Measuring Policies with the Social Impact Assessment Framework: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Social impact assessment (SIA) is still evolving as a stand-alone discipline. While interest in SIA has steadily increased in the last three decades, the focus has largely been on resource-type projects. This paper is an introduction to a new discussion on adapting the current SIA framework for policy-assessment purposes and is based on Adusei-Asante and colleagues' (2016) 'Impact assessment of university-fee deregulation on prospective regional university students in Western Australia'. Drawing on this study, we argue that the current SIA framework can be used to measure the social implications of policies. However, developing an SIA framework for assessing policies or adapting the current one for that purpose would require: (1) consideration of impactees' knowledge of the relevant proposed policy, and (2) the use of social-research methods and theories as well as terminologies applied in the specific policy area.

Background

Social impact assessment (SIA) emerged alongside environmental impact assessment in early 1970 as part of the requirements of the United States of America's 1969 National Environmental Policy Act. 'Social impact assessment' is conceptualised as the process of considering and managing the social issues associated with development and/or planned intervention (Vanclay, 1999; Esteves et al., 2012). Interest in SIA has steadily increased in the last three decades, resulting in its emergence as a stand-alone discipline and professional practice. Currently, several organisations, including the World Bank, and researchers are contributing to the SIA framework (World Bank, 2003; IAIA, 2015; Suopajavi, 2013; Vanclay et al., 2015). As a specialised field, SIA is being used in several jurisdictions boosted by its codification (Vanclay, 2003) and Vanclay and colleagues' 2015 publication *Social impact assessment: Guidance for managing social impacts of projects*.

A typical SIA process involves scoping, baseline studies, impact identification and analysis, impact evaluation, management, and monitoring and reporting (Vanclay et al., 2015; McCallum & Walton, 2016). The current SIA framework seems to have been ostensibly developed to assess the social impacts of resource-type projects. However, Adusei-Asante and colleagues (2016) have shown that the SIA framework can be used to assess the social implications of policies that impact people directly. Although policy-impact assessment is an established field within the programme-evaluation sphere, developing a policy-relevant SIA framework would prevent SIA practitioners from vacillating between the two disciplines and deepen the significance of SIA. Further, adapting the current SIA framework to make it relevant for policy assessment may lead to the development of terminologies and techniques

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for conducting SIA in specific policy subfields, such as higher education, economic development and gender.

Some have argued that a consolidated SIA framework, applicable to both projects and policies, is needed (Esteves et al., 2012; Suopajavi, 2013; Arce-Gomez et al., 2015). The call for an integrated SIA framework raises a theoretical question relating to the types and variables of 'social' as well as the 'impacts' that might be investigated in SIA. According to Vanclay and colleagues (2015, p. 2), 'almost anything can potentially be a social impact so long as it is valued by or important to a specific group of people'. The authors argue further that social impact can be experienced or felt in either a perceptual (cognitive) or a corporeal (bodily, physical) sense, at any level—for example, at the level of an individual person, an economic unit (family/household), a social group (circle of friends), a workplace (a company or government agency) or community/society generally. Vanclay's (2003, p. 8) generic and overarching descriptors of 'social impacts' follow, and include changes to:

1. People's way of life—how they live, work, play and interact with one another on a day-to-day basis;

2. Their culture—their shared beliefs, customs, values and language or dialect;

3. Their community—its cohesion, stability, character, services and facilities;

4. Their political systems—the extent to which people are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives, the level of democratisation that is taking place, and the resources provided for this purpose;

5. Their environment—the quality of the air and water people use; the availability and quality of the food they eat; the level of hazard or risk, dust and noise they are exposed to; the adequacy of sanitation, their physical safety, and their access to and control over resources;

6. Their health and wellbeing—health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity;

7. Their personal and property rights—particularly whether people are economically affected, or experience personal disadvantage which may include a violation of their civil liberties;

8. Their fears and aspirations—their perceptions about their safety, their fears about the future of their community, and their aspirations for their future and the future of their children.

The Research: Study Rationale, Findings and Implications for SIA Practice

Australia's federal government proposed to deregulate university fees in 2014. The proposed economic rationalist policy, which was expected to take effect in 2016, would have ensured all registered higher education institutions (including public and private universities and non-university higher education institutions) would set their own tuition fees for Commonwealth-supported students, and the Australian Government would reduce its contribution towards tuition fees by an average of 20% for new students (Australian Government, 2014). The policy has been defeated twice in the Senate, in 2014 and 2015. However, if the current liberal government wins the 2016 election, there are indications that it would reintroduce the Higher Education and Research Reform Bill in Federal Parliament in

2017. If passed, the Bill would pave the way for the implementation of the university deregulation fees policy (UFDP) in 2017/2018 (Jacks, 2015).

Adusei-Asante and colleagues' (2016) study sought to unravel the potential impact the UFDP would have on regional students, who baseline studies in the literature showed had limited access to higher education and were at risk of dropping out when enrolled (Brett et al. 2015; Lim et al 2014; Scevak 2015). Adusei-Asante and colleagues adopted a qualitative research method for the study, which took place in three regional localities and involved 50 respondents. The data-collection process involved: (1) semi-structured interviews with Year 12 students, and (2) focus-group discussions with Year 12 students, parents and teachers.

Adusei-Asante and colleagues' (2016) findings raise two key theoretical issues with the SIA framework. First, the framework seems to assume that the policy's/project's subjects have knowledge of the initiative whose impact is being assessed. The study revealed that most of the research participants (students, teachers and parents) had limited knowledge of the proposed UFDP. Ninety-two percent of students, 40% of teachers and 70% of parents interviewed had never heard about the policy. Notwithstanding most respondents' limited knowledge about the UFDP, when they learned through this research that the policy would give universities the autonomy to set their own fees, the general concern was that it would lead to fee increases (Adusei-Asante et al., 2016). The fact that regional West Australians had little knowledge of the government's policy suggests that a future policy SIA framework may have to consider measuring those impacted by a policy's knowledge of the proposed policy; this is currently not reflected in the SIA framework.

Second, Adusei-Asante and colleagues' (2016) research revealed that, while legitimate, the generic conceptual categorisation of 'social impact' might not unearth specific social-impact issues within specific policy areas or specialist subfields. SIA experts work in several specialist subfields, such as higher education, landscape analysis, archaeological and cultural heritage, development, economic and gender impacts (see Vanclay 2003, p. 7). Beyond the generic SIA framework, these subfields have their relevant specialist concepts and descriptors that apply when conducting SIA. As SIA is still evolving, there seems to be little known about the descriptors of various specialist subfields. For example, Adusei-Asante and colleagues (2016) found that the fears of the research respondents, who were the subjects of the proposed policy, related to enrolment, attrition and retention, concepts they have proposed as descriptors of higher education–related SIA. Therefore, anyone developing an SIA framework for policy assessment would need to consider key terminologies and concepts used in the relevant policy area being addressed. Applying social-research methods and social analysis would also be instrumental in this respect.

Conclusion

SIA is emerging as a discipline in its own right. However, more debate is needed to ensure all aspects that are affected by, or can be measured within, SIA processes are incorporated into new discussions and definitions of SIA. Adusei-Asante and colleagues (2016) used the SIA framework to study the impact of a proposal to deregulate university fees on regional West Australians. They found that the current SIA framework can be used to measure the social implications of policies. In their study, the majority of respondents had no

real understanding of the policy being investigated. This finding—that the policies or programmes being investigated are commonly not understood by the subjects or participants—is important for SIA and needs to be addressed to ensure valid SIA. Drawing on this study, it is suggested that a policy-specific SIA framework be developed or the current one be adapted for that purpose. In doing so, we suggest the need to: (1) consider impactees' knowledge of the relevant proposed policy being assessed; (2) use social-research methods and theories as well as terminologies applied in the specific policy area being assessed; and (3) continue discussion of the opportunities and challenges of SIA and policy assessment among all stakeholders.

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