

Turning Impact into Dialogue: ESIA for Transboundary Trust



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Why do ESIA struggle in transboundary contexts?

**Hydropower =
high impact,
high politics,
high mistrust**

**Impacts extend
beyond borders
(upstream–
downstream)**

**ESIA often
treated as
technical –
legitimacy gap**

**Core proposition:
ESIA design influences trust and decision quality**

Project Context: Kambarata-1 (K-1) Hydropower Project (HPP)

The Kambarata-1 decision space

- Located on Naryn River - Syr Darya basin
- Implications for Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan
- Water–energy–food nexus
- Basin-wide ecological, livelihood, and political stakes
- Toktogul legacy issues





The Trust Problem – Trust deficits shaping ESIA

- Historical upstream–downstream tensions
- Information asymmetry and misinformation
- Public scepticism toward large hydropower
- ESIA credibility as a determining factor



ESIA as a dialogue-based governance process

- Trust
- Improved decision-making
- Sustainability

Anchored in:

- Aarhus & Espoo (International Conventions)
- World Bank ESF
- Social learning theory



ESIA Engagement Design - Designing ESIA for trust

- Early engagement (pre-scoping)
- Multi-level consultations
- Transboundary technical exchanges
- Clear accountability mechanisms

ESIA as engagement architecture



Engagement Evidence	Overview
Early and continuous engagement	Commenced prior to ESIA through the KRED Phase 1 program.
Multi-level and inclusive consultations	Reached national institutions and local stakeholders (Ayil Aimaks, pasture users, vulnerable groups). Pasture Management Consultant engaged.
Two-way communication and feedback loops	Communities invited to raise concerns, challenge assumptions, and contribute local knowledge.
Iterative validation of data and findings	Field data and assessments presented back to stakeholders in follow-up meetings for verification.
Transparency on constraints and uncertainties	Openly acknowledged data gaps, regulatory limitations, and unresolved land/pasture issues to manage expectations.
Targeted engagement with affected resource users	Focused consultations with pasture users and local authorities on livelihoods, access, and compensation risks.
Institutionalized grievance and safeguard mechanisms:	Grievance redress processes and safeguard requirements explained to strengthen accountability.

Engagement Mechanisms - What worked in practice

Participatory & Analytical Tools – enabled learning

- Participatory pasture mapping
- Validation of land use and livestock data
- Cumulative impact assessment
- Basin-level modelling and scenarios



Key idea: *shared evidence reduces politicisation*



Key Lessons for Practitioners - Four transferable lessons

01

ENGAGE EARLY

Engage early to shape problem framing

Pre-scoping dialogue ensures stakeholders co-define risks and priorities before formal assessment begins, building shared ownership of the process from the outset.

02

ACKNOWLEDGE HARM

Acknowledge historical harm explicitly

In transboundary contexts like the Syr Darya basin, openly addressing past grievances such as Toktogul-era water disputes is essential for building trust and credibility with downstream communities.

03

BE TRANSPARENT

Treat uncertainty transparently

Sharing data gaps, modelling assumptions, and unresolved issues openly counters misinformation and manages expectations, particularly around cumulative basin-level impacts.

04

LEARNING LOOPS

Embed visible social learning loops

Iterative feedback cycles — presenting findings back to communities for validation — demonstrate responsiveness and enable adaptive management throughout the ESIA process.

Conclusion & What IAIA practitioners should take away

**ESIA is
governance, not
just compliance**

**Engagement
design = risk
management**

**Trust improves
decision
legitimacy**

**Transboundary
ESIA needs
learning-
oriented
practice**

*“ When designed intentionally,
ESIA can be a platform for
cooperative futures”.*





Let's continue the conversation!

Message me your questions or comments in the IAIA26 app.



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