

Perspectives on Environmental and Social Impact Assessment practice in Solomon Islands

Jillian Ash¹

The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Introduction

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) as it is applied in the global south is often moulded by a broad range of international standards, policy norms and good practice tools, underpinned with principles of meaningful public participation. Yet recent literature and events indicate adverse and unanticipated impacts continue to occur, with local communities resisting proposed developments as they have failed to meaningfully participate in decision-making and protect their environmental and social values. This points to a disparity in ESIA policy and practice.

Through the case study of prospective nickel mining projects in Isabel Province of Solomon Islands (hereon referred to as the Isabel nickel projects), this paper aims to strengthen understanding on how ESIA is applied and perceived amid a tussle between international standards, government policy, practitioners and local communities. It does so by drawing on qualitative data to critically analyse the perspectives of international, government and local stakeholders on ESIA practice and their experiences in engaging with internationally-led ESIA processes at the Isabel nickel projects. The paper concludes with recommendations to evolve ESIA practice in the Pacific Islands region.

Case study and research methods

Mining in Solomon Islands, while principally undeveloped, has incited controversy, corruption and community resistance (Nanau, 2014; Baines, 2015; Allen, 2017). Isabel Province, one of nine provinces in Solomon Islands and populated with around 25,000 people, has received significant interest from multinational mining companies to extract its nickel resources.

However, nickel prospecting has been complicated due to two companies competing for prospecting licences in the same mining tenement, culminating in Solomon Islands' longest running court case (Baines, 2015). At the same time, the companies were prospecting in other tenements of Isabel Province. In Solomon Islands, mining is a prescribed development and requires compliance with *The Environment Act 1998* and *The Environment Regulations 2008*, which necessitate preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement for approval by the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology.

The mining companies engaged Australian-based consultants to prepare the ESIA's to meet national regulatory requirements. The ESIA's stated they were prepared with reference to

¹ jillian.ash@ghd.com

international and industry best practice standards and guidelines, including the International Finance Corporation Performance Standards.

The Isabel nickel projects form the case study for this paper. The research involved data collection from five field sites, including Honiara (capital of Solomon Islands), Buala (capital of Isabel province) and three villages located on or nearby mining tenements (located in inset of Figure 1).

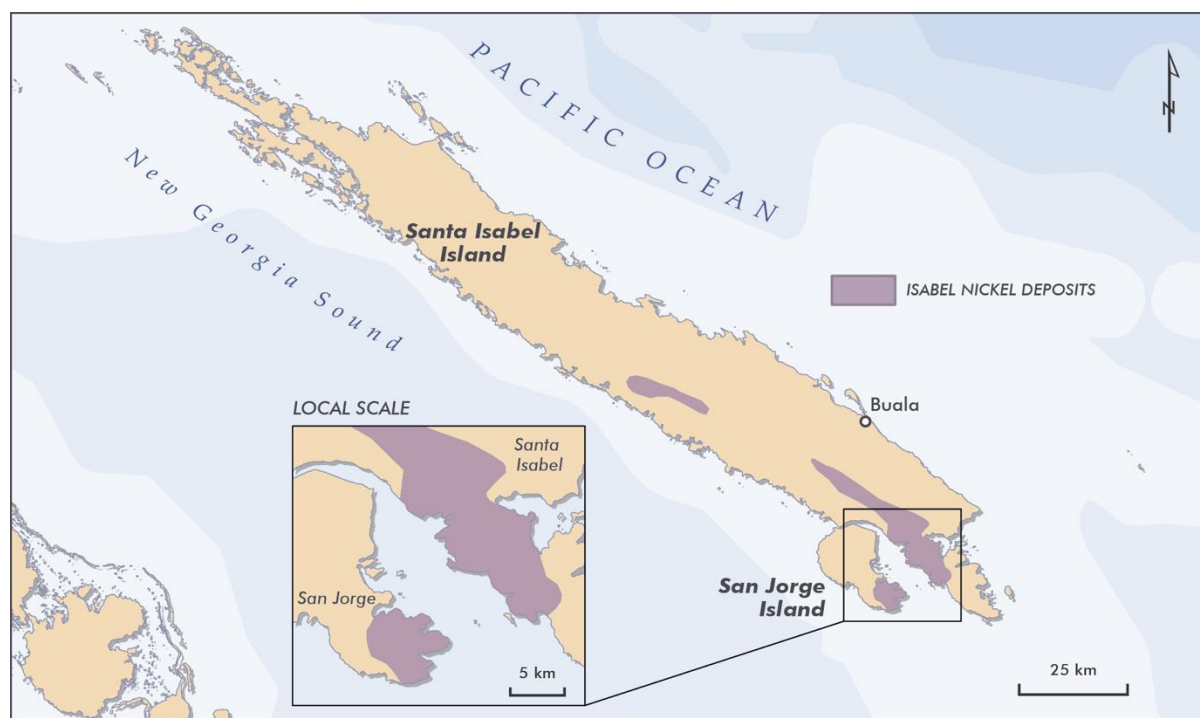


Figure 1 Isabel Province, Solomon Islands

These villages, which had populations of between 150 to 350 people at time of fieldwork and were principally reliant on subsistence agriculture, were subject to, and involved in, ESIA processes by the mining companies.

Over a six-month period in 2016 in Solomon Islands, forty semi-structured individual and group interviews were conducted by the author across three broad stakeholder categories, including international, government and local. Interviews were undertaken to elicit participants' perspectives towards the social impacts of mineral exploration activities at the Isabel nickel projects. The interviews involved questions and discussions relating to ESIA practice, of which the responses are the focus of this paper.

Findings

Transcripts of interviews were analysed, and common themes identified within international, government and local stakeholder groups. These themes provide insights into how ESIA processes at the Isabel nickel projects was perceived and understood across the stakeholder groups (Table 1).

Table 1 Key themes across stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group		Participants (no.)	Key themes
Local	Landholders	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> not adequately informed of ESIA process and mining impacts need first-hand experience to understand potential impacts to their environment recognition of knowledge disparity between ESIA teams and local communities lack of awareness impedes ability to meaningfully participate in and influence ESIA process
	Village/tribal chiefs		
	Women leaders		
	Youth leaders		
Government	National government	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> international ESIA standards not applicable to Solomon Islands context government do not have capacity to implement policy local communities not properly informed about ESIA purpose or process provincial government a 'bystander' along with local communities in ESIA process
	Provincial government		
	Member of Parliament		
International	IFI consultants	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> international ESIA standards not the issue, it's how they are communicated ESIA public participation process inadequate weak in-country governance, with government incapable of implementing policies Isabel nickel projects are not as 'impactful' compared to mining projects elsewhere, so ESIA process should be straightforward
	Mining company representatives		

Local perspectives

Local participants included landholders, village and tribal chiefs, and women and youth leaders across three villages². There was overwhelming consensus from local participants that information and awareness about the ESIA process was “*not enough, we at community level needs more*” (L4). In one village, participants noted that while they observed ESIA activities in their community:

“at our community level, we don’t really understand the message that was tried to put to use of the impacts it would have on us unless we see and feel for ourselves what the impact were before we could fully understand what was talked about” (L5).

Some participants attributed their lack of awareness and understanding to a language disparity, as consultants and company representatives “*use language that is in their own level which the community find it hard to understand*” (L14). Due to this language disparity, participants stated that some of the environmental monitoring equipment installed around their village was removed by the community as they did not understand its purpose.

² Interviews with local participants were conducted in Solomon Islands *pijin*. Interviews were recorded with their permission, and transcribed and translated into English.

As per regulation, stakeholders, including locally affected communities, were invited to provide feedback on draft ESIAs, however:

“unfortunately, the results compiled were very thick that it would take us villagers to read and try to understand the content for probably a year” (L3).

As such, the findings indicate that local participants have insufficient understanding of mining and its potential impacts, suggesting that public participation processes were inadequate. Consequently, this impeded the ability of locally-affected communities to participate in and influence the ESIA process. Further, this suggests that important local experiential knowledge has not been factored into ESIA reporting and decision-making, as local stakeholders were unable to meaningfully participate in the process. This also raises questions of the adequacy of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, which one company had stated to acquire during its ESIA process. In addition, the knowledge disparity suggests that government played an absent role in the ESIA process, who would usually provide neutral expert representation and ensure stakeholders can meaningfully participate in the process.

Government perspectives

Government participants included officers from national ministries and provincial government, and a member of parliament. While some participants felt that the ESIA processes were compliant with international good practice, others questioned the applicability of the international standards, as *“Solomon Islands is pretty far from international standards”* (G8). A participant elaborated by stating that ESIAs in Solomon Islands do not adequately capture the multifaceted dimensions of the natural environment, which encompasses social, cultural and economic elements important to local livelihoods, culture and traditions. The Western categorisation of social, economic and environment values as separate entities, as international ESIA practice dictates, therefore was perceived as conflicting with traditional understandings of the environment. Further to this, some participants expressed that government do not have capacity to ensure meeting of international standards, or international good practice in ESIA.

Participants also perceived that local communities were not fully informed of ESIA processes, with a participant noting that *“village people can not understand or read ESIAs”* (G2). Another participant elaborated that the lack of awareness at the local level was because:

“...some of the awareness is conducted in a way that they are not able not fully understand it because of a language barrier, or – and they have no firsthand experience of this [potential impacts]” (G14).

Provincial government was recognised as having limited influence in the ESIA process, with provincial government having only received presentations from the mining companies about the ESIAs. As such, they expressed they played a *“bystander”* (G14) role alongside the local communities in the ESIA processes and a participant felt that the *“mining companies just do ESIAs to tick the box”* (G11). It was stated that provincial government should play a greater role in the ESIA process, particularly in ensuring ESIA activities at the local scale including consultation is appropriate to the local context.

International perspectives

International participants included consultants and specialists from international financial institutions (IFIs) and representatives from the mining companies. Overall, international participants were not critical of international standards underpinning ESIA practice. Rather, they were critical of how the ESIA process was communicated, with a participant expressing that *“the issue with the ESIA is not the standards, it’s the way in which they’re communicated”* (I1). Further, it was raised by a participant that public participation processes at the local scale were inadequate, as:

“how are people going to, for the very first time, hear about a project, and in that same meeting, give feedback on it without having any knowledge of the mining sector?” (I3).

As such, findings indicate that international participants recognised that local stakeholders were inhibited in their ability to participate in, and influence on, the ESIA process. International participants suggested that inadequate communication and public participation processes was due to incapacity of Solomon Islands Government to implement policies. This weak governance context was perceived by some participants to allow *“cowboy operators”* (I4) to come and exploit *“what is a vulnerable country”* (I4), therefore placing the onus of poor ESIA practice on the absence of rigorous governance.

The participants had experience and knowledge of other mining projects such as in Papua New Guinea. As such, they often framed their discussion of the Isabel nickel projects in a comparative perspective, with the proposed projects deemed as less impactful than projects from elsewhere. For example, a participant noted in relation to one of the proposed nickel projects:

“it’s a simple mining project...if you compare it with other mining projects, it’s pretty – relatively low impact, I’d say” (I1).

The comparative perspective led international participants to frame the ESIA process at the Isabel nickel projects as straightforward and uncomplicated, which can result in overlooking the local context.

Recommendations to evolve ESIA practice

Through the study of the Isabel nickel projects, the following recommendations to evolve ESIA practice emerged from the research data:

(1) Enhance government capacity by appointing independent advisory process

While mining companies and their consultants have a responsibility to produce scientifically and technically sound ESIA reports, Pacific Island governments have an important role in ensuring this responsibility is met (Bradley and Swaddling, 2016). However, as the findings indicate, it is perceived that Solomon Islands government lack capacity to manage ESIA processes, particularly in ensuring meaningful public participation at the local scale.

Contributing to the lack of capacity is the challenge of geography, as Solomon Islands is largely made up of remote and rural islands and communities with poor transport infrastructure, in turn impeding delivery of governance.

challenges associated with geography, as Solomon Islands is largely made up of remote and rural islands and communities coupled with poor transport infrastructure. Baines (2015) also suggest that government lack the technical capacity to evaluate ESIA, as in the case of one of the ESIA at the Isabel nickel projects, the government was very quick to issue approval and made no call on the mining company to rectify obvious weaknesses in the ESIA.

Government capacity to manage ESIA processes could be enhanced by appointing an independent advisory process, such as engaging with SPREP's Pacific Network for Environmental Assessment (SPREP, 2016). An independent advisory process could assist government with evaluating the technical aspects of the ESIA, in addition to providing guidance to applicants and their consultants in localising ESIA activities at the local scale. However, questions remain as to how an independent advisory process could be facilitated.

(2) ESIA public participation process should be localised

The findings indicate that local stakeholders were not meaningfully consulted or included in the ESIA process, pointing to a knowledge disparity. International participants demonstrated thorough knowledge of the ESIA process and of mining and its potential impacts more broadly, while local communities did not demonstrate this knowledge. As a result, local communities were prevented from meaningfully participating in the ESIA process.

To overcome this barrier, public participation processes underpinning ESIA activities at the local scale should be localised where feasible to bridge the knowledge divide. For example, all content and engagement should be translated into local languages and be supported with pictures and graphics that describe complex issues, such as the purpose and design of a tailing dam and its potential changes to the environment.

ESIA consultation and public participation activities should also be staggered to allow local communities time to digest and discuss among themselves new information about their environment. This would also provide them with opportunities to ask questions and seek additional information if necessary. When local communities can receive new information within their knowledge context, they are then more likely to meaningfully participate in the ESIA process.

(3) ESIA should capture qualitative dimension of environmental values

A goal of ESIA is to meaningfully understand the environmental and social values of a context. International standards underpinning ESIA methodology are framed through a Western lens, which tend to view environmental, social and economic values as separate entities. Local (indigenous) knowledge in Solomon Islands is situational and experiential, in that it cannot be separated from the environment, and Solomon Islanders derive their individual and collective identity from the natural environment and its ecologies (Gegeo, 2001). Therefore, the ESIA process can unearth tensions between Western values and assumptions underpinning ESIA practice and local realities and knowledge. The failure to recognise this can contribute to inadequacies in internationally-led ESIA processes.

ESIA methodology should be designed to capture the qualitative dimensions of environmental values, alongside the typical quantitative dimensions. This is particularly important in the Pacific Islands context, as societies across the region differ considerably,

and the inclination of international stakeholders to take a comparative perspective can limit effectiveness of ESIA as they are likely to overlook the local context and undervalue local experiences. This approach should provide opportunity for local communities to share their knowledge on the environmental value, which can lead to a knowledge-sharing process, and allow ESIAs to adequately capture environmental values important to local communities.

References

Allen, M.G. (2017) Islands, extraction and violence: mining and the politics of scale in Island Melanesia, *Political Geography*, 57, 81-90.

Baines, G. (2015) Solomon Islands is unprepared to manage a minerals-based economy, *SSGM Discussion paper 2015/6*, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia, Australian National University.

Bradley, M. and Swaddling, A. (2018) Addressing environmental impact assessment challenges in Pacific island countries for effective management of deep sea minerals activities, *Marine Policy*, 95, 356-362.

Gegeo, D.W. (2001) Cultural rupture and indigeneity: the challenge of (re)visioning “place” in the Pacific, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13(2), 491-507.

Nanau, G. (2014) Local experiences with mining royalties, company and the state in the Solomon Islands, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 138-139, 77-92.

SPREP (2016) Strengthening environmental impact assessment: guidelines for Pacific Island countries and territories. Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme. Apia, Samoa.