



## How is environmental conflict addressed by SIA?

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### ABSTRACT

The fields of Environmental Conflict Management (ECM), Environmental Conflict Resolution (ECR), and Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) have become well established; however, as yet there has not been much use of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to manage environmental conflicts. ECM, ECR and PCIA are mainly undertaken when problems are advanced or, more likely, have run their course (post-conflict). This paper examines how conflict is addressed by SIA and whether there is potential to develop it for more proactive assessment of conflicts (pre-conflict or while things develop). SIA has the potential to identify and clarify the cause(s) of environmental and natural resources conflicts, and could possibly enable some avoidance or early mitigation. A promising approach may be for 'conflict-aware' SIA to watch for critical conflict stages or thresholds and to monitor stakeholders. Effective conflict-aware SIA might also significantly contribute to efforts to achieve sustainable development.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper explores how Social Impact Assessment (SIA) might improve the management of environmental and natural resources conflicts. There are many post-conflict appraisals, but few attempts to provide advanced warning or make assessments before conflicts finish. Environmental Conflict Resolution (ECR), Environmental Conflict Management (ECM) and Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) are widely practiced but there has been little development of proactive conflict-aware SIA. This paper examines whether there are recognisable conflict stages and thresholds that could be used by conflict-aware SIA, and also tries to establish what might be promising approaches.

There is no universal definition of SIA; perhaps the best is that provided by Vanclay (2003:6): "...the process of analysing, monitoring and managing the social consequences of development." Alternatively, SIA could be described as a process that seeks to assess whether a proposed development will alter quality of life and sense of well-being, and how well individuals, groups and communities adapt to the changes (see also: Vanclay, 1999; 2002, 2004; Becker and Vanclay, 2003; Burdge, 2004). An SIA should consider what would happen if the proposed development did not take place, explore ways of avoiding or mitigating adverse (especially irreversible) impacts and flag likely or apparent beneficial impacts and opportunities. Increasingly the process also seeks to inform and involve stakeholders and make developers more reflective and accountable. There are three

possible points for application of conflict-aware SIA: pre-conflict; in-conflict; and post-conflict. SIA must be applied early if it is to support proactive governance and management, so pre-conflict application is desirable but that is currently much less common than post-conflict usage. Whenever it is used SIA can aid in understanding the cause(s) of conflict, may help make developers more accountable, might help integrate diverse disciplines involved in planning, and thereby assist efforts to achieve sustainable development (Cox et al., 2000; Cavaye, 2003).

It is not uncommon for a project, programme or policy to 'succeed' in the sense that it meets its planned goals, yet be overshadowed by problems and conflict it provokes (Westman, 1985). Failed developments can also trigger conflict, change independent of any development that can cause or ease problems, and a development or an unrelated change may highlight or catalyse already developing conflict.

Before proceeding further it is useful to try to clarify the meanings of *development* and *conflict*. Definitions of *development* reflect the current values of those involved. So, what was once seen as development may no longer appear to be because opinions vary over time and between groups or among individuals. There can be no precise and universal definition. However, most accept it is a process of change, often multidimensional, and something many governments, bodies or individuals aspire to prompt and steer. Development may not progress toward 'better' conditions; there can be no change or deterioration. The focus of development can be economic, social, technological, cultural, etc. Progress may not be marked by more disposable income, but by greater security, improved sense of well-being, more fulfilled and healthy life, etc. Before the 1970s there was little concern for environmental quality or social welfare; that has changed and there has also been the establishment of the concept of sustainable development. The latter may be crudely defined as development,

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which maintains achievements for those involved without reducing the options of others now and in the future. Development may be pursued at an individual, local, regional, national or international scale, through projects, programmes or policies, or simply the promulgation of a message. The process can be orchestrated from the bottom-up, or from the top-down; it can be short-term or longer-term in focus, planned and managed or more casual, even unconscious.

One definition of a *conflict* is that is a “...perceived divergence of interests, or belief that the various stakeholders' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously” (Persson, 2006: 3). For a somewhat different definition, see: *International Alert* (2006). An environmental conflict can manifest as political, social, economic, ethnic, religious or territorial strife or discontent over resources, or national interests (Spillmann and Bächer, 2005). Conflict can be non-violent or violent but either can be damaging. Occasionally conflict prompts change and progress; often there are opportunities as well as problems. Cause(s) of conflict can often be identified, although there may be situations where perceptions are unclear or disagreement is based on long-forgotten events or unfounded prejudice. Sometimes a conflict is preceded by an obvious crisis, a realization that a threshold could be crossed leading to serious trouble. Crisis warning and crisis management may be able to contribute something to conflict prediction. For example, the crisis may be at a ‘hot-spot’ and occur well before a more general problem.

Divergence of interest may be expressed in ways short of public disagreement, let alone serious violence, but even restrained conflict can have serious consequences. Those in disagreement may fail to cooperate, might fail to share useful information, etc. Conflict can arise when stakeholders benefit, as far as impartial outsiders can judge, to broadly the same degree. Often disagreement reflects divergent beliefs or habits. So, there may not always be a clear initial crisis.

## 2. Conflict and Social Impact Assessment

Projects, plans, programmes, policies, cultural development or socio-economic development in general and environmental changes run the risk of creating or exacerbating conflicts. During the process of preparing proposals SIA might be used to anticipate and thereby give a chance for reducing destructive conflicts. It may also be possible to run a SIA if precursors of conflict become apparent to monitoring bodies, NGOs, or whoever is vigilant. Vanclay (2004: 274) found that a number of conflict related SIAs had been conducted by 2003. However, most of those, and the majority of subsequent conflict related SIAs have been initiated post-conflict. So the potential of conflict-aware SIA has not really been adequately recognised or developed.

### 2.1. Social Impact Assessment

In some cases, developers do not adequately understand the potential and scope of SIA to improve proposals prior to decision-making, although this is changing (see Esteves and Vanclay, 2009). There may also be situations where things other than the proposed development are causing impacts, such as ongoing social or economic trends, environmental change, etc. SIA should be initiated before any developing conflict or proposal progresses too far to facilitate choice of best way forward and to give a chance of proactive management. In practice, SIA has mainly been applied to initiated projects, expected changes (social, economic, technical and environmental), already developing conflicts, ongoing programmes and policies, and post-development (or dispute) situations. Before those points, funding is unlikely to be forthcoming and the need little perceived. One of the basic demands for useful environmental SIA is to ensure it is applied as early as possible in order to try and: offer early-warning; establish causation; assess likely effects. Realistically, the best that can usually be expected is SIA application early in-conflict, which would at least offer the latter two benefits. It might be useful to explore ways to fund

rapid response conflict-aware SIA and establish bodies to watch for situations which merit its application. If that sort of proactive approach found a situation deserving a full conflict-aware SIA, efforts should be made not to adopt too narrow a focus and to explore the full context of the dispute, proposal or development.

A *social impact* may be broadly defined as the consequences of any action that alters how people live, think, behave, and react to each other (Burdge, 2004). The impact lies somewhere on the scale from good via insignificant to bad. Social impacts include social, cultural, health, and psychological impacts. A social impact can be real or perceived and affect individuals, families, groups, societies, countries, and even the global community. Social impacts can result from environmental and/or socio-economic changes, including technical and cultural innovation Gleditsch, 1996. The negative manifestations include: increased insecurity, more vulnerability, frustration, hardship, and loss of livelihoods, alienation from land or social networks, and conflict. Positive manifestations include: improvements to confidence, social capital, and livelihoods, and better adaptability. It is important to stress that impacts may be beneficial and offer opportunities, not all are negative. It may take SIA to spot and flag such opportunities. Social impacts may occur without a planned development taking place, through ongoing change, such as: demographic shifts, altered tastes and fashions, unexpected disasters, and so forth. A given change can cause different impacts on various groups or among individuals within groups. For the same group or individual a similar change may cause different effects with passing time. Assessment may identify *outcomes* as well as impacts. For example, a development may cause learning or networking with little obvious effect (an outcome), which can mean similar events in the future, would be dealt with in a different way (Vanclay, 2002).

A development or environmental change can cause social impacts that contribute to conflict in a negative or positive manner (MacKay, 1981; Porter and Ganapin, 1988; Homer-Dixon, 1991; Baechler, 1998). Conflict can cause social impacts that affect the developer or the environment. The developer can cause environmental impacts, which contribute to conflict. Added to all that, there may be positive or negative feedbacks. As in EIA one can subdivide impacts into first-, second-, third-order, and so on. A first-order impact is a simple and relatively apparent relationship. Second-order impacts involve a two-step indirect causation, and so may be less obvious, and so on as the order-rises. Devising SIA methods for identifying first-order impacts is relatively easy; however, they are like weak dip-beam headlights, providing a broad close view, but failing to show things further away in the darkness. There is a risk if SIA assesses only first-order impacts those commissioning the assessment will get a false sense of security. Things are in reality even more difficult; indirect impacts may form often complex chains and webs of causation, whereby wholly unrelated impacts interact at some distant point in time and/or space in a significant manner (Slootweg et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Such chains of causation can be modelled, but it demands time, funds and expertise, and it is unlikely to be precise. Worse, human behaviour can be fickle and difficult to forecast (Barrow, 2000, 2002). There is also a need to exercise caution to avoid environmental determinism: environmental change or disaster do not invariably cause stress leading to conflict, there can be quite the opposite effect, or little change.

There is the potential for conflicts to arise between stakeholders involved in natural resources development or impacted by environmental change or disaster. A *stakeholder* may be defined as someone (it could also be an organism or local environment) that is affected or perceives they could be affected by something. The effect could be either positive or negative, and ‘stakeholder’ also includes those affected but unaware of it (including people in the future or off-site, possibly far away). In the early stages of an SIA stakeholders need to be identified and understood as accurately as possible. Complex multi-stakeholder situations with overlapping interests are common.

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