

Developing a ‘best practice’ SIA process: Exploring the integration of technical and participatory approaches

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Introduction

Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) are a tool that may be utilised to address the social impact of businesses when establishing projects, and enhancing the potential benefits for local communities. An SIA can be defined as “the process of analysing, monitoring and managing social consequences, both positives and negatives, of planned interventions (policy, plan, program, project) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions” (Vanclay, 2003: p. 1). SIAs are particularly important for sustainable development as they aim to “bring about a more ecologically, socio-culturally and economically sustainable and equitable environment” and take a “proactive stance to development and better development outcomes” (Vanclay, 2003; p. 2).

Although efforts have continued around the development of a ‘best practice’ SIA process (Esteves et al., 2012), as well as the development of SIA legislation around the world (see Burdge and Taylor (2012) for more information on SIA regulation internationally) there is still a lot that needs to be done. Burdge and Taylor (2012) indicate that in order to expand the use of SIAs around the world, further work is required on developing the SIA processes. This research seeks to contribute towards this endeavour, and provide a preliminary framework for guiding future research efforts aimed at unravelling the SIA process.

The subsequent sections are structured as follows. First, a brief review will be undertaken on the current approaches and most prominent models within the extant literature. Building from this point, the study will subsequently propose a new SIA framework to be utilised when there are no regulatory guidelines in place in different jurisdictions around the world, incorporating both the key stages identified in previous research, and emerging empirical findings to inform how these stages evolve within practice. To conclude, this study will address the significance and value of this framework for guiding future research endeavours.

The current state of SIA literature

Extant literature often makes reference to two key conceptual studies considered as milestones in the development of the SIA field, the ‘Principles and guidelines for social impact assessment in the USA’ by the Interorganizational Committee on Principles and Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment (IOCPG, 1995; 2003); and ‘The international principles for social impact assessment’ by Frank Vanclay (2003). These two studies have been seminal in contributing to the development of the SIA research domain, paving a way for further research within the field (Vanclay, 2006). Both documents provide an overview of what an SIA entails, covering its definition; core values, principles and guidelines; and SIA variables (IOCPG, 1995; 2003; Vanclay, 2003). In line with the development of a conceptual basis to guide future empirical studies, this research will examine more specifically both of these studies.

Looking first at the work by the IOCPG (1995; 2003), an adaptable SIA procedural framework was developed with the intent of standardizing SIA practice. This framework proposed a list of sequential steps that should be followed in the SIA process, which are based primarily on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) steps put forward by the ‘Council on Environmental Quality’ (1986). Building from this standpoint, the SIA procedural framework proposed by the IOCPG (1995; 2003) is characterised by a technical approach. Technical approaches to the SIA process tend to be based on the expertise and knowledge of social scientists, who direct the prediction of social impacts caused by planned interventions (Ziller, 2012). This approach is usually seen as being more objective and systematic due to the rigour that social scientists bring to SIA process, with an objective assessment method and the use of quantifiable indicators based on ‘expert’ determination (Felton 2005).

The second significant study developed by Vanclay (2003), proposed a SIA process orientated around stakeholder engagement and participation – contrary to the technical approach adopted by the IOCPG. Vanclay (2003) developed a list of 17 key activities underlying the SIA process; however, these activities are not intended to be sequentially ordered or prescriptive in guiding practitioners on the process of implementation. Vanclay (2006) indicates that a specific procedural framework was not prescribed due to the large number of frameworks present in textbooks. Furthermore, Vanclay's (2003) research focused on conducting SIA through participatory approaches. Participatory approaches to a SIA leverage from the local community's knowledge and understanding, to predict potential social impacts from a proposed action that are contextually relevant to that community (Fenton, 2005; Ziller, 2012). This approach allows for a unique reflection of the specific characteristics of the communities that will be affected by a proposed action, through active consultation and participation in the design of the SIA process (Becker et al. 2003).

Even though participatory approaches have received widespread support within extant literature (Ross, 1990; O'Faircheallaigh, 1999; Buchan, 2003; Lane et al. 2003; Vanclay, 2003; Vanclay, 2006), certain drawbacks have been identified. Esteves et al. (2012), for example, suggest that participatory processes still require clarification and development to move beyond simply a "space" for public comments and information gathering. Moreover, Lockie (2001) highlights the difficulty in involving diverse stakeholders with conflicting or varied interests and views, due to an increased likelihood of providing exaggerated or biased opinions on the impacts raised, which can convolute or distort the process. Ziller (2012) takes this one step further, suggesting that as most stakeholders do not necessarily have training in social sciences or technical knowledge of impacts associated with a project, a tendency will emerge to express fears, wants and needs that may not provide a realistic set of potential social impacts to direct project assessors towards appropriate mitigation or enhancement strategies.

Despite the polarisation of these studies into technical versus participatory approaches, there has been a shift within the literature towards developing pathways for integrating these two approaches. The rationale behind this integration is aimed at enhancing the number of impacts identified, evaluated, and managed within the SIA process, as well as the significance of these impacts for the communities affected. Lane et al. (1997) proposed that an integrated approach would increase the predictive capacity of SIAs and provide more relevant information for decision makers, whilst empowering communities to control their own development. These benefits are further supported by Becker et al. (2004), who ran parallel studies on the same project (the construction of a hydroelectric dam) to empirically demonstrate the benefits of integration. One study followed a technical approach, whilst the other a participatory approach. The results of this comparison showed that an integrated approach was able to yield a greater number of impacts, which were more significant to the local communities, than what each individual approach was able to.

While the most recent 'state of the art' research on SIA practice (Esteves et al. 2012) indicates that the activities that compose a 'good practice' SIA process are agreed on internationally, a range of divergent approaches to previous SIA studies would indicate there remains significant work to be done before a consensus framework is achieved. This is particularly the case when examining the move towards integrating technical and participatory approaches, the activities that would comprise a procedural framework for practitioners, and the process to guide the development, implementation and continuous improvement of SIA practice in under- or un-regulated environments.

In this research, we engage in the development of an SIA framework that aspires to the ideals purported to by Lane et al. (1997) and Becker et al. (2004) for greater integration of technical and participatory approaches. This develops upon the IOCPG (2003) procedural framework, Vanclay's (2003) list of recommended activities, and Esteves et al. (2012) 'state of the art' study on SIAs. This framework will also bring into consideration the particularistic, or individual stage studies that have begun to unravel different stages within the SIA process through empirical examination. In so doing, this study will begin the process of

developing a conceptual basis, including testable propositions, to guide future empirical tests to examine and validate a consistent framework.

The "Best Practice" SIA Framework

Leveraging from extant literature, we identify eight different steps that compose the SIA process. These include, 1) screening projects to identify if an SIA is necessary (Ahmadvand et al., 2009; Momtaz, 2005), 2) studying the baseline conditions of the social receptors that can potentially be impacted (Rowan, 2009; Ziller, 2012), 3) scoping the potential impacts that might be caused by a project (Fenton, 2005; Ziller, 2012), 4) projecting the significance of the predicted impacts (Rowan, 2009; Becker et al., 2003). 5) Creating mitigation and enhancement strategies and developing a plan to manage social impacts (Joao et al, 2011; Franks et al., 2009), 6) formulating alternatives for the project (Egre & Senecal, 2003), 7) monitoring social impacts (Franks et al., 2012), 8) evaluation and reporting (Esteves & Vanclay, 2011).

Screening

Current practice in SIA indicates that the first stage in the process is determining what projects require undertaking an SIA by engaging in a screening process. Extant literature on SIA is heavily based on resource extraction activities or planning of the biophysical environment (i.e. activities that are expected to cause biophysical environmental impacts), however, SIAs are not exclusively applicable to these scenarios (for example, see Beckwith, 2012; Carrington & Pereira, 2011; Ahmadvand et al., 2009; Momtaz, 2005). We would suggest, rather, that a screening stage can inform project proponents, irrespective of the industry focus, on the necessity of undertaking an SIA.

The screening stage is set to identify potential significant social impacts, caused by a project, on the local community it is operating within. This would be particularly important for countries with inadequate regulations on SIA as a pathway to developing such regulatory requirements. The screening process can also justify not having to conduct an SIA even when there is pressure from civil societies or individual groups to conduct one (State of Queensland, 2010; Cox et al., 2001; Kemp, 2011). The decision to execute an SIA for a project is usually based on predetermined lists of specific projects that are likely to cause negative impacts (according to national LPAs), either because of their size or the nature of the activity or industry that the project is part of (Ahmadvand et al., 2009; Momtaz, 2009; Toro et al., 2009). These lists are usually composed of specific activities and thresholds that LPAs consider will have a detrimental effect on the areas where the project will be executed. Thus, we propose that:

P1: The decision to conduct an SIA should be done by an examination of potential impacts that might be caused by the nature of the proposed intervention.

Baseline conditions

An examination of the extant literature indicates that once the decision to execute an SIA has been identified, the characteristics of the local communities must be studied and understood (Rowan, 2009). Understanding the local conditions of a community is necessary for an SIA to yield results that are significant and relevant to the impacted community (Ziller, 2012). In contrast, an SIA based purely on technical information of projects without consideration of local characteristics, is likely to produce superficial information on impacts (without local contextualisation), thus, hindering the creation of strategies to manage significant social impacts for the communities. This is a common criticism of technical approaches to SIA, as it is often assumed that individuals and communities respond to change in similar ways, however it is the opposite scenario that is often true (Becker et al., 2004). Thus, in order to conduct an SIA that benefits the community, it is imperative to understand the values and social relationships that shape the community. Building from extant literature, we present the following proposition:

P2: A study of baseline conditions is necessary for an SIA to produce results that are specific to the impacted community. These studies should be carried out through participatory approaches and consultation, which are a more effective tool to identify local conditions.

Scoping

Extant literature in SIA indicates that once the baseline studies have been finalised, the SIA process can move on to scoping potential social impacts (IOCPG, 2003; Vanclay, 2003). Scoping entails the identification of potential social impacts caused by proposed projects (Lahiri-Dutt & Ahmad, 2011). The outcome of the scoping stage is to form the basis of management strategies to respond to both negative and positive social impacts associated with the project. Previous research reveals two predominant approaches commonly taken to impact scoping – technical and participatory. Therefore, we propose that:

- P3:** A technical approach to impact scoping allows for the identification of "hard" impacts that can be quantified. This approach is usually seen as being more objective and rigorous due to the use of quantifiable indicators based on 'expert' examination.
- P4:** Participatory approaches to impact scoping allow for consideration of "softer" impacts, which often cannot be quantified but are of great importance to the communities.
- P5:** Adopting both approaches to issue scoping will enable the SIA to cover all the potential impacts that a proposed intervention may cause, including both "hard" and "soft" impacts.

Projection Stage

The projection stage extends from the scoping stage, and involves analysing the identified impacts in order to fully understand their actual implications and effects on a community's social receptors (IOCPG, 2003). This projection stage aims to measure the magnitude and significance of the impacts identified in the scoping stage, which will affect the local communities (Rowan, 2009). Two key approaches again predominate the projection stage – the technical and participatory approach. Another underlying consideration within this stage is the incorporation of cumulative impacts – which captures the long-term impacts associated with the project. Thus, we propose:

- P6a:** A technical approach to the prediction stage will focus on the expertise of the impact assessor when determining the significance of impacts based on perceived vulnerability and well being of social receptors.
- P6b:** A participatory approach will enable a community-based projection of the significance of impacts upon the local community as perceived by the social receptors through the use of consultation and participatory techniques.
- P7:** The consideration of cumulative impacts ought to be included when determining the long-term mitigation and management of social impacts.

Mitigation Stage

A mitigation plan is a set of steps taken to respond to social impacts (João et al. 2011). In an ideal situation, the negative impacts of a project should be avoided unless doing so represents the end of the project (IOCPG, 2003). If these impacts cannot be avoided, then the mitigation and compensation strategies will come into place (IOCPG, 2003). From a review of extant literature, three key steps have been identified as being important for implementing a mitigation strategy – the identification and prioritization of impacts identified in the projection stage (IOCPG, 2003; Vanclay, 2003), the implementation of mitigation or minimisation strategies for these impacts (Government of Queensland, 2008), and the possibility of integrating enhancement strategies (Rowan & Streather, 2011; João et al. 2011). Based on previous research, we therefore propose that:

- P8a:** At the mitigation stage, proponents will first prioritise and rate the significance of issues and impacts to be addressed.
- P8b:** When developing the mitigation strategies proponents will identify a comprehensive management strategy for addressing these negative issues and impacts.
- P9:** As part of the mitigation stage, enhancement strategies will be considered to enable positive impacts to be incorporated into project design.

Formulation of Alternatives

Parallel to the mitigation stage, alternatives to the project should be designed based on the social impacts that were previously identified (IOCPG, 2003). These alternatives to the project should be designed especially when mitigation strategies are not enough to avoid negative impacts, or to enhance positive impacts in the local communities (Vanclay & Esteves, 2012). This stage will basically be a 'redesign' stage where the

project proponent, based on the results of the SIA, will explore alternative ways of carrying out the project to avoid the previously unavoidable impacts (Egre and Senecal, 2003). Building from extant literature, we propose:

P10: Alternative selection will be determined by the negative or positive impacts to be addressed by the project proponent.

Monitoring

Once the assessor determines the impacts to be addressed, and a plan for how to address these, extant literature indicates the next stage is to design a monitoring systems for regulating the activities associated with the project once implemented (Franks, 2012; Government of Queensland, 2010). A monitoring system will allow proponents to keep track of the social impacts that were analysed and to determine the accuracy of the initial predictions and activities taken to address these (Franks et al., 2009). It should also indicate whether there are any unanticipated impacts, and review any cumulative impacts and compare the difference between projected impacts and actual impacts (Franks et al., 2009). The information gathered by the monitoring system should then be used by the project proponent to address the points raised by the community, creating another feedback loop that repeats itself throughout the life of the project (Franks et al., 2009). Thus, developing from extant literature, we propose that:

P11: A monitoring system will enable the determination of how project activities align with selected mitigation and enhancement strategies.

Evaluation and reporting

The last stage of the proposed procedural framework is the evaluation and reporting of the SIA process. Evaluation is needed to understand how well the process have been implemented, the areas that need improvement, and to design improvement plans for the identified areas (Vanclay & Esteves, 2011). Reporting will be based on the evaluation of the SIA process and can be used as a means of communication from the proponent of the project to local communities on the activities that are being undertaken (Esteves et al., 2012). It is emphasised that the proposed framework is based on creating a synergy between stakeholders and proponents as well as a constant improvement of procedures in order to bring a greater outcome to the local communities. Building from extant literature, we propose:

P12: The evaluation and reporting stage provides a basis for ongoing feedback on the SIA process for the duration of the project.

Discussion and Conclusion

There remains an ongoing need to develop a 'best practice' SIA process that will enable the expansion in the use of SIAs around the world (Burdge and Taylor, 2012). This study has presented a preliminary basis from which this will be considered, reflecting on the two predominant approaches within the extant literature – technical and participatory. While the limitations of the paper does not enable a more comprehensive examination of the extant literature and development of more specific literature informing each stage, it does provide a preliminary basis from which this study can be extended. This paper has attempted to briefly draw together the key propositions from existing research that will inform future development of an SIA framework. In so doing, this research reveals the need for a greater consensus in the integration of technical and participatory approaches, enabling a more comprehensive and effective SIA to be undertaken. It is hoped this research signals a greater effort towards scholars in the area dedicating attention towards building a conceptual platform for future empirical studies. Such research is clearly needed, with a clear divergence evident within previous studies between the technical and participatory approaches, when both may be mutually reinforcing and support the effective implementation of SIAs in practice.

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