

Towards Developing Policy Impact Assessment Framework: An Introduction

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Abstract

Policy impact assessment has received little attention in current discussion on impact assessment frameworks within the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), the leading global organisation on impact assessment for informed decision-making. While there are accepted guidelines for strategic environmental assessments, social impact assessments (SIAs) and health impact assessments, there appear to be various siloed policy impact assessment (PIA) guidelines, mainly drawing on programme evaluation models. The lack of a PIA framework means that SIA professionals working on public policies and programmes have to adapt existing impact assessment frameworks or look elsewhere, however discrepant the field. This can create validation problems when comparing studies from different jurisdictions. This paper is an introduction to discussions on the need to develop a PIA framework within the IAIA, and argues that relevant policy analysis models could be drawn on and developed into one coherent but adaptable IAIA-led PIA framework.

Introduction

So the goal of social impact assessment is to help individuals and communities, as well as government and private-sector organizations, understand and better anticipate the possible social consequences for human populations and communities of planned and unplanned social change resulting from proposed policies, plans, programs and projects. (as cited in Burdge, 2003, pp. 85–86; emphasis mine)

We started a discussion at the 2016 International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) Conference in Japan on adapting the current social impact assessment (SIA) framework to render it applicable to policy-type impact assessment. It was noted that the current SIA framework was ostensibly developed to measure the social impacts of resource-type projects, and that the growing interest in SIA by policy professionals necessitates the development of a policy-relevant SIA framework. In our view, this would enhance further development of SIA as a standalone practice, while discouraging policy SIA practitioners' reliance on programme evaluation models (Adusei-Asante & Hancock, 2016). This paper seeks to continue the discussion on embedding a 'policy focus' in the current SIA framework.

Why Do We Need a Policy Focus in SIA?

This section discusses arguments on the need for a policy focus in SIA. First, assessing the impact of ‘policies’ is part of the process and requirements for environmental and natural resource decision-making in the United States, where environmental impact assessment (EIA) started (IAIA, 2003; Vanclay, Esteves, Aucamp, & Franks, 2015). EIA has been a key part of environmental planning and decision-making in the United States since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1970. NEPA requires agency planners and decision-makers to identify and address social consequences of policies, plans, programmes and projects (IAIA, 2003). SIA was launched in 1992, when a group of social scientists created the Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment to delineate a set of guidelines and principles to support public and private-sector agencies and organisations to meet their obligations under NEPA and other related mandates (IAIA, 2003). In 1994, the Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for SIA defined SIA as including:

All social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions [including policies] that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society. (as cited in Burdge, 2003, p. 85; emphasis mine)

In 1999, Burdge argued further that:

In a research context, social impact assessment is a sub-field of the integrated social sciences that is developing a knowledge base to allow a systematic appraisal of impacts on the day-to-day quality of life of persons and communities whose environment is affected by a proposed policy, plan, program or project. (as cited in Burdge, 1999, p. 4; emphasis mine)

The definition of SIA presented in a 2003 IAIA monograph is similar:

In the 2003 version, we continue to define social impact assessment in terms of efforts to assess, appraise or estimate, in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from proposed actions. These include: specific government or private projects, such as construction of buildings, siting power generation facilities, large transportation projects, managing natural resources, fish and wildlife; and preserving or leasing large tracts of land and the adoption of new policies and resulting plans. (as cited in IAIA, 2003, p. 231; emphasis mine)

Vanclay (2003) defined SIA to include:

The processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment. (p. 5)

What is clear from the definitions above is that policy impact assessment (PIA) is not new, and is an established component of procedures for understanding the social impacts of activities.

Second, the definition of what constitutes ‘social’ in impact assessment processes is relevant for policy-type SIA. According to Vanclay et al. (2015):

Almost anything can potentially be a social impact so long as it is valued by or important to a specific group of people ... [and also] that social impact may be experienced cognitively, bodily, physically and at different relationship levels including the individual or corporate dimensions (family/household, workplace or community). (p. 2)

Descriptors of social impacts as provided by Vanclay et al. (2015, p. 8) include variables that are relevant to policies and not only resource projects, which were the focus of the authors. Typically, SIA professionals assess changes pertaining to:

1. way of life—how people live, work, play and interact with one another
2. culture—shared beliefs, customs, values and language or dialect
3. community—cohesion, stability, character, services and facilities
4. system—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. environment—the quality of the air and water, the availability and quality of food, the level of hazard or risk, dust and noise, the adequacy of sanitation, physical safety and access to and control over resources
6. health and wellbeing—where health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity
7. personal and property rights—particularly, whether people are economically affected or experience personal disadvantage, which may include a violation of their civil liberties
8. fears and aspirations—perceptions about safety, fears about the future of the community and aspirations for their future and the future of their children.

When examined critically, each of these eight variables are also applicable to policies. The findings from our study of the Australian federal government’s proposed policy to deregulate university fees in 2014 is a case in point. The proposed policy, which generated impassioned debates in Australia, aimed to ensure that:

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, 2014a, p. 1)

An SIA of the proposed university fees deregulation policy in 2015 revealed that regional Western Australians had concerns that the policy would lead to fee increases. The respondents also noted that, without adequate social-support policies, they (1) feared being left with unusually high student debt, (2) might reconsider accessing higher educational altogether, and/or (3) would access higher education as mature-age students, because of the necessity of taking gap years to work and save (see Adusei-Asante et al., 2016). The issues raised in the study reflected what Vanclay et al. (2015) would regard as social impacts, a clear indication that policies, whether proposed or implemented, generate social concerns.

Third, although project-type SIA and policy-type SIA share similarities, they are different in many respects, and therefore, an SIA framework developed for resource-type projects cannot be used to assess social impacts of policies without adaptation. In terms of their areas of commonality, both project-type SIA and policy-type SIA seek to unearth outcomes ultimately meant to benefit people (Budge, 2003). Further, policies create the environment for projects, while project outcomes may feed back into policy development processes (World Bank, 2003). However, the Interorganizational Committee on Principles and Guidelines for SIA distinguishes between project SIA and policy-type SIA, describing policy-type SIA as the ‘general approach to such issues as immigration, hazard and contaminated waste disposal, the relocation of households, global warming and the maintenance of food stocks’ and project-type SIA as including examples such as the ‘building of irrigation facilities to enhance agricultural development or the expansion of an airport’ (IAIA, 2003, p. 231). According to Vanclay et al. (2015), SIA activities related to ‘dams, mines, oil and gas drilling, factories, ports, airports, pipelines, electricity transmission corridors, roads, railway lines, and other infrastructure including large-scale agriculture, forestry and aquaculture projects’ comprise project-type SIA (p. i).

Further, project-type SIA appears to operate reactively, as a ‘fire service’ approach, while policy-type SIA tends to be proactive. Project-type SIA is a mandatory statutory requirement for resource extraction industries and those working with the environment in many jurisdictions (State of Queensland, 2013; Suopajavi, 2013; Vanclay, 2003; World Bank, 2003). In contrast, policy-type SIA is not driven by codification and statutory obligations; rather, it operates as a fact-finding tool, providing insights to decision-makers on best practices, potential outcomes and worst-case scenario analysis.

Another important reason that a policy focus is needed in SIA is that the SIA framework provides ‘advice to various stakeholders about what is expected in good practice social impact assessment (SIA) and social impact management processes, especially in relation to project development’ (Vanclay et al., 2015, p. i; emphasis mine). While the work done by Vanclay et al. (2015) is commendable, in the sense that it provides extensive guidelines for SIA practice, the focus on project-type SIA means that the framework cannot be regarded as the standard guide for all SIA practitioners, particularly those working on SIA of public policies. For example, while the Vanclay framework does not provide any variable that measures (qualitatively or quantitatively) people’s knowledge of a given policy/project they may be affected by, our study of the proposed university fee deregulation policy in Australia showed that this is critical in PIA:

Most of the research participants (students, teachers and parents) had limited knowledge of the proposed policy. Specifically it was found that 92% of students, 40% of teachers and 70% of parents interviewed had never heard about the policy ... 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, p. 3)

Thus, while the need to measure community knowledge of a given policy or project may not be important in project-type SIA, it is crucial for policy-type SIA.

Lastly, developing a policy-type SIA will lead to the professionalisation of the field and enhance integration of the impact assessment family. As the current SIA guidelines offer little or no guidance to policy SIA professionals working on public policies and programmes, the latter have to adapt or look elsewhere for various siloed impact assessment frameworks, however discrepant (see Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Morestin, 2012; Mingat, Tan, & Sosale, 2003). This tends to create validation problems when comparing studies from different jurisdictions. Developing a policy-type SIA framework will result in the standardisation of practice guidelines, opening avenues for knowledge sharing and training in the field, and ultimately, strengthening SIA as a standalone discipline within the broader EIA fraternity.

Discussion

This paper introduced a proposition to develop a policy-type SIA for measuring public policy outcomes. It sought to generate discussions on insights into developing a coherent but adaptable international PIA framework. Several arguments were put forward to support this proposition: (1) PIA is not new, and has always been part of the procedures for understanding the impacts of environmental and natural resource activities; (2) public policies have social implications that need to be studied and addressed; (3) the current SIA framework is project biased despite the fact that SIA is not only about projects; and 4) there is a need to standardise PIA practice and professionalisation within the IAIA.

The audience of this presentation at the 2017 IAIA conference in Montreal, Canada, welcomed the proposition to develop an IAIA-led PIA. There was a general consensus that PIA is an important component of SIA and that uniform PIA guidelines approved by the IAIA were long overdue. It is within this context that we recommend that the IAIA establishes or supports a taskforce to discuss and develop a draft PIA, for presentation either at the 2018 Durban (South Africa) IAIA conference or the conference earmarked for Brisbane (Australia) in 2019.

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