What matters is more important that what counts: Qualitative approaches to social impact assessment (SIA)

By Jane Munday, PhD Candidate with the Northern Institute, Darwin, Australia

Abstract

This paper offers a concept of social licence to operate as the space between a project's legal licence and society's expectations. It explores the difference between a regulatory compliance-based approach to social impact assessment and qualitative participation that builds an understanding of a community's lived experience, aspirations and values, which is particularly important for projects proposed on Aboriginal land.

Introduction

We live in an era of contested spaces, polarised opinions and argumentative debate fanned by social media. Citizens want more say about development on their land and impacts on their neighbourhoods, hence a growing focus on meaningful public participation to better capture the social impacts of projects.

Social impacts are described by Vanclay (2003) as changes to people's way of life, their culture, their community, political systems, environment, health and wellbeing, personal and property rights and their fears and aspirations. Understanding how a project or policy impacts on these dimensions requires quality time as opposed to the use of 'simplistic tools', linear approaches and aggregate statistics to characterise an affected community (Howitt, 2011) or producing an "opus that will extract a pass mark for least effort" (Harvey, 2011).

Public participation

Public participation has been described as "a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it's good for you" (Arnstein, 1969). However, in the author's experience, participation often has little influence on project decisions, leading to cynicism and consultation fatigue.

What, then, are the elements of qualitiative participation, rather than a quantitative process that counts meetings, fact sheets and stakeholders? They include story-telling or grounded questions to understand community values, deliberation to engage people in dialogue rather than debate, scenario planning to guide best-guess predictions of uncertain futures and strategic assessment to consider regional and cumulative impacts. The foundations are time, trust, relationships and listening skills: attributes often in conflict with the time constraints, culture and regulatory approaches.

Social licence to operate

A social licence to operate is "society's expectations regarding the rights granted to a business to use land, its natural and mineral resources and the reciprocal responsibilities and accountability of the business to society" (Preston, 2014) or the "level of acceptance or approval of the activities of an organization by its stakeholders, especially local impacted communities" (Vanclay et al., 2015). Preston presents a model where the space between a company's legal and social licence to operate flexes with its ability to satisfy society's expectations. A social licence is influenced by the values, beliefs, emotions, perceptions and aspirations of real people. It will be granted when a community feels listened to and understood, has confidence and trust in relationships formed with companies and can see an equitable distribution of impacts and benefits.

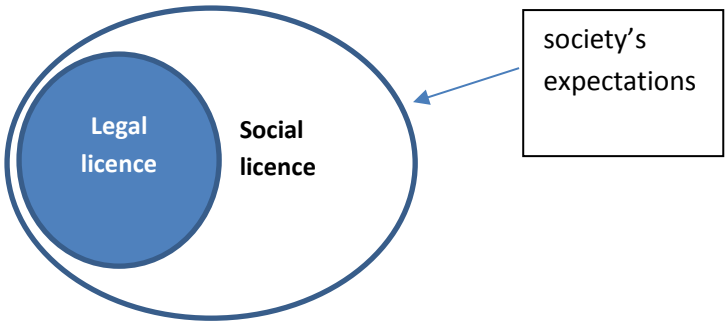

Fig 1: The gap between a legal licence and society's expectations (Preston, 2014).

Preston's model is amended by the author (Fig. 2) to consider the gap between a legal licence and society's expectations as a qualitative working space where public participation will contribute to wise decisions and environmentally, economically, culturally and socially sustainable projects. Technical studies and quantitative data may be sufficient for straight-forward projects. Analysis of baseline data contributes to scoping for more qualitative studies. Quantitative studies are necessary, but rarely sufficient, however, when dealing with complex, emotive and disruptive projects.

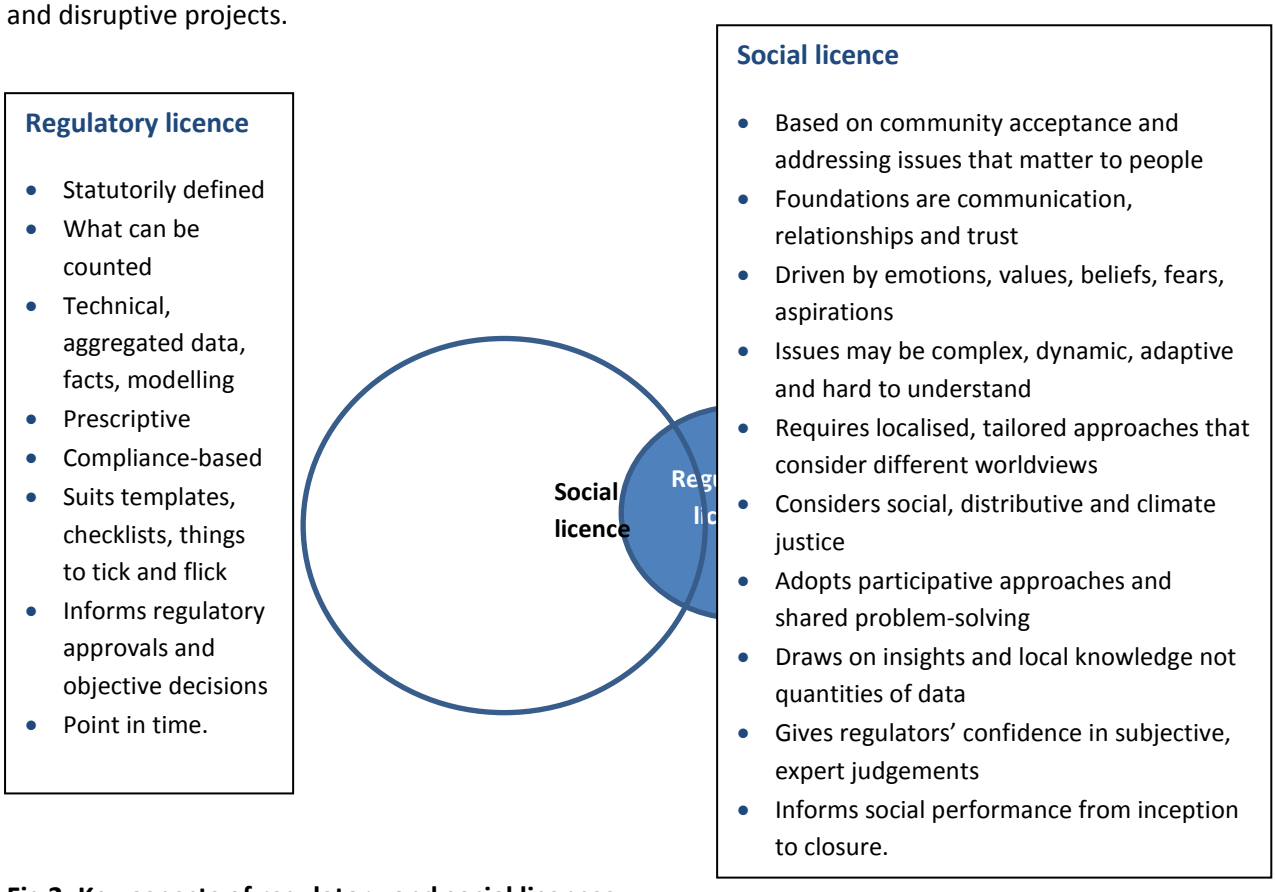

Fig 2: Key aspects of regulatory and social licences

Is democracy off the rails? Can deliberation help?

What do qualitative approaches to SIA and public participation contribute to the 21st Century burning deck: democracy in turmoil? Why are elections throwing up populist, argumentative autocrats? Why is it that the more we argue, the more we disagree: what James Hoggan refers to as the 'polluted public space' (Hoggan, 2016)? To understand why – and when - citizens take strong positions on issues, we have to consider the values and self-interest that underlie these positions. What we think

of Donald Trump will depend our beliefs, the values we will fight to defend (sustainability, respect, social justice) or whether we just feel abandoned, jobless, threatened by diversity and mourn for the good old days?

The more people howl outrage at Donald Trump, the more his popularity rises with those espousing opposing values. Outrage is like a foxhole: we dig ourselves deeper and deeper, look for information to confirm our righteous beliefs and bond closer to the rest of what is now our 'tribe'. Deliberation, on the other hand, coaxes us out of our foxholes – or gets us talking civilly to each other before we become an angry tribe – into a space where we can explore, engage in dialogue with people unlike ourselves, find shared values and interests and consider how to resolve our differences.

Parkin and Mitchell (2005) have explored the application of deliberative approaches to SIA and compare deliberative spaces with more episodic forms of democratic participation which may be limited to 'sound bites' and popularity contests. They draw on a definition of deliberative democracy as "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinion in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers, 2003). Mitchell and Leach (2015) draw on Tobin's DIKW hierarchy (data-information-knowledge-wisdom) to outline how a deliberative team approach provides multidisciplinary learning.

Deliberation and narrative also explore values. Exploring environmental, cultural, spiritual, economic and social values helps us predict reactions to a project and the strength of positions for or against. Values include respect for distributive, social, climate and procedural justice and human rights, none of which can be counted.

What counts or what matters?

Baseline studies for impact assessment in Australia typically draw on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. While this provides a starting point for characterising an area of study, there are many deficiencies in aggregated data, not the least of which is that it is often outdated and does not capture diversity, perceptions and matters of concern. It doesn't account for the principle of subsidiarity: the closer people live to a problem, the more likely they are to have solutions and should be involved in decision-making (Vanclay et al., 2015; Surowiecki, 2005).

Take a family living a quiet rural lifestyle next to a proposed mine. This family might be a statistical outlier or match the average demographic 'person' in the region. Dust modelling might indicate no amenity impacts on this 'nearest receptor'. But it doesn't tell us that the owners are fourth-generation farmers whose blood, sweat and tears are in the soil along with the ashes of their beloved son and the social, cultural and spiritual connections to place that may elevate their reactions to a social media storm.

Data should be relevant to the issues that emerge in the initial scoping of a social impact study rather than constituting a 'data dump', such as irrelevant statistics on childcare places in the nearest town - when the project is likely to rely on FIFO workers. What's more, consideration of gendered and cultural impacts looks at workforce issues for women (as workers and in their role as caregivers if partners leave the community for work) and cultural norms with childcare. In some Aboriginal communities, it is the extended family unit that takes on childcare, with 'grannies' bearing the burden (Austin-Broos, 2009). It may be culturally inappropriate for other families to look after these children.

Data doesn't deal well with the future, the sort of scenario analysis that probes the indirect impacts of demographic and neighbourhood change. It doesn't capture aspirations, fears and perceptions. Most of all, what can be counted and measured is often not what matters most. For example, an analysis of the role of traditional knowledge in a Canadian impact study (Stevenson, 1996) observed that the First Nations hunters didn't count caribou so much as observe their health and behaviour, because that's what is important for hunting.

To draw on the case study of a fairly typical mining project going through its regulatory approvals in Central Australia:

- Groundwater is a key issue of the impact assessment and modelling suggests no detrimental impact on bore water. However, the local people describe issues with water pressure that turn out to be caused by an antiquated pumping system not declining aquifers (this insight led to a focus on communicating water issues during consultation).
- Data (ABS 2011) suggests a nearby township of about 120 mostly non-Aboriginal residents with no children (but a busy school with all Aboriginal children), no unemployment in an area with 20% Aboriginal unemployment and virtually no public housing, but everyone renting – the explanation of this anomalous profile is a service town of mainly government and council workers supporting several nearby Aboriginal communities.
- It was assumed workers would be either FIFO or bussed from nearby communities with no implications for housing, a picture that becomes more dynamic with suggestions people may return home for work, straining already overcrowded housing. A young man aspires to come home and invest his wages in a house. But land in his Aboriginal community is communally owned and there are no spare blocks in town for him or anyone maybe wanting to start a business (a community development aspiration supported by the mining company).
- While the company aspires to the social justice objective of employing Aboriginal people, feedback suggests the mine may poach good workers from existing jobs rather than moving them from unemployment queues. To provide a realistic analysis of this fraught topic, one needs to heed the literature and lessons from other projects about how to move disadvantaged, long-term unemployed into meaningful work and different worldviews of whether we are defined by a 'job' or our relatedness to community and all the competing obligations this brings (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).
- Five-year old Census data on the regional centre of Alice Springs (ABS, 2011) suggests an emerging trend of in-migration of residents born in India, Africa and the Philippines (Yuhun, Taylor, & Winter, 2012). By 2015, local knowledge suggests immigrant residents may comprise one-sixth of the town's population, with implications for recruiting workers and community composition and cohesion.

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Key features	Counting, data, modelling Presenting facts Desk research	Listening, insights, narrative Understanding community issues Fieldwork
Best use	Technical and operational decisions	People studies
Informs	Regulatory approvals Baseline data	Social performance Wise decisions
Culture, values	Rational, scientific, technical expertise, facts, certainty	Respect, diversity, subsidiarity, openness and accountability, distributive and social justice, human rights
Professional	Technical expertise, linear, inductive reasoning, order and logic.	Non-hierarchical and dynamic, capturing emerging issues.
Purpose	Regulatory approvals Scoping	Deeper insights to guide social performance
Spatial	Project footprint	Areas of social influence
Temporal	Point in time Starts at impact assessment phase	From project inception to closure Ongoing.
Advantages	Efficient	Effective
Disadvantages	Doesn't give the community a voice Misses the unknowns	May be expensive and 'over the top'
Tools	Models, tests, surveys	Participatory, literature reviews, case studies
Risk	ISO risk assessment: risk to project	Issues analysis: risk to community
Communication	Facts and figures (GDP, jobs, ML)	Emotional, values-based
Who commissions	Proponents	Proponents Governments (strategic assessment)
Who assesses	Regulators Management: early warning of risk	Regulators The community
When to use	Projects are straight forward	Issues are complex and emotive.

Figure 3: **Key features of quantitative and qualitative approaches to impact studies ****

Conclusion

The implications of this initial study include whether meaningful social impact assessment is possible when used just as a regulatory tool owned by more technically-focussed professions rather than as a multi-disciplinary approach that informs both regulatory approvals and long-term social performance by companies. What is valued by regulators is what will be rewarded when companies allocate funding to studies.

Regulatory approaches may be efficient (streamlined studies and approvals to meet the cost and time pressures) but not effective (gathering insights that guide good policy, practice and decision-making and reducing mistakes and conflict).

The discrepancies between approaches extend to communication about projects. Rather than a 'facts and figures' approach, communication that supports qualitative approaches needs to build understanding, reflect community values and address the issues that matter, not just those that can be counted.

Jane Munday

Jane Munday is a community engagement and social impact practitioner living in the Northern Territory of Australia, a large but sparsely populated land where one-third of the residents are Aboriginal (or First Nations). There are growing land use pressures and debate about issues such as water use, mining and fracking. Jane has experience in senior government communication positions. For 12 years ran her own business specialising in communication and community engagement. She has qualifications in Journalism, Psychology, Business Management, Community Engagement (public participation) and Social Impact Assessment. She is enrolled as a PhD student with the Northern Institute of Charles Darwin University on the subject of 'Qualitative approaches to social impact assessment'. This paper is an initial analysis to inform the focus of her study, so any feedback would be welcome to jane@janemunday.com.au

Bibliography

Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35*(4), 216-224.

Austin-Broos, D. (2009). Arrernte Present Arrernte Past. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *2011 Census QuickStats: Alice Springs.* Retrieved May 18, 2015, from Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data:

Baines, J., & Taylor, C. (2011). Ethical issues and dilemmas. In F. Vanclay, & A. Esteves, *New Directions in Social Impact Assessment* (pp. 96-113). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Chambers, S. (2003, June). Deliberative Democractic Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science, 6*, 307-326.

Charlton, A., & Harris, L. (2016). A pox on both your houses: The rise of populism in Australia. *The Monthly*, 36-42.

Harvey, B. (2011). Foreword: SIA from a resource developer's perspective. In F. Vanclay, & A. Esteves, *New Directions in Social Impact Assessment* (pp. xxvii-xxxiii). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing .

Hoggan, J. (2016). *I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The toxic state of public discourse and how to clean it up.* Vancouver: New Society Publishers.

Howitt, R. (2012). Theoretical Foundations, in F. Vanclay, & A. Esteves, New Directions in Social Impact Assessment. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing .

International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) at www.iap2.org.au

Leighninger, M. (2016, October). The Economic Argument for Engagement: New Directions for Research. *Journal of Public Deliberation, 12*(2).

McRae-Williams, E., & Gerritsen, R. (2010). Mutual Incomprehension: The Cross Cultural Domain of Work in a Remote Australian Aboriginal Community. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 1*(2).

Mitchell, R., & Leach, B. (2015). Knowledge Integration in Impact Assessment: A Case Example from Panama. *IAIA Conference paper.*

Moffat, K., & Zhang, A. (2014). The paths to social licence to operate: An integrative model explaining community acceptance of mining. *Resources Policy, 39*, 61-70.

Parkin, J., & Mitchell, R. (2005). Public Participation as Public Debate: A Deliberative turn in Natural Resource Management. *Society and Natural Resources, 18*, 529-540.

Preston, B. (2014, October 22). *The adequacy of the law in satisfying society's expectations for major projects.*

Stevenson, M. (1996). Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Assessment. *Artic, 49*(d), 278-291.

Surowiecki, J. (2005). The Wisdom of Crowds, Anchor Books, New York.

Vanclay, F. (2003, March). International Principles for Social Impact Assessment. Impact *Assessment and Project Appraisal, 21*(1), 5-11.

Vanclay, F., & Esteves, A. (2011). Current issues and trends in social impact assessment. In F. Vanclay & A. Esteves, *New Directions in Social Impact Assessment* (pp. 3-19). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Vanclay, F., Esteves, A., Aucamp, I., & Franks, D. (2015). *Social Impact Assessment: Guidance for assessing and managing the social impacts of projects.* International Association for Impact Assessment.

Yuhun, P., Taylor, A., & Winter, J. (2012). *Alice According to You; A snapshot from the 2011 Census.* Darwin: The Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University.