The role of time and social churn in impact assessment: An engagement-based model

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A B S T R A C T

To participate in social impact assessments, members of a community need to understand both the nature and complexity of impacts at the individual and social level. This study considers the role of engagement in developing community understanding of social impacts by documenting and analyzing organizational and community actions and responses in the Adani Carmichael mine case. Findings suggest engagement facilitates the conduct of social churn. We define social churn as a process of collective level discussion, meaning-making, and consensus-building from multiple information inputs in response to equivocality or uncertainty resulting from organizational behavior, out of which is generated an articulation of community level perceptions of that organizational behavior and its impacts at an individual, community, and societal level. Theoretically, the findings of this study challenge traditional linear notions of social impact assessments and offer an alternative engagement-based model. Practically, the model identifies ways in which organizations can recognize and participate in the social processes that both create and represent the differing levels of social reality determining perceptions of those impacts.

1. Introduction

Organizations operate within complex environments characterized by a range of social and environmental pressures. Responding to these pressures is challenging as organizations are expected to show awareness of the impact of their decisions on these complex environments, and provide evidence of their response to any actual or potential stakeholder concerns—including those of community members. To understand the nature and extent of the effects of organizational decisions, organizations are increasingly using social impact assessments (SIAs). A central premise of SIAs is that organizations understand the effects of their decisions and behaviors on stakeholders. Traditionally, organizations have relied on informed "best guesses" to help them anticipate the likely nature and impact of these effects (Dietz, 1987). However, trends toward adopting a stronger stakeholder orientation are emerging in SIAs, such as identifying and responding to stakeholders' own perspectives on the impact of actual or planned organizational behavior (Esteves et al., 2012; Hattam et al., 2014). Organizations though can be critical of this collaborative approach (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), based on the perception that stakeholders may have insufficient understanding of the complex social problems decisions are addressing (Becker and Vanclay, 2003) and the risks that localism brings to a project (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Localism means stakeholders only see impacts in terms of how an organization's decision will affect them as an individual, rather than at the community or societal level. For stakeholder involvement in SIAs to be effective, therefore, stakeholders need to understand the complexity and nature of that impact, at both an individual and a social level.

Research into the processes involved in stakeholder understanding of social impacts has recognized the value of participation but not the co-creational processes and influences on how community groups achieve collective level understandings of complex decisions and impacts. This study addresses this need by documenting and analyzing organizational and stakeholder actions and responses in the Adani Carmichael mine case, and proposes an engagement-based model reflecting the social processes required to undertake SIAs. The model is based on the conduct of engagement as both a means of providing information between organizations and stakeholders; and facilitating the conduct of *social churn*—a process of collective level discussion, sense-making and consensus-building, out of which is generated an articulation of stakeholder perceptions of organizational behavior and its impacts at an individual, community, and societal level. These periods of social churn involve communication between stakeholders, and occur both within and beyond organizational boundaries. The justification for these conclusions is presented in the following sections.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Social impacts

Organizations impact their environments in many ways. Understanding the impacts of a decision on a community can challenge researchers due to both the diversity of a community and the extent of the impact. Vanclay (2002) argues social impacts can span a range of impacts including health and well-being, livability, economic, cultural, family and community, political/legal, and gender, and must be "experienced or felt in corporeal or perceptual terms" (p. 201) (see Vanclay, 2002, for a full discussion). We draw on these ideas to conceptualize social impacts as *changes in the way people live, experience, sustain, and function within their society, resulting from organizational decisions and consequent behaviors.*

2.2. Assessing social impacts

SIAs provide a way to identify and assess the social impacts of organizational behavior on communities (Bond et al., 2001). Esteves et al. (2012) note SIAs are often predictive in approach, however Vanclay (2012) positions them as both prospective and retrospective.

SIAs have been operationalized as a process including steps of identifying, and analyzing consequences of an action (Becker, 2001), both "intended and unintended" (Vanclay, 2003, p.6). SIA techniques aim to identify, anayze and evaluate (Dietz, 1987) possible future consequences resulting from organizational decisions (see, for example, Arce-Gomez et al. (2015) and Becker (2001)), typically drawing on predetermined categories of impacts (Vanclay, 2012). Barrow (2002) and Esteves et al. (2012) identify that using such categories is potentially problematic, noting that the effectiveness of the SIA is dependent on the willingness of the SIA community "to take an external stakeholder orientation, ironically an orientation that it itself promotes" (Esteves et al., 2012, p. 40).

More than a decade ago, Vanclay (2006) called for an enhanced role for stakeholders in SIAs, arguing that SIAs should become "a community-driven process leading to appropriate sustainable development" (p. 10). Ideally, this role will also facilitate the incorporation of culturally-specific concerns and insights where these will enhance such appropriateness and sustainability (Nzeadibe et al., 2015 – see also Throsby, 2017, and other articles in the Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development special edition of the International Journal of Cultural Policy).

While shifts to participatory approaches or "'good' SIA practice" (Esteves et al., 2012, p. 34) are still being talked about, few studies (see, for example, Miller et al., 2007) address the complexity of the sense-making component of understanding the actual or potential discussion and therefore the resulting social impacts. Bond et al. (2018) argue that understanding how information is accessed and used by community members is important. This approach contrasts with current SIAs' linear processes and requires a re-theorizing that recognizes the social influences that generate meaning and understanding within a social setting.

Community engagement is argued as fundamental to community responsiveness in SIA processes (Franks and Vanclay, 2013). This importance reflects the contribution of social issues to the management side of SIAs (Esteves et al., 2012, p. 36). A social process view of engagement therefore offers a means for organizations to participate in socially-generated meaning, and co-created understanding, of social impact and subsequently, the value of their decisions and behaviors.

Engagement is a multidimensional and relational concept featuring both psychological and behavioral attributes that incorporate connection, participation, and involvement (Johnston, 2010). In stakeholder engagement, this translates into organizational efforts to reach stakeholders with communication on a topic or issue in a way that interests them and elicits a response. In a community context, engagement ultimately aims to build social capital and enhance outcomes through facilitating community involvement, evaluation, and opinion exchange

(Johnston et al., 2018). Engagement is central to SIAs (A. Bond et al., 2018), building social capital within a social setting (Taylor and Kent, 2014). Social capital refers to the knowledge, understanding, and capacity of the community to understand the complexity of the social impacts of organizational decisions (Vanclay, 2006), involving trust, reciprocity and a community orientation or mindedness (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). These characteristics are developed and displayed through community members' participation in interactions with organizations.

Participation is a central tenet of SIAs (Smyth and Vanclay, 2017). O'Faircheallaigh (2010) conceptualizes public participation as "any form of interaction" (p. 20) between an organization and community as part of the impact assessment process, noting public participation is used as an aid or a mechanism within decision-making structures. Studies confirm the importance of public participation in social and environmental impact assessments, but recognize various challenges in conceptualizing, "doing", and integrating outputs from participation (Esteves et al., 2012; Franks and Vanclay, 2013; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Rega and Baldizzone, 2015; Sinclair and Diduck, 2017). These challenges have been particularly recognized in relation to the "integration of cultural rights in cultural policies and in sustainable development strategies" (Kangas et al., 2017, p.131).

While local community participation is lauded as critical to building community relationships, Mohan and Stokke (2000) highlight that the shift to localism—that is, local participation and empowerment—presents a number of challenges relating to power, social inequality within a "local" community, and a de-contextualization from broader forces. They argue localism "has tended to essentialise the local as discrete places that host relatively homogeneous communities" and requires a "global sense of place" (p. 264). Organizations should therefore aim to undertake a form of engagement that encourages interactions between community members to facilitate understanding of social impacts at levels that include, but also move beyond, that of the individual.

It is through these social processes—and specifically the communication processes embedded or assumed to occur—that meaning and reality is both created and understood (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Previous research has established the benefits of collaborative approaches (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), and calls have been made for the legitimacy of SIA processes to be recognized (Bond et al., 2018), and to understand the subsequent realized value (Cape et al., 2018). Deliberative and social processes both create and represent the differing levels of social reality that determine perceptions of those impacts, but research to understand how this happens is limited (Nowak et al., 1990).

2.3. Time

Public participation in SIAs shifts and generates new knowledge and understanding (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010, 2017), particularly influencing collective shared understanding of community level impacts, generated through social processes. Nowak et al. (1990) suggest this social interaction produces new knowledge, perspectives, and understandings that are unique to the individual or community.

To generate this knowledge, perspectives, and understandings individual community members need to be exposed to multiple sources of information, reflecting different points of view. Engagement around social impacts therefore needs to allow time for community interaction to share these points of view. Time as an aspect of public participation has been raised as an important consideration by the Aarhus Convention (Hartley and Wood, 2005). More recently, Vanclay et al. (2015) noted that sufficient time is required for participation processes to be carried out. Time provides opportunities for individuals to co-create a social level understanding of impact, discussing their perceptions with others as they confirm, revise, or reject their personal perspectives. An extended engagement timeline is particularly important