

EIA as a Consensus Building Tool
‘The Hidden Contribution of EIA to Industry’

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Public participation as part of Environmental Impact Assessment has been a topic of debate in recent years as a result of the repeated lack of appropriate consultation process in project design and development. However, its significance is widely acknowledged and current EU and Irish legislation (Part X of the Planning and Development Act 2000) make public participation compulsory under the EIA process (Directive 97/11/EC). These stress the need to provide appropriate tools to inform and address public concerns, as well as allowing for interested and/or relevant parties' involvement. Furthermore, Section 95 of the Irish Planning and Development Regulations 2001 provides for the applicant to formally agree the scope of the EIS with the Planning Authority through consultation.

Public participation plays a key role in environmental assessment by helping to include cultural, social, economic and political dimensions. This consequently helps achieving more comprehensive, transparent and acceptable resolutions. However, the role of early informal stakeholder involvement that takes place during the project's early conception stage and the associated contribution to project structure and progress are not fully acknowledged.

Notwithstanding the central importance of formal public participation in major development projects, it is important to acknowledge the need for early 'alignment' between key stakeholders - long before the formal EIS process - when exploring fundamental project feasibility. An unrecognised role of Environmental Assessment is to provide language and structure for debate among these diverse key stakeholders during the earliest stages of project conception by the provision of preliminary impact

statement material*. The gathering of environmental and planning data and other relevant information at the initial stages of the development, together with stakeholder involvement at the feasibility study stage can be key mediators in defining the final scope of the project, significantly contributing to the identification of sustainable engineering solutions and helping to achieve successful outcomes of complex decision-making processes.

The fundamental feasibility (i.e. engineering, environmental and economic) of the proposed development can be analysed at 3 major stages throughout the project lifetime (see Figure 1). The interactions between these phases are significantly assisted by the availability of pre-EIA material. Stakeholder alliance and participation plays a vital role in the process as it provides a forum that will ensure a focused and efficient public participation.

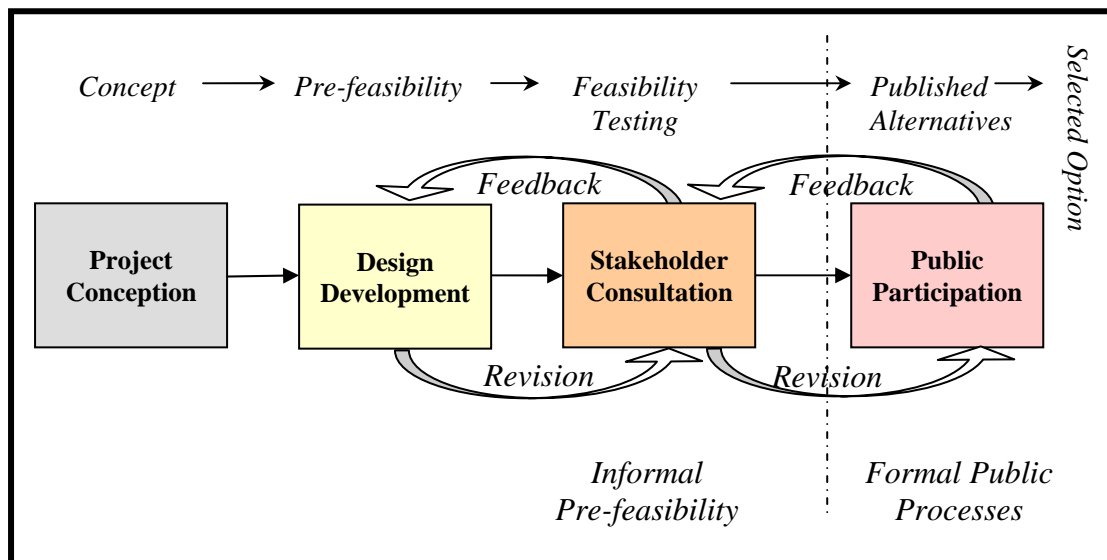


Figure 1.- Feasibility of Options.

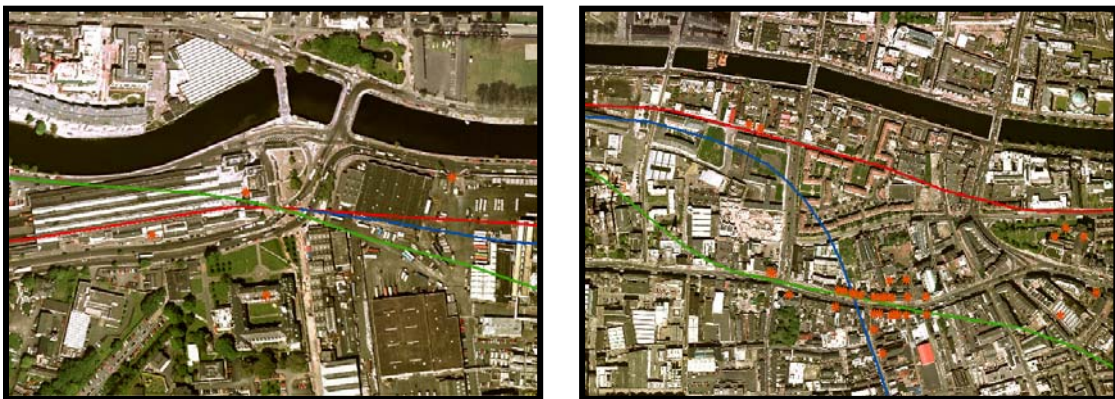
The *Interconnector Study* prepared for Irish Rail and completed in 2003 provides a good example of consensus building. The potential to provide an underground railway link in Dublin City was initially analysed by a team of engineers. Potential routes were identified which were considered to be viable in economical, technological and engineering terms. *Preliminary* and *parallel* Environmental Impact Assessment allowed identification of key environmental constraints and opportunities which

* Preliminary Impact Statement Material consisting of desk studies and compilation of high-level data on likely environmental constraints and opportunities.

facilitated communication between interested parties. The early availability of rudimentary environmental constraints/opportunities allowed weighting of the proposed route alternatives. This facilitated rapid narrowing of options for informal, early consideration by key stakeholders.

A initial project hypothesis was informally circulated among key stakeholders in the city with the environmental constraints and opportunities presented at workshops. Workshops aimed to provide an opportunity for participants to define the criteria and ‘weighting’ factors used in making decisions on the route. The main objective was to obtain agreement on ‘preferred’ alignment options by undertaking a ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ assessment of each of the alternatives.

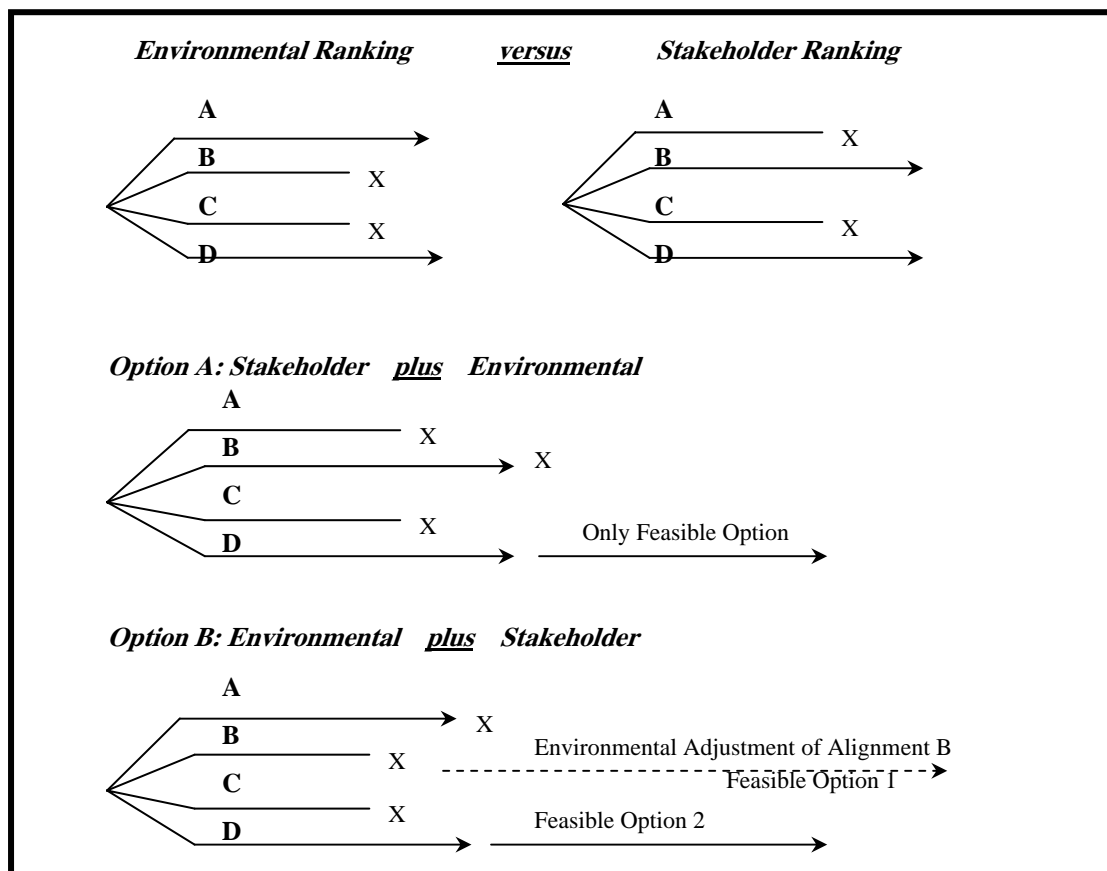
The graphic representation (i.e. GIS mapping – see Figures 2 & 3) of engineers’ proposed alignments and key environmental and land use factors, helped rapidly identifying potential planning/environmental conflicts. The IA material facilitated them in evaluating and articulating their concerns, interests and preferences. The spatial analysis of architectural heritage and archaeology encountered along the alignment and other environmental constraints such as surface and underground rivers, soil stability, etc, together with development and planning considerations allowed for weighting of proposed alignments as well as adjustments in the preferred route options to be made.



Figures 2 & 3.- GIS mapping allows rapid identification of environmental and planning conflicts.

Stakeholder consultation facilitated the ranking of the proposed alignments according to different value systems (i.e. environmental and planning versus functional and economic). This allowed a re-evaluation of potential route alternatives, preliminary

discarded due solely to engineering and/or environmental factors. The identification of the potential economic gain - derived from altering a particular route or from servicing particular areas throughout the city that could have been overseen at preliminary engineering and environmental stages in the project - provided new possibilities for alternative alignments. Similarly, routes initially feasible in engineering and environmental terms were rejected as a result of planning conflicts, development interest or a lack of perceived economic returns. This is illustrated in Figure 4 below, which provides a sample sketch of basic feasibility evaluation and ranking of potential routes.



Figures 4.- Basic Feasibility Ranking of Route Alternatives (indicating the importance of the sequence of consultation for route elimination).

The Stakeholder Group not only helped select best alignment options for further study but also identified sensitive areas and sites with future development potential. This helped to adjust the underground railway route and define strategic station locations that greatly assisted with regeneration. Most importantly, consultation at an early stage in the project significantly assisted in determining the optimum *scope* for a

scheme with potential to reshape the future of Dublin City's transport corridors,. This contributed to define a robust development in economical, environmental and planning terms while allowing for future development patterns and planning trends to be foreseen.

In conclusion, early informal stakeholder involvement allows narrowing of options and defining the scope of the study for further consideration within a more formal EIA process. It consequently guarantees a focused and efficient public participation by providing a limited number of feasible alternatives for consultation in the formal process.

Overall, public consultation is making major contributions at the practical and policy levels of EIA on an increasing basis. Stakeholder involvement needs to be acknowledged as a key step of the public participation process. The early availability and use of preliminary IA material, the creation of better links between developers, planners, concerned parties and local people, together with the provision of technical expertise and experience, can significantly contribute to environmental and planning conflict avoidance and resolution, to economic viability and overall cost reduction and, most importantly, to sustainable project design and development.

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