

## **Environmental Information Centre (EIC)**

### **Innovation Report**

#### **I. The Context**

- (1) With the growing need to strengthen environmental regulatory process for sustainable development, there has been a growing demand for services in the environmental management sector
- (2) The process of obtaining environmental clearance for specified projects has evolved and the basket of projects requiring such clearance has also been under regular review and updation. Growing need for development has substantially increased the demand for environmental clearance provided by the Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF), Government of India (for projects of Rs.60 crore and above) and the state Pollution Control Boards (in respect of projects of size less than Rs.60 crore)
- (3) The clearance requirement stipulates the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment to be conducted for every project requiring such a clearance from the government. The conducting of EIA is a process based on evaluation of impacts with and without the project in order to evolve strategies for their mitigation as a part of the project implementation program for any given project
- (4) Usually, an EIA therefore rests on data availability for conducting such an impact analysis with regard to various parameters that would define the environment. The data requirements for such studies include a wide spectrum such as demography, air quality, soil types, meteorology, geological & topographic information, groundwater & surface water analysis, flora and fauna, which in the present context are required to be sourced from various departments, agencies, accessing previous databases
- (5) The process is time-consuming and has several disadvantages, as this involves data consolidation from different sources, could be subject to errors (as different data could relate to different time periods), quality and adequacy of data and duplication of efforts. Ease of data availability is also an issue and so is retrieval
- (6) With the greater need for accessing data for conducting an EIA or any kind of environmental assessment, availability of data in a ready and interactive format is the basic requirement. IL&FS first conceived the concept of evolving a knowledge database for this purpose.
- (7) The MoEF at this juncture was having a problem of evaluating proposals and providing clearances due to non-compatibility of data base and retrieval of information. The MoEF also felt the growing need for avoiding duplication of efforts and standardizing the data base with all information required to conduct such an analysis and document it in reports

- (8) IL&FS approached the MoEF with the concept of developing a repository of information or an environmental database that could be evolved as a tool for various applications. The concept of "Environmental Information Centre" (EIC) was strategised and developed in 2002 by IL&FS in partnership with the Ministry of Environment & Forests
- (9) The EIC is a unique platform evolved for information sharing, database retrieval, value addition and quality control, customization and dissemination to tailor made requirements. Additionally, the EIC provides data in a GIS enabled format which serves as a basic tool in conducting such an analysis with layers of complex database. The process of formulation and operationalisation has taken about two years
- (10) The innovative features of EIC include:
- (a) First unique database in India to be set up on PPP basis
  - (b) a standardized customized product that would minimize errors
  - (c) a consolidated database of information
  - (d) use in GIS based applications for complex analysis of physical information required for development in sensitive areas, regions of national importance, biospheres, etc.
  - (e) single point source of information for environmental analysis
  - (f) savings in time and effort due to ease in data availability
  - (g) improvement in quality of EIA
  - (h) expedites the process of environmental clearance
- (11) The EIC has now evolved as a professionally managed clearing-house of environmental information. This initiative has been in operation since 2004
- (12) Needs and Objectives of the Innovation:
- Experience on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in India indicates that lack of availability of timely and reliable environmental data has been the major bottleneck in preparing quality EIA reports. Since environment is a multidisciplinary area, a multitude of agencies are involved in the collection of environmental data in India. However, there is no single organization in India that tracks the data available among the multitude of data generators and makes it available in the form and manner required by the practitioners in the field of EIA. This in turn affects the effectiveness of EIA process by causing delays in conducting EIAs and in reviewing the EIA reports for Environmental Clearance (EC). Further, the environmental data is often not available in a processed or value added form that can possibly enhance the quality of environmental decision making

To address these issues, Environmental Information Centre (EIC) was conceived to act as a clearinghouse of environmental data needed for preparation and review of EIAs. EIC data is also used as a project level decision support system for:

- Site selection
- Ecological degradation or improvements over time
- Early warning system for Glacier Lake Outbursts
- Catchment area degradation
- Determination of Environmental Status

Thus the basic objective of EIC is to efficiently meet the secondary environmental data needs of all stakeholders involved with Environmental Impact Assessment and speed up the environmental decision making process

## **II. Implementation of Innovation**

- (1) As mentioned above, EIC is the first institution of its kind set up on a PPP format. The centre is a joint initiative between Ecosmart and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF)
- (2) EIC has formed various strategic partnerships with data collection agencies and regulatory authorities such as state pollution control boards. It has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to develop a knowledge management framework that can generate early warnings and state of environment reports. Within the company, a dedicated and multi-disciplinary team of professionals are involved in developing and managing the database, liaising with stakeholders and identifying and establishing new initiatives
- (3) It is intended that EIC will evolve into a Not-for-Profit Trust with an independent board of trustees, management committee and an advisory committee.

## **III. Impact Assessment**

- (1) Achievements within the Organisation

The organisation has developed and strengthened its GIS capability that provides inputs to most other projects undertaken by the organisation. Use of such inputs has helped improve the quality of Ecosmart's deliverables. Ecosmart has also been able to customise outputs to meet the varied requirement of its stakeholders

During the establishment phase of EIC, Ecosmart undertook extensive consultations across the country that not only helped feed in varied

stakeholder expectations but also improved the brand equity of Ecosmart as a socially and environmentally responsible organisation

(2) Achievements Outside the Organisation

- (a) EIC has helped create a basic level of understanding amongst key stakeholders such as Financial Institutions (FIs), Project Proponents, Central and State Agencies and civil society about the need to consider relevant environmental information while planning projects
- (b) To the Project Proponents, it provides a quick understanding of all pertinent environmental issues and significant savings in time and resources due to faster data procurement. It also contributes to improved quality of EIA
- (c) To FIs and regulatory authorities, it provides assurance that all significant parameters have been considered
- (d) To MoEF and NGOs it provides an independent view on adequacy of data reported in EIA and an opportunity to verify the authenticity of data

(3) Specific Socio-Economic Impacts

Most medium to large projects that have significant economic multiplier effects, could have substantial social and environmental costs if not planned well. EIC Database has helped mitigate some of these costs by internalizing social and environmental considerations while planning projects with optimal economic returns. Wider application of such information will eventually contribute to an improved quality of environment