

# AN ASSESSMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ASSESSMENT (EIA) IN MALAYSIA

Masdiah Abdul Hamid \*, Kweh Qian Long

*Department of Accounting, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Pahang, Malaysia.*

## ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in evaluating the planning project is a debatable issue among academics and practitioners, since EIA has been claimed to be unable to eliminate the environmental issues. Focusing only on technical improvements is not sufficient for rectifying the problems of EIA; the process of EIA should be clearly identified instead to maximise the effective use of EIA. It is important to note that the effective use of EIA, particularly on process-related issues could significantly minimise bad environmental effects. In summary, this study aims to explore and identify the effectiveness of EIA in the planning process and barriers to evaluate the environmental performance in Malaysia. The findings of this study could be a baseline for organisation to minimize emission, avoid the risk of prosecution and fines arising from potential environment breaches and cost reduction within the organisation.

**Keywords:** Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Environment, Society and Sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Rapid development and urbanisation have been leaving significant side effects on the environment since decades ago. In Malaysia, the Department of Statistics reported that the increasing population number and the level of urbanisation in Malaysia significantly contributed bad impacts towards the environment especially the quality of air. That is, air pollution is one of the major problems due to rapid growth of industrial sectors, increased traffic volume, expansion in land exploration, forest degradation, burning of fuels in industrial processing, open burning etc. It has been reported that air surrounding us is contaminated by any number of substances such as gaseous and particulates not normally found in the air. With these phenomena, the air pollution in a few states in Malaysia are said to have reached the danger zone. Overall, a number of environmental problems such as air pollution, forest destruction, acid rains, global warming, ozone depletion, hazardous waste and over-pollution have caused numerous effects to the country resulting from environmental disaster. Due to the magnitude of these nuisances and their possible effects on businesses, intensive remedial efforts have been taken by countries, business corporations, non-profit organizations and even individuals. However, the afore-mentioned situations remain unchanged but getting worse. Therefore, a comprehensive action should be taken to improve the environmental performance.

To that end, using Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) would enhance greater awareness and understanding of environmental issues and its benefits. While EIA is widely used, it has been subject to criticism to improve and addressing the issues emerging from the EIA application. EIA has been critiqued for its failure in identifying and determining the process-related issues and interaction with key elements in Environmental Management System (EMS)

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\*Corresponding author's email: [masdiah@uniten.edu.my](mailto:masdiah@uniten.edu.my)

which caused the effectiveness of EIA to drop. Moreover, EIA not only identifies the best solution among all possible alternatives, it also might raise confusions among planners or other professionals (Dendena & Corsi, 2015) and thus EIA seems as hard to practise. Also, focusing only on the technical improvements is not sufficient for rectifying the problems of EIA, and therefore function EIA should be clearly identified to maximise the effective use of EIA. Lack of discussion on EIA effectiveness has motivated this study to provide in-depth knowledge about the process issues and enrich the discussion in Malaysia. In response to environmental issues, comprehensive EIA is an imperative tool to eliminate the adverse effects on environment. Effectiveness of EIA which is perceived as the back bone tool to improve environmental performance may thereby indirectly assist businesses, save government money, public funds and ultimately contribute to a healthier environment.

That is, related parties can rely on the establishment of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which aims to protect the environment and eliminate adverse impacts of any numbers of substances by recommending the appropriate mitigation measures prior to the realisation of a particular activity (Pavlickova & Vyskupova, 2015). Hillary (1998) defines EIA as a systematic process to document periodic and objective checking process of company's environmental performance against pre-set standard and objectives in evaluating the compliance status to environment regulatory requirements, the Environment Management System (EMS) and overall environmental risk of an organization (Haslinda & Fuong, 2010; Mustafa, 2011). Traditionally, EIA is used to assess company's activities and likely implications for the environment. Thus, EIA has been practised aggressively throughout the world among organisations because of the ability of EIA in the identification of the major environmental impacts resulting from company's operations and to document suggestions of mitigation measures to minimise the environmental effects. EIA is highly associated with nature of the organisation's operations, which requires methodical review of operations according to specified criteria (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2001) for internal management use and verified the accuracy of estimates in environmental impact statements. Moreover, EIA is also used as an internal control mechanism with the purpose to ensure that organisational operations adhere to environmental laws and regulations (Yusoff, 2013). It is important to note that EIA is used as environmental tool to ensure that available resources had been used economically, effectively and accomplishes the ultimate objective of an organisation.

Taken together, EIA is considered as a technique commonly used to improve environmental performance and ultimately to achieve sustainable development. In Malaysia, environmental protection is governed by Malaysian Environmental Quality Act 1974 which is regulated pertaining to prevention, reduction, control of pollution, and enhancement of environmental performance. To sustain healthy environment for the benefit of mankind and enable all people enjoy the beauty of earth, it is our shared responsibility to preserve our environment to assure the quality of life to reduce adverse effects on the well-being of the people.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA)**

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) captures the idea of assessing proposed actions of organisation from projects to policies, with respect to their likely implications for the environment (Dendena & Corsi, 2015). EIA considered as one mechanism used to measure the positive and negative impacts prior the proposed planning take place by an organisation. Pavlickova and Vyskupova (2015) suggested that the users seem to be well suited for the comprehensive EIA process because the process of EIA has a positive effect on the

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\*Corresponding author's email: [masdiah@uniten.edu.my](mailto:masdiah@uniten.edu.my)

identification of potential cumulative effects in Malacky city. An effective EIA process is helpful in giving a better understanding of the current environmental and socio-economic conditions of the affected area and the specific effect of each potential predicted impact. Soria-Lara, Bertolini, and te Brömmelstroet (2015) remarked about gap between the content related and process related with EIA. The study argued that existing process of EIA only focused on the measurement of environmental effects regardless the roles of EIA in the planning process and the interaction between key actors. On the other hand, Rozema and Bond (2015) posit on the effectiveness of impact assessment tools due to challenge to future practice of impact assessment which seem as ineffective and controversy generated amongst stakeholders in decision making. They further argued about the meaning of effectiveness in impact assessment tools as an inevitable consequence of increased participation in environmental decision making. The analysis on EIA however appears that the EIA was established to support decision making through a better understanding of the implications on the environment. Thus, it is important to map the process of EIA in different decision context and also the role of impact assessment in those processes. A study done on the value of independent EIA follow-up verifiers suggested that the value of those checker significantly add value when the consultant getting involved with screening EIA requirements of new project, allocation of financial and human resources, checking legal compliance, influencing implementation, reporting conformance results, community and stakeholders engagement, integration with self-responsibility programs such as Environmental Management System (EMS) and controlling records, in South Africa context (Wessels, Retief, & Morrison-Saunders, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The lack of environmental related rules and regulations imposed on decision makers makes EIA possibly an ineffective one. Besides, EIA has been proven to not able to address the environmental impacts of developments. Any improving modifications on the EIA procedure in either its structure or applications have to be continuously developed and executed. Measures that should be in the policy makers' considerations include ensuring that the impact of any developments is minimised or even to the extent that no any protective measure is needed afterwards. If the impact is moderate to severe, parties involved should have taken protective or corrective measures to restore the initial environmental health.

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\*Corresponding author's email: [masdiah@uniten.edu.my](mailto:masdiah@uniten.edu.my)

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\*Corresponding author's email: masdiah@uniten.edu.my