

The Significance of Social & Economic Impacts

Presentation to IAIA'04, SIA
Sessions

by David P. Lawrence, PhD

Lawrence Environmental

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The Significance of Social & Economic Impacts

- Applied research report
- Purpose – aid EA/SIA practitioners & other participants determine the significance of social and economic impacts
- Components - 1) conceptual analysis (literature review), 2) experience-based analysis (over 100 EA & SIA practitioners & commentators) & 3) case example analysis (22 case examples)
- Focus – general lessons & discussion points

Scope

- Definitions
- Social & Economic Impacts Most Likely to Be Significant
- Approaches for Determining Significance
- Links to Sustainability, the Precautionary Principle & Collaborative EA Processes
- Status, Improvements & Residual Limitations
- Case Example Analysis
- Perspectives on Significance Determination

Selective Lessons

- Define social & economic broadly (including positive, direct, perceived & cumulative); link to physical & ecological
- Recognize that inherently subjective & central to decision-making (what is important)
- Role for specialists, public & other stakeholders
- Thresholds & criteria (properly applied) can enhance decision-making (consistent, explicit & informed)

Selective Lessons (continued)

- Middle ground between standardized & case-by-case interpretations (e.g. flexible criteria for situation classes)
- Not completely context-dependent; some types of impacts tend to be more significant (e.g. health, displacement, compliance, composite impacts on people & communities, impact triggers, change capacity, sustainability, vulnerabilities & inequities)

Selective Lessons (continued)

- Composite approaches can effectively combine frameworks, thresholds, criteria, technical methods, participatory approaches & support methods within a significance determination process
- Collaborative approach with technical & quantitative in support role generally preferable
- Significance can be interpreted in terms of if & extent contributes to or undermines sustainability

Selective Lessons (continued)

- In making precautionary significance determinations uncertainty becomes a criteria, greater weight is given to harm avoidance, the burden of proof is reversed & adaptive decision-making is stressed
- Interpretations aided when placed in context of broader social & sustainability initiatives, regional issues, international standards, conventions & guidelines, corporate social policies, legal requirements & agreements & research frameworks & discussion papers

Selective Lessons (continued)

- Sometimes helpful to define significance thresholds & to provide related guidance at regulatory level
- Frameworks, handbooks & specific requirements & guidelines also can be helpful (providing contextual adjustments & creativity not inhibited)
- Explicit criteria & decision rules can facilitate government & public involvement
- Sometime appropriate to acknowledge significant from outset & to focus on acceptability, alternatives & mitigation

Selective Lessons (continued)

- Review boards & panels often address significance through carefully reasoned analysis; can be aided by guidelines & well-defined roles
- Traditional knowledge can make a valuable contribution to significance from a community perspective
- Possible to systematically address qualitative social concerns (e.g. visual intrusion, amenity values, heritage, stigma, environmental justice)

Selective Lessons (continued)

- Focusing on key issues, questions, themes & linkages can help scope significance determinations
- Ensure a diversity of values & explicitly address value tradeoffs & implementation consequences
- Significance determinations can emerge from collaborative EA / SIA processes
- Advocacy organizations can apply social & economic analyses to substantiate own & test the significance interpretations of others

Status

- Considerable room for improvement
- EA requirements tend to inhibit systematic social & economic significance determination
- Guidelines provide only basic advice
- Inconsistent & rudimentary practice
- Multiple perspectives on social & economic significance determination; reflects nature of SIA
- Some good practice examples & positive prospects

Suggested Improvements & Residual Limitations

- Desirability of EA regulatory reforms (e.g. direct social & economic impacts) & of enhanced guidance, training, resources, capacity building & collaboration / delegation
- Many knowledge uncertainties & difficulties in predicting social & economic phenomena
- Continuing regulatory, resource, study team & political barriers & obstacles & continuing secondary status of SIA & of economic impact assessment; good practice still possible