

Power and Place: Rethinking Communication in Impact Assessment (IA)

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Places are socially constructed, they are intentionally forged by power and agency in every society, they are designated to serve specific purposes, laws and institutions enforce their existence and sustenance (Castree, 2003; Rios et al., 2012 ; Dacin et al., 2024). In Impact Assessment (IA), place goes beyond the physical geography and peculiarities in a locale, from the micro to the macro places; they take both historical, cultural, ‘spiritual’, and mental dimensions. Places shape how, when, and who is heard, evidence that is accounted for, and how decisions are ultimately made (Lefebvre, 2014). Communication within IA, between proponents, regulators, consultants, stakeholders/rightsholder, and affected communities, is typically treated as a neutral, procedural activity centered on information disclosure and formal consultation. However, critical scholarships and practice increasingly demonstrate that IA communication is neither neutral nor apolitical (Foucault 1982; Castree 2001; Dovey, 2014; Storey, 2022a). Rather, it is deeply shaped by power relations and by place-specific social, cultural, and political contexts (Olorundami, 2022). This paper argues, with power as a common currency in place-making and transactions in IA, communication functions as a place dependent activity, through which power is exercised, negotiated, and reproduced, often privileging expert and institutional knowledge while marginalizing local voices, particularly in multicultural settings and contexts marked by unequal power relations (Smith, 2005). The paper seeks to rethink IA communication by examining the interconnected roles of power and place. Drawing on qualitative, interpretive case study analysis of IA processes, including document review and practitioner reflections, it examines how communicative practices shape participation, legitimacy, and whose knowledge counts in decision-making. Analytically informed by critical theories of power and place, it conceptualizes communication as a social practice that produces inclusion and exclusion rather than mere information exchange. By synthesizing empirical insights with critical theory, it advances a more reflexive and context-sensitive understanding of IA communication, offering conceptual directions for redesigning participatory practices to support more equitable engagement and the co-production of knowledge for IA decision making.

Consider two contrasting spaces: a sports locker room and a church confessional. In a locker room, conversations are often informal, performative, and shaped by shared group identity. Participants may exaggerate, withhold, or adapt the truth to maintain social standing, reinforce group cohesion, or simply engage in banter. The power relations in this setting are relatively diffused and communal, with influence negotiated among peers. By contrast, a church confessional is characterized by a clearly asymmetrical power relationship between the priest and the confessor. The setting is structured around authority, vulnerability, and moral accountability, which inevitably shapes what is said, what remains unsaid, and how truth is articulated. If public consultation for a development project were conducted in each of these settings, it is highly likely

that the outcomes would differ, not because the issues themselves had changed, but because the spatial and relational dynamics of power would influence the nature and content of communication. Yet, within much of Impact Assessment (IA) practice, these contextual influences are rarely acknowledged (Berisha et al., 2021). Consultation processes often assume that communication is spatially neutral: that participants will express themselves in the same way regardless of where consultation occurs, who is present, or how power is distributed within that setting (Olorundami, 2022). This assumption overlooks the possibility that spaces associated with authority may inhibit open participation, while spaces where communities feel ownership and familiarity, the sense of agency may encourage more authentic dialogue (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Duncan, 2013). The argument here is not that one setting is preferable to another. Rather, it is a call to rethink and reimagine the role of place as an active participant in public engagement. Place is not simply the backdrop against which communication occurs; it shapes power relations, influences participation, and ultimately affects both the quality and substance of communication within Impact Assessment (Pierce et al., 2011; Sirigotis 2019; Batchelder et al., 2026).

Environmental impact assessment occupies a contested communicative space shaped by place and power (Smith, 2005). On one hand, spatial context influences whose knowledge is heard: impacted communities often possess critical local insights tied to place, yet EIA processes frequently marginalize these voices through top-down communication modes (Figueroa and Ulibarri, 2024). On the other hand, power asymmetries dictate how information flows: technical experts and project proponents typically control the narrative and channels, while the public is largely left with passive roles (Sinclair and Diduck, 2017; Ulibarri, et al., 2022). For example, even when community members mobilize around environmental justice concerns, procedural EISs routinely underreport distributive impacts (Figueroa and Ulibarri, 2024). Visual and digital media offer new avenues for engagement, but they can both mitigate and exacerbate inequities: if not co-designed for local contexts, GIS maps or infographics may confuse rather than clarify. (Mwenda et al., 2013; de Oliveira et al., 2023)

The result is often a superficial “dialogue” that satisfies legal requirements but fails to redistribute decision-making power. Bridging these gaps requires reframing EIA communication from a monologic compliance exercise into a dialogic learning process. The literature suggests moving beyond simply informing the public, toward co-production of knowledge: enabling communities to frame issues in their own terms and to hold authorities accountable in shared spaces of negotiation (Glucker et al., 2013; Sinclair and Diduck, 2017). In practice, this could mean early and repeated consultations in affected localities, multimedia materials adapted to community languages and literacy levels, and participatory scenario-building workshops. Such strategies recognize that place matters not just physically, but epistemologically: what counts as evidence, impact, or benefit is partly determined by cultural and spatial standpoints. Hence, practitioners may start to change assessment from a token process into an open, fair forum for sustainability decision-making by clearly recognizing and addressing power in EIA communication.

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