

Life Beyond the Checklist

**How a Co-Creative, Relational Approach Can Revitalize
Environmental Impact Assessment**



We Are Building at an Unprecedented Scale, and the Costs Are Staggering.



1 Million Species

Facing Extinction. (Source:
IPBES, 2019)



~500,000 km

of new roads and railways are
planned for construction in the
next decade, threatening nearly
2,500 animal species.
(Source: UNEP, 2022)



40%

By 2030, urban expansion could
degrade up to 40% of existing
protected areas globally.
(Source: Ardian, 2022)

Large-scale infrastructure projects, accelerated by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),
are posing irreversible threats to our planet's biological and cultural diversity.

Our Primary Tool for Managing Impact Is Failing to Meet the Challenge.

EIA: The Principle

A fair, accurate, and open-ended evaluation to curb extractivist patterns and protect social-ecological systems.

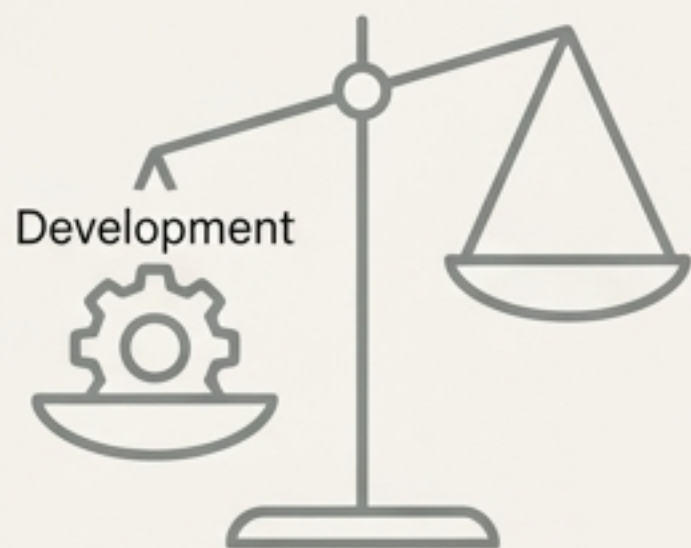


EIA: The Practice

An instrumental, “box-ticking exercise” used to facilitate the approval of decisions already made elsewhere.

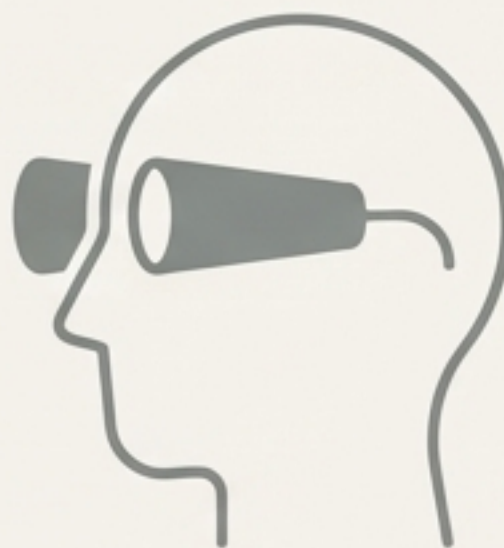
“Efforts to mitigate ecological and social harm have been sidelined in favor of uneven economic gains and investor profits.”

Conventional EIAs Suffer From Three Fundamental Flaws



Pro-Development Bias

EIAs are used instrumentally to approve pre-determined projects. The language and criteria are shaped by economic and political interests, making approval seem inevitable.



A Narrow, Short-Sighted Vision

Sustainability is reduced to standardized, anthropocentric indicators. It ignores intrinsic and relational values, voice, agency, and cultural beliefs.



A Lack of Meaningful Participation

Consultations are often untimely, limited, and use inaccessible language. The perspectives of local and vulnerable communities—and the needs of more-than-human entities—are systematically excluded.

The Result: A Story of Erasure

Project Location



The 1050 MW Lamu coal-fired thermal power plant was planned to be situated on approximately 865 acres (350 hectares) of land at Kwasasi, a sparsely populated traditional agricultural area...

Conventional EIA documents systematically sideline concerns not directly linked to the project, Source Serif Pro Regular. Conventional EIA documents systematically sideline concerns not directly linked to the project, overlook vulnerable actors, and depict project locations as blank spaces ready to be filled. Life, culture, and complexity are erased.

To Fix the Tool, We Must First Shift Our Worldview



Introducing CoRIAP: The Co-Creative Relational Impact Assessment Process

CoRIAP is a robust, actionable framework designed to expose and overcome discursive biases in EIA processes, while enhancing their capacity to consider impacts that are systematically overlooked.

1. For Practitioners & Planners

To strengthen impact assessment by incorporating relational elements (ethics, emotions, aesthetics) that are essential for well-being but hard to quantify.



2. For Communities

To establish a structured pathway for communities to reclaim control over the narratives shaping their territories, creating a foundation for envisioning transformative alternatives.

The CoRIAP Framework is a Five-Step Journey from Erasure to Empowerment



Each step produces an output that feeds into the subsequent phase, building a richer and more inclusive assessment.

At Its Heart is Re-storying: Making the Invisible Visible

1. **Ecolinguistic Analysis:** Participants perform an assisted analysis of EIA documents to identify how language is used to erase meaning and legitimize bias.
2. **Rewrite:** The group collaboratively rewrites the narrative, reintegrating overlooked details, sensibilities, and goals.

Criterion	Guiding Question
Omissions	<i>What important aspects, characters, or relationships are missing from the story?</i>
Representation & Role	<i>Who is represented as an active agent? Who is passive? Are non-human entities included?</i>
Senses	<i>Is there any language that engages sight, smell, sound, touch, or taste?</i>
Power	<i>Are power imbalances acknowledged, or are “locals” treated as a monolith?</i>



From a Blank Space to a Living Place: Re-storying in Action

Pakbeng Dam

Original EIA Story:
Abstract, technical
description

CoRIAP Re-story: “The Mekong River is a **lifeline** for its many peoples and ecosystems... The discourse is centered on what the **river does for people**... and for non-humans... a dynamic human-food-place nexus.”

Lamu Coal Plant

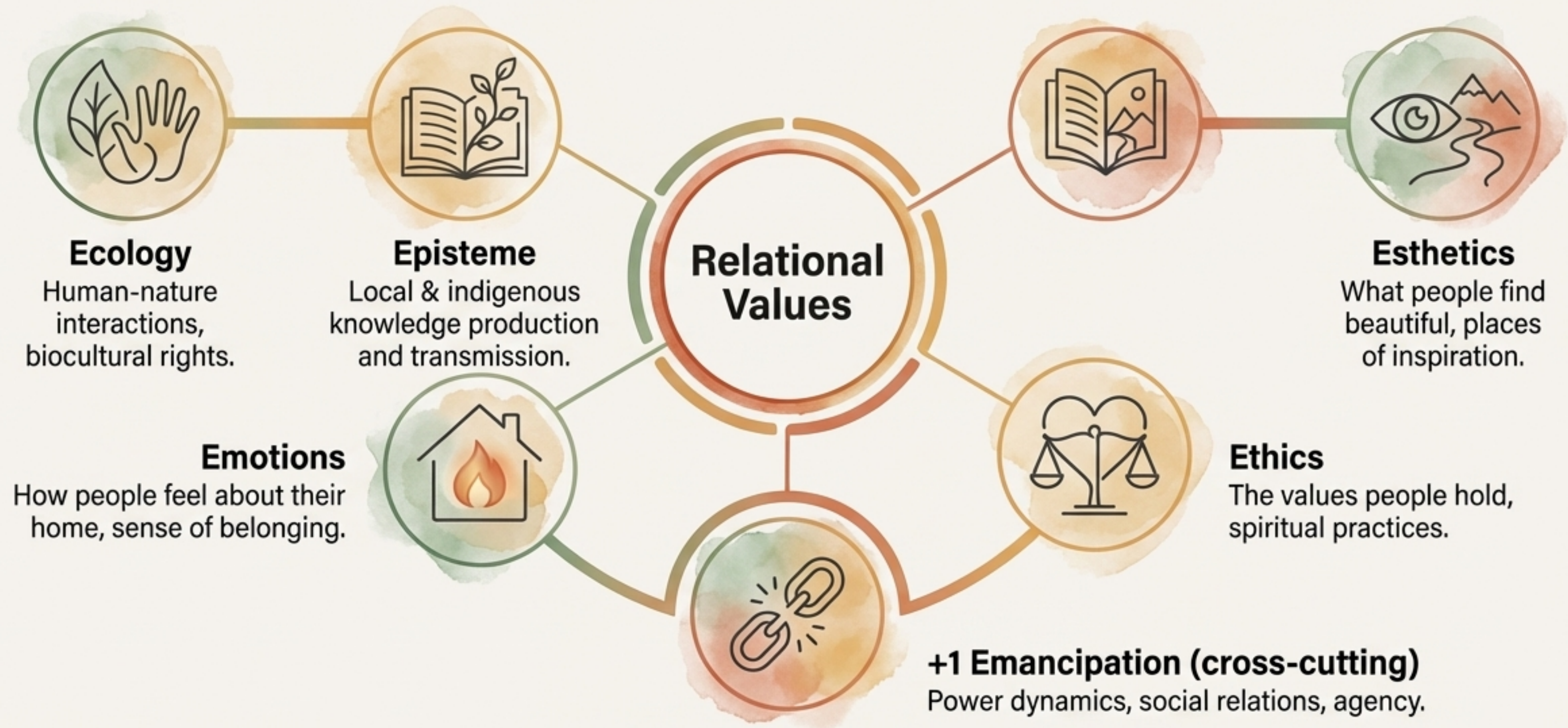
Original EIA Story:
Dry, demographic data

CoRIAP Re-story: “A vivid description... bringing back **sounds** (the roaring of the sea, whistling of fishermen), **sights** (birds scanning the sea), **touch** (the marine breeze), and **taste** (roasted fish)... also senses **‘uncertainty’** about the future through human voices.”

Re-storying restores agency, incorporates sensory experience, and reveals the complex web of relationships that define a place.

Scoping Beyond the Technical with the '5+1 Es' Framework.

CoRIAP uses the re-storied narratives to identify impacts that conventional EIAs ignore.
This framework provides a structured lens to guide the process.



When Given a Voice, People Prioritize Relational and Cultural Values.

In a validation session, a diverse group of professionals, students, and activists were asked to prioritize assessment criteria for a hypothetical project in a place they cared about.

What is most important to assess?



Key Takeaway: The results confirm that impacts on emotions, culture, and social fabric are of primary importance, yet are precisely what conventional EIAs overlook.

A New Toolbox to Assess a Richer Reality.

Assessing relational impacts requires moving beyond conventional metrics. CoRIAP integrates methods from participatory action research, anthropology, and the arts.



Walking Interviews

Experience the landscape through the eyes of geologists, biologists, and community elders.



Photovoice

Empowering community members to document their own realities and concerns through photography.



Participatory GIS

Collaboratively mapping places of cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance.



Sound Ethnography

Capturing the acoustic environment and the stories it tells.



Community Radio

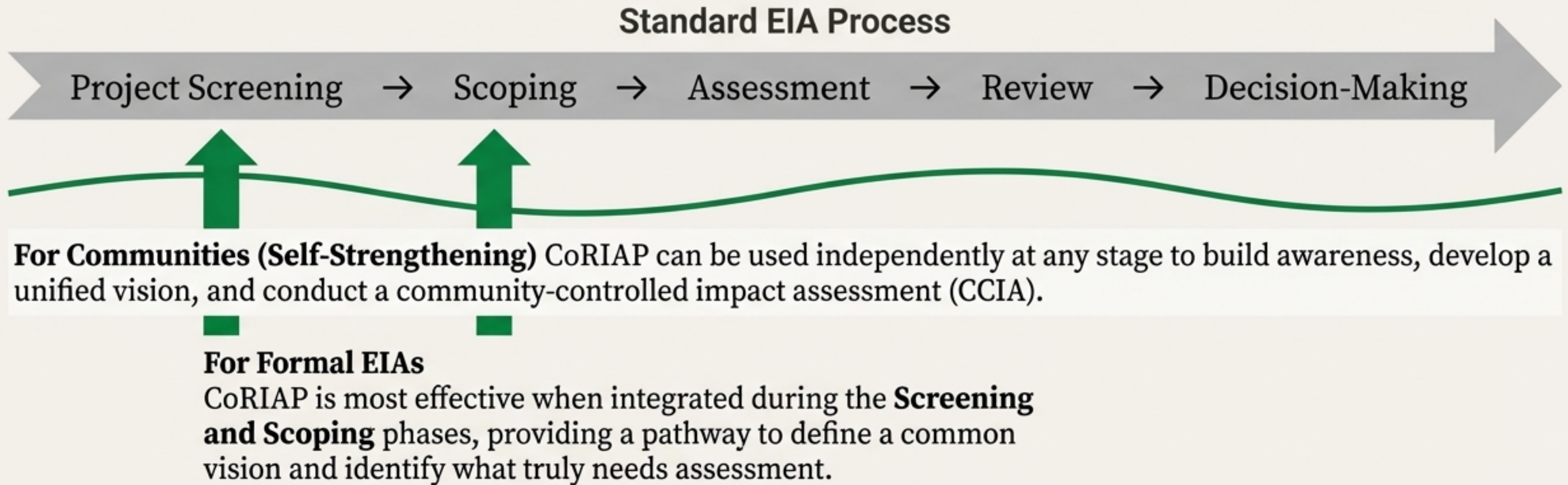
Creating a platform for broad-based dialogue and information sharing.



Role Play & Performance

Exploring potential futures and power dynamics through embodied practice.

CoRIAP Can Be Applied Both Within and Outside Formal EIA Processes



Key Insight: Community involvement should be substantial throughout, while expert roles may become more prominent during the design of specific metrics.

This is About More Than a Better Process. It's a New Purpose for Assessment.

CoRIAP is not a substitute for current practice, but a tool to transform it. By bringing a relational understanding of sustainability into focus, we can move impact assessment beyond a procedural hurdle.



We can transform the EIA from a tool that legitimizes extraction into a locus of critical reflection about development, justice, and our shared social-ecological future.