

Beyond the Checklist: A Learner's Guide to the CoRIAP Method

Introduction: Why We Need a Better Way to Assess Our World

Massive infrastructure projects—like new highways, dams, and power plants—can change our world forever. They often have huge, irreversible impacts on nature, biodiversity, and the communities that call these places home. To evaluate these impacts before they happen, we rely on a tool called the Environmental Impact Assessment, or EIA.

In principle, an EIA should be a fair and open-minded evaluation. In reality, it is often used as a simple "box-ticking exercise" to push through decisions that have already been made, ignoring the real costs to people and the planet.

To fix this, a group of academics, practitioners, and activists developed an innovative new approach: the **Co-Creative Relational Impact Assessment Process (CoRIAP)**. It is a more inclusive method designed to move beyond the checklist and give communities a real voice in decisions that affect their lives. This guide will provide a clear and simple overview of what CoRIAP is, how it works, and why it's a significant step toward fairer and more sustainable development.

1. The Problem: Three Flaws of Traditional Impact Assessments

To understand why CoRIAP is so valuable, we first need to look at the problems it was designed to solve. Conventional Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) suffer from three major flaws that make them ineffective and often unfair.

- **Pro-Development Bias:** Instead of being an open-ended evaluation, the EIA is often used as a tool to justify projects that powerful economic and political interests have already decided on.
- **A Narrow Vision of Sustainability:** Assessments typically focus only on technical data, ignoring crucial human elements like cultural beliefs, community values, and the intrinsic worth of nature, which are essential for true sustainability.
- **Lack of Meaningful Participation:** Consultations with local communities are often done too late, are limited in scope, or use technical jargon that makes it impossible for everyday people to have a real influence on the final decision.

To address these fundamental flaws, a new process was developed to move beyond the checklist and embrace a more holistic view.

2. What is CoRIAP? A New Process for a Fairer Future

The **Co-Creative Relational Impact Assessment Process (CoRIAP)** is a blueprint for making environmental assessments more collaborative and participatory. It offers a structured way for experts and communities to work together to understand the true impact of a project.

CoRIAP serves two primary purposes:

- **To strengthen assessments:** It brings crucial but often ignored elements into the evaluation, such as community ethics, emotional connections to place, cultural values, and local ways of knowing.
- **To empower communities:** It provides a tool for community self-strengthening, offering a structured way for local people to reclaim the story of their own land, challenge biased narratives, and envision better, more sustainable alternatives.

Crucially, CoRIAP is designed to **complement and broaden** existing EIA practices, not necessarily replace them. It is a tool to make the current system better, more comprehensive, and more just.

But how does CoRIAP achieve these ambitious goals? It follows a structured, five-step journey.

3. The CoRIAP Journey: A 5-Step Guide

CoRIAP is a carefully designed process that unfolds over five distinct steps, with the output of each step feeding into the next.

1. **Convening** This first step is all about creating a safe and shared space. The goal is to build trust among all participants—from local residents to technical experts—and ensure everyone has the same background information about the project.
2. **Re-storying** This is the heart of the process. Participants analyze the official project story to uncover hidden biases and missing information. They then work together to create a new, more complete narrative that includes the voices, values, and perspectives of the local community and the land itself.
3. **Scoping & Criteria Setting** Using the new, richer story, the group identifies what *truly* matters to the community and what impacts should be assessed. This moves the process beyond standard technical indicators to focus on criteria that reflect local cultural, ethical, and emotional values.
4. **Design of Assessment Methods** Once the key criteria are set, this step involves choosing the right tools to measure them. These methods are often creative and participatory, designed to capture the complex, relational impacts that traditional assessments miss.
5. **Validation** In the final step, the results of the process—the new stories, criteria, and methods—are shared with the wider community. This ensures that the findings are legitimate, credible, and truly representative of the community's perspective.

Two of these steps contain the most powerful and unique ideas within CoRIAP: 'Re-storying' and the '5+1 Es' framework for scoping.

4. The Core Concepts: A Deeper Look at CoRIAP's Big Ideas

This section breaks down the two central concepts that make CoRIAP so transformative.

4.1 The Power of 'Re-storying': Changing the Narrative

Official project documents often tell a one-sided story. They might use technical jargon to hide meaning, leave out important details about the local culture, or simply ignore the perspectives of vulnerable communities. 'Re-storying' is a two-part activity designed to correct this imbalance.

- **Finding the Flaws (Ecolinguistic Analysis):** Participants learn to act like detectives, analyzing the official project texts to uncover hidden biases and erasures. They are guided by a set of simple questions that help them see what the language is *really* doing.

What to Look For	Simple Question to Ask
Omissions	What is left out of this story? Is an important character missing?
Technical Jargon	Does the text use words that are hard for a non-expert to understand?
Representation & Role	How are different people or groups shown? Who is active, and who is passive?

- **Writing a New Story (Rewrite):** After finding the flaws, the group works together to write a new story. This new narrative is richer and more holistic, including the missing voices, senses, emotions, and cultural details that paint a complete picture of the place and its people. Crucially, it restores agency to vulnerable human and more-than-human communities who were silenced in the original story.

4.2 The '5+1 Es': Expanding What We Value

To ensure the assessment looks at what truly contributes to the well-being of people and nature, CoRIAP uses a framework called the '5+1 Es'. This helps the group identify assessment criteria that go far beyond typical technical measurements.

- **Ecology:** The web of life and the deep biocultural relationships between people and their environment.
- **Episteme:** Different ways of knowing, especially the local and indigenous knowledge that is often overlooked.
- **Esthetics:** What the community finds beautiful, inspiring, and worth preserving in their home.
- **Ethics:** The core values, moral principles, and spiritual beliefs of the people who live there.
- **Emotions:** How people feel about their home and the deep emotional connection they have to their land.
- **+1 Emancipation:** The overarching goal of empowering communities and making the entire decision-making process more democratic and just.

These concepts, while powerful in theory, have been tested and applied in real-world situations.

5. CoRIAP in Action

CoRIAP was tested on two real-world infrastructure projects: the proposed **Lamu coal power plant in Kenya** and the **Pakbeng hydropower dam in Laos**. The results showed just how powerful the method can be.

The 'Re-storying' exercise successfully exposed how the original EIA documents created an "**erasure effect**." By using technical language and abstract maps, the official reports made the project sites seem like empty, undeveloped land. This effectively silenced the vulnerable human communities and the non-human world of plants and animals that lived there, making their concerns invisible.

In stark contrast, the new documents created through CoRIAP brought these places to life. The re-storied narratives included the sounds of the sea, the sights of fishermen at work, local cultural practices, and the voices of the people. By doing so, they legitimized concerns about culture, livelihood, and belonging that were completely absent from the original assessment. This was achieved through different but equally powerful approaches: the Pakbeng rewrite focused on the conceptual web of social-ecological connections, while the Lamu rewrite used a poetic, sensory-driven travel diary to evoke a deep sense of place.

This practical application demonstrates both the immense potential of CoRIAP and the challenges it faces in the real world.

6. The Path Forward: The Promise and Challenge of CoRIAP

CoRIAP offers a powerful tool for communities to strengthen themselves and for official assessments to become more fair, comprehensive, and accurate. It helps transform the EIA from a rigid checklist into a dynamic platform for critical reflection and true collaboration.

However, the primary challenge for CoRIAP is gaining acceptance from EIA practitioners and government bureaucracies who are used to more conventional, technical methods. Overcoming this resistance will not be easy.

Ultimately, CoRIAP's success depends on close collaboration between dedicated communities and open-minded experts who believe in empowering people to shape their own futures. It is a hopeful step toward a world where development serves the well-being of all life, not just the interests of a few.