SIA under the spotlight: What works and what doesn’t in SIA practice?

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While SIA practitioners are generally familiar with best practice guidelines and principles for assessments, putting these into practice often presents special challenges in a consulting environment. These constraints can include:

- Very limited timeframes
- Small budgets
- Limited influence on project design or outcomes
- Client / proponent uninterested in knowing about social impacts or poor client relationship
- No community feedback, no obvious issues
- Lack of data
- Few identifiable impacts.

As an example of how these factors can contribute to a low quality SIA, a typical scenario is that we get a call from a mid-tier developer, after hearing from Council that they will need to submit an SIA with their DA, and wanting to lodge within 2-3 weeks. This type of project has the makings of a poor SIA process and limited outcome: apart from the timing limiting almost any opportunity for meaningful consultation or changes to the proposal, these projects often seem to have relatively minor impacts. They may not be ‘desirable’ or ‘ideal’ in terms of their designs or size, but on the other hand, the SIA or SHIA is not likely to uncover any significant new insights: increased numbers of residents or businesses, traffic and parking, overlooking and privacy loss, loss of amenity or changes to the character of a neighbourhood, noise and construction impacts. Many of these are social impacts and some are picked up in other specialist assessments. We try to add some value through door knocks or letter box drops, recommendations to improve local amenity or something to better integrate the project into the local community. Generally we receive no feedback, either from potentially affected neighbours, or from the developer or Council about if or how the information was used to issue conditions or impact on the outcome. The process is in no way ideal.

But every now and then you get an opportunity to contribute to a project in a significant way, you get in early, or have a great project team or an enlightened client. I’d like to give you a few examples of where we’ve been able to work with a client to turn around a project to avoid potentially adverse social impacts and improve the outcomes for the community – and why these worked.

1. Western Sydney Light Rail SHIA

This project presented the opportunity to become involved early in the planning stages of the project at the feasibility stage, providing evidence and advice to guide route selection. The scope of work covered social AND health impacts, and there was time and budget to undertake a literature review and analyse and map a wide range of data covering socio-economic and health factors and highlight variations in equity across the Western Sydney region. The information and analysis were key inputs to the options evaluation process, so we were able to contribute to a process of project planning and development across the project team.

This project shows:

- The benefits of early involvement at a stage when changes can still be made to shape project options.
A collaborative approach with client and the project team which allow a project’s benefits and impacts to be considered from a wide range of perspectives

Use of literature review, case studies, socio-economic and health data and mapping to highlight areas of vulnerability and inequity, show potential benefits and provide evidence-based recommendations

However, one limitation of SIA at this very early stage is the absence of community involvement.

2. Aged care facility relocation and site redevelopment

Plans for relocation of an aged care facility to a new purpose built facility 15kms from the existing site raised a number of potentially significant social impacts – few of which relate to redevelopment of the existing site. In this project, most issues arise from the loss of the existing facility and plans for the relocation of the residents, most of whom are elderly and in poor health. The client is aware of the responsibilities to the residents but the facility is too old to be redeveloped at the same location. We provided strong unequivocal advice early in the project as to the importance of managing the relocation process in order to minimise potentially severe social and health impacts on residents and their families / support networks. This included drafting a ‘protocol’ to guide the process and minimize potentially severe impacts on the health of residents, which helped the client / operator focus on the strength of the project feasibility and the options and processes for rehousing residents, when it occurs.

These sorts of issues also arise in relation to caravan park closures, for example, when our contribution relates less to identifying the social impacts of a proposed development, and focuses more on managing the impacts on the lives of vulnerable individuals and local support networks who will be relocated.

This project shows:

- A good client relationship can encourage open communication and strong, unequivocal advice early in a project to help tailor project development and mitigate potentially damaging social and health impacts
- Use of literature and data to provide best practice guidance and evidence based advice
- Social impacts can extend beyond development site.

3. Sydney Light Rail

In another example, we recently prepared a SIA for Sydney CBD and South East Light Rail EIS. The project began as a “Place Manager” (ie community engagement / communications) role. However, it soon became clear that there would be major and complex social and economic impacts, so that when an SIA was required, much of the preliminary community engagement had been scoped and data collected. This early emphasis on community consultation and communications also provided us with a deep and detailed understanding of the impact of the design on the social and business environment. This enabled us to provide advice to client and project team on the need for changes to project design or the construction process, and ways to mitigate or manage impacts, including through future communications so that impacted stakeholders can plan for the disruption.

This project shows:

- Despite some strong community opposition, early and detailed relationship building and consultation / communication enabled social impacts and issues to be identified early and worked through in the design of the project
- Deep level of understanding of local community, who’s there and ‘how it works’
• Primary focus on mitigation and management of impacts, including ongoing consultation and communication.

4. SIMP for coal mine

As touched on in the previous example, an increasingly important contribution of SIA is to focus on the management of likely future impacts, through a SIMP. For example, many mining projects require SIMPs to deal with the social impacts identified in SIAs. Some mining companies can be persuaded of the benefits of producing SIMPs (or are otherwise required by legislation to produce them) to manage impacts of their mining operations on the basis of corporate social responsibility (CSR). A detailed SIMP takes the findings and recommendations of a SIA and provides detailed management plans around factors such as housing affordability and availability, employment and training, local business development, community infrastructure, opportunities for the indigenous community, traffic, cumulative impacts, community cohesion and changes to existing structure and activities. Together, the SIMP can result in far more detailed consultation and impact analysis than the initial SIA. Management actions, the timing and responsible agency are set out, together with the specifics of ongoing consultation and communication, complaints procedures, monitoring and follow up across all project stages from planning and construction through to decommissioning.

This project shows:
• Effective community engagement and communications are essential
• Detailed understanding of social and economic impacts through SIA, stakeholder engagement and data
• Project focus is on practical steps to mitigate and manage identified impacts, and accountability for each action
• Company buy-in through corporate social responsibility charter (and legislation).

Lessons

This summary shows the following processes are generally essential (although not always present) to ensure good SIA project outcomes:
• Consultation – consult early and often for a deep understanding of local issues, project options and better community outcomes. Consultation and engagement provide the essential links through the process of impact assessment to recommended actions
• Strategic communications – it’s not only what you say but how you say it and when
• Quality and meaningful research – to highlight evidence of need, equity issues, disparities. A good SIA needs to show a good understanding of the community and how it works. That information needs to be conveyed through the report and used in planning a project and framing recommendations and mitigation measures
• Pragmatic recommendations – starting from early in framing a study, often arising from community engagement, the impact assessment process needs to draw clear linkages through to the mitigation and management recommendations.

If this doesn’t sound like SIA in the strict sense of Best Practice Guidelines it’s because in practice in consulting, SIA is only part of a continuum which can and often does incorporate wider activities such as:
• Project design
• Community engagement
• Strategic Communications
• Urban planning processes
• Social planning / social infrastructure planning
• Follow up / post occupancy / peer review research
• Mitigation strategies / management and implementation plans.

Opportunities to up the ante

• Better targeting of practice guidelines to consultant environment
• A stronger emphasis on consultation (and SIA) **earlier** in the planning and design process to assist in obtaining a better understanding of local communities, a fairer outcome for impacted neighbours and greater clarity for developers
• Database of information – ‘grey literature’ research findings are not consolidated or easily accessed, so often there is little evidence base
• Feedback loop (eg from Councils, DPI) particularly about how the information was used, shortfalls, gaps.

Conclusions:

We like to envisage SIA as a standalone process or area of research, but in reality it’s part of a continuum.

Consultants can and do add value in a variety of ways – sometimes through the advice given to clients about the expected effects of a project, or through the process of community engagement which allows a detailed understanding of a local community and assists in identifying impacts, or through the mitigation measures developed. Sometimes these can have real benefits for project design or project outcomes, and sometimes these can happen without getting to the SIA stage.

We aim for the ideal, but need to be pragmatic: while we can make significant contributions in some situations, realistically SIA is one tool in a highly proscribed development approvals process.