

General Studies-3; Topic – EIA

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

1) Introduction

- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is an important management tool for ensuring optimal use of natural resources for sustainable development.
- It covers developmental sectors such as industries, thermal power projects, mining schemes etc.
- EIA has now been made mandatory under the Environmental (Protection) Act, 1986 for 29 categories of developmental activities involving investments of Rs. 50 crores and above.

2) Background

- The EIA process finds its origin from United States where due to huge public pressure; the government enacted National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1970s.
- The role of EIA process was formally recognized at the Earth Summit in Rio Conference in 1992.
- The Rio declaration stated that EIA shall be taken as national instrument for proposed projects which might adversely impact the environment.

3) Importance

- EIA reports are a critical component of India's environmental decision-making process.
- It acts as a detailed study of the potential impacts of proposed projects.
- It helps in predicting environmental impacts at an early stage in project planning and design.
- Based on these reports, the Environment Ministry or other relevant regulatory bodies may or may not grant approval to a project.
- The EIA reports are also important to define measures that the project could take in order to contain or offset project impacts.
- EIA-based approvals for most projects also involve the process of conducting public hearings, so that who are likely to be affected can be taken on board before approving the project.
- EIA links environment with development. The goal is to ensure environmentally safe and sustainable development.

4) Issues Related to EIA

- Environmental decision-making processes for development projects are supposed to use the best available scientific knowledge to ensure that development does not lead to negative impacts.
- But there are compromised decision-making on development and infrastructure projects.
- Sometimes the EIA reports lack the expected degrees of honesty, owing to bias, corruption, exaggeration and wrong claims.
- EIA reports for the approved "redevelopment" projects in Delhi were prepared by copying from copyrighted papers, webpages and other EIA reports.
- There are many instances of missing or misleading information which understate the potential impact of the projects.
- Many projects are approved without public consultation.
- Lack of awareness among the local people about the process of EIA, its significance for them, their own rights and responsibilities.
- Most of the time EIA reports are unavailable in local languages, thus local people are unable to decipher the reports, and are misled by the proponents.

- Expert Appraisal Committees (EAC) is dominated by ex-bureaucrats and institutional experts rather than eminent environmentalists.
- Very little importance is given to socio-economic issues, including those related to gender.
- In the end, it is citizens who have to bear the brunt.

5) Way Forward

- An EIA should not be used just as a means for obtaining an environmental clearance; rather, project proponents should use it as a management tool to assess the soundness of a project plan.
- The focus of EIA needs to shift from utilization and exploitation of natural resources to conservation of natural resources.
- Competent authorities must ensure that a project causes minimal adverse environmental impact and generates maximum social and economic benefits.
- Involving affected people and concerned citizens in environmental decision-making has far reaching effects.
- It allows for democratising environmental governance.
- Participatory processes give opportunities to understand and plan for unforeseen effects.
- In 2009, the Delhi High Court in Utkarsh Mandal v/s Union of India upheld that it is the duty of the EACs to consider the merits of the objections raised at the public hearings.
- Women and other vulnerable sections of the society are the first and most affected by consequences of developmental processes and damage to the environment.
- Adverse impacts of development projects can be reduced with the full and equal participation of both genders, particularly women in decision-making processes.
- NGOs, civil society groups and local communities need to build their capacities to use the EIA notification towards better decision making on projects.