

IAIA 2022 Vancouver, Canada

Paper Submission:

**Impact assessment at-a-glance: Process booklets for a wide audience**

Jeremy Freeman

Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board

Yellowknife, NT Canada

Presented: May 6, 2022 (In-Person, in Vancouver)

## Introduction

We are here at this conference discussing various aspects of Impact Assessment. This session's theme in particular is "How to achieve more meaningful public participation in impact assessment". But what IS impact assessment? And who ARE the public? Definitions differ, amongst many different legal jurisdictions worldwide, even within a country's boundaries.

Impact Assessment (IA) is a very complex process and concept. What is the best way to communicate this complex concept to diverse audiences – the audiences who are our partners and stakeholders in the Impact Assessment process? In this presentation and paper, I highlight a method we used at the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board (MVEIRB, or the Review Board) in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada to communicate IA to a broad audience via Process Booklets or brochures, and the thinking that went into how to create and construct them.

I do want to note from the start that in our jurisdiction we consider environmental assessment (EA) to be synonymous with what the larger IAIA community calls impact assessment (IA), and I use these terms interchangeably. I will mostly utilize EA in place of IA, as it is the legal term for IA in our jurisdiction. We are also moving to use the term Indigenous more often, but legally in many various pieces of legislation in Canada, Aboriginal peoples' is still used. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are also used synonymously.

## Who We are, Where We're Located, What We Do

First, an introduction to who the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board is, where we're located and what we do is called for.

We're a co-management organization that is derived from Indigenous people's land claims in the area that we operate. These land claims in turn derive their jurisdiction from Canada's Constitution Act. We are not "government", though some Board members are government appointees. An appointed Board directs and guides us, consisting of no less than 7 members, including 1 chair. One-half of the Board is appointed through Aboriginal land claim organizations, and one-half by the federal and territorial governments.

The Board has staff that work for them, of which I am one. We are a small and nimble organization, currently staffing in the range of 10-15 employees. Our business is strictly Impact Assessment. We set policy and process for what many are familiar with as 'screening' of proposed projects (to determine if a formal impact assessment is needed), but we do not typically conduct the screening of projects ourselves. When a project is deemed through screening to have significant impacts or public concern and put forward to environmental assessment we lead the process forward.

As noted before, we are based out of the capital city of the Northwest Territories in northern Canada, in Yellowknife. Our jurisdiction for impact assessment however, the Mackenzie Valley, consists of the majority of land in the Territory, with the exclusion of the Inuvialuit Settlement region in the Northernmost portions/High Arctic. The Inuvialuit have their own environmental assessment regime from their land claim, the *Inuvialuit Final Agreement*. The land under the Review Board's impact assessment jurisdiction is vast and diverse.

We define environmental assessment as a set of steps for decision-making, predicting whether a proposed project is likely to cause environmental impacts that matter, and identifying ways to reduce or avoid those impacts. The environment in our "environmental" assessment is broad, and must consider social, economic, cultural AND environmental effects, and incorporate Traditional Knowledge. We rely on participation for our process, from Indigenous Groups, government and members of the public.

## Where the EA Process Booklets Came From

All of the above shaped how we wanted to communicate our complex, legalistic process with a broad audience and led to the development of process booklets. However, we didn't start from scratch.

We started by using our existing tools. We have a very well-designed Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines document that describes our environmental assessment process in a "micro" level of detail. While well-written and designed, it is prescriptive, text-heavy (approximately 100 pages), and was written over a decade and half ago. It also features language that can be quite technical, but provides a level of detail environmental practitioners need for informed participation in our process.

Around five years ago, our Policy team spearheaded the creation of some easy-to-understand, very visual tools to help describe our complex process to others. This led to the planning and creation of seven Pop-Up Display Banners (that are unrolled from metal boxes and propped up, somewhat taller than the average adult) that are brought to communities, tradeshow, technical hearings, etc. These banners were released in 2018 and we started bringing them to nearly all public events. They contain a "macro" level of detail on our EA process. They are a quick, visually-heavy description of our EA process with minimal text highlighting only key process steps. They give a broad, "high-level" overview of EA in the Mackenzie Valley and the overall process steps, in order.

It was determined that we needed something in-between however, (not a micro-level of detail, but not incredibly macro, or high-level) that would cover in sufficient detail the steps of the EA process, and where the public could get involved. In between these two products we set out to create the EA Process Booklets – six booklets that would detail how the Review Board conducts its environmental assessments, where the public could get involved, and how that feedback is considered.

While built from the ground-up in-house by our staff, these booklets were to fit within the system of tools we already had. Almost like a nesting-doll or fractal approach, the booklets would share consistent messaging with the other tools available (the guidelines and the pop-up display banners). It was just a matter of scaling that message to the right level for the intended purpose and audience.

## Audience

Who was our audience? An important question to ask when you'd like to design such learning materials or tools.

Our audience at the Review Board can be many diverse groups, including Indigenous groups and/or government; municipal governments, territorial and federal governments, members of the public, developers/project proponents, NGOs and even industry groups. Our main focus for these booklets however was members of the public.

Who is the public in the Northwest Territories? As noted, the public is diverse. While Statistics Canada describes the population as 51% Indigenous, the non-indigenous population is overwhelmingly located in a few major cities (Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Inuvik, Hay River). The majority of smaller communities in the Territory are large-majority Indigenous (80-90% of the population). The public also speaks one of eleven official languages of the Territory: not only English and French, but also nine diverse Indigenous languages.

### Tailored Approach

In light of this broad audience and diverse “public”, we structured our process booklets accordingly.

We emphasized “Plain Language” as key throughout the booklets. We aimed for a very straightforward and approachable reading-level, keeping in mind that many in our audience may know English not as their primary, but a secondary language. We defined any technical terms clearly. We provided bulleted text/explanations whenever possible.

We let the Table of Contents tell a story of the booklet within. Headings in the booklets were assertions of what was to be said or learned, so if, for instance, one was strapped for time, one could get an idea about what the booklet (and step in the EA process) was about, at-a-glance. Key Take-Away messages were also summarized and inserted into the start of each booklet. These are short, punchy “one-liner” key messages we hoped to get across – not all the content but the overall, key-messages the Review Board wishes to impart on readers and participants – the “if you get nothing else out of these brochures, we hope we can at least impart these messages to you”.

We used visual tools or keys throughout the entire booklet series to guide readers as to where they were in the booklets and process. There was a grounding set of EA steps with caribou tracks at the start of each booklet, highlighting where we were in the EA process, and which steps we’d be focusing on in the booklet. The front cover highlights which of the six booklets we are in, and at the back of the booklets is a textual description of what each is about.

In regard to the overall visual and written balance of the books – the aim was still to be very engaging and visual-heavy, noting our audience and the fact that effective visuals can go a long way to improving anyone’s understanding of a complex process. We aimed for (and usually achieved) simple explanatory text and easy-to-understand visuals that represented complex processes wherever possible. We were not perfect in this regard, but tried our best given our process.

Finally, we aimed to always be accurate with grammar and consistent in style.

### Think Local, Show Local

Think local, show local was another theme that came out of our process. Whenever possible we strived to use pictures and examples of places, people and projects (past and present) we were involved with. The Northwest Territories is incredibly large and vast, geographically, but also in terms of culture and people. Even within the “administrative” regions of the Territory, there are great differences amongst communities. By showing local examples from a variety of places, we show commitment and respect to the areas in which we work and the people within them.

### Lessons-Learned

Some other general tips and take-aways I thought we could share in the creation of similar outreach tools for educating on environmental impact assessment.

In terms of content creation – Utilize consistent colour/visual themes. Working with people who design such things for a living is helpful, and they can utilize the same visual look (clipart, templates, etc.) and colour-scheme for your product.

In terms of the actual text – use consistent language! We had multiple authors from our team (8+ people) writing the templates for these booklets. Consistent terminology and language, even writing style and tone are important and add value and professionalism. It is worth it to take time between review of each booklet and do an overall scan for tone and terminology. A list of exact terms may even be helpful.

Avoid the use of acronyms whenever possible. If a very technical term is used three or more times, perhaps an acronym is worth using. If not, err on the side of spelling the word out completely. Define

acronyms that are used on first use. Acronyms can confuse the uninitiated about the EIA process and the non-technical, in particular.

Speaking of definitions, define your technical terms and utilize definition text-boxes, if possible. A text-box, separate from the main body of text can really help highlight important terms for readers.

Avoid “walls of text”. Try to keep things simple and to-the-point, using point form or bulleted lists wherever possible. Try not to have too much text, too long paragraphs or too many bullets on one page with no other queues (visuals, etc.).

### Take-Home Thoughts

Some other ideas gathered from the management-end of such a project for over a year.

Utilize your existing tools: legislation, policy documents, guidelines, visuals, photos, etc. You are not building completely from scratch! Review these documents and your plans for your booklets. Does what is in the legislation, policy and guidelines actually match the process in your booklets? Does what you actually do “on the ground” match both?

Keep in touch with your organizations management! As you work on these documents and come across perhaps conflicting messaging, or hard-to-meet timelines, they are your allies and can suggest best approaches, appropriate wording, and excellent examples.

Keep in touch with your design person. We all can't be desktop publishing experts, and different tools are needed besides the typical Microsoft Office suite (Word) to design these products. Keep in mind that these people likely don't know the environmental impact assessment process, or your language/jargon at all. You must be very explicit with them when making edits or requesting changes, and give near-literal instructions, or risk misinterpretation. Ideally these designers have worked on other projects for your organization and can use similar templates/colour schemes and clip-art to enhance your booklets.

Realize the creation of such a tool will take time, and likely longer than you or management expected, to get right.

Realize you will most definitely learn a tonne about your process! I have been working in environmental impact assessment for eight and-a-half years, four here in the north, and still, the act of defining and

simplifying the process you do every day into an easy-to-understand format will teach you about what you do and do not know!

And finally, realize your product is likely only “Version 1.0”. As in impact assessment, an iterative, adaptive-management process is probably helpful. At some point, you do want a final, firm deadline for any edits and changes though. Limit your management/approvals circle if possible, and set a firm final deadline to release your “1.0” on the world!

## Conclusion

Hopefully this paper (and associated presentation) gave a helpful, colloquial overview of our experience and some of the lessons-learned from the creation of these educational booklets about our environmental impact assessment process. Meaningful public participation means the public understanding the intent of process and procedure. Meaningful means giving relevant, local examples and being inclusive to the people who live there and are affected by developments proposed in impact assessments. Meaningful also means easy-to-understand, irrelevant of language or cultural background.

I thank you for allowing me to share our experience thus far creating these materials and always welcome feedback and further networking! Thank you to the International Association for Impact Assessment and IAIA 2022 Coordinators for allowing me to present and share, and to my direct Manager, Alan Ehrlich for his guidance and support while he juggled an already busy plate, and thanks to our other colleagues who helped contribute to initial designs, prose and ideas for the booklets. Their names are noted in my presentation deck. Thanks to our Executive Director, Mark Cliffe-Phillips for his being supportive and encouraging of our endeavour, fitting it into our organization’s strategic planning. And finally, a thank-you to our current Board Chair, JoAnne Deneron and our Board Members for allowing us to do what we do, and our reason for existence – serving the people of the Mackenzie Valley. It is now the end of June 2022 and I am happy to report that the “finalized” (Version 1.0) version of the Environmental Assessment Process Summary Booklets are posted to our website,

<https://www.reviewboard.ca> . Mahsi-Cho!