



## Social relations: A critical reflection on the notion of social impacts as change



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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to reflect upon the dominant conception of social impacts as the change produced by development projects and programs, and the ways in which those affected perceive and experience them. Identifying change may be a necessary but not sufficient step in acknowledging the complexity of social life. Engaging with critical scholarship produced in the fields of both social impact assessment (SIA) and of the social studies of technical/planned interventions, I discuss how the understanding of social impacts as change responds ultimately to a causal–instrumental logic that, in order to make sense of the complexity of social life, tends to reduce it to a series of variables and matrices. I suggest a complementary dialectical approach focusing on social relations. This approach, allows an alternative means of analysing social impacts concerning the way policies and projects reconfigure conditions and possibilities on a societal level. To accomplish this, and in order to go beyond the sequence of potential impacts (or changes) and their generic indicators, I propose a set of analytical questions that highlight how social relations are structured. Besides, on the assumption that development is both a form of governance and a space of contestation, negotiation, and activism, this approach may contribute to further the potential for reflection and mobilisation that the practice of SIA presents.

### 1. Introduction

In this article, I seek to present a reflection on the dominant conception of ‘social impact’ as the changes ‘that affect people’ (Vanclay et al., 2015: 2) brought about by development interventions, and to propose that while identifying a broad range of changes may be a necessary step to identifying the social significance of planned interventions, it may not be sufficient to account for the complexity of social life.

This reflection stems from the acknowledgement that, even if social impact assessment (SIA) has become a recognised field of practice ‘with a legitimate mandate’ (Esteves et al., 2012: 38), and notwithstanding the growing corpus of works advocating and proposing more political and critical approaches to SIA (Freudenburg, 1986, Craig, 1990, O’Faircheallaigh, 2009, Esteves et al., 2012, Morrison-Saunders et al., 2015, among others), there is a tendency in the planning and execution of development and economic projects to carry out poor social impact assessments and, sometimes, to ignore them altogether (Vanclay, 1999, 2002a, 2002b; IFC, 2009; Pope et al., 2013; Vanclay et al., 2015; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2015; Bice, 2015).

What I intend to argue here is that this situation derives in part from the fact that the definition of impacts advanced in the general field of impact assessment (as the changes produced by development projects), has been extrapolated and applied to social life ignoring some of the basic traits of social phenomena, as has been observed by Franks et al. (2010, 2011), Freudenburg (1986), and Craig (1990) among others. Furthermore, the application of this generic definition of impacts to the social world has had important social consequences in itself, since it has contributed, by reducing its analytical scope, to the ‘depoliticising’ (Ferguson, 1994) of the projects and interventions under study.

This probably explains why, even when SIA exercises are performed following the safeguard measures and other recommendations established by development institutions and agencies (or indeed because of this<sup>1</sup>), projects do not necessarily reach the larger social objectives they set and frequently encounter unforeseen contradictory effects. Development and its specific interventions (policies, plans, and projects: PPP<sup>2</sup>), remain a minefield — as evidenced by the numerous and ongoing conflicts triggered by socio-environmental issues in the target countries for development — and are, in many cases, a determining factor in the impoverishment and subordination of their recipients (cf.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope et al. (2013) note that ‘the availability of guidance does not necessarily correlate to good practice’ (p.3), and affirm that ‘excessive regulation serves to stifle the creative side of impact assessment’ (p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Further references to development policies, plans, and projects will appear as PPP.

Mitchell, 2011; Tsing, 2005; Greenough and Tsing, 2003; Miller and Rose, 2008; among many others). And sometimes, they give rise to explosive situations where those who are the purported beneficiaries of the projects actually consider themselves more as ‘affected parties’ or even as their victims (Serje, 2010; Jaramillo, 2012). This is, no doubt, related to the fact that social impacts are either ignored or not properly identified. It might also have something to do with the fact that the tools currently used to identify social impacts are limited in scope and may overlook many social trends, practices, and emergent processes.

Identifying social impacts appropriately is of crucial importance since, as Pope et al. (2013, p.6) suggest, the management of ‘non-technical risks has recently become a hot topic’. It has been recognised that in order to adequately address the socio-environmental conflicts associated with development projects, SIA must go beyond the instrumental scope of the PPP in order to assess their effects in a broader societal context and in this way, transcend the purpose of influencing decision-making within development goals, and contribute to the creation of social possibilities for equity and sustainability, particularly so where indigenous groups are concerned (Freudenburg 1986; Craig, 1990; Nish and Bice, 2011; Hanna et al., 2016, among others).

My intention here is not to discuss SIA practice, but to explore the current definition of social impacts conceptually. In what follows, I will present a reflection on the way in which social impacts are defined in what may be considered the ‘mainstream’ SIA operational literature (put forth by institutions such as the IAIA and adopted by corporations and international development agencies) and argue why this definition may be seen as limited. To broaden the analytical scope for social impacts, I will propose a complementary route of analysis, centred on social relations. Thus, in Section 2, I discuss the mainstream concept of social impacts, which refers to the changes (however they are defined or qualified) produced by planned interventions. I will then discuss the idea of social change from an anthropological perspective, examining the assumptions upon which this particular notion of social impacts is based, in order to investigate whether conceptualising social impacts as change in itself or as the experience of such change is a sufficient approach to understand them.

In the third section, this paper builds on scholarship within SIA literature (on the dilemma between its ‘political’ and ‘technical’ or instrumental dimension), and within the social sciences (on the politics and instrumentality of social interventions) that shed light on key issues to rethink social impacts. These discussions have opened new perspectives by placing the problem of causality in social life at the centre of the debate and by focusing on social relations (that is, the relationship between the social roles, hierarchies, and categories through which individuals and groups interact). An important insight to be drawn from these studies is that, in order to account for the complexity of social life, we need to recognise the emergent character of social phenomena and analyse social relations dialectically. Subsequently, in the fourth section, I discuss the relevance of the analysis of social relations to identify and evaluate social impacts and the challenges they pose, and I propose a set of questions as a guide for this kind of analysis.

## 2. Impacts as change

Following the definition of impacts in general, social impacts have been broadly conceptualised as the change in the human environment brought about by certain actions or events. Social impact assessments have focused, accordingly, on the various aspects that are described as social change. The current definition of social impacts, adopted officially by the IAIA (Vanclay et al., 2015) and put forward by influential international development agencies such as the World Bank (2014), IFC (n.d.), UNDP (2016), is best articulated in Vanclay (1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2006, 2012)’s and Vanclay et al. (2015) influential work, where he defines social impacts as the ‘measurable change in human population, communities and social relationships resulting from a development project or policy change’ (Vanclay,

2002a, p.186) or as the set of ‘consequences and changes’ derived from the implementation of PPP (Vanclay, 2002a, p. 190). This same notion underlies the definition provided by Goldman and Baum (2000, p.7): ‘a social impact is a significant improvement or deterioration in people’s well-being or a significant change in an aspect of community concern’. Or in the definition proposed by Barrow (2002, p.188), according to whom ‘a social impact is a significant or lasting change in people’s life brought about by a given action or a series of actions’.

The understanding of impacts as the changes produced by planned interventions, inherited from the general field of impact assessment, has resulted in a tendency to focus on the change that is observed according to components or variables rather than on the social dynamics of the context where it is produced. This tendency can be better understood by looking into the etymology of the word ‘impact’. It stems from the Latin word *impingere*, which means to ‘force, drive, or thrust against’ something. It literally means a collision and, essentially, it used to be a military term (which is in itself significant as it explicitly refers to an instrumental logic). In the language of weaponry, the impact refers to the moment when the trajectory of a projectile strikes the objective. Thus, it implies a target and the intent to affect it. In this case, the laws of physics allow an exact calculation of the dimension of impacts. The force with which the projectile is launched, its mass, the distance to the target, the energy of the explosive, etc., can be calculated with accuracy; that is, the impact can be assessed in a precise manner. In physics, the action/reaction phenomenon is quantifiable and predictable. In the field of biology, an analogous logic has been applied to assess, for example, the impact of deforestation on the population of a certain species. Here, it is also possible to measure, in a relatively precise manner, the response of a living being to a stimulus. And I say in a *relatively* precise manner because it is not possible to precisely predict the reaction of sentient beings to a stimulus, since many have some form or degree of agency (Ingold, 1974; Kohn, 2013).

To apply this logic to people and societies is even more problematic. In the social world, it cannot be assumed that an intervention X produces a reaction or an outcome Y. Among human beings, an event or intervention not only produces multiple reactions simultaneously, but it also connects with other events and interventions in sometimes-unexpected ways. This will depend on manifold features of the social groups. Human beings are creative (we question, learn, adapt), dynamic (we experience permanent change and evolution), and, while we share a number of basic features, we are heterogeneous (see things in different ways, want different things) and conflictive (we act within power relations). These characteristics can be observed in any human group: from the family and even the couple, to national societies or transnational organisations.

Thus, social life is contingent (it responds to conditions in a constantly changing context) and subjective. Many factors are involved, such as the world of ideas (for example, a particular idea of divinity is crucial for its ethical, political and economic implications), the world of moral principles (the social life of a group of people who find putting profit above any other consideration as morally acceptable is considerably different from that of a group for whom this is morally unacceptable), each group’s sense of justice, expectations and hopes, its sense of the future, what its members understand as beneficial, and, thus, what they expect from development.

People’s reactions are therefore much more complicated than those of other living beings. Their responses to stimuli and actions are mediated by a multitude of variables. They are determined by factors such as genetics, language, perception, the unconscious, interests, emotions and feelings, ideas and principles with which we identify<sup>3</sup> and, especially, by history. That is, they are determined by the specific social and economic conditions in which people live and the politics

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Bateson (1972) presents a comprehensive discussion of the complexity of the mediation of the human mind.

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