

## **Thinking socially about environmental analysis: co-construct tools with local and regional stakeholders**

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This paper follows a partnership research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and developed to improve the consideration of social dimensions in environmental assessments conducted in southern Quebec under the Law on the quality of the environment, which obliges this process for any major development project.

Environmental assessment (EA) in Quebec is a procedure governed by the Environment Quality Act aimed at anticipating and supervising the changes likely to be caused by certain infrastructure projects. This procedure, under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment and the Fight against Climate Change, is one of the instruments of public action used to assess development actions and their possible impacts on the quality of the environment and on the human life, health, safety and welfare.

The procedure aims to allow the government to make a decision as to whether or not to authorize the project. It constitutes a progressive process linking the project initiator (it can be a ministry, a municipality, a company, an organization, a person), the government and the populations. and territories possibly affected by the project.

One of the key elements of the procedure is the completion of the impact study by the project initiator following the directives issued by the government. The impact study is the basic document from which the ministries (during the admissibility analysis) and the population (during public hearings) will be able to express themselves, ask questions, express concerns.

Several researchers have noted, however, that until now, the social dimensions have been more difficult to take into account during the environmental assessment and that their integration has remained fragile, even often deficient. However, social demands in terms of the environment, justice, equity and participation in decision-making are multiplying and often result in protests and concerns expressed by citizens and other social actors with regard to certain development projects. layout.

### **The social dimensions**

By social dimensions, we mean what concerns human groups, and which relate to people's daily lives (lifestyle), culture (values, cultural confrontation, marginalization), community (cohesion, resources, social tension, violence ) or in the political and symbolic system (INSPQ 2020: VI); for example :

- group dynamics
- social capital and other community resources
- economic, cultural, social aspects
- politics including democracy, participation, governance, equity and social struggles
- history, collective identity, values, belonging the landscape
- land use planning, infrastructure and services.

In Québec meridional part, measures have been in place since 1972 to take these elements into account during the environmental assessment of major projects, and quickly took the form of an original approach to consultation with citizens and other interested parties, via the Bureau des audiences publiques en environnement (BAPE) (André et al., 2018). And the practice of environmental assessment in Quebec tends to broaden the definition of the environment by giving it a broader scope that includes social impacts (Leduc and Raymond, 2000). As Fortin (2009) notes, environmental assessment practices have changed and, although "issues related to the quality of the biophysical environment (air, water, soil) still remain central [...] others are added and gain in importance, such as those related to social impacts [...]". Indeed, the importance of taking into account social and human factors in EA has grown in recent decades, particularly following the questions raised during public hearings at the BAPE and the participation of the populations.

The controversies surrounding the arrival of certain projects and the notions of risk and social acceptability that often accompany them show that the social dimension has become crucial in the environmental analysis of certain projects. In the same vein, the Sustainable Development Act of the Ministry of the Environment and the Fight against Climate Change "recognizes the inseparable nature of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of development activities". Above all, the EA procedure was modified in 2018 and certain points should be noted. The first is the opening of a register allowing citizens, municipalities and all interested persons to mention their concerns with regard to the announced project, concerns which must be included and taken into account in the impact study. . In addition, the environmental analysis must now be considered on the basis of the stakes of the project, which could lead to changing the nature and the importance given to the participation of the actors of society.

However, the analysis of the social impacts of projects submitted to EAs remains a challenge for professionals from the various ministries and organizations involved in the EA procedure. For the moment, it must be noted that what is raised at the BAPE has always been and remains little taken into account in the decisions allowing the implementation of large-scale projects, compared to other concerns (Gauthier and Simard, 2007; Côté et al, 2011). What is more, the legitimate representatives of the citizen communities, i.e. the local and regional governments, have no specific role during these hearings or throughout the process, despite their privileged position in the territory. These conditions differ, for example, from the implementation conditions provided for in northern Quebec, or for the Crees of *Eyou Itschee* territory.

This difficulty is not unique to Quebec, one of the shortcomings of environmental assessment systems around the world is the lesser importance given to social impacts compared to other more "technical" or "environmental" impacts (impacts on fauna, flora, air, water, etc.) (Burge, 2002; Fortin, 2009).

SSHRC-funded research sought to better understand the processes related to the social dimensions of environmental assessment in southern Quebec. She first focused on understanding the way in which the social dimensions are taken into account by the authorities with the official role of deciding during the environmental assessment process (objective 1). She then built tools taking into account the challenges of these processes, and oriented towards improving them (objective 2). This second objective will be further developed in the context of this communication.

## **Objective 1: a portrait of the current process**

In order to achieve the first objective, semi-directed interviews were conducted with nearly 50 government officials, belonging to ministries associated with community and social aspects: health, municipal affairs, culture and communication, as well as with strategic members of the bodies linked to the consultation process itself: environmental assessment department of the ministry in charge, and Bureau des audiences publiques en environnement (BAPE). We interviewed people both at central and regional level, stratifying the sample to obtain a variety of territorial realities.

The results of this first phase showed that the following factors negatively influence the consideration of social dimensions:

- Lack of training and knowledge in social sciences;
- Lack of political will or political stakes;
- Prejudices towards citizens or towards social struggles;
- Work context making it difficult to add additional work.

However, interviewees were very aware of the importance of social elements, such as conflict, social acceptance and landscape. These are obviously important factors in the smooth running – or not – of the evaluation and implementation of the project. According to those interviewed, however, these elements are of low priority in the political decision, which seems to be oriented above all towards the promises of local and national economic growth.

## **Objective 2: tools favorable to the social dimensions**

The second phase of the project aimed to co-construct tools promoting the consideration of social elements in the work of civil servants having to formulate observations and recommendations on the environmental assessment provided by the promoter of a project. These tools had to be simple to access, easy to understand and use, and target the essential elements. They have been improved by the addition of knowledge transfer specialists to the project, and have been formatted on a specific website: <https://ee.uqar.ca>

The Environmental Assessment Act was revised in 2018, currently being drafted. It re-oriented the process towards an analysis by issues, rather than by impacts. As a result, another phase has been added to our partnership work to better understand the meaning of this shift, the changes in practice it would bring, and how to respond more appropriately. We then used an important and recurring issue in the projects submitted in recent years in Quebec: the landscape. The subject made it possible to better anchor the learning, and the resulting tools, in a concrete reality. No legal actor is officially responsible for the landscape in Quebec. No law really regulates the landscape. This can therefore be worked on by any ministry, public or private actor, regardless of the territorial scale. There is therefore no definition of landscape common to all ministries. However, two legal statutes recognize the value of certain landscapes according to very specific criteria. These are the statuses of humanized landscape (established by the ministry in charge of the environment in 2002) where the importance of biodiversity is central and of heritage cultural landscape (established by the ministry in charge of culture in 2012), for which the symbolic, identity and aesthetic aspects of the landscape are more taken into account, mainly through so-called remarkable landscapes or landscapes with a strong heritage dimension. These designations immediately exclude many territories whose characteristics correspond to neither of these designations, but which, in a holistic approach (Berque et al., 2006, Tress and Tress, 2001) have nevertheless a real value in the

eyes of the people who live there and who inhabit it, since they weave symbolic and pragmatic links with their communities, regardless of their aesthetics or their historical representativeness.

By adopting this landscape approach, the role of territorial actors (municipalities, cities and regional county municipalities/MRCs) appeared crucial both in documenting the issues and in carrying out certain characterizations and reflections in a participatory mode. We therefore continued the reflection with this group of actors by organizing specific data collection activities in the spring of 2018: two discussion groups and an open forum. In their environments, in general the landscape is not designed here solely for its aesthetics, but in a more global sense of living environment. For the participants, the landscape is plural, that it raises several crucial issues for thinking about the coherent planning of the territory and the development of the communities, and that it raises the question of the collective value granted to it.

The results also showed how much the territorial authorities are sidelined from the entire environmental assessment process, and that they lack the resources (human, financial, tools) to fit into the only place where they can to pronounce: the hearings of the BAPE. However, the people we met have developed several specific ways of knowing about the social dimensions of their territories, and especially about the holistic landscape aspects. Several characterization, enhancement and protection initiatives were presented and testify to a detailed knowledge and a firm commitment to this dimension. However, at present, these “landscape tools” cannot be used by the MRCs in the EA process. Other than at the BAPE, where this information can be presented, there is no time or place that allows planners to present their landscape initiatives so that they are taken into account by EA analysts.

These findings invite us to question how environmental assessments should be conducted in the future. If we really want to work from the issues, and take into account the landscape issue in all its complexity, it seems important to consider the environments and the diversity of the territories. This shows the interest in local governance on subjects such as the landscape and therefore greater flexibility in government orientations in terms of land use planning. These observations also invite us to consider that landscape issues can legitimately be present before the arrival of projects, and that they must be taken into account during the environmental analysis. Similarly, regional landscape initiatives should find a real place in the EA process, they should be considered as essential knowledge tools during the landscape analysis of a project.

## **Conclusion**

These results eloquently plead for greater inclusion of territorial actors in the evaluation process. They were delivered to the partners of the research project. Certain regional offices of the ministries, in particular those of Culture and Communications, volunteered to forge more links in this regard. However, the SARS-COV19 pandemic changed intentions and made it impossible to pursue these goals.

The project as a whole confirms that too little space is still given to social dimensions in the environmental assessment process of southern Quebec, and the results add to this already known observation a crucial element of reflection, that of the little space left territorial, local and regional actors, despite their in-depth knowledge of the issues.

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