Social impact assessments: Developing a consolidated conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) have played an increasingly important role in the conduct of planned interventions, providing proponents the capacity to assess and manage the social consequences of their activities. Whilst the SIA field has experienced significant conceptual and practical development over the last decade, efforts at consolidating this within one framework have been limited. In this paper, we incorporate this new knowledge by redeveloping and thus updating the SIA procedural framework developed by Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment. In doing so, this updated procedural framework has attempted to incorporate current 'best practice' that focuses on participatory approaches to undertaking an SIA. This involved making adaptions to two steps, expansions to five steps, integration of a stronger participatory approach to six steps, and the development of a new step, *Management and Evaluation* reflecting moves towards ex-post use of SIA processes. It is hoped that this consolidation of the literature of a decade's worth of key findings in SIA research will lead to further efforts towards a meta-evaluation of SIA literature and a platform from which newer developments may be further investigated.

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Introduction

In addressing the social aspects of sustainable development, Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) first emerged as a component within Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), used to gauge, moderate and invariably mitigate the impact of planned interventions (Esteves et al., 2012; Mahmoudi et al., 2013). SIAs have since developed into a distinct discipline within the impact assessment field, capable of providing mechanisms in which human and social ecosystems are integrated into decision making (Ahmadvand et al., 2009). Along-side this development, the impact of projects, programmes, plans and policies (planned interventions) on the social well-being of communities has become an area of increasing concern, which explains the accelerated

development and practice of SIAs in recent years (Esteves et al., 2012; Lord, 2011; Momtaz, 2005; Suopajärvi, 2013; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011).

SIAs have increasingly been used across a variety of different countries, such as Finland (Suopajärvi, 2013), Iran (Ahmadvand et al., 2009) and Bangladesh (Momtaz, 2005), reflecting the recognition of SIAs as a key element in the planning process for planned interventions (Ahmadvand et al., 2009; du Pisani and Sandham, 2006; Momtaz, 2005; Suopajärvi, 2013). These efforts have led to a variety of ways to conduct an SIA, allowing for the unique aspects of each case and community to be embraced so that specific and individual needs are addressed (Esteves et al., 2012). As part of its theoretical and practical development, it has been recognised that the SIA process should be designed as a non-prescriptive process that enables flexibility in practical application (Suopajärvi, 2013).

Despite the importance of flexibility in the practical application of SIA processes, the development and codification of the SIA process

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and associated procedures remain important in providing guidance on appropriate approaches to be adopted by practitioners. This has been recently highlighted by Suopajärvi (2013) and Mahmoudi et al. (2013), who claim that more improvements are needed on the theoretical, practical and methodological aspects of SIAs. Likewise, in the recent 'State of the Art' article by Esteves et al. (2012, p. 40), emphasis was placed on further understanding the core concepts of SIAs, including "the theoretical bases for participatory approaches". Esteves et al. (2012, p. 37) suggest public participation within the SIA process "continues to be an issue" with efforts to include the community "at worst … being little more than a feeble attempt at project legitimization".

The lack of understanding and continued calls for further theoretical development is somewhat surprising, particularly with regard to participatory approaches, given the formalisation of the core values and principles to guide SIAs. This was developed by an official project from the International Association for Impact Assessments (IAIA), which resulted in the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment (Vanclay, 2003a,b). Current 'good practice' within SIAs has also recently been reinforced by Esteves et al. (2012, p. 35), who highlight that the SIA process should be "proponent-led or community-led", with participatory processes enabling community discussions and a negotiated agreement for proposed interventions. Over the last decade, this has been paralleled by efforts to develop guidelines on how to conduct an SIA within a range of books (Becker and Vanclay, 2003; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011; Ziller, 2012) and articles (i.e. Asselin and Parkins, 2009; O'Faircheallaigh, 2009; Rossouw and Malan, 2007; Rowan, 2009).

We believe that the continued issues regarding the integration and utilisation of participatory approaches, as well as the ongoing calls for further theoretical development within SIAs, arise in part from the sheer magnitude of research and development that has been undertaken in the field. Suopajärvi (2013): 25 laments on this point, suggesting that "there seems to be quite a wide gap between academic recommendations and the SIA case studies, suggesting that a metaevaluation of SIAs is called for if we are to improve SIA practices". To address such concerns it is argued that the guidelines produced from theoretical and empirical work over the last decade need to be consolidated and incorporated into a new procedural framework. This may serve to provide a basis from which other developments within the SIA field may be incorporated more effectively. This includes recent efforts around free, prior and informed consent; human rights; social performance standards; governance standards and local content requirements, amongst others (Esteves et al., 2012). This consolidation of new knowledge into a procedural framework will thus provide practitioners a platform from which to understand other advances in SIA techniques and approaches.

In this paper, we draw upon two particularly important works produced by the Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles (ICGP) for Social Impact Assessment aimed at codifying SIA practice (Esteves et al., 2012). The first was produced in 1995, with the *Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment*, and then, subsequently, in 2003 with an updated document, *Principles and Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment in the USA*. Even though the second document received significant critique from notable scholars in the field, such as Vanclay (2006), who highlighted the failure of the updated document to engage sufficiently with the extant literature, these two documents have, nevertheless, contributed towards the development of the SIA field. This is particularly so with regard to the first document, which codified "the core procedures and understanding of SIA at the time" (Esteves et al., 2012; p. 35).

Accordingly, in this paper, we attempt to modify the framework developed by ICGP so that it incorporates and thus reflects current knowledge, and particularly 'best practice' as articulated through the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment (Vanclay, 2003a,b) and *Social Impact Assessment: the state of the art* (Esteves et al., 2012). This will be achieved by first incorporating new findings into the relevant steps throughout the framework, and second, by considering (wherever possible) how technical and participatory approaches can complement

and enhance the SIA process when operating in conjunction. It is not our aim to integrate all knowledge that has been discovered about SIAs. Rather, we seek to engage with a range of key studies that have offered specific and relevant insights that we believe, if incorporated, will contribute significantly to improving the existing framework and providing an important step towards theoretical consolidation and meta-evaluation within the field.

With this endeavour in mind, we now turn to the following activities. First, a critique will be undertaken on the most common approaches (technical and participatory) to an SIA within the extant literature. Next, we will design a newly proposed framework, building from the ICGP framework, which will reflect the key innovations appearing from recent scholarly endeavours. This may then be used to inform how each step may evolve in practice. Lastly, we will discuss the significance, value and efficacy of this new, consolidated framework as a mechanism for guiding future research endeavours that seek to unravel the complexity of SIAs.

Approaches to conducting SIAs

The ICGP (1995) developed a procedural framework that contributed towards the early codification of SIA procedures and arguably paved the way for research within the SIA field. Both the 1995 and 2003 publications provide an overview of an adaptable SIA procedural framework developed with the intent of standardising SIA practice (ICGP, 1995, 2003). This framework proposes a list of sequential steps that should be followed in the SIA process, drawn primarily from the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) steps put forward by the 'Council on Environmental Quality' (1986). The framework is characterised by its technical approach, which means that it relies upon the expertise and knowledge of social scientists to determine the prediction and assessment of social impacts caused by planned interventions (Ziller, 2012). This approach is invariably perceived as being "objective" and "systematic" due to the rigour of having "social scientists" involved, and their use of objective assessment methods and quantifiable indicators which are based on their "expert" determination (Asselin and Parkins, 2009). Ziller (2012) details the importance of technical approaches due to the expertise required to understand and predict patterns associated with social trends, which is vital to contextualise social impacts. However, we identify three key shortfalls to this approach. First, whilst we acknowledge the importance of "objectivity" in technical approaches, SIAs are also considered ill-equipped to deal with the diverse beliefs, values and interests of various stakeholders who are typically present in the societal context in which the assessment takes place (Lockie, 2001).

Second, the use of quantifiable variables shifts the focus of SIA results towards easily identifiable and measurable consequences, such as economic and employment growth (Ahmadvand et al., 2009). This means there is a risk that the "softer" social impacts which should also be considered, such as any detrimental impacts on the culture of the community, are overlooked (Lockie, 2001; Rowan, 2009). We draw our third point of criticism of the technical approach from the ICGP (1995) itself, who suggest that invariably, the social or community issues which are included in SIAs are not necessarily the most appropriate ones, but rather those which are the easiest to account for, quantify, or to measure.

Based on an international project by IAIA that captured the ideas and comments of experts in the field, a list of 17 key activities was developed underlying the SIA process (prepared by Vanclay, 2003a,b), known as the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment. As later explained by Vanclay (2006), these activities were not intended to reflect sequential ordering of SIA processes, nor to form an implementation guide for practitioners, but rather to expound the importance of considering a broad range of activities when conducting SIAs. In this way, SIA processes would be sure to draw upon the local community's knowledge and understanding and to ensure that any impacts are assessed in a way that is contextually relevant to them (Asselin and Parkins, 2009; Ziller, 2012). This "participatory" approach, reflects the