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Ensuring Environmental Sustainability through Public Consultation in Canada's Environmental Assessment Process: Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

Environmental assessment is a planning and decision-making process used to promote environmentally responsible decision-making. In Canada, the environmental assessment is regulated by both federal and provincial acts. Canadian environmental assessment act regulates the environmental assessment federally while each Province has its own legislation on environmental assessment. With regards to federal projects, Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency is the responsible authority to get the environmental assessment done and have to be approved by the minister of environment. With regards to the provincial projects, there are three types of assessments; individual environmental assessments (done when the environmental impacts are very significant), class environmental assessments (these are prior approved planning documents for ten types of projects-resource stewardship and facility development, minor transmission facilities, government transit, energy infrastructure, remedial flood and erosion control, water power, northern development and mines). Based on the severity of the environmental impacts, they are categorised into schedule A, B and C. They are self-assessed assessments, but if proved to have higher environmental impacts, then the minister of environment will issue an order to conduct individual environmental assessments. For electricity, waste management and transit projects, environmental screening process has been introduced with a provision to upgrade to individual environmental assessment if required.

According to the Canadian environmental assessment act, public participation is included in all the key milestones of project approval, in the determination of whether an environmental assessment is required, finalising environmental impact statement guidelines by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency to the project proponent, the preparation of the environmental impact statement by the project proponent, in finalising the environmental impact statement by the agency. In provincial administration, public participation is included when the project proponent is preparing the terms of reference, in finalising the terms of reference, in conducting the environmental assessment by the project proponent, in making the final decision on the project by the ministry. Public participation ensures an open, balanced process and strengthen the quality and credibility of a project. Local and traditional knowledge about a project's physical location can help to identify and address potential environmental effects at the early stage of an environmental assessment. The opportunities and seriousness placed on public participation by the Canadian government facilitates sustainable development.

Keywords: Public participation, Environmental assessment, Canada