SIA: Evolving Perspectives and Emerging Approaches

Ross E. Mitchell[1]; 25 June, 2016

Abstract

This paper has two objectives: (1) to review the key concepts, approaches, and methods in social impact assessment (SIA) with a focus on Canada, and (2) to draw on a case study from the Canadian North that exemplifies critical issues and areas for development within theory and practice. Strict technical approaches to SIA that attempt to anticipate impacts prior to project developments are giving way to more holistic approaches, focused on meaningful public participation and community development, and paying closer attention to ongoing systems of monitoring, evaluating, ameliorating impacts and enhancing benefits over a project lifetime. After discussing how the practice of SIA has evolved since the 1970s, a case study is used to illustrate key challenges and outcomes. It is concluded that more focus on social issues such as community capacity and resilience will help conceptualize and implement linkages between industrial development and community sustainability.

Introduction

The field of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) theory and practice is taking on new significance in Canada and in the international community. This paper offers a window into the dynamics of SIA as it has evolved from the 1970s to the present. My objective is twofold: (1) to review some key concepts, approaches, and methods in SIA, with a focus on Canada, and (2) to draw on a case study from the Canadian North that exemplifies critical issues and areas for development within theory and practice (an expanded version of this paper has been published in Parkins and Mitchell, 2016).

Although federal legislation was slow to emerge in Canada, a significant impetus in the development of SIA came in 1974 through a federal government inquiry into the proposed Mackenzie Valley Gas Pipeline from Yukon Territory to Alberta (1974–8). Headed by Justice Thomas Berger (Berger, 1977), the "Berger Inquiry" developed a template for SIA that was innovative, comprehensive, and ahead of its time—attracting attention continuously in the published literature (Gamble, 1978; Torgerson, 1986; O'Faircheallaigh, 1999). According to Gamble (1978), the Berger Inquiry was influential as a template for SIA for many reasons, in part because of the autonomy of the assessment process. Berger developed an approach to collecting information in tune with local cultures and languages within remote northern communities. His commission visited all 35 communities along the Mackenzie River Valley, as well as other cities across Canada, holding meetings in local languages. Much of this local information was then given equal status with technical and external forms of expertise in the final decision. It was also the first major proposal for industrial development that was delayed and effectively overturned for social reasons.

Within the Canadian context for environmental impact assessment (EIA), federal legislation is triggered in only a relatively small number of projects that cross interprovincial or international boundaries or where federal jurisdiction is impacted, such as navigable waters. Federal legislation (the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act of 1993) has provided limited direction on SIA except for a broad definition of EIA, intended to identify and understand the effects of proposed projects on the bio-physical environment, as well as on the social and economic environments of the people to be affected. The updated legislation (CEAA, 2012) makes no explicit mention of social impacts; indeed, with a much

---

[1] Independent researcher, The Hague, Netherlands.

IAIA16 Conference Proceedings | Resilience and Sustainability
36th Annual Conference of the International Association for Impact Assessment
11 - 14 May 2016 | Nagoya Congress Center | Aichi-Nagoya | Japan | www.iaia.org

narrower focus on environmental impacts the only mention of "health and socio-economic conditions" in this new legislation is in relation to Aboriginal populations.

Much greater direction on SIA in Canada is found within provincial and territorial jurisdictions. For example, Alberta's Environmental Enhancement and Protection Act (EHPA) states that the purpose of EIA is to "predict the environmental, social, economic, and cultural consequences of a proposed activity" (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2014: 41). An assessment report is required to describe these positive and negative impacts. Beyond these broad requirements, until very recently there has been very limited guidance on what is required within this SIA. Therefore, the form and content of SIA vary considerably within the same industrial sector.

Methods in Social Impact Assessment

Extending from these important advances in the 1970s, contemporary approaches to SIA in North America have become more technical and procedural in their basic orientation, with stronger regulatory oversight and strict timelines (Vanclay, 2002a). These procedural approaches are undertaken predominantly by consultants who work on behalf of project proponents. They are focused on measurable and quantifiable indicators, and they rely on technical procedures such as cost–benefit and statistical analyses. This approach often involves quantitative and technical elements of indicator identification, baseline assessments, and research approaches that generally dovetail with biophysical elements of EIA.

In recent years, scholars and practitioners are working more frequently with approaches that take into consideration not only the anticipated impacts but also focus on monitoring, evaluating, and ameliorating impacts and enhancing benefits over the lifetime of a project. At the international level, the focus on SIA has extended to issues of human health, culture, politics, human rights, and sustainable development (Mitchell, 2012). In the Northwest Territories, Socio-economic Assessment Guidelines (MVEIRB, 2007) provide a context for assessing impacts on the human environment. These guidelines have been designed to encourage developers to work with communities and responsible government authorities to identify "valued components" of the human environment, appropriate indicators and sources of information to measure change, pathways by which change may likely occur, and mitigation and monitoring strategies that may be required to maximize benefits and minimize adverse impacts.

One critique of highly technical and expert-based orientation to SIA is the frequent lack of clarity around theoretical and conceptual frameworks to guide this work. Typically, SIAs rely on indicators and variables, with little attention to why these indicators are relevant and how they relate to each other. It is uncommon for these indicators to be developed in conjunction with local people, based on insights on local values and interests. Bottom-up approaches often require extensive methods of public engagement and participatory indicator selection (Becker et al., 2004). At the end of the process, however, indicator lists often are not solidly grounded in any particular theory of community development, quality of life, or concepts of community sustainability—weaknesses that make them difficult to assess.

Examples of Social Impact Assessment: Northern Canada

We now turn our attention to a case example from the Canadian North, where the methods described in the previous sections illustrate some challenges and outcomes of SIA. For reasons of confidentiality, both for the developer and for the affected communities, identifying details are omitted.

During the past decade, the author conducted a SIA as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment for a new mine that would require additional (or shared) infrastructure and resources such as power, water, roads, and airports. Consultation with the affected communities was initiated several years prior to the formal EIA process, and the community engagement approach generally followed a logical sequence seemingly designed to reach a satisfactory outcome. Several "gentle and careful steps" were taken over several years with the affected communities, including four years within the context of the EIA. At public meetings, responses to issues raised were noted, documenting any issues that needed to be resolved. The community and public meetings provided an opportunity for project feedback and showed how past input was used to refine and improve the mine development plan. Other objectives included obtaining input from the community members and land users for environmental monitoring programs, social development plans, and closure plans.

Even with many diverse activities over several years, by some accounts the engagement process was not always successful. As time passed, difficulties experienced in the consultation process negatively affected the work needed to complete the social impact and cultural heritage impact assessments. The mining company repeatedly tried to arrange public meetings through the community leadership, but local leaders would not provide authorization for these meetings to proceed, perhaps due to their overall opposition to the project or due to internal friction within their community leadership that tended to slow decision-making. During the baseline studies, social and cultural specialists working in the affected communities were asked by a local authority to leave, even though government-approved scientific licences for these studies had been obtained after months of work to secure them. As one community leader put it, "I never authorized them." As a result, some key interviews were never completed, which would later have serious complications, especially for the cultural studies where face-to face communication with Elders and others is critical. Traditional knowledge is generally passed down through stories and by direct experience on the land. As such, a traditional knowledge study primarily based on secondary data would not serve the rigorous requirements of the Review Board.

While interpreters of the local language were used when necessary, community workshops were criticized for not being held in the local language with a focus on the "real issues" such as land rights and the perspective of Aboriginal women. It was no surprise that some issues remained unresolved leading up to the final hearings for the EIA. According to feedback received in meeting minutes and during the hearings, people felt misled or ignored, and many planned meetings never occurred. During the final hearings some questioned how the area was explored and a lease granted without any consultation with local residents.

This perspective may have been inaccurate but nonetheless it was held strongly by some residents. Part of the issue was the apparent distrust of local leadership to accommodate people's wishes—some alliances were formed and others broke down with certain leaders. As a result, trust declined and a long process of miscommunication, mistrust, legal proceedings, and even hostilities began. Over the final two years of the EIA process, access roads were blocked, consultation meetings were denied, and the mining company was sued, along with many other obstructionist or delay tactics. It was not until the final Review Board public hearings that signs of relationship-building and potential building blocks for working together were made apparent. The mining company committed to continue its efforts to obtain specific input on the design of its aquatic and wildlife effects monitoring programs, its closure and reclamation plan, and socio-economic monitoring programs, as the project proceeded through the permitting process. Financial arrangements were also made with the affected communities to carry out their own traditional knowledge study. Still a long way to go, but positive steps were made. It had taken several years and millions of

dollars invested in studies and several public hearings before finally securing regulatory approval to proceed. It was encouraging that the mining company took on all consultation activities and seemed to follow the right steps to early and in-depth engagement. As the project "owners," they rightly felt that they knew the people best. At one of the Review Board hearings, the Board thanked the developer and all parties involved for the efforts made towards "respectful engagement."

Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

New trends in SIA are changing the way it is done, how long it should take, and by whom. Today, SIA is increasingly being used as input for project decision-making, for community development, for long-term monitoring (a life-cycle approach), and even as a tool to enhance local empowerment in the design and implementation of industrial projects. But the promise of something larger, namely what SIA could have become since the Berger Inquiry, appears elusive. SIA could be much more than a tool to predict and minimize (adverse) impacts in a regulatory context. SIA can help manage social and cultural issues associated with development and ensure that the goals of development (project benefits) are attained and enhanced (Vanclay and Esteves, 2011). Nonetheless, those who commission EAs and SIAs, and often the people who do SIAs, have a traditional view of its role in the regulatory process, limiting the potential of SIA to make a real difference to the lives of people affected by proposed development.

The practice of SIA appears to be shifting from a predictive or evaluative tool to an impact management process with potential to spur positive change. In Canada, the international standards likely to have the greatest influence on SIAs in Canada are the International Finance Corporation (IFC) Performance Standards (IFC, 2012). As an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) high-income country, Canada is exempt from the IFC Performance Standards. Moreover, Canadian regulatory, permitting, and public comment process requirements are generally stated to meet or exceed the IFC Performance Standards, even though some gaps may exist between these standards (e.g., Mitchell, 2012). Nonetheless, a few "head of the pack" companies in Canada are starting to use the IFC Performance Standards as a benchmark and risk assessment tool. There may also be another incentive in that adopting these standards could lead to significant financial savings.

New trends in SIA may produce tangible results, including achieving permitting approvals and enhancing benefits for communities. Other important challenges and opportunities include growing attention to Indigenous peoples' plans, consideration for vulnerable peoples, expanding definitions of the "area of influence" (of affected communities), community health impact assessments, and the inclusion of feedback mechanisms into the impact assessment process and resultant social management plans. However, even if well intended, efforts by developers to engage or to assure a complete EIA are likely to be seen as cooptation. Perhaps the only way around this is to entirely separate the proponents from doing the studies and outreach.

Summary and Conclusions

SIA is gaining traction as an important component of impact assessment and performance management within EIA regulation, policy, and practice. Strict technical approaches to SIA that attempt to anticipate impacts prior to project developments are giving way to more holistic approaches. These approaches include a focus on meaningful public participation and closer attention to ongoing systems of monitoring, evaluating, ameliorating impacts, and enhancing benefits over the lifetime of a project. Ways of framing the SIA approach theoretically and conceptually remain an important challenge, with a need for closer linkages between community development scholars and practitioners who focus on issues such as

community capacity, resilience and adaptation, and other ways of conceptualizing the linkages between industrial development and community sustainability. These linkages appear to be increasingly relevant, in a world of global competition and declining public resources, for achieving desired social and economic outcomes in rural and remote communities around the world.

References

Alberta Queen's Printer. 2014. Environmental Enhancement and Protection Act (EHPA). Revised Statutes of Alberta 2000 Chapter E-12. Current as of December 17, 2014.

Becker, D.R., C.C. Harris, E.A. Nielsen, and W.J. McLaughlin. 2004. "A Comparison of a Technical and a Participatory Application of Social Impact Assessment." Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal 22, 3: 177–89.

Berger, T.R. 1977. Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, 2 vols. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services.

Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. 2012. Regulations under CEAA 2012. Accessed 21 Mar. 2014. http://laws- lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/C-15.21.pdf.

Gamble, D.J. 1978. "The Berger Inquiry: An Impact Assessment Process." Science 199, 4334: 946–52.

International Finance Corporation (IFC). 2012. International Finance Corporation's Performance Standards on Social and Environmental Sustainability. Washington: International Finance Corporation, World Bank Group.

Mackenzie Valley Review Board (MVEIRB). 2007. Socio-economic Impact Assessment Guidelines. Accessed 21 Mar. 2014. http://www.reviewboard.ca/process_information/guidance_documentation/guidelines.php.

Mitchell, R.E. 2012. "Comparing EIA and ESHIA for Evaluating Mining Projects." Mining Engineering 64, 8: 87–92.

O'Faircheallaigh, C. 1999. "Making Social Impact Assessment Count: A Negotiation-based Approach to Indigenous Peoples." Society & Natural Resources 12: 63–80.

Parkins, J.R. and R.E. Mitchell. 2016. "Social Impact Assessment: A Review of Academic and Practitioner Perspectives and Emerging Approaches." Pp. 122-140 in Environmental Impact Assessment: Practice and Participation, 3rd Edition, K.S. Hanna, ed, Oxford University Press: Toronto, CAN.

Torgerson, D. 1986. "Between Knowledge and Politics: Three Faces of Policy Analysis." Policy Sciences 19, 1: 33–59.

Vanclay, F. and A.M. Esteves. 2011. "New Directions in Conceptual and Methodological Advances." Pp. 3-19 in Current Issues and Trends in Social Impact Assessment, F. Vanclay and A.M. Esteves, eds, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.