

## **Is SIA cosmetic in Indian road development schemes?**

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### **Abstract**

SIA is a tool to evaluate not only a development project but also a tool to learn from it. However, in India, its role has been reduced to a cosmetic one. This paper discusses one such role in India's national road development schemes. Where, on the one hand, dramatic changes brought by road infrastructure to a region is especially evident in its rural territories, which in its quality of life and built environment are becoming quasi-urban. On the other hand, such territories due to its rural status are failing to be recognised by Indian planning authority. Thus, as such territories increase, they create an unsustainable region. The SIA used fails to evaluate the impact of such infrastructure on regional development dynamics as well as it fails to incorporate lessons learnt in the regional development schemes.

This paper studies the role of SIA in Indian road infrastructure development projects, especially in reporting its impact on the region. It evaluates the role of SIA using two sets of methods. First, it studies the phase at which SIA is introduced, how criteria are selected, what lessons are learned and how this report is disseminated, in the Indian planning scenario. Second, it evaluates the impact of such development on the rural territories through statistical demographic and anthropological studies. The comparative analysis of the lessons learnt in these two sets of methods demonstrates the mismatch between the reporting of SIA and experiences encountered on site.

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## Is SIA cosmetic in Indian road development schemes?

Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is for assessing both unintended and intended outcomes of a project (Vanclay 2003). In India, however, it has been reduced to identifying negative or unintended outcomes that might delay the construction of the project, without determining the impacts of the intended outcomes. The national rural roads scheme is one such project; although the scheme intends to bring access to social and economic opportunities to the rural territories, the SIA conducted neglects to assess how these opportunities would change rural population's way of life. While it does its due diligence in reducing the extent and number of land losses experienced by directly affected people, it fails to determine the kinds of the transformation it brings to the rural territories. Hence, the consequence is misinformed regional planning agencies and ill-prepared rural territories. This paper explains why and how the current role of SIA in India has evolved into a compliance one, which fails to evaluate the intended outcomes, and has been diluted to become a cosmetic exercise.

### 1. SIA in India

The early development projects have had a lasting impact on the discourse of SIA in India. Notably, the Sardar Sarovar projects, a series of thirty dam projects developed to supply water and electricity to the western states of India. The dams' development caused an outcry both historically and contemporarily for the rights of tribal and farming populations from the now submerged land in the Narmada valley (Oommen 2008; Mathur 2010). Under the growing outcry, the World Bank, one of the financiers of the projects, commissioned an independent review. This commission concluded, "[d]espite Bank policies, many projects have commenced without accurate data. Not only are the direct impacts of the project little understood, and plans made that do not take account of what is likely to happen, but also the broader dimensions of the difficulties go unappreciated [...] As a result, at each stage of project development, new emergencies arise. As these accumulate, those affected feel growing indignation, and political opposition begins to mount." (Morse and Berger 1992, p. 58).

The adverse social impacts of the earlier development projects triggered a series of policies by the Government of India to use SIA as a tool to avert similar public outcries. For example, the Provisions of the Panchayat<sup>2</sup> (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 empowers local leaders to voice concerns, over development projects affecting their habitations, through a traditional gathering called *Gram Sabha*; the National Rehabilitation & Resettlement Policy of 2007 mandates conduction of SIA as part of the preparation process of a new project or extension of one. Furthermore, the Ministry of Finance (MoF 2011) further advises government entities on projects having a public-private partnership in India. Thus, "the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Finance Corporation (IFC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as most multilateral and private agencies, including commercial banks, require some kind of prior SIA for projects that they finance in India." (Mathur 2010, p. 41). However, as a consequence of the historical developments leading to SIA being mandated, dealing with losses have become the prime focus in reporting impacts.

Currently, SIA in India is used to mitigate and to manage different forms of emergencies having the potential to derail the development project and making it imperative to carry out SIA for projects yielding loss of land, structures, livelihood, crops/trees, and access to infrastructure and utility by a community or an individual (MoF 2011; Dutta and Bandyopadhyay 2010). Thus, SIA being used in preparing Resettlement Action Plans, Community Participation Framework, Due Diligence (environmental, social and economic impacts) reports and Social Safeguard Compliance reports either to reduce adverse social impacts on communities or for acquiring consent from affected

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<sup>2</sup> Panchayat is a system of self-governance in rural territories in India.

persons. Under this plethora of documentation on accountability of negative impacts, the positive impacts transforming “people’s way of life” (Vancly 2003, p. 8) go either underreported or unreported (Rajaram and Das 2008). Thereby, compromising the preparedness of affected communities for the transformations brought by the said development.

In India, one such development project encompassing both positive and negative impacts on rural territories is the rural road development scheme (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana [PMGSY]). On the one hand, the scheme recognises road development “[...] as an infrastructure that provides access to social and economic services. They are an entry point for poverty alleviation and act as facilitators to create an agricultural surplus, improve basic health, provide access to schools and employment opportunities.” (ILO-PMGSY 2015, p. v). On the other hand, the SIA of the project details community participation, surveys and interviews conducted to reduce land loss, to acquire a memorandum of understanding with affected persons and to report on aspired transformation but without baseline conditions (IED-ADB 2014). Furthermore, the analysis and recommendation only recognise the relationship formed between the rural and the urban through the road (IED-ADB 2017) and ignore the undergoing socio-spatial-economic transformation it produces within rural territories (Mukhopadhyay *et al.* 2016). As a consequence, the national planning agency continues to underreport on the contribution of rural transformation in Indian urbanisation, resulting in ill-prepared regions (Guin and Das 2015). This paper examines one such Indian scenario in the Bengal region.

## 2. Road Development and Rural Populations in Bengal

Road Infrastructure plays an important role in the transformation of the rural territories, see figure 1. Notably, the Rural Road Scheme (PMGSY) by the central government, providing all-weather road access to the core network (national and state highways) for rural habitations<sup>3</sup>. The ongoing project was initiated in 2000, with a proposal to improve 738,000 kilometres of rural roads, costing at an estimation of \$30 billion (USD) to connect 170,000 rural habitations (ADB 2016), of which 598,840 km has been completed till date (OMMS 2019). The project is funded by the central government, World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

While the government envisions connectivity to provide access to urban centres, on the ground, the rural population considers the all-weather road in two ways. First, the officially reported economic way, all-weather roads ease resource and labour delivery to the city as well as improve access to various health, education and income opportunities available within the city. Second, the underreported physical way, as labour and resources can access city, markets and social institutions from the city can also tap into the uncharted rural territories (ADB 2011; Samanta 2012; Mukhopadhyay *et al.* 2016). Thus, in many ways road acts as a catalyst for urbanisation. This two-way exchange became evident by the Census of India (2011) which re-classified 2,553 rural territories as new statistically urban territory, called ‘Census Towns’<sup>4</sup> (Census of India 2011). These census towns have contributed 30% to India’s urban growth in the last decade (Guin and Das 2015). However, this urbanisation is not recognised or assisted by the national and state planning agencies, whose efforts are spent planning in and for larger cities or conglomerations (Planning Commission of India 2011b).

Bengal region makes a good case to understand the role of the road in the transformation of rural territories in India. There are three key reasons for this: 1) geographical location, 2) demographic characteristics, and 3) high subaltern urbanisation. Geographically, Bengal is central to national and trans-national road development projects underway, the core-network, with Kolkata city as its focus

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<sup>3</sup> A habitation is a cluster of houses in a compact and contiguous area. A single village may have more than one habitation, each habitation being separated from any other.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Urban Development – ‘In India, a census town is one which is not statutorily notified and administered as a town, but nevertheless whose population has attained urban characteristics.’ They are re-classified by the Census of India on the following criteria: settlement size exceeds 5,000 persons, with minimum density of 400 persons per sqkm and at least 75% of the main working population employed in non-agricultural work.

(Ghani *et al.* 2016; Mitra 2017). The demographic characteristics of Bengal, with its dense, young and socio-economically dynamic rural population<sup>5</sup>, further accelerates the transformative process brought by the road. The demographic shift has resulted in the growing number of scholarly reports on subaltern urbanisation in territories beyond Kolkata (Samanta 2012; Mukhopadhyay *et al.* 2016) contributing 29.5% to the state's urban growth (Census of India 2011).

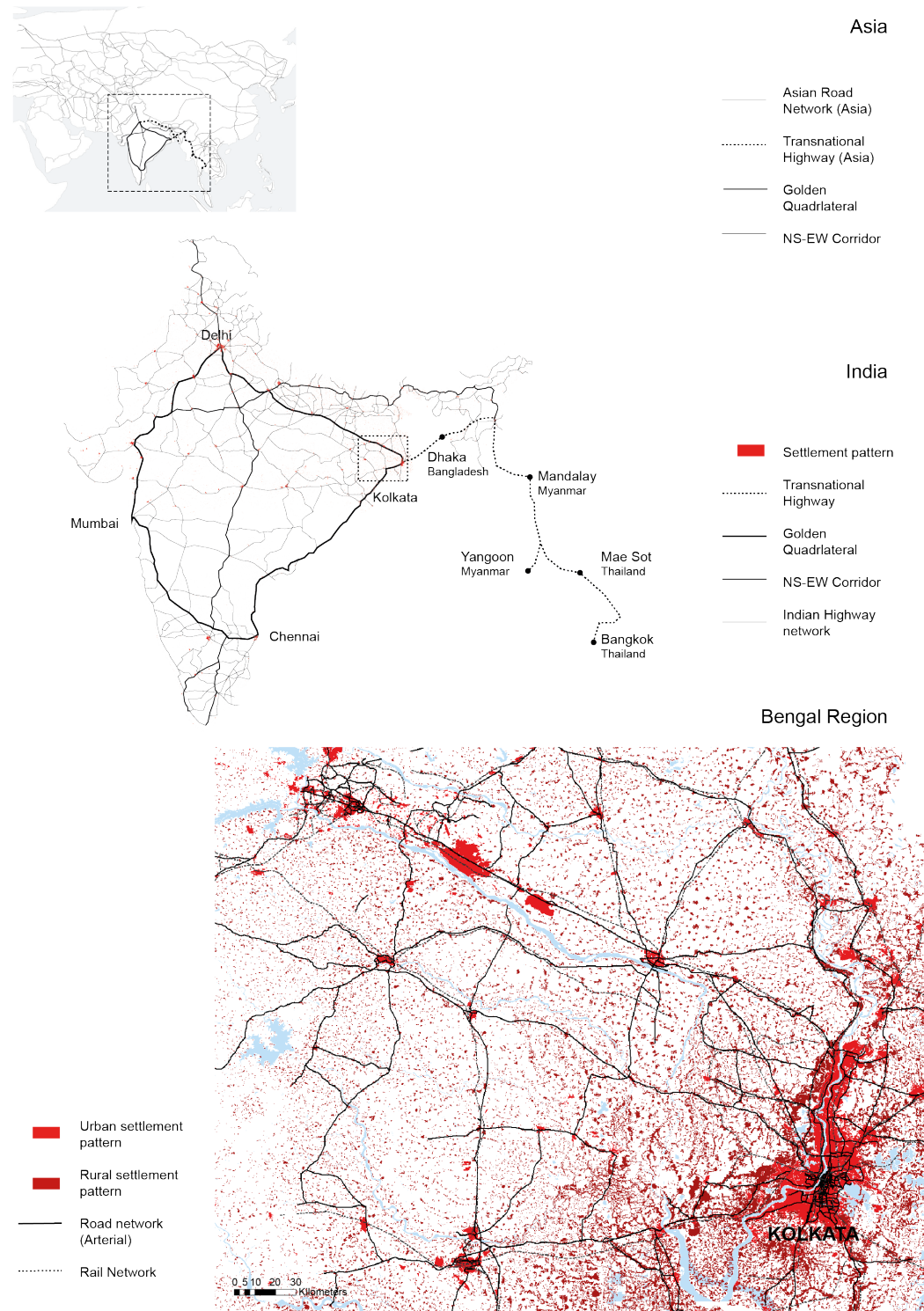


Figure 1: Settlement pattern and road, Chandra 2018

<sup>5</sup> West Bengal (State) population density is 1,028 persons per km<sup>2</sup> (Census of India 2011) of which 70 percent is youth population 0 – 25 years (Census of India 2011) and 40 to 50 percent conversion rate of working population from farm to non-farm activities, as per compared data from Census of India 2001 and 2011 (Sidhwani 2014).

### 3. Rural road development and regional consequences

The paper examines the SIA reporting of the PMGSY project carried out in the state of West Bengal. Since 2002, Government of India and ADB<sup>6</sup> have undertaken three types of agreements for the scheme's implementation:

- i) Rural Road Sector ([RRS] 2002 – 2012)
- ii) Rural Road Sector Investment Program (RRSIP] 2004 – 2015)
- iii) Rural Connectivity Investment Program ([RCIP] 2011 - ongoing)

Government of India's SIA documentation is limited reducing the understanding of lessons learnt over the course of the project, ADB has a plethora of documentation where the evolving SIA presents a valuable understanding on the use of SIA in the Indian scenario. Hence, the paper selects three subprojects from each type of agreement. These subprojects are spaced out from 2003 – 2017 to capture the evolving nature of SIA in the rural road scheme (PMGSY).

For completed subprojects from RRS and RRSIP, the paper examines the recommendation report at concept phase, completion report at the end phase and validation report by the Independent Evaluation Department (IED) of ADB. This comparison gives insight on the shift in the framing of the project's rationale and probable outcomes, criteria for evaluation, the methodology to evaluate, reporting of positive and negative impacts and further recommendations made by both subprojects.

When compared, RRS (ADB 2003; 2011) and RRSIP (ADB 2016) subprojects, the later showed a clear departure from the former in its framing of the rationale. Whereas, the former completely endorses the government declaration of probable impacts (i) connectivity, (ii) transportation, (iii) government services, (iv) livelihood, (v) commerce, (vii) education, (viii) health, (ix) land value, (x) infrastructure, (xi) social interactions, and (xii) gender empowerment; the later states the support the government's rationale and reports on roads constructed, traffic analysis conducted and probable reduction in vehicle operating cost factors that contribute to economic internal rate of return. Both subprojects provide an overview of the socio-economic impact. However, RRS was scrutinised over lack of baseline data, targeted improvement of impact performance indicators and time of achieving these impacts (IED-ADB 2014); comparatively, RRSIP fared well in its validation report as it had amassed a large dataset through six series of household surveys, although, all conducted at the initial phase between 2008 – 2009 (IED-ADB 2017).

The two subprojects predict similar negative impacts on road safety, potential degradation of natural resources, outward migration, loss of livelihood and increase in HIV/AIDS and trafficking cases. However, these predictions in both projects lack qualitative or quantitative evidence; thereby, reducing the scope of the reports in further discussing these impacts. Therefore, the subprojects under both RRS and RRSIP continue to underreport "improved roads will be catalyst for urbanisation and commercialisation" (ADB 2011, p. 63; ADB 2016, p. 47) as "external service and product providers and social contacts now have improved access to rural communities" (ADB 2016, p. 47) and "[l]and values in connected rural habitations are forecasted to continue to increase" (ADB 2016, p. 46).

The ongoing RCIP subprojects follow a similar pattern of reporting as RRSIP. And SIA carried out are concerned in averting adverse social impacts through the resettlement of affected persons, relocation action plans, and community participation for achieving consent for the project (ADB 2012a; 2012b; 2012c). Baseline assessment, if done, is currently unavailable.

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<sup>6</sup> ADB co-funded for the states of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Assam and Orissa; whereas World Bank co-funded for the states of Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu.

While ADB effectively follows its country and strategic programs of poverty alleviation by supporting the Indian effort for inclusive growth and socio-economic development, it does not justifiably assess it. This detachment from impact assessments while complying with the project brief reduces harsh evaluations (IED-ADB 2014), reduces cost (IED-ADB 2017) and reduces the time taken for implementing a project.

Meanwhile, these reports predate the census of India 2011 and subaltern urbanisation scholars in projecting the probable rural transformation. However, the lack of evidence reduces the degree of impact or consideration they could make within the discourse of regional development or urbanisation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“The focus of concern of SIA is a proactive stance to development and better development outcomes, not just the identification or amelioration of negative or unintended outcomes” (Vanclay 2003; p.6).

SIA was mandated in India due to the series of public outcries against displacement by a development project. This historical context of the mandate has reduced the expectation from SIA to respond to displacement and resettlement. In the rural road scheme, existing roads are being improved. Hence, the displacement or loss of land experienced is minimum. However, the changes brought by road access are multiple and complex, leading to rural transformation. Methods, evidence and discourse used to assess these changes, however, are insufficient in predicting and empowering the rural territories. Impacts considered probable, but indeterminable, reduces their inclusion in further discussion. Additionally, partially reported positive impacts results in, while, willing participation but ill-prepared territories. The partial use of SIA as a tool to avoid further public outcries against the development project without being a tool to look forward to exasperates the ill-effects of urbanisation on a region. Hence, in India, a one-sided SIA emerges that enables the project brief, but is unable to capture the larger picture of the impact made, making it a cosmetic exercise as a project deliverable.

Hence, a shift is required in current practices of SIA by government and development agencies: first, by prolonging their involvement in monitoring and evaluation of impact (IED-ADB 2017; Aucamp and Lombard 2018); and second, by considering the spatial aspect of social impact assessment in development projects impacting at a regional scale.

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