

PLan: the Planning Action Network, Inc
PO Box 2513, Darwin, NT 0801
margaret.clinch@bigpond.com

16.7.2013
Draft Environmental Guidelines,
NT Environmental Protection Authority
Darwin, NT
NTEPA.Consult@nt.gov.au

RE: Draft Guidelines for the Preparation of Economic and Social
Impact Assessment.

Dear Sir Madam,

1. Introduction

We happened to be looking at the EPA website last evening and found this draft guideline for comment. As our work happens to be very much in this field, we ask that you accept our submission for consideration, it being less than a day overdue. This morning we are unable to call up the special form, but will email this submission to the advertised address.

Ours is a voluntary organization working for over fifteen years for planning sustainability for the community, in social, cultural, environmental and long term economic terms. In other words, we are seeking four square sustainability for the living environment, regarding the human element as an essential part of the environment.

We cannot remember ever having been invited to comment on this draft, even though we have made submissions to the EPA before, and also contacted the EPA in cases of emergency damage to the environment.

2. Commencement of our Submission

2.1 Generally speaking this submission follows the sequence of the Draft Guidelines.

2.2 Modern definitions of Environment include People.

A proper guideline including social impact issues is very welcome. This aspect has been very much neglected in the past. Community has borne the brunt of this neglect. However modern approaches to assessment have long included social impact as a part of the concept of 'Environmental impact' in the real sense.

Indeed we recognize your quote of the definition from the Environmental Assessment Act which agrees with what we have long said- that environment includes:

'all aspects of the surroundings of man including the physical, biological, economic, social and cultural aspects.'

2.3 Failure to follow through and enforce the social impact aspect.

In some recent instances, some reference to the social aspect may have been included, but it restricted itself to local heritage interpretation, and even then petered out in the application, eg ConocoPhillips, Darwin Wharf Project and Lyons.

2.4 Scope and Inclusiveness of Economic and Social Assessment Guidelines.

The people of the Northern Territory have been faced during the last fifteen years with an imperative of economic development. A balanced government must manage the social impact of economic development for the growth of a skilled well rounded mature population based on families, and not upon a unstable transient single frontier type of life.

Examples of rapid economic development include not only major projects initiated by companies, such as oil and gas and mining, but also government developments such as the Commonwealth's Defence Move North, Department of Immigration programmes, and the Northern Territory Government's (NTG) improving of infrastructure to support new growth, including the building of sustainable new tropical suburbs to house a growing local population.

Major Government projects must also be subject to Economic and Social Impact Assessment because they have a huge impact on the natural and social environment far into the future.

2.5 Aboriginal Communities

In the Northern Territory, where approximately one third of the population is Aboriginal, the guidelines must address the social issues of both cultures. Senator Hill recognized this when the uranium mining development of Coronation Hill was not permitted.

3. 'Social Licence to operate'

3.1 Initial and Ongoing

The concept of establishing through assessment a social licence to operate is a useful one. However any assessment process, including a social assessment, must establish an ongoing management of outcomes process. Any 'monitoring' process must be independent and have legal 'triggers' for action.

Larger organisations need to be regulated by legal provisions, to achieve control.

4. Aspects of Social Assessment of Development

4.1 Social assessment and the natural environment

Some aspects of social assessment of developments are directly related to impact on the natural environment.

Such examples include:

- clearing of mangroves which the community knows are important to the health of the harbour, fish breeding supplies, and the protection of marine mammals
- * avoiding placing noisy, smelly, dirty, hazardous or polluting industries close to residential suburbs
- * establishing enclosed canal estates which are either banned or discouraged in many states

- building of suburbs with regard to tropical conditions
- ignoring storm surge and cyclone issues
- implementing energy saving architecture
- protecting of areas of special or diverse environmental concentration for research, natural protection, educational study, or human enjoyment, as 'green areas, or green belts'.
- avoiding building on prominent natural landmarks and environmental features such as catchments.
- establishing of a new 'dirty and hazardous' port outside Darwin harbor

Even aspects in this category are being ignored with severe consequences, as in the Mitchell Creek Catchment new in Palmerston East.

4.2 Social sustainability per se.

Other aspects of social assessment are more directly associated with the development of 'new community living environments' or planning suburbs. New suburbs must be socially workable. These projects must now become accountable by inclusion in the social impact assessment process, for the sake of sustainability.

4.3 Government Projects, and Social Impact Assessment

We are particularly concerned at recent social outcomes from the planning process for new suburbs. The use of the Specific Use device by developers to create 'integrated suburbs', in co-operation with departmental planners, has in the last five years or more, created suburbs which would be non-compliant with the main body of the Northern Territory Planning Scheme (NTPS).

The accelerated use of Exceptional Development applications, and the Development Consent Authority's (DCA) dominant approval regime, is endorsing suburbs like Muirhead which are socially unsustainable, because they provide no public facilities.

4.4 Social Impact Assessment and new Suburbs

In generic terms, the needs of new suburbs could be described as offering a variety of residential options on different size lots, 10% useable flat green open space (not drains), and a range of public facilities such as large community centre, child care, school, preschool, community garden, youth centre, and/ or seniors centre, and basic shopping with post office. Good public transport, bicycle paths and pedestrian access is essential. The design should reflect the tropical environment, and address green house issues.

4.5 Social Impact and Sustainability

The generic description above support economic transport, greenhouse economies, healthy living, a local focus, social interaction, and minimum policing. Failure to provide a range of homes, a convenient layout, provide facilities, easy access to education and training, walkable neighbourhoods, public open spaces, meeting and recreation places, without totally destroying the natural environment, causes public resentment, and a failure to identify with place. Long staying families build commitment and sustainability.

4.6 Environmental Damage in Projects

Two types of clearing occur in the building of new suburbs.

The first is the clearing of vegetation within subdivision as the suburb opens, based on an established Area PPlan, or on a layout the Minister, and or the DCA has approved. Is it necessary to do total clearing, or could this be done on an individual lot basis by builders ?

The second type of clearing is the sudden seemingly random clearing, or destruction of vegetation, including special and riparian vegetation, when heavy equipment operators, apparently on contracts, move across country for various types of infrastructure. This requires the co-ordinating authority of an agency such as the EPA.

Plan is very concerned about a late totally unexplained change to the long established Palmerstone Area Plan 2-3 (Bucolic/ Mitchell.)

5. Economic Assessment and Social Impact Assessment

The impacts, good and bad, of any project should be accountably described in any assessment. The management and follow through must be based on thorough preparation.

The lists provided through your Section 5 are useful. However it is noted that benefits to community are so easily overstated in the early stages, like the degree of provision of Aboriginal employment, or the provision of a suburban school. Statements like these need to be need to be accountable, not fade into oblivion as time passes.

6. Public Consultation on Projects and Developments

Public consultation on the positive and negative aspects must occur in a candid and open way, sufficiently early in a project or development that responses can be achieved, not at the final 'announcement stage'. Consultation standards are useful, but even these can be abused if decision making and project commitment goes ahead of the public consultation timetable.

We must avoid of the situation at Moorhead where the Fitzmaurice Drive community did not find out until two years too late, that their beautiful stand of eucalypts was to be sacrificed to the new suburb by the Defense Housing Australia. They are mourning it still.

The community provides the benefit of local knowledge. Flora and fauna associations, land care and environmental groups, youth and age welfare providers and specialist groups such as Plan and the Friends of Mitchell Creek Catchment should be consulted as well as residents.

We agree that an independent facilitator should be employed in these public consultations. Proponents must be made accountable for the truth of the assessment document's scope and content.

Section 6 is useful, particularly for its lists, particularly:

‘towns and residential communities’

‘community infrastructure and services’

‘community cohesion and inclusion, patterns and social interaction, and social foci – and

‘ places appreciated/used for cultural. Recreational and aesthetic reasons’

7. Staging of Environmental Assessment processes in terms of time.

Most of the public’s awareness of each assessment process is in the initial preparation of documents, followed by the Management Plan response. After that not much is usually heard, leaving the public unaware. IPEX has proved an exception, with detailed progress reports being publicly provided.

It is desirable that there be progressive reporting to the public of any project which has required NTG assessment approval.

The EPA should ensure that there is ongoing candid communication about the management of project as part of the Economic and Social Impact Plan (ESIMP), not just in-house monitoring. Which can become ineffective by being taken for granted by uninformed or biased staff.

The independent supervisory role should be made clear, with the public able to raise issues and obtain responses when they occur, rather than waiting on proponent. One of the most fraught phases of projects is the closure or rehabilitation stage when the proponent may have left the scene. The EPA has special responsibilities in seeing that such issues can be met.

8. Conclusion

The NTEPA Guidelines for the preparation of an Economic and Social Impact Assessment is an important document. We welcome its attention to the social impact of projects.

We have used our long experience to contribute to the document, which has a good base. In particular, we regard it essential that the

planning and development of new suburbs by the NT Government with or without commercial partners, be subject to such Formal Assessment. At present evidence shows that, in social terms, new suburbs are being poorly planned.

M A CLINCH

Convener

PLan: the Planning Action Network, Inc.

