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Global Perspectives on the Application of Western Worldview in Social Impact Assessment

Social impact assessment (SIA) originated in the early 1970s as a complementary part of the assessment of the environmental impacts of projects (Esteves et al. 2012). It was regarded as a technique for predicting social impacts as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Over time the realm of SIA has evolved to include the process of analyzing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planed interventions (policies, programs, plans, and projects) and any social change invoked by those interventions, with the purpose to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment (Vanclay, F. 2003). Over the last half century, many principles and guidelines have been developed for SIA both in the national/regional and international levels. The internationally agreed guidelines, as stated by Vanclay, F. (2003), were deducted from principles, and derived from core values agreed and shared by SIA practitioners and scholars. He further maintained that those values were rooted in the concepts of civil society and democracy. This leads practitioners to question whether those guidelines are universally effective and adaptive across various geographical and socio-political contexts, as well as applicable to development projects of various sizes and complexities. Accordingly, this paper is intended to reflect the perspectives of on the ground practitioners, who are engaging with communities throughout the project development process and applying the core values and fundamental principles of SIA around the world. While the size and complexity of the undertakings will vary, along with the driver to consider the potential for social impact or risk, practitioners share their experiences in seeking to understand the effects that communities may experience, and the journey to manage these effects.

Various legal and policy requirements and guidelines of SIA have been developed in the national/regional level, as well as international level since its formalisation. It is evident that SIA began in the national level in response to the formal requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of the USA in 1969, and such a trend spread leading to development of national-level policies and guidelines for EIA around the world, and beyond western countries. From there, SIA guidelines took two directions with one focusing on contextual differences and requirements specific to the particular region, and the other focusing on consensus, and more inclusive and universal requirements for cross-jurisdictional and international practice of SIA (international standards). National/regional SIA standards now include requirements and guidelines for resource projects in jurisdictions such as Queensland Australia (Holm, D. et al 2013) for example, and formalization of national EIA requirements mandating an assessment of social impacts in Indonesia (Wuwur, F. A. et al 2022). National/regional SIAs usually play a role in securing local legislative permission, while international SIA oftentimes serve as a precondition of financing or requirement of an international collaborator. Such a distinction between national/regional and

international SIA standards has driven the separation of SIA practice in national/regional setting versus the international context, where a gap analysis is usually required to "lift" national/regional SIAs to meet international standards. Unlike national/regional SIA requirements which are designed to reflect the local context, international SIA standards often face the challenge of effective and adaptive implementation in different social contexts.

Although aimed to be applicable across different social contexts, international standards for SIA have largely been rooted in two key concepts advocated by western countries: civil society and democracy (Carothers, T., & Barndt, W. 1999; Gulakov, I., & Vanclay, F. 2018; Gulakov, I. et al 2020). There is some preliminary evidence indicating that the effectiveness of international SIA standards could be compromised across various jurisdictions or in a non-western context (Carothers, T., & Barndt, W. 1999) (Gulakov, I., & Vanclay, F. 2018), however, it remains unclear what notions or requirements of international standards are lacking to achieve a more adaptive and effective result of SIA in a non-western context. Furthermore, practitioners are cautious to focus on the arrival at a complete and comprehensive, all-encompassing consensus on standards given they may not provide value to the practitioners who are on the ground, practically executing SIA today. Should the focus, rather, be on consideration for and awareness of these core value and fundamental principles, and how they may or may not be applicable in the national/regional context; so in as to provide the maximum value to proponents and ultimately to the communities themselves.

Increasingly, with the consideration of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) frameworks, proponents are commissioning tailored SIAs, not only in response to prescriptive regulatory requirements, but to address the potential for social risk to their investments and operations. Issues, such as social disruption, justice, and sustainability are being considered earlier in the project development process because of their potential to make provocative headlines across social media, and susceptibility to the spread of misinformation.

In reality, and as observed by the practitioners interviewed in preparing this paper, SIA is an evolving concept, research field and practice which continues to self reflect and engage with external concepts and practices to expand and improve itself. As maintained by Esteves et al. (2012), SIA promotes the orientation of taking advantage of opportunities to engage with other social concepts and practices including free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), human rights, social performance, and risk assessment. Even though project approval and legitimacy remain the fundamental reasons for initiating the majority of SIA studies, there is a trend of transitioning from a regulating tool towards a practice which sees participation as fundamental to promoting sustainable and equitable development. This calls for revisiting the core values and concepts of SIA, and transformational change in the way SIA is practised (Esteves et al. 2012).

In preparing this paper, interviews were conducted with more than 30 practitioners from around the world, representing professional consultancies and both public and private project proponent and investments organizations. They had at least 10 years of professional experience and represented SIA practitioners, community engagement specialists, environmental and social impact assessment specialists. These practitioners shared perspectives on community engagement and SIA in more than 40 countries across North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Australia. We encouraged story telling as a way to inform our qualitative research; identified key themes; and asked them to reflect on pivotal moments in their professional careers, as well as the major influences that shaped their approach to engaging with communities and in executing SIA.

Key themes overwhelmingly emerged, including respect, transparency, the investment in relationships in-community, as well as hyperawareness of the potential for bias, and the desire to arrive at meaningful (sometimes transformational) positive change. While concepts around respect and transparency may seem overly obvious and simplistic, there is an emerging challenge in executing SIA in our contemporary reality of social media and misinformation; and, while this doesn't change the foundational importance of these concepts – their practical execution is increasingly more complex. Putting meaningful engagement (which takes more and more time) at odds with the practical need to execute projects, for example in industries that contribute to the decarbonization of energy generation.

An overwhelming opinion from those partitions who emphasis meaningful engagement and community participation is that the current international SIA frameworks need to be a more 'be-spoken' system where it allows convention to be built gradually in non-western societies and feedback to be provided both from on the ground and from SIA practitioners. There is no quick and easy way to build an all-fitting set of guidelines across all cultural, political and social contexts. We appreciate the effort from SIA communities to clarify the values, principals and develop sets of SIA guidelines, however based on our interviews, we recommend that the most important next step towards a practical SIA framework would be putting these guidelines to test and work out which areas are non-negotiable requirements across all cultures, which areas are negotiable and allow in-context interpretations, and what are accepted conventions within certain cultural/social contexts. We believe this practice will also facilitate the process of transforming SIA from a pure permitting tool to allowing more in-depth understanding of the community and find the balance between these two drivers. This calls for a feedback system to capture the nuances in practice and changes with time across cultures, and continuous evaluation and improvement.

For example, during the preparation of this paper, one area is highlighted in which practitioners were challenged to adapt international standards to non-western social contexts. This is around the term or concept of Indigenous people. The protection of rights of Indigenous people is a core principal of many international SIA guidelines, however identifying Indigenous people can be challenging. In our interviews with SIA practitioners, the concept of Indigenous people is believed to be closely linked to the history of colonization and implies certain power imbalance - Indigenous people are the vulnerable and need to be protected. For example, the UN's understanding of Indigenous people exists in "historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies" (Daes, E. I. A. 2008). This view is also supported by extensive academic literature. Mosolova et al (2021) argued that "Indigenous peoples" is an appropriate term only in the context of colonial or post-colonial relations, relevant discourses and specialized research, and that it does not correspond to the historical reality of all modern countries. For example, in some countries, the native residents continue to dominant their society, where new-comers (migrants in history) formed ethnic groups and are instead the minority. Some SIA practitioners argue that there are no Indigenous people by this definition (in those social contexts), while others have developed their own interpretation of the term, stating that the intent of this concept is to protect vulnerable social and cultural groups, and that the emphasis should be on vulnerability, as opposed to a specific historical experience. Therefore vulnerable cultural groups, ethnic groups, or cultural minorities may be better terms used in this context.

While the potential for bias requires ongoing awareness, the majority of practitioners agree that the application of international standards does not appear to negatively influence the SIA process, and continues to contribute to the practice through tailored consideration of additional frameworks. Many acknowledge that overly prescriptive requirements, inhibit the ability to focus on the issues of most important, often requiring practitioners to justify the exclusion of topics from treatment within the SIA.

Leadership requires a certain level of autonomy in focusing on core values such as the protection of human rights and value of local knowledge and experience; and fundamental principles around recognition of diversity, community acceptability and social sustainability.

Finally, when asked to reflect on the major influences on their approach to SIA (whether that be their education, training or on-the-ground, real world experience) participants responded that in-community experiences were pivotal moments in their professional careers, as well as the major influences that shaped their approach to engaging with communities. All participants shared stories about their specific experiences in-community, allowing my coauthor and I to share in their experience, and let it inform our frame of reference moving forward. Each story adding cumulative value and richness to inform our own approaches.

The core values of SIA remain relevant two decades later, and as described above, practitioners consistently raised foundational principles around transparency, trust and respect and the investment of time in-community as fundamental in conducting SIA, despite the cultural context or driver, and of increasing importance in this contemporary age of misinformation. We believe those core values should be carried on in international SIA guidelines, and recommend a tailored, feedback-oriented system to ground these guidelines in different social contexts and capture these nuances, allowing continuous improvement in SIA. Additionally, story-telling in the practice of SIA is of critical and increasing importance, and practitioners should prioritize mentorship and sharing their experiences frequently and freely so that SIA outcomes can benefit from the sharing of these experiences, both in avoiding conflict but also in tailoring engagement programs and assessments, to maximize the return on investment and expedite schedule to the extent possible.

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