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Institutionalizing social impact assessment in Bangladesh resource management: limitations and opportunities

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Abstract

Consideration of social issues in environmental impact assessment (EIA) of development projects has been an integral part of project cycle since the inception of EIA in Bangladesh in the early 1990s. This paper examines the emergence of social impact assessment (SIA) in Bangladesh environmental management and its institutionalization. It reveals that although SIA does not have a statutory status like EIA, social dimensions are firmly established in donor funded poverty alleviation projects. It is proposed that SIA is given a clear legislative mandate. The Department of Environment (DOE)—the agency that looks after the implementation of EIA on behalf of the government—needs to be strengthened and transparent in order to play a more effective role.

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1. Introduction

Social impact assessment (SIA) is the process of assessing and managing the consequences of development projects, policies and decisions on people.

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Its objective is to identify the intended and unintended effects of planned interventions in order to develop sustainable management plans (Burdge, 2003; Vanclay, 2003). SIA emerged as a separate field of applied social science due to the realization in the early days of NEPA 1969 that environmental impact assessments (EIAs) could not adequately address social issues. In the late 1970s, many developed countries and some developing countries adopted SIA as a means of addressing social issues arising from development initiatives (Gilpin, 1995). However, SIA remained basically an integral component of EIA and is yet to be as firmly established in environmental planning as EIA (Cox et al., 2000). Environmental assessment is a newcomer in the development arena of Bangladesh. Bangladesh National Environmental Policy 1992 sets out the basic framework for environmental action in Bangladesh and paves the way for EIA for all major project interventions. The country had its first EIA guidelines in 1992 for infrastructure development in the water sector. Despite weaknesses in the implementation side, EIA has become a well-recognized part of policy development (Momtaz, 2002). This paper briefly examines the evolution of EIA in Bangladesh, evaluates the place of SIA in project planning and implementation by major agencies and makes some recommendations on the assimilation of SIA in development planning.

2. Methods

I visited Bangladesh in December 2003 during my study leave from the University of Newcastle, Australia. I contacted all major organizations involved in the design of EIA procedure and its implementation and had discussions with relevant personnel. These organizations are Department of Environment (DOE) of the Government of Bangladesh, United Nation's Development Program (UNDP), US Agency for International Development (USAID), World Bank Dhaka Office (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) Dhaka Office, CARE Bangladesh, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, IUCN Dhaka Office and Environment and GIS Support Project for Water Sector Planning (EGIS), Ministry of Water Resources. I also collected and thoroughly examined relevant literature on EIA and SIA published by these organizations. I examined a number of SIAs conducted in Bangladesh by major agencies involved. A follow-up email survey was conducted in the following months to supplement the information received during the field-work. An email questionnaire was sent out to some 25 leading academics and personnel investigating and involved in EIA applications in Bangladesh. Some 15 responses were received. The survey was not intended to acquire quantitative information on SIA; rather, the qualitative information derived from the survey helped substantiate many of the findings from the first round of discussions.

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