to find out about community concerns, while the project design may still be flexible, and can be changed to satisfy those concerns. It is this openness to concerns and ideas that helps make engagement meaningful, as communities may have a true opportunity to influence project designs. Having a meaningful and sincere engagement process helps with the legitimacy of the process, which can lead to more local support. It is also possible, based on the feedback, to design the project in a way that helps the community indirectly, such as by helping set up locally-owned businesses to supply products or services to the project.

The benefits of early planning are nothing new. What’s different about the IAA is the expectation that government will be involved from the beginning, and the nature and timeliness of that involvement. At the end of the early planning phase, the government is required to produce a number of documents, which create a road map for the impact assessment process going forward. These include tailored impact statement guidelines, impact assessment coordination, indigenous engagement and partnership plan, public participation and permitting plans. These documents form one of the little-recognized benefits of the proposed legislation, more certainty in the planning process, due to government authorship and involvement.

Detailed impact statement guidelines can provide clarity on impact statement effort and may reduce information requests later. Various coordination, engagement and partnership plans should provide clarity on how stakeholders will work together and how communities can be meaningfully involved. The indigenous engagement plan and partnership plan may reduce uncertainty around legal requirements related to consultation. Finally, early engagement and issue identification could reduce the risk of unknown issues arising later in the process.

GOING BEYOND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

A second key aspect of the IAA is that it broadens the review process from a focus mainly on environmental issues to considering a wider range of factors that encompass “sustainability.” These
include the social, health and economic impacts of the proposed project. While some may see this as being too much to expect from a proponent to consider, it is already included in several provincial and territorial legislative requirements in Canada. So, it is not a new idea to be more comprehensive in the review scope. It is just new at the federal level.

Further to this, the IAA emphasizes the importance of focusing on not just the mitigation of potential negative impacts, but also giving serious attention to the potential positive benefits of projects. If done well, the sustainability assessment will look to the long-term goal of creating communities that can thrive beyond the life of the project.

Taking this more comprehensive approach will bring Canada in line with the impact assessment review processes followed in many other parts of the world, which formally incorporate economic, social and health factors. While environmental considerations are critical to address, often projects come up against opposition, due to the inadequate attention given to the social issues that communities care about. This has not necessarily been any fault of the proponents but rather due to a significant gap in the requirements in law. The IAA will rectify these gaps with the proposed sustainability approach.

It sounds like a lot more work for proponents, so why should they welcome such change? It may come down to good business practice. Proponents of large infrastructure projects, which the IAA will likely affect the most, should have a business interest in developing constructive, collaborative relationships with the communities that they are moving into, especially if they plan to be there for decades. Through their projects, they have the potential to assist in community development, and not just economically. They have the potential to help contribute to the growth and development of healthy communities, if done right. This begins with early, meaningful engagement on the issues that people care about.

Therefore, a review that is comprehensive, allowing for dialogue on issues of social, health, economic concerns and opportunities, in addition to the usual discussions on environment, may be of benefit over the long term. And again, it is important to point out that the proposed IAA requires and encourages the assessment of the positive gains of a proposed project. This new information will be taken into consideration by decision makers when weighing the pros and cons of a project. It will affect the “public interest” test which is now acknowledged as a point of contemplation by the government in deciding upon approvals.

The inclusion of social, health and economic aspects points to the integrated nature of many development issues, and why it makes sense to include these considerations in the scope of assessment. For example, while potential impacts to a river are identified as an environmental issue, they may also be an economic issue if people in the area depend on fish from that river as part of their food supply. It can be a social issue too, if fishing is part of their spiritual life or community recreation.

In practice, it is often difficult to separate social issues from economic. In many jurisdictions around the world and in Canada, the regulations talk about “socio-economic” factors. This helps with sustainability in two ways. One is the context around global sustainability, the wise use of resources, and the accepted definition of “allowing current generations to meet their needs while not interfering with future generations to meet their needs.” But it goes further, into the ability of the project to sustain itself, given a good level of acceptance and support from the people being affected by it, so that they will allow it to continue.

For example, a project that relies only on a “fly-in-fly-out” workforce may not be as sustainable as one that hires local people and trains them for the work available, with chances for advancement, as well as becoming a reliable customer for local businesses. With the emphasis that the IAA places on sustainability, it is companies that reach out to communities early for discussion, and work with them to build socio-economic sustainability into the project, that are the most likely to be successful.

The benefit to project proponents is that these broader considerations of social, economic and health factors can build public trust and support for the project.

Ultimately the changes to CEAA, 2012 are aimed at creating a good planning process. Good environmental and social impact analysis is about good planning and having a well-informed process that is inclusive, with meaningful engagement, the inclusion of rigorous science and traditional knowledge, and decisions that are transparent and timely.

The views presented here are those of the author and do not represent those of Golder.

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The IAA seeks to overhaul the way major projects, including pipelines, are reviewed and approved.