

CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERTISE – AN INSTRUMENT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

At the beginning of the new millennium, balancing the need for economic and social development, on the one hand, and environmental protection, on the other, is a crucial priority in the international climate. This involves the promotion of sustainable development, which must embrace economic growth, improvement of the quality of life, health, education, social development and environmental protection.

Environmental problems are particularly complex, as the causes are interrelated, requiring action at all levels: local, national and regional authorities, as well as the European Union, each with its own role in increasing responsibility for environmental protection.

In order to help Member State authorities and developers to better manage the environmental consequences of construction projects, the Commission has brought together all existing EU legislation governing environmental impact assessment (hereafter EIA).

In this study we intend to approach transboundary environmental expertise as an essential mechanism in the context of infrastructure projects, exploitation of natural resources, construction of hydropower plants, transportation of hazardous substances and other activities that may have a wide-ranging environmental impact across borders.

Keywords: *environment, environmental expertise, cross-border, natural resources, liability.*

JEL Classification: K32

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context of global development, many economic and infrastructure projects have environmental effects that extend beyond national borders, endangering ecosystems and communities in multiple countries. Cross-border environmental expertise thus becomes an essential tool for assessing and minimizing environmental impact in the context of such projects. This article explores the role of this type of expertise, the relevant legislative framework, and

the challenges faced by national and international authorities in conducting effective cross-border assessments.

1.1. Defining Cross-Border Environmental Expertise

Cross-border environmental expertise refers to the process by which the environmental impact of a project is formally assessed when this impact exceeds the borders of a single country. Unlike domestic environmental assessments, which are limited to the jurisdiction of a single state, cross-border expertise involves collaboration between authorities from several states to analyze potential negative effects on the environment, population, and ecosystems in neighboring regions. Its purpose is to protect the environment and ensure that cross-border projects comply with environmental standards and contribute to sustainable development.

This expertise is essential, especially for large-scale projects such as the construction of dams, international highways, nuclear power plants, oil pipelines, and gas pipelines, which can affect multiple ecosystems and populations in neighboring regions. The cross-border impact assessment involves a thorough analysis of risks, identification of impact mitigation solutions, and ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources.

1.2. The Necessity of Cross-Border Expertise in the Context of Globalization

Globalization and the intensification of economic cooperation between states have led to an increase in the number of projects with cross-border impact. Extended economic activities, from natural resource exploitation to transport infrastructure development, have long-term ecological effects and can affect public health, biodiversity, and natural resources in several countries.

Cross-border environmental expertise is necessary to ensure that all involved countries have a clear understanding of the risks and that appropriate measures are adopted for environmental protection. In the absence of such expertise, cross-border projects risk causing environmental degradation and conflicts between states, especially when economic interests are prioritized over ecological protection.

1.3. Basic Principles of Cross-Border Environmental Expertise

The cross-border environmental expertise process is based on several fundamental principles, including:

- The precautionary principle: In cases where there is uncertainty about a project's potential environmental impact, the involved states are encouraged to adopt preventive measures. This principle allows authorities to make conservative decisions, avoiding major environmental risks even when scientific evidence is not fully conclusive.

- The prevention principle: States must take measures to prevent and minimize the negative impact of cross-border projects on the environment. This involves implementing advanced technological solutions and best ecological practices to limit harmful effects on natural resources.
- The principle of transparency and public consultation: Cross-border environmental expertise includes the obligation to consult the public and stakeholders in all countries affected by the project. Transparency in the assessment process ensures that citizens and environmental organizations can contribute to the project analysis and express their opinions.
- The principle of international cooperation: States involved in cross-border projects must collaborate to identify optimal solutions and reduce environmental impact. This involves the exchange of information and expertise between authorities, as well as supporting countries that lack the technical or financial capacities to carry out a complete assessment.

1.4. Cross-Border Environmental Expertise and Sustainable Development

Through the detailed evaluation of environmental effects, cross-border environmental expertise supports sustainable development, ensuring a balance between economic growth and ecological protection.

This means that projects are evaluated not only in terms of economic profit but also based on their long-term impact on natural resources, public health, and biodiversity. Thus, cross-border expertise helps prevent environmental conflicts between states and promotes rational use of resources, minimizing ecological risks and supporting sustainable economic development.

1.5. Examples of Projects Requiring Cross-Border Environmental Expertise

Energy and transportation infrastructure projects are among the most common examples requiring cross-border environmental expertise. A relevant example is the construction of gas pipelines that cross multiple European countries, such as the Nord Stream pipeline, which connects Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea. This project had a significant impact on the marine environment, and the regional states were consulted to assess the impact and identify mitigation measures.

Another example is the construction of hydropower plants on transboundary rivers, such as the Danube River, which flows through multiple European countries. These projects can have a major impact on biodiversity and downstream communities, which is why international collaboration and a detailed ecological impact assessment are necessary before implementation.

2. THE INTERNATIONAL LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK OF CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERTISE

2.1. The Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention (1991)) and Its Importance for Cross-Border Environmental Expertise

The Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, known as the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991), is an international agreement adopted in 1991 under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

The Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) represents a major step in international environmental protection, establishing the obligations of states to assess the potential impact of projects that may affect the environment beyond their national borders.

To date, the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) has been signed by numerous countries, including those outside of Europe, emphasizing the global importance of protecting the environment in a cross-border context.

According to the provisions of the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991), signatory states are obliged to inform and consult neighboring states when planning projects with significant ecological impact.

These cross-border consultations ensure that all affected parties have the opportunity to evaluate the environmental impact and contribute to identifying suitable solutions to reduce negative effects.

The Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) also includes the obligation to conduct detailed impact studies and present proposed measures for pollution prevention and control.

2.2. The Evaluation Procedure under the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991)

The Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) provides a standard procedure for evaluating transboundary environmental impact, structured into several essential steps:

- **Notification:** The country of origin of the project is required to notify neighboring states about the proposed project and its potential environmental impact. The notification includes details about the nature and location of the project, as well as a preliminary description of the possible ecological effects.
- **Public consultation:** The Convention mandates that both the public in the country of origin and the public in the affected countries be involved in the assessment process, giving them the opportunity to participate and express concerns about the project (Jay *et al.*, 2007).
- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):** A detailed environmental impact assessment report is prepared by the country of origin and presented to the affected states. This report includes an analysis of the impact on

ecosystems, biodiversity, water and air resources, and proposes measures to reduce negative impact.

- **Negotiation and agreement:** In cases where affected states disagree with the implementation of the project or consider that the mitigation measures are insufficient, the Convention allows negotiations and mediation to reach an acceptable solution for all involved parties.
- **Project monitoring:** After project approval, the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) provides for the monitoring of environmental impact to ensure that all proposed protective measures are effectively implemented.

2.3. European Union Directives and Cross-Border Environmental Expertise

The European Union is a global leader in environmental protection and has adopted a series of directives supporting environmental impact assessment, including for cross-border projects:

- **Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (EIA Directive):** Initially adopted in 1985 and periodically updated, this directive regulates environmental impact assessment for large infrastructure projects and other economic activities that may have a significant environmental impact. The EIA Directive requires EU member states to conduct impact studies and consult both the public and neighboring states when projects may affect the cross-border environment.
- **Habitats Directive (European Commission 1992) and Birds Directive (European Commission 1979):** These directives are essential tools for biodiversity protection in the EU and are part of the Natura 2000 network, a protected area network including valuable ecosystems across Europe. Cross-border projects that may affect protected habitats or species of community interest must be carefully assessed, and protective measures are essential to safeguard these areas.
- **Floods Directive (European Commission 2007):** This directive requires member states to develop flood risk maps and management plans, being particularly important in the case of transboundary rivers and shared river basins. For rivers crossing several countries, such as the Danube, states are required to collaborate to protect aquatic ecosystems and reduce flood-related risks.

2.4. Other Relevant International Agreements

Besides the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) and EU directives, other international conventions contribute to cross-border environmental expertise, especially in water and biodiversity protection:

- **Helsinki Convention (Helsinki Convention 1992) on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992):** This convention promotes cooperation among states for the protection and

sustainable use of transboundary watercourses. It requires signatory states to implement preventive measures to avoid water quality degradation and to conserve aquatic ecosystems.

- Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992): Although broader in scope, the CBD also includes aspects relevant to the cross-border context, particularly when proposed projects affect critical habitats and ecosystems essential for biological diversity.

2.5. The Importance of the International Legislative Framework for Environmental Protection

International legislative instruments, such as the Espoo Convention (Espoo Convention 1991) and EU directives, play a crucial role in protecting the environment from cross-border project impacts. These agreements provide a framework for collaboration and harmonization of environmental standards among states, facilitating rigorous assessment and appropriate environmental protection.

This legislative framework is essential for preventing ecological conflicts and promoting balanced, sustainable economic development that respects natural resources and protects public health.

Additionally, the international legislative framework helps establish common environmental standards, enabling states to adopt best practices in environmental protection. This is a vital component of cross-border environmental expertise, ensuring that projects comply not only with national regulations but also with international environmental requirements, thereby safeguarding shared resources and ecosystems.

3. METHODOLOGY OF CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERTISE

Cross-border environmental expertise is based on a series of methods and techniques that enable the identification, evaluation, and mitigation of potential environmental impacts in projects conducted across multiple countries. The methodological process involves complex and multidisciplinary stages aimed at ensuring rigorous assessment and protecting affected ecosystems and communities (Kidd and Fischer, 2020).

3.1 Assessment of Environmental Risks

One of the initial steps in conducting cross-border environmental expertise is the assessment of the ecological risks that a project may generate. This stage involves identifying the potentially affected environmental components, such as water, air, soil, biodiversity, and public health. Ecological risk assessment is carried out through field data collection, including species monitoring, water and

air quality measurements, soil analysis, and direct observations of natural habitats (Glasson *et al.*, 2013).

This stage requires a thorough analysis of how the project might impact each environmental element. For example, in the case of constructing a dam on a transboundary river, experts must analyze the impact on aquatic ecosystems, the river's self-purification capacity, and the flood risks for downstream riparian areas.

3.2. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

Cross-border environmental expertise employs a wide range of techniques and tools for collecting and analyzing environmental data:

- **Field studies:** A fundamental component of the assessment involves field studies, which include direct observations and the collection of soil, water, and air samples from areas affected by the project. These studies allow the identification of local flora and fauna species, water resources, and the geological and topographical characteristics of the land.
- **Laboratory analyses:** The samples collected from the field are analyzed in laboratories to evaluate environmental parameters such as chemical pollution levels, the presence of heavy metals, and other toxic substances. Laboratory analyses provide detailed information about the quality and contamination level of water and soil resources.
- **Use of GIS and remote sensing technologies:** Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and remote sensing techniques enable extensive monitoring of cross-border areas impacted by projects. Satellite remote sensing, for example, can be used to observe landscape changes, monitor water levels in rivers and lakes, or track vegetation shifts over time (European Environment Agency, 2018). These data are extremely useful for assessing long-term environmental impact and for monitoring the effects of a project on the environment.

3.3. Ecological Impact Modeling

Ecological impact modeling is an essential technique in cross-border environmental expertise, as it allows the simulation of a project's potential effects before its implementation. Ecological models are based on collected data and use algorithms to project possible environmental consequences of the project. For instance, a model can simulate the dispersion of pollutants in a transboundary river or estimate changes in natural habitats.

Modeling makes it possible to anticipate negative effects and supports the development of strategies to reduce ecological impact. This is especially important for projects involving gas emissions or pollutants that may affect air quality, such as the construction of a power plant, where pollutant dispersion models can be used to evaluate the potential contamination of neighboring areas.

3.4 Mitigation and Adaptation Measures

After ecological risks have been assessed and environmental impacts have been modeled, cross-border environmental expertise proposes mitigation measures to reduce the project's negative effects on the environment. These measures include strategies and technologies aimed at minimizing the project's impact on natural resources and affected communities. Some of the most common mitigation measures include:

- **Emission filtration and reduction technologies:** In the case of power plants or industrial projects that emit gases and pollutants, air and water filtration technologies can be employed to reduce contamination levels and limit the effects on public health.
- **Creation of ecological corridors and buffer zones:** For infrastructure projects that cross natural habitats, experts may propose ecological corridors that allow the movement of wildlife and prevent habitat fragmentation. Buffer zones can also be established to protect water resources from construction-related pollution.
- **Water management:** For projects involving the use of water resources, adaptation measures may include techniques for regulating water flow, such as reducing water intake during critical periods to prevent resource depletion and ensure the continuity of aquatic ecosystems (Petts, 1999).

3.5. Public Consultation and Stakeholder Involvement

A central aspect of cross-border environmental expertise is the consultation of the public and the involvement of stakeholders from all affected states. This stage is essential to ensure transparency in the evaluation process and to allow citizens, environmental organizations, and local authorities to contribute to the assessment. Public consultation can offer important insights into the project's impact on local communities and can lead to the identification of more effective ecological solutions.

Public consultation is conducted through open meetings, information sessions, and online consultations, ensuring that all opinions are considered in the evaluation process. By actively involving citizens and organizations, cross-border environmental expertise becomes a participatory process, contributing to informed and equitable decision-making.

3.6. Post-Project Monitoring

The completion of a project does not mark the end of cross-border environmental expertise. Post-project monitoring is an essential stage to ensure that all protection and mitigation measures are properly implemented and that negative environmental effects are effectively controlled. This monitoring may

include ongoing measurements of water and air quality, monitoring of flora and fauna species, and regular inspections of the infrastructure.

Through post-project monitoring, authorities and stakeholders can identify and address any issues that may arise after project implementation. Additionally, monitoring contributes to improving future environmental assessments by providing relevant data for similar projects (Morgan, 2012).

4. CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERTISE

The process of cross-border environmental expertise involves numerous challenges that can affect both the quality of the assessment and the implementation of environmental protection measures. These challenges are diverse in nature, encompassing legal, technical, coordination, and financial aspects, and require collaborative and innovative solutions to ensure the success of the evaluation process.

4.1. Legal Challenges

Differences in environmental legislation and standards among countries involved in a cross-border project represent a major obstacle to effective environmental expertise. Each state has its own regulations and requirements regarding environmental protection, which can create difficulties in harmonizing the assessment process. For instance, one country may have stricter standards for pollutant emissions or biodiversity protection than a neighboring country participating in the same project.

This issue can lead to conflicts between states regarding ecological requirements and the necessary mitigation measures. In some cases, states must negotiate to reach a common understanding and adopt uniform standards, but this process can be cumbersome and time-consuming. The solution often involves referring to the international legal framework and applying agreements such as the Espoo Convention to facilitate compliance with shared minimum standards (Espoo Convention 1991).

4.2. Coordination and Communication Issues

Coordination among environmental authorities from different countries represents a critical challenge in cross-border environmental expertise. Each country has its own institutions and environmental agencies, and the lack of effective coordination can lead to confusion and delays in the evaluation process. Additionally, language barriers, differences in organizational culture, and administrative procedures can hinder communication and collaboration among authorities.

To address these issues, states may establish joint commissions or working groups that facilitate information exchange and collaboration between experts and

institutions. The use of online data-sharing platforms and the adoption of clear communication protocols can also help improve coordination and prevent conflicts among authorities.

4.3. Limited Technical and Financial Resources

Conducting cross-border environmental expertise requires financial resources and advanced technical expertise; however, not all participating states have the necessary capacities to carry out such a rigorous evaluation. Transboundary assessments involve the collection of complex data, ecological impact modeling, and public consultation – activities that are costly and require qualified personnel.

Less developed countries or those with limited resources often face difficulties in financing such expertise, which may affect the quality of the environmental assessment. To address this issue, international organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) provide technical assistance and financial support to states in need. International partnerships and the use of external funding sources are essential for ensuring an efficient and fair assessment process.

4.4. Ecosystem Impact Complexity

Assessing the impact on transboundary ecosystems is often complex due to the interdependence of natural ecosystems and the difficulty of estimating long-term effects. For instance, a forest exploitation project in one country may affect biodiversity and the hydrological cycle in a neighboring region, but the consequences of such changes may only become visible over time.

This complexity requires an interdisciplinary approach and advanced ecological modeling tools to evaluate long-term impacts. Environmental experts face challenges in predicting all potential effects of projects on transboundary ecosystems, particularly in the case of large-scale initiatives such as dams, mining operations, or transportation infrastructure. The use of ecological modeling methods and continuous monitoring of environmental parameters are necessary to provide as accurate an assessment as possible.

4.5. Public Participation Challenges

Public consultation and stakeholder involvement in transboundary impact assessment represent an essential stage, though not without challenges. States have different systems for public consultation and transparency, and involving citizens from multiple countries can be difficult due to linguistic and cultural differences.

Moreover, populations in affected regions may hold different perceptions and interests regarding the project, which can lead to disagreements and tensions. For infrastructure or natural resource exploitation projects – such as gas pipelines –

citizens in the countries of origin may be less exposed to risks, while communities in neighboring countries may experience more significant impacts. To facilitate public consultation, authorities can organize open information sessions and ensure that relevant documents are translated for the public in all affected countries.

4.6. Methodological Limitations and Uncertainty

Cross-border environmental expertise also faces methodological challenges, as environmental impact predictions are often based on models and data that may have inherent limitations. Uncertainty regarding the outcomes of ecological models and the difficulty of anticipating all consequences of a project can influence decisions about its implementation (Canter, 1996).

This uncertainty is particularly significant in the case of projects with long-term impacts, such as nuclear power plants or maritime transport developments, where the potential environmental effects are difficult to predict with precision. To mitigate these uncertainties, the involved states may apply the precautionary principle and periodically review impact studies in light of new data and updated technologies.

4.7. Case Study: Danube River Projects

A relevant example of the challenges in cross-border environmental expertise is the case of projects carried out on the Danube River, which flows through ten European countries. Hydroelectric and navigation infrastructure projects on the Danube often pose risks to aquatic biodiversity, water quality, and the health of riparian ecosystems, and these risks directly affect all riparian states (ICPDR, 2020).

Assessing the transboundary impact of such projects requires intensive cooperation among the involved countries and the implementation of complex environmental protection measures. For instance, the construction of hydroelectric dams necessitates evaluation of the effects on water flow, sediment transport, and migratory fish species. In these cases, the involved states must collaborate to identify conservation solutions, such as creating ecological corridors or implementing pollution reduction technologies.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Cross-border environmental expertise plays a crucial role in environmental protection and in ensuring a balance between economic development and the conservation of natural resources. In a world where many infrastructure and development projects affect territories across multiple countries, cross-border expertise is an indispensable tool for assessing environmental impact, minimizing risks, and preventing ecological conflicts between states.

This form of expertise supports not only environmental protection but also international cooperation and sustainable development, ensuring that economic

interests do not compromise the health of ecosystems and the well-being of communities.

The challenges associated with cross-border environmental expertise are significant and include regulatory differences between countries, difficulties in coordination among authorities, lack of financial and technical resources, as well as the complexity of assessing impacts on ecosystems. These difficulties underline the need for a well-structured international legislative framework, such as the Espoo Convention, and for financial and technical support measures provided by international organizations.

Recommendations for Improving Cross-Border Environmental Expertise:

- **Harmonization of Environmental Standards:** It is essential for states to harmonize their environmental standards in order to facilitate the cross-border evaluation process and to avoid conflicts. Adopting common norms and guidelines based on best ecological practices can contribute to more effective assessments and better environmental protection.
- **Strengthening International Cooperation and Regional Partnerships:** Cross-border projects require close collaboration among states. Joint commissions and working groups, supported by international organizations, can facilitate coordination among authorities and improve the quality of environmental assessments.
- **Increasing Transparency and Public Participation:** Public consultation and the involvement of stakeholders from all affected states are essential to the success of cross-border expertise. Informing citizens and providing participation opportunities ensure a comprehensive assessment and contribute to public acceptance of the projects.
- **Supporting States with Limited Resources:** Countries with limited financial and technical capacities need support to conduct rigorous assessments. International funding and technical assistance provided by bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations Environment Programme are crucial for strengthening these states' ability to engage in cross-border environmental evaluations.
- **Use of Advanced Monitoring and Ecological Modeling Methods:** Ecological simulation models, GIS, and remote sensing technologies can contribute to a better understanding of the impact of projects on the cross-border environment and allow for the anticipation and monitoring of long-term effects. Implementing advanced technologies can reduce uncertainty and increase the precision of assessments.

In conclusion, cross-border environmental expertise is an essential tool for ensuring a healthy environment and promoting sustainable development in a global context. Through international cooperation, technical and financial support, and the active involvement of all stakeholders, states can contribute to the

protection of ecosystems and to a sustainable future, where economic development does not compromise ecological integrity.

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