

# Understanding Impact Assessment



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# Understanding Impact Assessment

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Steve Rhodes <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ari/9046525895/>



<https://scx1.b-cdn.net/csz/news/800/2016/1-whatcausesai.jpg>

# Impact assessment is...

...a process for considering the implications of proposed actions (from policies to specific projects) while we still have the chance to modify (or abandon) the proposals.....anticipatory

*“Implications”*: for natural environmental systems, but also for people and communities, their social, cultural and economic wellbeing, their health, etc.

a way of thinking...  
can be applied to all scales of activity...  
simple idea, but complex to implement effectively...

For example...



<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-cement-insight/shuttered-at-home-cement-plants-bloom-along-chinas-new-silk-road-idUSKCN1PO35T>

## Concrete in high demand around the world...

- but cement production is environmentally contentious

- esp use of fossil fuels to achieve high temperatures; release CO<sub>2</sub> with climate change implications
- other emissions...local pollution...
- requires limestone plus other minerals (sand, clay, etc.)...mining activities
- produces dust, fumes locally
- involves heavy transport of materials, products, and waste, etc...often road based...

## Purpose of IA?

- provide sound information about the likely impacts of the cement plant
  - ▶ **technical** information
    - what scope/range of information will be needed?
    - how do we identify and characterize possible impacts?
  - ▶ **social significance** information
    - who do we listen to? how do we engage with them?
- provide it early, to support decisions
  - ▶ about design of the cement plant
  - ▶ about granting permits, licenses, etc.



# Who benefits from IA?



[http://tentacle.eu/a/uploads/bilder/Panel\\_TENTacle\\_DxO.jpg](http://tentacle.eu/a/uploads/bilder/Panel_TENTacle_DxO.jpg)

Decision-makers

Proponents/developers

Stakeholders, affected parties

Local communities generally



[http://afocosec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/programs-projects\\_7\\_1.jpg](http://afocosec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/programs-projects_7_1.jpg)

## All need **good information**

- well grounded
- not biased
- should cover all the key issues
- reflect the diversity of opinions and values
- effectively communicated
- accessible to any interested person or group

These encapsulate the basis of good IA practice

# Two contexts for IA

Institutionalised decision-making  
(IA and licensing)

IA and project design

# Impact assessment and licensing

This is the most common form around the world

- legislation or official procedures require IA before permits, licenses, etc., are given for a project
- acts as a final check before a project proceeds



## A necessary safety net, but not the ideal solution...

Often too late in the development process

- if an IA process indicates major problems, resistance from developers to change project

IA may alert local people to issues, but with no real chance to get answers to their concerns

- rise in antagonism, opposition to project, time delays, costs, etc.

Imposed on the developer, so seen as an onerous duty, not a helpful process

- becomes a mechanistic process, not substantive

These are indicators of poor institutionalisation of IA

## Good institutionalisation needs:

a secure policy context for IA

a tiered approach to assessing decisions

# Policy context

IA is a process, not a technique

- to generate information: facts, values....

That information cannot be used in a vacuum

- need higher level statement of aims, purpose...a policy
- IA then provides information that can be judged with reference to those aims

National:

e.g. an environmental or sustainable development policy

Globally:

e.g. Climate change agreements; SDGs; Safeguard policies of funding banks, etc.



# Tiered approach to IA

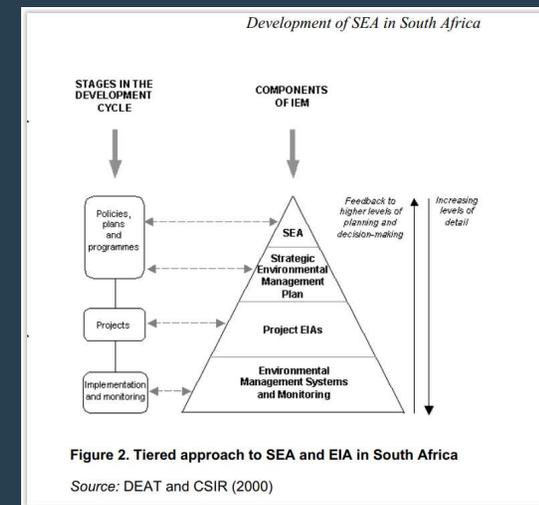
Big projects often raise larger policy issues in public debates

- project decision-making not designed to handle those issues

A resource policy or plan may well have environmental (incl. social) implications

- these need impact assessment too, but rather broader in style and less detailed in content

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA)



# Impact assessment and project design

## IA should be integral to the project cycle

- from earliest stages, developer incorporates IA thinking
  - used alongside technical and economic analyses as project takes shape
  - starts broad, then more focused as project details developed
- by the time an IA is needed for permits, licenses, etc., all the work has been done, issues dealt with

*overall:* promotes a more open, informed approach; better project design; saves money; better public relations



Better **institutional** procedures and better project **design** processes will greatly improve efficiency and effectiveness of impact assessment

The other key component is **practice**: if practitioners lack understanding and skills, they will produce poor IAs.

# Main steps in impact assessment

**Screening** - to decide whether IA should be used, at what level, and of what types

**Scoping** - to identify the important issues for closer investigation in the next step

**Impact analysis** - to predict the effects of a proposal and evaluate their significance

**Mitigation** - to establish measures to prevent, reduce or compensate for impacts

*contd....*

**Reporting** - to prepare the information necessary for decision-making

**Review** - to check the quality of the IA report

**Decision-making** - to approve (or reject) the proposal and set conditions

**Impact management** – for the life of the project, and beyond

**Follow up** – to monitor the impacts of project implementation, audit management practices

**Public involvement** - to inform and consult with stakeholders...throughout the process

# Key points on practice

Good IA practice involves affected people and stakeholders

- from scoping to impact management...

Impacts: not just about obvious direct impacts

- good environmental engineering should address the known issues....
- trace cause-effect pathways to identify potential indirect impacts
- identify cross-sectoral links, distributional issues, cumulative effects....

Post-decision impact monitoring and management are as important as pre-decision activities

- submitting the impact statement or report is not the end of IA!

# Main variants of IA

Strategic environmental assessment

Social impact assessment

Cultural impact assessment

Health impact assessment

Ecological impact assessment

*or just*

Environmental impact assessment!

but many other variants such as climate change IA, cultural heritage IA....



## Latest trends....

### Covid-19 pandemic: economic crisis in many countries

- seeing a retreat from environmental measures
- anything seen to impede economic development
  - impact assessment requirements could be constrained in a number of countries to speed developments
- false economy....
  - good impact assessment will always repay the effort
  - bad practice is the real impediment
  - important we improve practice, show good IA saves money in medium and long term...

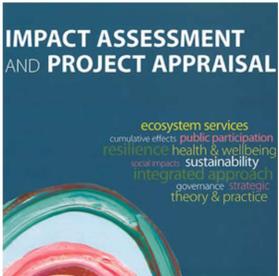
# Take away messages

- ▣ IA as a process, not mechanistic technique
- ▣ Core of principles, but practice must be adapted to local context
- ▣ Has both technical and social components
- ▣ Best used early in development of proposals
- ▣ Seems easy, but very challenging to get right!

# Follow up...

## ▣ IAIA

**IAPA JOURNAL**



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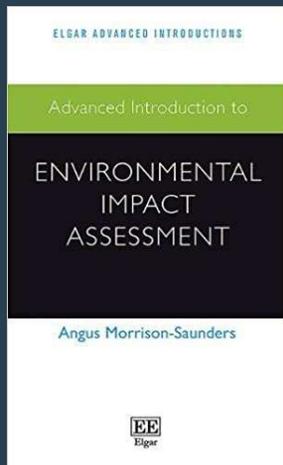
- ▣ IAIA Affiliates



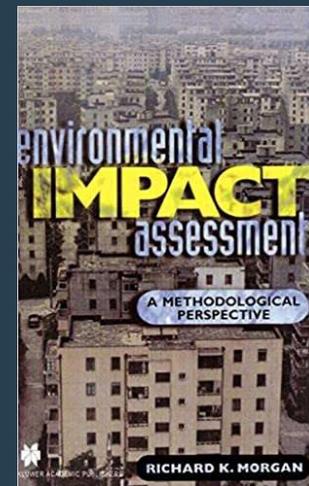
- ▣ Other national IA organisations
- ▣ Lending and funding agencies

## ▣ Books

- ▣ many good texts, often set in national context
- ▣ two that focus on core ideas...



Angus Morrison-Saunders (2018)



me! (1998)

# Questions?



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