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Social Impact Assessment: Can and Should It Empower Community?

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ABSTRACT

Driven by the consequence that any policy or development initiatives create both positive and negative impacts, the conducts of Social Impact Assessment (SIA), or locally known as Analisa Dampak Sosial, for any proposed policy or development initiatives are deemed necessary. Besides guiding developments, SIA is useful to identify the likely benefits and the potential problems and further to provide solutions for improvements. The ultimate aim of SIA is to answer the question of whether there will be a measurable difference in the quality of life of the communities, as a result of proposed projects. Shortly, with SIA, potential negative impacts of a proposed development intervention can be anticipated/predicted while the positive impacts (the benefits and the opportunities) can be identified and documented. However, there is a tendency within the businesses, that SIA is commonly used as a tool for reducing public opposition and for obtaining supports from governments, communities and or non-government organisation. This paper seeks to provide a deferent perspective within SIA discourse, that is, by explaining that as a type of inquiry and analysis, SIA can empower community and indeed it should do so.

Key words: *consultation, participation, empowerment, SIA, potential, impact*

As a type of inquiry and analysis that increasingly important today, Social Impact Assessment (SIA, hereafter SIA) has significantly distinguished from others. This is especially determined by the word 'social' in its term. While other types of inquiry analyse economic, environmental or administrative considerations, SIA takes seriously the views of the proposed beneficiaries and affected population of any development activities (Derman, 1990: 107), these beneficiaries and affected population are so called 'community'. Moreover, SIA is different because it concerns about "people impact" (Wolf, 2002). It seeks to analyse and evaluate the condition, causes, and consequences of social change on people where they live in families and community. Indeed, most development programs or projects have undeniably created social consequences, and the most significant social consequences stem from the effect on the affected communities. This reality has placed community as the unit of analysis of SIA.

With community as the unit of analysis of SIA, the ultimate goal of a SIA is to estimate both short and long-term effects of a proposed action on the affected community (Branch *et al.*, 1984: 25). Concerning its implementation, a major question which often rises

from a SIA is to whom the proposed actions will give benefits.

While proponents of the proposed actions often believe that their activities will benefit everyone in the directly impacted community, the facts can be different. Hog and Smith (1970) assert that the benefits accrued may be felt by only a small subset of the community or even enjoyed by people outside the community (in Soderstrom, 1981: 2). Even policies or development projects that are designed for community benefit often generate uncertain social impact to the community near the project. It is worsened by the fact that communities frequently become victims of the development projects. Unfortunately, there is not enough attention has been paid in the project literature to those whose lives are negatively impacted (Derman, 1990: 108). Thus, a discussion on whether SIA can and should empower local community deems necessary.

This paper will argue that, although it is not always, as it may do the opposite, SIA can empower community, followed by discussion that SIA should empower local community. This discussion would be relevant to explain the view that SIA is more than a methodology, but it is also philosophy about

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development and democracy (Vanclay (nd), <http://www.dams.org/docs/kbase/contrib/ins220.pdf>: 1, diakses 5 September 2007). This view regards that SIA considers pathologies of development (i.e. impact), goals of development (e.g. poverty alleviation) and processes of development (e.g. participation and capacity building). To gain a comprehensive understanding, this paper will first discuss briefly some important points of SIA and the notion of empowerment and participation in SIA.

SIA: Some Important Points

Unlike "evaluation research" which gauges the effectiveness of programs already in operation, SIA aims to predict the social effects of a policy, program or project while still in the planning stage (Wolf, <http://www.seiryo.ac.jp/iaia-japan/news/news3/d00006.html>, diakses 12 November 2007). In a more comprehensive definition, Vanclay (nd) observes that SIA is the process of analysing (predicting, evaluating and reflecting) and managing the intended and unintended consequences on the human environment of interventions (policies, plans, programs, projects and other social activities) and social change processes so as to create a more sustainable biophysical and human environment (<http://www.dams.org/docs/kbase/contrib/ins220.pdf>: 1, diakses 5 September 2007).

Besides guiding developments, SIA is also useful to identify potential problems and also to provide solutions for improvements. The ultimate aim of SIA is to answer a question of "will there be a measurable difference in the quality of life in the community as a result of proposed project? More importantly, with SIA potential negative impacts of a proposed development intervention can be anticipated/predicted while the positive impacts (the benefits and the opportunities) can be identified and documented.

In general the methods and/or the steps of conducting a SIA include the following: 1) public Involvement, 2) identification of alternatives, 3) description of baseline conditions, 4) scoping the range of social impacts/problems expected, 4) projection of estimated effects, 5) predicting responses to impacts, 6) estimating indirect and cumulative impacts, 7) recommending changes or alternatives, 8) mitigation, 9) monitoring.

The processes of SIA will involve community participation through one or more of the following methods: 1) key informants, 2) advisory group, 3) community forum, 4) public hearing, 5) workshop,

6) questionnaire, interview, mail, telephone survey, 7) newsletter and 8) public display information (For details of the steps/methods or process of SIA see for example Barrow 2000 and Wolf, 1982).

Empowerment, and its relation with participation in SIA

Public participation in SIA has been identified as a source of improved decision making about resources development in several countries, with an implicit assumption that this sort of participation provided an avenue for empowerment of local community in the decision making process (Gagnon et. al, 1993: 229). This explanation shows that the notion of empowerment cannot be separated with the notion of participation, which undoubtedly has extensively been applied in SIA process.

The conventional meaning of empowerment would be bringing people inside to the decision making process. It is a matter of maximizing people's opportunities, which include access to 'intangible decision making'. In empowerment, people become aware of their own interest and those of other in order to participate/influence to such decision making. It also must involve undoing negative social construction, so that the people affected come to see themselves as having capacity and the right to act and have influence (Rowlands, 1996: 87).

Similarly, Rifkin and Pridmore (2001: 3) consider empowerment as a means to create opportunities and inspiration for those who are powerless. Thus, the powerless gain the experience and confidence needed to influence the decisions that affect their own daily lives. Mohan et. al., (2000: 248–249), in somewhat different perspective, regard empowerment as collective mobilization of marginalized group against the disempowering activities of both the state and the market. An ongoing process of empowerment, in their point of views, enables local community takes over their own development. They further maintain that the empowerment of marginalized groups requires a structural transformation of economic and political relations towards radically democratized society.

Regarding the relation between empowerment and participation, Mohan *et al.*, (2000) argue that participation is one element in an on going process of empowerment where local community take over their own development. The link between participation and empowerment is clearly explained by Peter Oakley that divides participation into three

categories: a) participation where local people are only involved in programme activities. It does not promote empowerment; b) participation where local people help to decide what the priorities should be for the programme as well as being involved in the activities, however professional still control the overall aim of the programme. This type of participation is consultation; c) participation where local people play an active and direct control in project development. This type of participation is empowerment (in Rifkin and Pridmore, 2001: 18).

Richard Roberts (1995) provide a valuable discussion regarding participation in SIA. By explaining the notion of public involvement, He describes how SIA can empower community. In Roberts' opinion, public involvement is a process for involving the public in the decision making of an organization, it can be in the form of *consultation* and *participation*. Unlike, participation, which deliberately involves the public into decision making process, consultation includes education, information, sharing and negotiation with the public to gain better decisions without further involvement in the decision making process (Roberts, 1995: 224, Scott, 1992: 430).

From the discussion of empowerment and participation above, it is clear that what Roberts means with participation is somewhat correspond to empowerment definitions that have been defined before. Thus, in this essay, the term of empowerment will be based on Roberts's notion of participation as a means for public involvement.

SIA can empower local community

As some theorists argue, SIA plays a crucial role in shaping ongoing monitoring and evaluation and may also a mean for public involvement and empowerment. Other theorists regard SIA as a means of ensuring participation or even empowerment of people in development process (Barrow, 2000: 2). Similarly, Wolf (2002) argues that in its process, SIA can contribute to social development by means of endogenous capacity building and the empowerment of peoples to control the forces of change which may potentially affect them.

A major explanation that SIA can empower community is revealed by its approaches that currently tend to be more a bottom up (participatory/political approach in SIA) rather than a top down one (technocratic/technical approach in SIA). Another approach, i.e. consultative approach, is also a means

of public involvement which can be considered as a first stage of empowerment. As Derman (1990: 107) claim, "...however, there is a contemporary redirection toward participatory development to involve intended beneficiaries in different stages of an SIA process". Thus, it has been clear that participation has taken as a greater concern in SIA process.

Technocrat orientation in the previous SIA can be characterized as 'elitist' in which, the analyst assuming the role of an expert engaged in detached scientific inquiry. Thus, it emphasizes the objective data and often ignores the social conflict (Torgerson in Carley, 1983: 48). This positivistic approach in development is based on empirical judgments and geared towards economic growth (Craig, 1990). Moreover, this approach is largely technical or scientific that focuses more on prediction rather than planning, in which, the experts who mostly live outside the proposed development areas judge the economic and environmental feasibility of the proposed development (Roberts, 1995: 226; Barrow, 2000: 55). Regarding this approach indeed, the experts might able to make an educated judgment and predict how people might be affected, yet, they cannot determine people's feel desire and value.

Participatory impact assessment, on the other hand, requires public participation. Its final assessment results from inter-group conflict and cooperation over development proposal instead of from numerical calculation. With this participatory approach, Torgerson emphasises the political nature of SIA. He suggests the role of SIA in pluralist political process, as balancing power in political decision making (cited in Carley, 1983: 48).

Craig (1990: 47), in somewhat different view, proposes a distinction between technical and political approaches in social impact assessment. She claims that political approach in SIA can be used to stress value choice, increase public involvement, efficacy, and give more democratic direction to the decision making process. Similar to Torgerson's participatory approach, Craig also maintains that a political approach to SIA focuses on citizen participation, value conflicts, and community development. This approach according to Roberts (1995: 226) has reoriented SIA methodology to focus on the human, living community, and not just data, statistics, and projections.

Based on this political or participatory approach in SIA, it is clear that SIA can empower community. This is because unlike the technical approach, which

endorses governments or corporation power, the political approach tends to promote community development or empowerment (Howitt in Gagnon *et al.*, 1993: 230). It is also strengthened by Ross's (1990) idea regarding community SIA that shift the balance of power towards the affected community.

The SIA's empowerment capability is also proved by the facts that there have been many policies failures or unsuccessful development projects due to the communities' opposing views. Some of these policies/projects are delayed or even canceled. Quebec population's dispute upon Ashuapmushuan River in Canada is one of the examples. This project should be abandoned and revised as it is opposed by the community, who asks the project's necessity, viability, effectiveness and accountability to the community (Gagnon *et al.*, 1993: 232–234).

Another example that SIA can empower local community is the case of Thailand's Nam Choan Dam. This case demonstrates how rural population has to encounter the urban and development interests, but then they enable to protest and against the dam. This dam should be shelved as a result of greater awareness on the environmental and social impact from public debate (Gagnon *et al.*, 1993: 236–239).

A longer list of evidence can be gathered from the indigenous community. As some analysts argue, most local empowerment in SIA can be linked to the indigenous people's organization. Indeed, as a minority group, indigenous people often experience some disadvantages. In Australia, for instance, in the proposed alumina refinery at Weipa- Queensland, the conventional approach of SIA has marginalized Aboriginal people in other EISs. Similarly, in Indonesia, the dispute on Freeport cases triggered by the ignorance of indigenous communities, specifically the Amungme and the Kamoro, has caused irrecoverable harm to the indigenous community and its environment.

Accordingly, He suggests a participatory approach in which the aboriginal community was directly involved and controlled any impact assessment that affected them (Gagnon *et al.*, 1993: 242). Another example is in the Glen Canyon dam case. In this case, pressure from tribes affected by the Glen Canyon dam and from officials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs led to eight tribes being incorporated into an impact assessment process initiated by the U.S Department of Interior in 1990 (Austin and Bullets in O'Faircheallaigh, 1999: 65). These cases prove that SIA can empower the local community (i.e. indigenous communities).

The capability of SIA to empower community is also shown by the fact that the centralized power of institutions is fragmenting under various pressures. Often the decisions of powerful statutory authorities and transnational corporations are not independent of human intervention", -the cases above are the examples. As Gagnon *et al.*, (1993: 244–246) claim, these interventions are as first step of empowerment in the SIA. They further consider these phenomena as *divided power* and regard as the sources of empowerment to generate viable and acceptable responses to affected groups. In their discussion regarding the efficiency of SIA as a means for local empowerment, they also observe that internal tensions and divisions, which often occur amongst the powerful stakeholders within policies or development projects, have open locally empowering intervention. These tensions are due to the fact that these stakeholders, such as corporate proponents, the states, central and local institutions often have particular interests within statutory impact assessment and decision making.

In brief, the participatory or political approach in SIA has undeniably led to the empowerment of the community. This empowerment requires a shift in SIA procedures, from the formal statutory procedure into less formal setting that leads to a greater community involvement. Empowerment in SIA also requires an increase in the community control of technical input (such as who directs the research, what data is used and which scenarios will be considered) and resources needed for formal SIA. Otherwise, it will be more of advocacy rather than empowerment.

Yet, there has been some evidence that instead of empower community, SIA has also disempowered community. It is apparent, especially when it deals with indigenous communities. In some cases indigenous people have been marginalized or even completely excluded from impact assessment projects that affect them. This will be explored later in the discussion on neutrality in SIA.

From all the above discussion, in order to achieve an effective SIA, SIA should empower local community. The rest of this paper will discuss why SIA should empower local community and not remain neutral as its ideal.

SIA should empower local community

It has been known that SIA should go beyond anticipating possible impacts to suggest development

alternatives to avoid, reduce, or mitigate problems and maximize benefits. Thus, an effective SIA should address both positive and negative impacts. In this way, Ideally, SIA should be neutral. SIA should become social science that its goal is solely to inform community and 'the client'-those who use SIA's findings, that is governments, or developers for commercial interest. As Howitt (1989) argues where SIA is neutral and advising decision makers, it is essentially empowering them (people or community, cited in Barrow, 2000: 58).

However, as other form of assessment, it is difficult for SIA to be neutral. Analog to an evaluation, SIA is not a value free exercise. As Oakley's (1990) claim about evaluation:

"Whatever the nature, evaluation is not a value free exercise. Conventional evaluation approaches are often criticized for the implicit value assumptions they make in judging programme or project performance. The very term of evaluation with its implicit suggestion of 'judgment', is value laden and it would appear impossible to construct an evaluation exercise which is neutral" (p. 37)

Similarly, the conventional approach in SIA has created a certain burden for SIA to be neutral. Indeed, in some ways it is even disempowering community, more specifically indigenous community. As Edelstein and Kleese (1995) argue the emphasis on supposedly "rational" and "scientific" approaches to impact assessment, which usually characterizes project approval processes, is in fact far from value neutral, because these approaches promote development agendas and deny the validity of perspectives and evidence put forward by indigenous peoples (cited in O'Faircheallaigh, 1999: 64).

More participatory (political) approaches in SIA seem effective to maintain the neutrality or even enhance empowerment capabilities of SIA. However, it remains difficult when it involve political structures. Factually, SIA occurs not only as part of a larger project assessment process, but also within broader political and institutional structures (O'Faircheallaigh, 1999: 65) Thus, SIA has also become a managerial and political activity that burdens the neutrality or empowerment capability. Gagnon, *et al.*, (1993: 246) also assert that central to community empowerment is the formation and transformation of political alliances around proposed development projects. Often, this institutional structures set up the political status quo on SIA outcomes.

For another, as other assessment or research (again analog to evaluation), SIA relies on funding. Accordingly, SIA is difficult to be neutral as it has to deal with certain clients or customers, (who fund or initiate an SIA). Most of these clients have particular interests that frequently influence SIA's finding. Just like evaluation, SIA is an endeavor shaped mainly by the interest of the assessors who are greatly influenced by the customers. Moreover, although "impact" in SIA should be neutral term, but it is generally understood in negative connotation, such as 'risk'-that can be interpreted as the antecedent probability of negative impact (Wolf, <http://www.seiryo.ac.jp/iaia-japan/news/news3/d00006.html>, diakses 12 November 2007). Accordingly, SIA findings tend to be bias and not objectives, as it often tried to please the customer while the community's interests tend to be neglected. In this way SIA can not merely to be neutral, but it even disempowered communities

Evidence of this disempowered can be gathered in some indigenous community. In some cases indigenous people have been completely excluded from impact assessment projects that affect them, particularly where SIA is conducted a part of assessment processes initiated by developers and controlled by state agencies that have interest in promoting "development". An impact study of proposed silica sand mine at Shelburne Bay in Queensland, Australia, for instance, in this case the developers, the state government officials and consultants denied the right of Aboriginal people to participate in the study. Moreover, other cases show that indigenous people have been admitted at a formal level, but have been unable to participate effectively in SIA and so have been powerless to influence its outcomes (O'Faircheallaigh, 1999: 63).

As neutrality remains a utopia for SIA, thus rather to do the opposite, SIA should empower community. As Wolf (2002) argues SIA's aim is to provide means for protecting and enhancing the quality of life, thus to realized this goal SIA should empower community. Besides the reasons regarding neutrality above, the rest of this paper will explore some reasons why SIA should empower community from different angles.

Firstly, the need of empowering community in SIA emerges as today societies are marked by a more educated public. Development of information and communication technology has taught community to be much more powerful. They often enable to make demands and create pressure to decision makers. Therefore, SIA should empower local community

either to promote public education and accommodate the educated public.

For another, to empower community means that at least there is a public involvement in SIA procedures. Public involvement here is both in the form of consultation and participation. Public involvements in SIA emerge as communities always have a particular interest in the outcome of a project. This may be in terms of job or business, opportunity, safety, aesthetics and many other interests. Whatever the interests are, public involvements in SIA provide information of what community needs. Explicit identification of these needs would result in an easier conflict determination and its resolution (Soderstrom, 1981: 73). Public consultation, for example can avert confrontation between organization and affected community and achieve a greater community support. Therefore, it improves the project planning and decision making process as well as its implementation.

The community's needs identification would be best pursued by a community needs assessment. A community needs assessment is a tremendous means of involving the public in problem solving and developing local goals. Such assessment does not only teach people to be aware of their circumstances but also provides a means to give them a feel that they have had a voice in the policy outcome (Burdge, 1983: 192, 208). Application of this needs assessment is a further public involvement process in SIA. This assessment gives the affected community a say in the decision making process. Thus, it also provides answer to SIA whether the policies or the projects will meet the needs identified by the impacted community.

Moreover, SIA process must recognize that development activities always require costs, which mean certain groups of people may lose out. Regarding this view, without community involvement, the root question for SIA is 'who benefits and who loses', these questions stress the notion of costs (or risks) and benefits. The dissociation of these notions generates inequality as those who win and those who lose are not the same stake holders (Wolf, 1983: 15).

Concurring with this view, some analysts assert that community often is in the losing side. With their 'three step model', these analysts argue that decision making processes will be improved by inputs from stakeholders, experts, and citizens. They further explain that 'citizens as the potential victims and benefactors of proposed planning measures, are the best judges to evaluate the different options available on the basis of the concerns and impacts revealed to

the other two group' – i.e. the stakeholder and the experts (Renn *et al.*, 1993: 205). Another valuable view from this model regarding the significance of public involvement is their explanation that the public enables a policy embrace of the local specific aspects, which are often neglected by the experts and regulators. This is because the expert and regulator often merely focus their assessments on the evident aspects.

On the contrary, there are also cases that the development activities are in the loose side. The closure of the Bougenville Copper mine in Papua New Guinea in 1989, for instance. This win and loose approach can ultimately destroy most of the apparent benefits that has and will be generated.

Instead of a win-lose solution, the participatory or political approach that leads to community empowerment in SIA provides a chance to elicit win-win solution towards the conflicts. A win lose approach in the conventional SIA approach, i.e. technical approach, may demolish the benefits that might be generated. In viewing communities' opposing views and pressure in the participatory SIA, they regard that 'these social dissatisfaction can affect long-term viability and security investments' (Gagnon *et al.*, 1993: 245).

For another, empowerment in SIA and further identification of communities' concerns means that a wide array of parties and interest are present in SIA. As a result, it provides alternative views of identified problems and the solutions. SIA's role to mobilize public involvement involves essentially two-way flow of information and interaction between the public and the developers or government agency. This is what is called as 'healthy political decisions' as it also foster public debate which may help all actors in decision making process to set priorities, recognize the positive and negative, and sensitive of various aspects in the assessment problem' (Carley, 1983: 47).

Eventually, by maximizing community involvement in SIA, which means empower community, uncertainty regarding the effects of the proposed action will be reduced. The legitimacy of SIA and the development of the projects are also enhanced, as well as the accuracy and capacity to mitigate impacts is maximized. Indeed, community involvement will lead to increased knowledge of the projects by the community and therefore reduce potential impact caused by uncertainty (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996: 33–49). Without public involvement, the 'right' and 'wrong' of a project might never be determined. Moreover, public involvements in the

planning and impact assessment process ensure that projects gain credibility in the public's opinion, regulators' view and within the organization itself. Thus, projects that are supported by and involve community have a greater chance of success.

However, it should be borne in mind that empowerment in SIA requires greater public participation in SIA process, as well as strong commitment of the assessors. Assessors must be aware of the possibility that public involvement may not represent the community. For instance, public meetings or the consultation process might involve merely one way information transfer or it might be only certain groups involve, (which means certain group are represented) as social underclass often tend to be excluded. Thus, SIA should also pay attention to the distribution of impacts across different population, especially those vulnerable segments of the population, such as the poor, women, elderly, and minority groups (ICGPSIA, 1995: 16).

Another significant point to discuss is Wolf's (2002) claim that SIA and impact assessment generally make too much sense not to succeed. Indeed, it might because an effective SIA often is regarded as treats for proposed development, more specifically the proponents or actors behind- such as the government, and developers, especially those which involve community empowerment. Yet, it should be remember also that an effective SIA with an empowerment capability can inform and reassure community, making them less oppose a development, even if SIA trigger community's opposition, it prevent unintended risks as well as explore likely benefits which will gives benefits to both the community and the proponents either in the short and long term.

Conclusion

A more bottom up (participatory approach) rather than top down approach (technocratic approach) in SIA has enhanced its capability to empower local communities. It is strengthened by the fact that many SIA activities have involved a greater public participation in their processes. This involvement has often given a pressure to SIA outcomes and its further decisions. This empowerment requires a shift in SIA procedures, from the formal statutory procedure into less formal setting that lead to a greater community involvement. An empowerment in SIA means there is an increase in the community control of technical input and resources needed for formal SIA.

Moreover, as other form of assessments, it is difficult for SIA to be neutral since it also depends on funding and engage with political activities. Eventually, development within communities can not be ignored trigger the need for SIA to empower community. This empowerment is both to educate publics as well as accommodate the educated public. This empowerment also leads to a more credible, visible, and effective decision making in SIA process.

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