

Public participation in environmental decision making, With special reference to project in Rajasthan

PRAVEEN MATHUR, KRITI SHARMA*, YATI KACHHAWA and SANGEETA PATAN

Department of Environmental Studies, M.D S University, Ajmer (India).

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ABSTRACT

Development is a continuous process and is essential to enable the population to attain a better standard of life. But it should not be at the cost of the environment. The challenge of a development pattern striving to harmonize economics with social and environmental needs requires active citizen participation in public issues. Public participation in decisions about development is fundamental to achieving lasting and possible solutions. Using case study from Rajasthan, this paper identifies the procedure followed for public hearing, its deficiencies and outcomes. The research argues that it is the right of citizen on the part of people to participate and the utmost duty of the authority (project proponent) to help conduct a successful public hearing in accordance with laws and in benefit of the society.

Key words: Development, Environmental Impact Assessment, Public Participation, EIA Notification, Project Proponent

INTRODUCTION

Development, is the process of producing or creating something new or more advanced; a new or advanced product- according to the Oxford learners' dictionary. Development has spread to different parts of the world, though its scale varies with each country.

"One of the fundamental prerequisites of the achievement of sustainable development", says Chapter 23 of Agenda 21 (the programmatic declaration emerging from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development), "is broad public participation in decision-making." (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004)

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

EIA was first formally developed as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 in the United States for considering possible impacts prior to a decision being taken on whether or not a proposal should be given approval to proceed. It consequently now has become a

requirement in many countries. Consultation and participation are integral to this evaluation (Wood, 1995).

"EIA can be defined as: the process of identifying, protecting evaluating and mitigating the biophysical, social and other relevant effects of development proposals, prior to major decisions being taken and commitments made" (Saddler et al., 1999).

The EIA Process and Public Involvement

The EIA process should be applied as early as possible in decision making for a project, providing for the involvement and input of communities and industries affected, as well as the interested public (Saddler, B. et al., 1999).

Public participation can be defined as a continuous, two-way communication process which involves promoting full public understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which environmental problems and needs are investigated and solved by the responsible agency; keeping the public fully informed about the status and progress

of studies and implications of project, plan, program, or policy formulation and evaluation activities; and actively soliciting from all concerned citizens their opinions and perceptions of objectives and needs and their preferences regarding resource use and alternative development or management strategies and any other information and assistance relative to decision. (Dodge, 2007)

Public Participation in India

Public consultation refers to the process by which the concerns of the local people regarding the adverse impacts of a project are ascertained and taken into account in the EIA study (CSE: Know about EIA). This concept was legally introduced in India in the form of 'public hearing' in 1997.

Public hearing is a form of participation in which stakeholders and proponents are brought together in a forum to express their opinions and offer suggestions on a proposed undertaking in order to influence the decision-making process.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The methodology that was used in studying the real "public hearing" practice in Rajasthan in this research paper included a case study. Data collection process included secondary data from literature review, interviews with local people affected, and interviews with proponent and observations for general purposes.

Case Study of "X" limestone mine

Limestone Mine No.1 is having lease area about 704.944 hectare, (Renewal from 17.4.1989 to 15.4.2019). The production from this mine will be 1.64 million tones and remaining 1.56 million tonne will be raised from the adjoining mining lease of limestone for an area of 213.33 Hectares.

Limestone Mine No.2 is having lease area of 213.33 Hectares. The production from this mine will be 1.56 Million Tonnes and remaining 1.64 Million Tonnes will be raised from the adjoining mining lease of limestone for an area of 704.944 Hectares.

The mines and cement plant were closed from 18.06.2002 due to recession in cement market

and financial crisis. The environmental clearance is required for renewal of mining lease as well as for enhancement of production from 0.2 MTPA to 1.56 MTPA from MoEF. The mining plan for enhanced capacity has been approved by IBM Ajmer vide letter no. 682 (23) (480)/2006-Uday dated 05.12.2006.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Experience of the Public

Information about the public hearing

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked about the information of public hearing via reason of the hearing being conducted, knowledge about the project, when did they come to know about the meeting.

At public hearing, people had very little knowledge about the project and reasons for which environmental clearance was desired. It was found that public was informed about the meeting a few days before the hearing, mainly during daily conversations between them.

Means of Information

Of the 37 interviewees, at public hearing, a major portion (82%) of people had known about the hearing from local leader. Due to illiteracy, nobody was aware about the public notice in the newspaper.

Arrangements at Public Hearing

More than 50 people were present at the public hearing; nearly 72% of the people were satisfied. However, the arrangements regarding the space were unsatisfactory. The classroom which was prepared for the meeting was small with respect to the number of presenters. Arrangements for recording of oral comments by public and refreshment were inadequate.

Technology used for disseminating information about the project

LCD Presentation was the media used to provide the necessary information about the project. Though it was in local language (Hindi) yet it was not comprehensible to many and was with a few loopholes, namely, fast slide show, no explanation for technical words used etc. presentation covered all areas of concern.

Influence Decision Making Process

Respondents were not well convinced about their ability to influence the decision making process. More than 50% of the respondents were not influential towards Environmental decision making process.

Employment Opportunities

Replying to this question, majority (more than 70%) of the public opinion was in favour of providing employment opportunities to the villagers, those residing in the vicinity of the project site.

Was your input listened to

Almost everyone had the view that their inputs have been appropriately dealt with. Moreover; a written application was also submitted by the people to the authority.

Environmental awareness

People answered in support of their experience and knowledge about pollution of various environmental components like air, water, soil and noise. Noticeable proportion (48%) of public response was towards noise pollution. Soil and water pollution were also considered harmful by a number of respondents. However, people had little knowledge about the air pollution sources due the project development at the site.

Opinion for greater public involvement in EDM process

A maximum of 62% of the respondents were in favor of the opinion for greater public involvement. In contrast, 35% of people showed no interest in answering the question.

Benefits of Public Involvement in EDM

Respondents saw the benefits of public participation as in improvement of project design (30%), a means of increasing transparency in the process (36%), reducing conflict (15%) and increasing public trust (approximate 10%). A very few recognized environmental protection as an advantage of public involvement (less than 5%).

Attitude of the Proponent

According to the proponent, public hearing had been a success. He gave strong affirmative responses to having had positive experience of

public involvement in EDM. He agreed that they do not have formal lines of communication with the wider community or help with comprehension of technical documents and are generally passive in this regard. They found that public opinions are highly influential.

Public involvement in Environmental decision making

Proponent gave strong affirmative responses to having had positive experience of public involvement in EDM. Financial cost of public involvement did not seem to be a major concern to him.

What methods you use to promote feedback from public

From the response of the proponent it is clear that they do not have formal lines of communication with the wider community or help with comprehension of technical documents and are generally passive in this regard.

Opinion regarding Public involvement in EDM

Responses of proponent seemed to be generally aimed at leading to greater transparency and was marked by a desire to increase public trust and reduce conflicts.

Should the public be excluded from any particular area of EDM

The strong response against exclusion does not, however, indicate whether they think the public should be included.

How do you help public understand EDM process

Proponent's response was not apt with fake reason.

People reaction to public involvement in EDM process

Proponent was genuine in his responses and that it would appear that he was glad to tell that public was enthusiastic and hearing was a success. However, we had a largely disgruntled public, an enthusiastic but under skilled and under resourced public service, and an industry response that was generally lukewarm.

Overall impact of public participation on final decision making

According to them, public opinions are highly influential. However, we had an impression that they mostly saw public participation as an irrelevance to them.

It is clear that the public recommend participating not due to environmental concerns but for their mean interests of employment. It was found that illiteracy among the people is one of the causes of inefficient public participation process. It can be

concluded that unawareness of public about their right to participate is being misused by the industry. Also, the authority shows no interest to make people aware of environmental impacts of their project and was liberal to the project impact on the environment and related issues. Thus, it can be concluded that the public involvement exercise was meant just to be in compliance with rules and regulations of the game. It seemed as if the public hearing was very well staged, so as fulfilling the criteria of obtaining environmental clearance for the project.

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