1. When we think of construction of a factory, road or mine, the first thing that usually comes to mind is economic development and employment.

2. Conversely however, development projects can also lead to negative impacts, such as air, water and soil pollution, deterioration of climate conditions, depletion of natural resources and the destruction of plant and animal life. They can also adversely affect human health and the long-term sustainability of the economy and society.

3. How can we then ensure project benefits and simultaneously minimise pertaining negative effects? This can be achieved via environmental impact assessment. It is a procedure which allows us to assess important environmental impacts concerning the development project before the investor acquires a permit for project implementation. The environmental impact assessment procedure, and the projects it covers, is thoroughly regulated by the Law on the Environmental Impact Assessment and accompanying bylaws. Therefore, detailed information can be found within these documents.

4. Environmental impact assessment gains even more prominent when considering the fact that the European Union expects candidate countries, such as Serbia, not only to properly transpose the related procedure, but also to implement it before becoming full EU member states. This is because the European Union itself has standards on impact environmental impact assessment. Further information is available on the official website of the European Commission, more precisely within the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. Therefore, the existence of the environmental impact assessment is of significant importance for environmental protection, but also for the EU integration process.

5. Let us now turn more closely on the environmental impact assessment procedure. How does it look? In order to implement a certain project, the investor must obtain a licence from the competent authority at the national, provincial and local level. During the procedure, the environmental impact of the proposed project is assessed. For some projects, the investor must submit a special study, while for other projects the competent authority decides if the further assessment is required. Nonetheless, in both cases minimal conditions for environmental protection can be proscribed. In any case necessary condition for obtaining a permit for the proposed project is that all important impacts are assessed and based on that further decisions taken with regards to proposed project. In order
for this to occur, the competent authority requires information. It is via information that the competent authority can assess during the decision making process what environmental impacts a project might have. Information can be provided among others by independent experts for specific projects.

7. However there are also other sources of information deriving from citizens and environmental organizations. Their participation is particularly important. Why is that? First of all, even if the general public does not possess technical expertise, it possesses local knowledge about the specific location, environmental features and population, based on life experience. Such practical, local information and data are priceless, because decision-makers can, based on them, directly assess likely significant impacts of a development project. Secondly, the increased participation of the public allows for the monitoring of the procedure itself. The threat of corruptive actions, by which a project can be realized without perceiving and taking into consideration all the harmful effects, is also decreased. Finally, the increased participation of citizens in the procedure leads to a broader acceptance of the proposed project among the local and wider community, especially if their opinion is heard and carefully taken into consideration.

8. Therefore based on previously research, investor's contributions, the experts' opinion and public participation, the competent authority has access to all relevant information. Based on this information, the competent authority can make the best decision regarding the proposed project. In case that the project is granted a permit, the chances that positive effects of a project will be used while conversely minimising or avoiding the negative effects, will increase because the competent authority can, based on the available information, designate concrete environmental protection measures.

9. Besides environmental impact assessment pertaining to development projects, there is also environmental impact assessment of strategic documents which regulate spatial planning and the overall development of a given country. In Serbia, this procedure is regulated through the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment. In the EU, it is regulated by the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. Citizens can also participate in strategic environmental assessment.

10. It is important to re-emphasize that the role of citizens during the whole process is of a crucial importance because the quality of environmental impact assessment depends on them. Through the active participation of the public, the work of public administration can be improved and the chances of Serbia becoming a full member of the European Union are increased. If environmental impact assessment of proposed projects and strategic documents is completed successfully, the protection of nature, health and limited resources will be secured and by that, also the long-term betterment of our country and local communities! Therefore, the message to citizens is vivid: take part in environmental impact assessment! Think, act, impact!