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

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This communication 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 Environment Quality Act, which requires this process for any major development project.

By social dimensions, we mean what is part of a population vision; Like what:

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

Even if these measures have been in place since 1972 and then quickly proposed an original approach to consultation with citizens and other interested parties, via the Bureau des audiences publiques en environnement (BAPE), it is clear that what concerns the social dimensions is very weakly taken into account in the decisions allowing the implementation of these projects. In addition, local and regional governments have no specific role, despite their privileged location in the territory. These conditions differ, for example, from the implementation conditions planned in Quebec's northern zone, or for the Cree of Eyou Itschee.

The research began with a focus on understanding how social dimensions are considered by jurisdictions with the ability to influence the environmental assessment process. To do this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nearly 50 government officials from ministries associated with community and social aspects: health, municipal affairs, culture and communication, as well as with strategic members of the bodies related to the consultation process itself: the environmental assessment directorate of the ministry in charge, and the Bureau des audiences publiques en environnement (BAPE). We interviewed people at both 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 the social sciences
- Lack of political will or political stakes
- Prejudices against citizens or social struggles
- Work context making it difficult to add additional work

Yet interviewees were acutely aware of the importance of social elements, such as conflict, social acceptance and landscape. These are obviously important factors as to whether or not the evaluation and implementation of the project runs smoothly. According to the interviewees, however, these elements are not given priority in the political decision, which seems to be oriented above all towards the promises of local and national economic growth.

The second phase of the project aimed to co-construct tools to promote the consideration of social factors in the work of public servants who have to make observations and recommendations on the environmental assessment provided by the proponent of a project. These tools had to be easy 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.ugar.ca>

The Environmental Assessment Act was revised in 2018, which is currently under development. 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 learnings, and the resulting tools, in a concrete reality.

In doing so, the role of territorial actors (municipalities, cities and regional county municipalities/RCMs) appeared crucial both to document the issues and to carry out certain characterizations and reflections in a participatory way. We therefore continued the reflection with this group of actors by organizing specific data collection activities in spring 2018: two discussion groups and an open forum. The results showed how these territorial bodies are excluded from the entire environmental assessment process, and that they lack the resources (human, financial, tools) to fit into the only place where they can decide: the BAPE hearings. In addition, the people interviewed have nevertheless developed several specific modes of knowledge about the social dimensions of their territories, and especially for the landscape aspects. Several characterization, enhancement and protection initiatives were presented and testify to a detailed knowledge and a firm commitment to this dimension. In addition, in general the landscape is not designed here only for its aesthetics, but in a more global sense of living

environment. These results eloquently argue for the greater inclusion of territorial actors in evaluative processes.

This information was delivered to the research project partners. Some regional branches of the ministries, notably those of Culture and Communications, were volunteering to build more links in this regard.

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