

LESSONS LEARNED FROM DEVELOPING GUIDELINES TO ASSESS IMPACTS ON WELL-BEING

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Abstract

Impact assessment practice in Canada and globally is improving the ways it looks beyond biophysical impacts to also consider interactions between the human and natural environments and sustainability. Sustainability is related to the concept of lasting well-being. The legislative framework guiding environmental impact assessment (EIA) in the Mackenzie Valley in Northern Canada has required the consideration of well-being in EIA for over 20 years. Well-being is central to the quality of life for people and communities. It includes many tangible and intangible aspects of the social, economic, health, cultural and biophysical environments. Meaningful consideration of well-being in EIA is good practice because it is an effective way to assess project impacts. Focusing on holistic well-being accurately reflects how the world works: not as a basket full of separate parts of the environment that interact in discrete and isolated ways with a project, but as an intimately connected, mutually dependent system. Since well-being is so personal and closely linked to place, meaningful consideration of well-being in EIA is difficult. However, it is not impossible. The Mackenzie Valley Review Board conducts EIA in northern Canada and is developing a guideline on assessing impacts to people, with a focus on well-being. Lessons from the development of this guidelines include talk to people and listen to what they tell you; move beyond silos, don't get too distracted by the details, and look to the future.

Background

The Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board (the Review Board) conducts environmental assessments and environmental impact reviews¹ in the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories, Canada. The work of the Review Board is guided by the *Mackenzie Valley Resources Management Act* (the MVRMA) which was developed collaboratively between federal and territorial governments and Indigenous Government Organizations to enact an integrated resource management system negotiated through modern land claim agreements.²

The MVRMA stems from these land claims. Accordingly, the values and priorities of the land claims organizations, and the people of the Mackenzie Valley that these organizations represent, are duly reflected in the MVRMA. One of these key values is the meaningful consideration of well-being in resource management decision making. Specifically, the MVRMA³ requires the Review Board to have regard to:

- the protection of the environment from the significant adverse impacts of proposed developments;
- the protection of the social, cultural, and economic well-being of residents and communities of the Mackenzie Valley; and
- the importance of conservation to the well-being and way of life of Indigenous peoples.

The MVRMA defines “impact on the environment” to mean any effect on land, water, air, or any other component of the environment, as well as on wildlife harvesting, and includes any effect on the social and cultural environment or on heritage resources. Taking this definition together with the Review Board’s mandate means that the Review Board must be expansive in the way it thinks about impacts and deliberate in its consideration of well-being.

Focussing on well-being in EIA is a clear and effective way to meaningfully assess project impacts as it accurately reflects the way the world actually works; not as a basket full of separate parts of the environment that interact in discrete and isolated ways with a project, but as an intimately connected, mutually dependent system. The Review Board understands that well-being is intrinsically linked to the health of the environment, our ability to live and provide for ourselves, and be a part of the societal and cultural structures we create. For this reason, almost all impact pathways assessed in EIA, if followed to their full and logical endpoints, converge on well-being.

Well-being includes many tangible and intangible aspects of health, social, economic, culture and the biophysical environment and can be experienced and defined differently by individuals and communities. Parlee *et al.* (2012) provides a helpful definition of well-being for northern Indigenous peoples as “the quality of life”, which “takes into account both economic and material considerations (e.g., harvesting, housing) as well as the knowledge, practices and beliefs that matter to people’s sense

¹ Environmental assessments and environmental impact reviews are collectively referred to as environmental impact assessments (EIA) in this document.

² Currently, modern land claim agreements are in place in three regions of the Mackenzie Valley: the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1992), Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1993), and Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement (2005). There are interim measures agreements and ongoing negotiations in other areas of the Mackenzie Valley.

³ See MVRMA s115.

of self and community”. The Review Board understands that assessing potential impacts on people, including well-being, requires a holistic consideration of each supporting pillar of sustainability (health, social, economic, cultural, and biophysical) and the intersections between them (Review Board 2020).

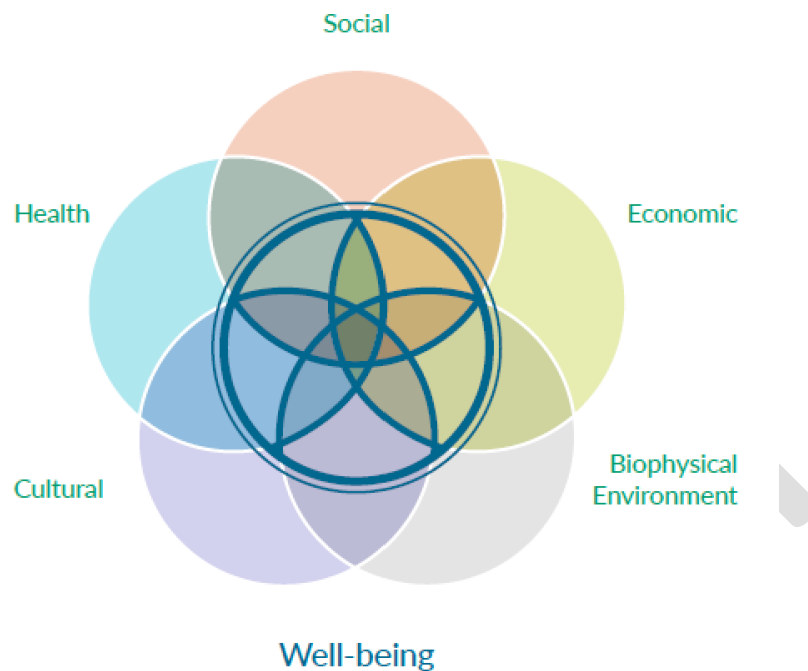


Figure 1: Well-being is the result of interaction between many sources of influence including social, economic, biophysical, cultural and health environments (Review Board, 2020).

Meeting our mandate: the need for a fresh approach

The MVRMA gives the Review Board its mandate, but it does not specify the processes by which its mandate should be carried out. To this end, the Review Board has developed a series of guidance materials over the past twenty years include its *Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines*, *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Guidelines*, *Guidelines for Incorporating Traditional Knowledge in Environmental Impact Assessment* and draft *Cultural Impact Assessment Guidelines* as tools and guides for EA practitioners, participants and developers.⁴ These guidelines have enabled the Review Board to conduct good, fair EIAs that consider potential impacts on well-being in a holistic and meaningful way. However, the Review Board recognizes that more work can be done to improve the consideration of well-being in EIA, especially given the emerging importance of, lack of existing guidance about and evolving best practice for this consideration.

The Review Board has heard clearly and consistently from communities and people that considering impacts on people and well-being EIA requires a holistic approach. Past approaches to considering impacts on people in EIA often look at impacts in discrete silos, following a valued ecosystem component and pathways analysis approach. This limits the ability of assessors and decision makers to identify and understand important linkages between parts of the environment, including biophysical and

⁴ All guidance materials are available on the Review Board’s website here: https://reviewboard.ca/process_information/guidance_documentation/guidelines.

human elements. Understanding the relationships between project impacts and looking at impacts as a system is important for assessing impacts as they are experienced by people: as a set of interactions overlaid on an existing social, cultural, and historical context.

The Review Board recognizes the challenges in undertaking such an assessment and has therefore begun drafting new *Guidelines for Assessing Impacts on People* (the Guideline). This Guideline will combine, and update the existing *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Guidelines* and draft *Cultural Impact Assessment Guidelines* and will include a focus on the holistic assessment of impacts on people as it relates to well-being.

The Process

The Review Board has taken a collaborative and iterative approach to developing its Guideline (see Figure 2). The Review Board began with a deep dive on the legislative context of the MVRMA, including the intents and thought processes involved in land claims. The Review Board also conducted an in-depth examination of past decisions to identify common themes and strategies for considering well-being, and to identify areas for improvement and better alignment with community values reflected in the MVRMA.

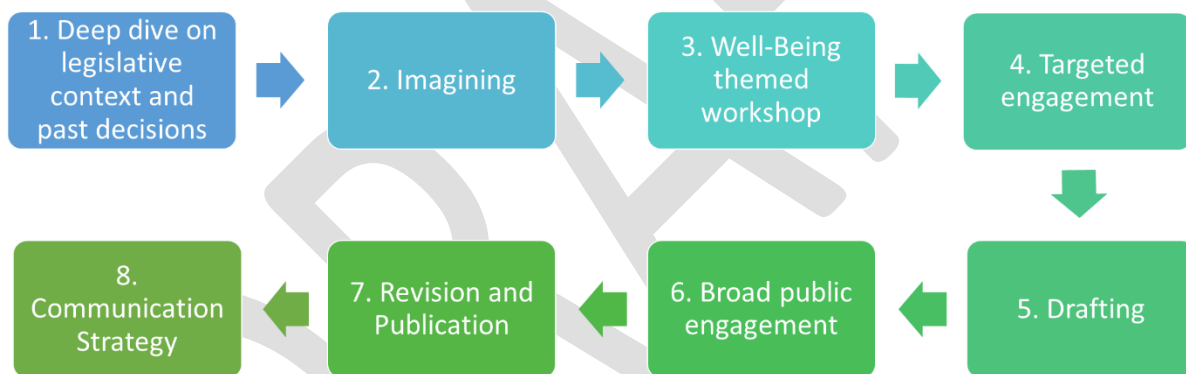


Figure 2: Schematic of the process for developing *Guidelines for Assessing Impacts on People*.

This detailed review fed into a process of imagining what a *Guideline for Assessing Impacts on People* that highlighted well-being might look like. The Review Board asked itself a series of questions about the ultimate goals and objectives for the Guideline: Who is the target audience? Should the Guideline be process based or outcome based? What should the document physically look like? What are the Review Board's goals surrounding how it conducts EIA and serves its mandate for the people and communities in the Mackenzie Valley?

The Review Board used the results of discussion from a recent virtual and in-person workshop on well-being in resource co-management decision making to further understand the context and meaning of, and important contributing factors to, well-being for residents in the Mackenzie Valley.⁵ This workshop also helped to identify targeted engagement partners who would be willing to speak further with Review Board staff to expand and define the appropriate and necessary content, structure and tone for the Guideline.

⁵ A workshop Summary Report is available on the Review Board's website [here](#).

The Review Board is currently in the drafting and targeted engagement stages of development. Conducting both stages simultaneously allows us to be flexible and adaptive to recommended changes and new information that we receive from engagement partners. It also allows us to proceed with developing the guideline in a timely way. The Review Board hopes to conduct broad public engagement on a draft of the guideline in the fall of 2021. Once the guideline is finalized the Review Board plans to publish and share the document following an inclusive and multifaceted communication strategy so that all stakeholders and interested parties can access the Guideline and the information therein in meaningful and accessible ways.

Lessons learned from developing Guidelines for well-being.

1. Talk to People and listen to what they tell you

One of the most important lessons that Review Board staff have learned through the drafting process is the value in meeting people where they are, to speak with them about issues that matter in respectful ways. In some cases, this means picking up the phone and calling someone, or going for a walk to chat rather than sending out mass e-mails and relying exclusively on formal or written feedback. This type of engagement requires building and maintaining respectful relationships over time with the people and communities where you work.

Part of speaking and listening respectfully to people means being open to and inclusive of different forms of expertise that can inform the process and content of the Guideline. This includes making space for and welcoming Traditional Knowledge or local community perspectives and holding these types of information alongside scientific or academic perspectives. People who are affected by development projects are often best placed to speak about the impacts of those developments on their lives and well-being, as well as to identify potential mitigations to address those impacts. The Review Board understands this and is working to ensure that this form of expertise is respected and reflected in guidance about impacts on people and well-being.

2. Move beyond silos

Time and time again, the Review Board has heard from people and communities that impacts are not felt in isolation. Examining impacts on a series of single valued ecosystem components does not and can not give a full and accurate picture of impacts as they are experienced in people's lives. Impact assessors need to understand the full, and sometimes complicated, environments in which impacts are felt (Ehrlich 2021) including local social, cultural, and historical contexts. Guidance relevant to understanding impacts on people needs to include direction on how to move beyond the siloed approach to impact assessment. For example, hearing the stories of places and communities to understand the context in which impacts are felt is just as important to baseline information requirements as quantitative or desktop studies of socio-economic data.

The meaningful assessment of impacts to well-being, and the well-being of Indigenous people and communities particularly, requires a holistic understanding of the connections between land, culture, and well-being. Moving beyond an assessment of impacts in isolation is consistent with methods employed in some Indigenous-led EAs, which have the benefit of "less separation of valued component into separate silos, and more openness to decision-making on projects as a whole (holistically) against cultural laws and norms, sustainability, effects on future generations, and net gains to Indigenous values" (Gibson et al, 2018).

Limiting the evaluation of project impacts to the current use of an area risks minimizing potential effects and is inconsistent with Indigenous views of the land. For example, Ehrlich (2010) describes how, in the assessment of a development within the culturally important Thelon Basin, the people of Lutsel K'e conceived of the land as holding importance both from a historical perspective and for the benefit of future generations. This continuum of use must be acknowledged and included in assessments of impacts to Indigenous well-being.

3. Do not get too distracted by the details

It is important to have a clear understanding of what well-being means and how well-being may be affected for the people and communities where you work. However, the term *well-being* is notoriously difficult, and perhaps impossible to define since it is subjective and informed by local social, historical, and cultural contexts. Spending too much time creating a universal definition of well-being would take resources away from developing the content and structure of the Guideline. For this reason, the Review Board has focused on understanding what well-being means to residents and communities in the Mackenzie Valley and the most common influences on well-being, rather than on precisely defining the term.

4. Look to the future

The last lesson that the Review Board has learned in developing its new *Guidelines for Assessing Impacts on People* is the importance of taking a long-term view of well-being. This represents a slight shift in focus towards project impacts that extend into and beyond closure of developments, in addition to project impacts that occur because of and during construction and operation activities. This problem was discussed by Gibson and the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) (2017) who found that in most EAs, “government and industry tend to weigh current use highly to exclusively, when Indigenous peoples want to see decisions based on more complex understanding of culture, relying on past, present, and desired future use and non-use values of an area.”

There is a clear link between the concepts of lasting well-being and sustainability. This relationship was perfectly expressed by Tara Marsden (Gitanyow Hereditary Chief), who defined sustainability as “the conditions under which ecosystem function, socio-cultural and economic well-being are maintained and risk to ecological integrity is low, thus providing the ecological foundation for the long-term socio-cultural and economic well-being” (as found in *Building Common Ground: A New Vision for Impact Assessment in Canada*). Guidance about assessing impacts on people that focuses on well-being must acknowledge that well-being is only meaningful if it lasts. It must also provide clear direction for developers and EIA participants on how development projects can help communities to reach their long-term objectives for well-being.

Conclusion

The Review Board has a clear mandate to consider well-being in EIA and a strong history of developing guidance for developers and participants in the EIA process in this regard. The Review Board looks forward to using this expertise and learning from the experiences gained in developing new *Guidelines for Assessing Impacts on People* to improve and evolve the way that well-being is considered in EIA in the Mackenzie Valley and beyond.

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