Session 3.
Fundamental Skills of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

Technical presentation and dialogue

Summary

This session will define Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as a formal process for identifying the *likely effects* of activities/projects on the environment, and on human health and welfare; and the *means and measures to effectively mitigate* these impacts.

Fundamental skills of the EIA process will also be introduced and explained, including:

1) Characterizing the **baseline situation**;
2) Identifying (and evaluating) the potential adverse **impacts** of planned development **activities** (issues of concern); and
3) Developing a **mitigation** strategy to address these impacts.

The session will further illustrate how the EIA process aligns with ESDM and establish that this process is the **internationally accepted standard framework for achieving ESDM** in project-based development. The linkage between EIA and USAID environmental procedures (Reg. 216) will also be established.

Discussion of Fundamental EIA Skills

This session addresses the essential EIA skills of activity identification, baseline characterization, and impact identification. The presentation introduces the topic of the fourth and fifth core skills, mitigation design and monitoring, which are discussed in-depth in subsequent sessions. These skills will be put to practice in the workshop's field-based activities.

Activity Identification

This portion of the session provides a definition for and examples of typical USAID activities. Within USAID, an activity is typically defined as a project or program consists of many activities and sub-activities.

Activities and sub-activities seek to achieve a desired output or project goal.

Baseline Characterization & Identifying Impacts of Concern

This portion of the session explains the basic, logical process behind baseline characterization and identifying impacts (or issues) of concern. An example from a typical small-scale irrigation project will illustrate why the fundamental EIA skills of baseline characterization and issue identification are directly relevant to effective mitigation and achieving ESDM.

Depending on the size, complexity and context of the activity, sophisticated environmental models and other tools *can* be required to evaluate impacts in the context of a comprehensive EIA study. But for most small-scale activities and preliminary assessments (or USAID-mandated IEEs), the simple, logical process described here—supported by good judgment and the information contained in the *Sector Environmental Guidelines* or similar resources—is sufficient.

Mitigation Design and Monitoring

The purpose of the EIA process is not simply to identify and assess potential environmental impacts, but to change project design and implementation so that these impacts are mitigated—that is, avoided, reduced or offset.

As such, mitigation is a critical part of ESDM and the EIA process. Monitoring is its essential complement, required to verify whether the mitigation measures are sufficient, effective—and actually implemented.

Objectives

- Achieve a basic understanding of the EIA process and how it is implemented
- Become familiar with core EIA skills and the technical approach to EIA activities
- Establish EIA as the basis of USAID Environmental Procedures

Key Resources

- The "Underlying EIA concepts and skills" page on the GEMS project Web site (available at: http://www.usaidgems.org/underlyingEIA.htm) provides additional background and context on the EIA process and includes links to other training and reference materials.
- The individual chapters of the *Sector Environmental Guidelines* are a key resource for: (1) identification of potential adverse environmental impacts; and (2) design of specific mitigation and monitoring measures.

Discussion Questions

In small groups with the workshop participants at your table, please discuss the following questions. Each group will have a workshop facilitator assist in guiding the discussion.

1. What is Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)?
2. Why is it important to establish and understand baseline conditions in the project activity area of influence?
3. Where would you as a project manager seek the baseline information? How would you go about collecting this information?
4. How would you define "environmental impact" in the framework of EIA?
5. Why is EIA important to your work with USAID development projects?