



Evaluating the use of Social Impact Assessment in the context of agricultural development projects in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The utilisation of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) in Iran is analysed in terms of its policy context and its application in practice. Five case studies where SIA was employed in conjunction with Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for agricultural development projects are evaluated. In addition, the performance of the policy context is assessed. This research revealed that there are legal and institutional constraints to the effective functioning of SIA in Iran, and that there are deficiencies in the operating guidelines. There were serious problems associated with the way SIA was undertaken in all five case studies. Recommendations to improve the policy framework for the conduct of SIA are made. The recommendations advocate for a higher profile of SIA within legislation, for social issues to have greater emphasis in official guidelines for the conduct of EIA and SIA, and for a range of measures to increase the professionalism of SIA practice.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, many agricultural development projects (ADPs) have been initiated in Iran to alleviate poverty, unemployment, and an insufficient food supply. Although these projects were assumed to be beneficial for rural people, they often had unintended negative impacts on the environment and local communities. The projects were largely unregulated and the impacts often unmitigated. As a result, Iran has suffered from social and environmental degradation in many agricultural areas. Recently, however, ADPs in Iran and elsewhere have been criticized for their detrimental social and environmental impacts at the local level and to the world ecology at large (see Rezaei-Moghaddam et al., 2005; Ahmadvand and Karami, 2009).

Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is a useful mechanism for ensuring that ADPs can be implemented while maintaining the dynamics of social and human ecosystems (Slootweg et al., 2001). The International Principles for SIA (Vanclay, 2003, p.6) define SIA as including “the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and

unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment”. There is no doubt that in some ADPs (e.g. large dams, water management projects), the assessment of social impacts is as important as, if not more important than the assessment of the biophysical and economic aspects of these projects. SIA is important because it helps planners, project proponents, the impacted population and decision-makers to understand and be able to anticipate the possible social consequences on human communities of the proposed project (Pisani and Sandham, 2006). Vanclay (1999, 2000, 2004) considers that SIA makes projects more inclusive by involving key stakeholders; it makes them more socially-sound by minimizing or mitigating adverse social impacts, maximizing social benefits, and ensuring that projects are designed to be compatible with the local population. He also suggests that SIA is part of a democratic process in which equity, transparency and ownership are ensured through public participation. Therefore, SIA is necessary for building local capacity, and enhancing the performance of ADPs as a tool in sustainable development.

Although there has been an increase in awareness of SIA in Iran, its potential role in contributing to the identification and management of the social issues in ADPs is underestimated. This may be because of inadequate SIA processes and structures, insufficient regulation, or the lack of a framework for implementing SIA in Iran. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to assess the role of SIA in Iran’s agricultural

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development projects. The performance of the Iranian SIA system is reviewed and evaluated, and the role of SIA in Iran's agricultural development project cycle is examined. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the SIA process are provided. While the focus of the evaluation is the Iranian context, it is likely that the recommendations will have wider relevance.

2. Methodology

This investigation is two parts, an analysis of the SIA and EIA system or policy context in Iran, and a detailed evaluation of SIA as undertaken in actual practice, based on the assessment of five EIA/SIA reports of ADPs. The analysis of the policy context involved document research augmented by discussions with key informants. All major organizations involved in commissioning SIAs, especially for ADPs, were identified, including: Iran's Department of Environment (DoE) (*Sazeman-e-Mohit-e-Zist*), the Ministry of Agriculture (*Jihad-e-Keshavarzi*), the Management and Planning Organisation (MPO) (*Sazeman-e-Modiriat va Barnamerizi*), the Ministry of Energy (*Niroo*), and international organizations working in Iran such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank. The extent of consideration given to social impacts in the Iranian development process was examined through a review of legal, regulatory and guidance documents, related reports and the research literature. The analytical criteria developed by Ahmad and Wood (2002) were used to assess the performance of the Iranian SIA system (see Tables 1–4 later in the paper).

To assess the use of SIA in practice, we examined in detail five SIA reports for ADPs. These were selected from the SIA studies of ADPs undertaken between 2001 and 2006 in the Fars Province in the southwest of Iran. Since the majority of ADPs for which SIAs were required relate to the water and soil management sector, all five cases have this context. Because the power of purposeful sampling rests in being able to select information rich cases for in-depth study, the cases were chosen deliberately rather than randomly. Assessment of the quality of the SIAs was undertaken using an evaluation framework originally developed by Glasson et al. (1999) and further developed by Androulidakis and Karakassis (2006). For our purposes, it was revised for use with SIA (rather than EIA) reports.

3. Results part A: assessment of the performance of the Iranian SIA System

3.1. Provision for SIA in legislation

During the 1970s, many developing countries in Asia emerged at the forefront of EIA and SIA practice in the world (Gilpin, 1995). Today, EIA and SIA are firmly established in the planning processes of many

Table 1
Assessment of the adequacy of SIA Legislation in Iran.

Evaluation criteria	Assessment of the Iranian SIA system
1.1 Legal provision for SIA	Clause 82 of the Second State Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan of 1994, as amended by Clause 105 of the Third Development Plan, Decree 138 of the Environmental Protection High Council, 1994, mandates the use of EIA. Arguably, assessment of social issues is implied within the provisions for EIA
1.2 Provision for appeal by the developer or the public against decisions	There is no provision for appeal; the decision of the Department of Environment is final
1.3 Legal or procedural specification of time limits	Time limits at various stages of the process, including for making a final decision on a development proposal following an EIA, are specified in law and are reasonable
1.4 Formal provision for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)	SEA is not mentioned in the EIA/SIA legislation and procedures

Table 2
Assessment of the adequacy of the Administrative Arrangements for the conduct of SIAs in Iran.

Evaluation criteria	Assessment of the Iranian SIA system
2.1 Existence of a Competent Authority for EIA/SIA and procedures for the determination of social acceptability	The Competent Authority is defined in Note 2 of Decree 138 as being the Department of Environment. In practice there is a specialist EIA Bureau within the DoE. However, there is no specific procedure for determining social acceptability
2.2 Existence of a Review Body for EIA/SIA	The EIA Bureau within the DoE determines the appropriateness of EIA/SIA. It consults with other authorities with environmental and social responsibilities as appropriate
2.3 Specification of the responsibilities of sectoral authorities in the SIA process	Relevant sectoral authorities are represented in the EIA Bureau. Their roles and responsibilities are reasonably clear, although perhaps not specified in any formal sense
2.4 Level of coordination with other planning and management agencies	The Environment Bureau within the central Management and Planning Organisation has designated responsibility for coordination of environment-related issues. However, perhaps there is no coordination agency for social issues

Asian countries (Momtaz, 2002). Iran is one of the few developing countries that have the principle of environmental protection built into its constitutional law. Article 50 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran 1979 states that (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979):

The preservation of the environment, in which the present as well as the future generations have a right to flourishing social existence, is regarded as a public duty in the Islamic Republic. Economic and other activities that inevitably involve pollution of the environment or cause irreparable damage to it are therefore forbidden.

Iran has a history of environmental awareness, even prior to the 1979 revolution. For example, it was one of the 114 governments represented at the historic 1972 United Nations Stockholm Conference, which addressed problems of the human environment. As an outcome of this conference, Iran passed its first environmental legislation, the Environment Conservation and Restoration Act (ECRA), in 1974 (DoE, 2003). The aim of ECRA was not only to prevent and eliminate environmental degradation, but also to ensure management of natural and historic assets and the land in such a way as to utilize their richness and preserve it for future generations (DoE, 2004). Although the Iranian Government has made significant efforts to protect the environment, the conditions on approvals by the DoE were often not carried out due to weaknesses in implementation and compliance mechanisms, and a lack of an appropriate management and monitoring system (DoE, 1999).

The approach to environmental management has since been transformed. In the Second State Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan of 1994, EIA became a legal requirement for a wide range of activities that may have a detrimental effect on the environment (METAP, 2002). According to Clause 82 of the enabling legislation, all major development plans (whether for production or service activities) must implement EIA activities and prepare an EIA report in conjunction with any feasibility study and before site selection. This regulation emphasizes the importance of the EIA instrument as a mechanism for developing a cooperative approach to the management of the environment. Therefore, since the 1990s a comprehensive legal framework for environmental governance and management has been established in Iran.

While there is no specific mention of SIA in any of the legal documents, in principle, SIA is a subset of EIA in Iran (El-Fadl and El-Fadel, 2004). Iranian policies, legislation and regulation have proceeded from the premise that 'the environment' ought to be

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