Social Impact Assessment

Local Participation and Social Impact Assessment

Furthering the participatory agenda

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Introduction

The social impact assessment (SIA) as a process of analysis and management of consequences of planned interventions is significantly influenced by practitioner's perspective to SIA. The technocratic orientation takes a positivist perspective and scientific approach in determination, projection, and management of social impacts while the participatory approach uses a constructionist perspective and understands impacts through lived experiences of the affected communities (Taylor et al.,2004). The impacts identified during an SIA, the indicators selected, and the knowledge produced in the process are significantly influenced by practitioner's choice of orientation or perspective (Lockie, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). These choices are themselves value laden and political processes and have significant social and political consequences that might influence the soundness of an SIA in a specific setting and relevance of SIA as a process of ex-ante assessment and management of impacts from interventions (Lane et al., 1997; Lockie, 2001). Though there has been a recent preponderance of theoretical discourses arguing for usage of participatory approaches in conducting SIAs (Lockie, 2001; Vanclay, 2003; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010 Glucker *et al*., 2013) yet most of the SIAs conducted so far have used technocratic approaches to them (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996; Lockie, 2001; Terrapon-Pfaff et al., 2017). Notwithstanding the relative merits of the two approaches, the argument that 'SIA can be conducted without local participation' might not be tenable in the face of theory and evidence. Rather, through review of literature and case studies this manuscript posits that a 'good'[1] SIA cannot be conducted without local participation. It further argues that, notwithstanding individual limitations of technical and participatory approaches, an effective way forward might be their complementary usage to enhance effectiveness and relevance of SIA in development decisions.

The document is organized as follows. The introduction follows into a brief outline of the SIA and relative strengths and weaknesses of technocratic and participatory approaches to SIA. The next section explores rationale and arguments in favour of participatory approaches before reviewing on ground application of such approaches in a neoliberal world. Based on the findings of these sections, the next section, proposes complementary usage of technical and participatory

[1] A good SIA is understood from (Vanclay, 2003, 2002) as an SIA that adequately accounts for both direct and indirect impacts of a planned intervention through local participation and separates identified impacts from broader social change in the community, lays down monitoring mechanisms for managing the consequences of social change over the life of the project.

approaches to increase effectiveness of the SIA in development decisions. The conclusion reiterates the argument and proposes avenues of further research.

SIA, orientations to SIA and their implications

SIA seeks to enhance the sustainability of human and biophysical environment in the face of human interventions in this balance. SIAs started as a part of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) which were sanctioned through the United States National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969. NEPA sought to incorporate environmental considerations in the development decisions while the social impacts indirectly gained attention through consideration of impacts to larger biophysical environment. Though deserving a dedicated policy attention, the SIAs form a part of EIAs in many countries as a regulatory requirement (Lockie, 2001). Vanclay (2003) defines SIA as "the processes of analyzing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions" (p.6). Though SIA does not restrict itself to ex-ante assessment of impacts and concerns itself with managing the social processes yet most of the SIAs have been restricted to expert driven predictions of impacts which has contributed to relative marginalization of SIA over time (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996; Terrapon-Pfaff et al., 2017; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011a). Vanclay and Esteves (2011) argue for a change in orientation to SIA, if it must remain relevant in predicting, monitoring, and managing the social processes.

The practitioners' orientation to SIA influences the nature of knowledge produced and the effectiveness of the SIA. Taylor *et al.,* (2004) classify two orientations to SIA based on the actions involved in conducting SIA, though further classification is also possible considering possible uses of SIAs, such as academic research and advocacy research. The first approach by way of its positivist epistemology favours an expert driven, technocratic mode of scoping, analysing and predicting social impacts (Becker et al., 2004). The technocratic approach believes that accurate predictions of social impacts can be made if sufficient data is provided to social scientists and the experts trained in the impact assessment. Most of the SIAs conducted so far have used either one or a combination of positivist tools such as trend projection, historical context, expert consultation, comparison communities, institutional analysis, or scenario construction as means of gathering data and predicting impacts (Burdge, 1998). However, there has been evidence that technocratic rationality has empowered governments and developers to highlight positive impacts of

development while masking the unquantifiable and unmeasurable social impacts to affected communities to avoid public scrutiny of decisions (Dale *et al* 1997). Moreover, Vanclay and Esteves (2011) argue that such approach in SIA is flawed in that it gives little voice to stakeholders, does not predict all impacts, ignores residual impacts to communities and might incur extra cost to the project proponent in the shape of potential protests and boycotts by the affected communities.

The other orientation to SIA is participatory in nature and rooted in belief that the communities impacted by the development decisions should be involved in determining impacts and management thereof (Taylor et al., 2004). This approach uses a constructionist epistemology and uses the knowledge and experiences of the affected communities as a basis of projecting impacts by engaging community through interactive engagement sessions (Becker et al., 2003; Sinclair et al., 2008). The scientist, instead of a neutral observer, is a facilitator of knowledge sharing, interpretation, and reporting impacts (Becker *et al*., 2004; Taylor *et al.,* 2004). This approach values the lived experiences and local specificities of affected communities as against a technocratic assumption that communities react to the bio-physical changes in a similar way (Stolp *et al.,* 2002). However, such approaches have been shown to suffer from elite capture, bias and inability of participants in understanding the nature of impacts and projection of personal vested interests as the community's interests (Becker et al., 2003; Delabre and Okereke, 2020). However, notwithstanding the critique of such orientation, the participatory approaches have captured the attention of planners and SIA practitioners since the turn of the last century, and, therefore, merit discussion around precise definition and objectives of such orientation.

What and why of Public Participation

The theoretical agreement on the need for public participation has not been reflected in the precise meaning of it. Despite sharing a long tradition of philosophical theorization such as Habermas' theory of communicative rationality (1969) and Arnstein's (1969) theorization of citizen power through participatory role for citizens in policy making, significant differences exist around its definition. These differences are not without implications for the ends these participatory approaches achieve. The International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), (2006) calls for "involvement of individuals and groups that are positively or negatively affected, or that are interested in, a proposed project, programme, plan or policy that is subject to decision making" (p.1). However, though the IAIA definition underscores a need for community participation, it does

not specify the extent of such participation and the ends it aims to achieve through such participation. On the other hand, Hughes (1998) calls for public participation in policy making where affected communities can influence the decision-making process. Similarly, Arnstein (1969) theorizes the need for public participation to effect a broader socio-political change and seeks to empower citizens by redistribution of power between haves and have-nots through participatory approaches in decision making. In the same vein, Vanclay (2003) seeks to enhance the position of disadvantaged and marginalized members of the society through participatory EIA.

In line with the definitional ideals, the participatory approaches aim to achieve far reaching outcomes through these practices. The normative rationale for conducting public participation seeks to pursue democratic ideals by empowering disadvantaged segments of society, increase their democratic capacity and citizenship skills, provide them with opportunities of social learning and emancipate them by effecting redistribution of power through participatory processes (Glucker et al., 2013). Similarly, the substantive rationale aims improvement in quality of decisions by harnessing the local value-based and socially relevant knowledge (Glicken, 2000; Glucker et al., 2013). Another possible rationale cited by Glucker *et al*., (2013) and others (Sinclair et al., 2008) is to enhance the legitimacy of decisions and confer social license to operate to the project proponent by involving local stakeholders in early stages of the project. Furthering the debate, Vanclay (2003) argues that such legitimacy may minimize possible costs to project proponent by avoiding costs that might be incurred due to potential protests and blockade by the disaffected communities. This serves to resolve conflicts before they even emerge. Esteves and Vanclay (2009) are so sanguine about the potential of participatory approaches that they argue for a mandatory participatory social development need analysis (SDNA) by the project proponent to increase legitimacy of the projects and confer social license to operate on them.

Are Participatory approaches, the sole panacea?

However, notwithstanding the soundness of underpinning philosophies, the success of participatory approaches varies in different contexts and policy settings. The value of the local participation must be assessed on the high normative, substantive, and instrumental rationales that proponents of participatory approaches set for themselves. Resultantly the claims that "SIA cannot be conducted without local participation" must be assessed against the theoretical benchmark, such orientation have set for itself to see if the theorized participation is unfolding in practice or not? Accordingly, there have been several instances where local participation has added value to the SIAs (Becker et

al., 2004; Schindler et al., 2016; Terrapon-Pfaff et al., 2017), however, there is increasing body of knowledge that suggests that participatory SIAs are influenced by the wider political ecologies and policy settings within countries. Resultantly, not only most of SIAs have been conducted without recourse to participatory approaches at all (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996; Terrapon-Pfaff et al., 2017), rather they have also been done using a façade of participation and without adhering the normative ideals of participatory approaches. The participatory SIAs are influenced by the wider policy settings and if done in isolation, as a sole method of determining and projecting impacts, may also suffer from biases of its participant. The next section discusses on ground applicability of participatory SIAs and shows how they are affected by extraneous factors such as political ecologies of the countries and endogenous capacities and biases of the participating communities.

Participatory SIA in application

The idealistic rationales of SIA may fail to deliver on ground due to entrenched power differentials between the project proponents and the participating communities. Instead of being emancipatory and redistributive in outcome, SIA might be reduced to a customary regulatory requirement to be 'ticked' by the dominant neoliberal rationality in justifying the development and its outcomes (Delabre and Okereke, 2020). Such practices might end up reproducing and further entrenching the pre-existing socio-economic and gendered marginalization within the communities. Purcell (2009) highlights the democratic deficit of the increasingly neoliberal world that requires it to sanction and orchestrate participatory spaces that remain top-down in spirit but democratic in façade. Cooke and Kothari (2001) invoke the 'tyranny' of participation to highlight potential negative impacts to the marginalized segments of participant communities in what Delabre and Okereke (2020) terms as the 'technocratic version of the participation' that gives a neoliberalized social license to operate (p. 646). Such settings have monopoly of control over who counts as a stakeholder and whose knowledge counts in determining the impacts and their degree (Delabre and Okereke, 2020). Though differing in the degree of its impacts, the political ecology of countries does taint the idealistic rationales of the participatory SIA paradigm. One such instance is discussed below.

Palm oil plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia have been shown to be sites of power struggles between the local communities and the dominant neoliberal rationality. Delabre and Okereke (2020) report the findings of the study conducted in ten villages of Malaysia and Indonesia where

SIAs were conducted to pave the way for palm oil plantations. The researchers report that the SIA consultants were geared towards tailoring the findings of the SIA to the needs of the multinational project proponents who engaged consultants to fulfill the regulatory requirement of the respective countries. The consultants claimed to have conducted a participatory SIA even when they were not aware of some villages that existed and affected by the plantations. Community was considered a homogenous in composition and consultations were predominantly conducted with the village chiefs and members identified by them. The village chiefs were on the payroll of the project proponent companies and highlighted only the positive benefits of the plantations to the community. Women and the potentially troublemakers in the community were not consulted at all, while the state ensured that police were present event when motions of community consultations were being fulfilled with the pre-defined members of the community. The indigenous communities were branded as unproductive citizens and therefore, not consulted at all.

The foregoing empirical findings provide evidence to theoretical discourses that highlight the impossibility of divorcing power from participatory processes. Furthering Foucault's work on power, Mouffe (1999) argues that power is not divorced from any interpersonal relations and, therefore, she is hopeless in achieving Habermas' ideal of communicative rationality through participatory spaces in policy making. In addition to providing evidence to Mouffe's argument, the Palm oil case study also shows that SIAs can be conducted without meaningful participation of the communities. This risk endangering the credibility of participatory SIAs to which Vanclay and Esteves (2011b) have alluded to in their suggestions to conducting SIA. However, in addition to the extraneous political ecology, the participatory process might also suffer from the endogenous weaknesses from the capacities of the communities participating in the SIA processes.

The soundness of participatory approaches to SIA might also suffer from biases and knowledge gaps of the communities participating in SIA process. Becker *et al.,* (2004) argue that identities and biases of the communities and their vested interests might interfere with the ways how impacts are assessed, and projections of those impacts are made. They report a study in northwestern United States of America where participants were invited to assess the potential impacts of removal of hydroelectric dams to recover species of Salmon in Snake River. The SIA consultants engaged communities through Interactive Community Forums (ICF) and invited members from the farming community and outdoor recreation and tourism community. The study also invited relatively informed citizens through purposive sampling of the same. In the four step ICF, the communities were first informed of the objectives of SIA and possible impacts to their livelihoods, then separately asked

to record their assessment of the impacts on an interval ratio scale. Subsequently, the communities were engaged through an interactive session with the purposively sampled informed members of the community, following which they were again asked to present their assessment of impacts on an interval ratio scale. Becker *et al.* (2004) report that the responses of the communities remained sensitive to their identity as farmers or outdoor tourism operators. However, the assessment of the impacts and the indicators selected significantly varied in both communities after interactive sessions with the purposively sampled community. Becker et al. (2004) also report that the responses of the participants were vague and insufficient to propose a future modelling of impacts and their management strategy. This highlights that participatory approaches to SIA may not be a panacea on their own due to, both, extraneous and endogenous factors that might undermine the soundness of the SIA.

The foregoing case studies highlight that SIA might be conducted with participatory orientation, but the participation may fail to add value to the SIA, thus necessitating a need for additional epistemic dimensions for conducting good SIA.

Way forward

The theoretical and empirical evidence gathered indicates insufficiency of the prevalent orientations to SIA, in isolation. While the technocratic approach might predict impacts based on scientific modellings and the data gathered can be easily aggregated or disaggregate across different scales, yet it cannot capture the nuances of the communities lived experience of the communities affected by the interventions (Becker et al., 2004). Similarly, the participatory orientation might suffer from the biases and capacities of the participant communities along with opening a possibility for 'technocratic' version of participation (Delabre and Okereke, 2020, p.646) to pass as genuine participation. Consequently, there have been arguments about exploring new epistemic dimensions in SIA by combining the participatory and technical orientations to SIA (Becker et al., 2004; Lockie, 2001; Schindler et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2008). Becker *et al.,* (2004) argue that combining such approaches might provide multiple sources of data and converging methods of indicator selection and, therefore, increase the trustworthiness of the projected impacts. Similarly, Lockie (2001) argues that integration of the technical and participatory approaches might enhance the scientific validity of the impact assessments and help the SIA practitioners reach close to 'the truth of the matter' (p. 283). Accordingly, there have been several case studies that provide empirical evidence to such theorizations.

Schindler et al. (2016) report findings of a study conducted in Tanzania that explored impacts of agricultural upgrading strategies (UPS) such as infiltration pits and application of fertilizers etc. on the surrounding communities. The study used technical (ScaIA-food security) and participatory (FoPIA-framework for participatory impact assessment) to select indicators for assessment and projection of impacts. The ScaIA-food security benefitted from the scientists' input while the FoPIA used farmers views for assessment and projection of impacts. The results showed that the two communities differed in the assessment of the impacts. The scientists identified direct impacts of the UPS while the farmers focused on the indirect linkages of the impacts to the crop yield in the face of drought and the time consumed in preparation of infiltration pits. Schindler et al. (2016), however, report that complete picture of impacts emerged only after combination of the results from two approaches. Similarly, (Terrapon-Pfaff et al., 2017) report impacts of Concentrated Solar Power (CSP) at local level in Morocco. They, too, establish utility of combining two approaches in SIA. The value of the SIA is enhanced in both cases through introduction of participatory orientation to the process.

However, the fact remains that complimentary usage of technical and participatory orientations might deliver better outcomes in SIA but might not alter the wider political ecology of a wider neoliberal world. After all, technocratic and participatory approaches are not end in themselves (Lockie, 2001). Do the participatory SIAs carry power to realize the emancipatory rationale and effect redistribution of power to make the development inclusive and equitable for marginalized segments of the society? Or on a lower scale, can the participatory SIAs ensure to place communities' interests at par with the project proponents' interests? The findings of the case study on Palm oil plantations are consistent with the contemporary reality which is characterized by neoliberal rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2003). The complementarities of technical and participatory approaches might afford nuanced and situated knowledge of reality, but the power to declare it knowledge rest with dominant neoliberal rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2003). The macroeconomic policy settings in many countries assigns epistemological authority to the knowledge that suits its purposes of wealth creation and its accumulation. Consequently, participants continue to be engaged in tokenistic consultations in many policy settings which too often end up in elite capture of the proceedings. O'Faircheallaigh (2010), as a way forward, argues for integration of SIA into processes of negotiations between developers and impacted communities to produce legally binding agreements. But how this is materialized remains unclear?

Conclusion

The manuscript has contested that claim that SIA cannot be conducted without local participation. It, rather, argued that good SIA cannot be conducted without local participation. Beginning with outline of the definitional and normative ideals of participatory orientation to SIA, the document established theoretical standards for participatory SIA to comply with. Based on the theoretical discourses and the case studies, it was argued that not only most of the SIAs have been conducted using technical rationale but power differentials within the neoliberal world have defeated the normative ideals of participatory approaches in many instances. Also, the argument was put forth that in addition to the extraneous factors of wider political ecology, participatory approaches may also be affected by the inherent biases and knowledge gaps within the participant communities. This necessitated the need for complementary usage of technical and participatory approaches to enhance the validity of knowledge produced through SIAs. However, even while controlling for community's biases and knowledge gaps, the modes of change in wider neoliberal rationality remains unclear and require further research.

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