to ensure we have clear, well communicated EIAs.

CiGs are important because they tell a story and help communicate complex ideas in a clear and meaningful way, in line with the old adage that ‘a picture tells a thousand words’. However we should also bear in mind that infographics are not just ‘pretty pictures’ or extractions of large amounts of words in a figure. They should be meaningful and well thought through and hence require a creative thought process at the early stages of the project.

\(\text{http://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/volume-4-issue-2/teaching-with-infographics}\)

\(^{(2)}\) \(\text{http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eia/review.htm}\)
The main purpose of CiGs is to make information presentable and digestible to a general audience. To cite an example, where a project is being undertaken in a geography/location where there are lower levels of literacy amongst the surrounding local community, CiGs visualisations may be particularly effective in conveying information about the project and its effects.

Moreover CiGs can be created in a universal language without the need for translation (or with simple translation) which is likely to be more effective than a word based report in many situations.

In modern society we have less and less time. Infographics allow us to get information across quickly creating this compelling imagery that can help the content to stand out from the overload of messaging we often receive. Since most people only remember about 20% of what they read, CiGs can help increase reading retention (1).

It is very common that figures and visuals form a very small percentage of an EIA report. To make EIA reports more effective in communicating with their intended audience, this approach needs to be changed. A few examples and comparisons have been included in this paper to illustrate how CiGs can be effective in communicating the features of development projects and their impacts and ways of managing these. Surely we don’t want to be writing a thousand words when one clear picture could say it all?

(1) http://www.brandjoe.com/2012/07/the-benefits-of-infographics/
In summary, through more extensive and imaginative use of CiGs, EIA reports can be reduced in scale and made easier to understand by their target audiences. In effect, this would mean that consent authorities, regulators, businesses, NGOs, community groups and members of the public would all be able to understand more quickly and more fully what a development project is about, what its impacts would be and how these will be managed.

There is no reason why greater use of CiGs should conflict with meeting statutory requirements or guidelines for EIA – in fact, through better communication, CiGs can potentially enhance compliance. It might be that EIA reports that use CiGs to their full effect could help to speed up decision making in relation to consenting development projects.

Naushad Tahsildar is a Principal Consultant in ERM Impact Assessment and Planning Practice, based in Oxford, UK. Naushad is an EIA specialist as well as a trained Architect and Planner, specialising in environmental assessment and management. Naushad is ERM’s global lead for ‘creative-info-graphics’ which are high quality and cutting edge visual presentations used in ERM’s ESIsA.