Welcome to this issue of Impact Connector published by The New Zealand Association for Impact Assessment (NZAIA). This issue has a number of papers relating to impact assessment and infrastructure focusing on Aotearoa NZ and the Pacific Islands. The set of papers provides a range of perspectives:

- Rebecca Foy - Place Matters: The importance of geographic assessment of areas of influence in understanding the social effects of large-scale transport investment in Wellington
- Rodney Yeoman - Unplanned Consequences? New Zealand's experiment with urban (un)planning and infrastructure implications
- Charles Crothers - Reflections on infrastructure, Town and Country planning and intimations of SIA in the late 1970s and early 1980s
- Mike Mackay and Nick Taylor - SIA guidance for infrastructure and economic development projects
- Terry Calmeyer - Scoping in impact assessments for infrastructure projects: reflections on South African experiences
- Nick Taylor and Greg Barbara - Impact assessment for Pacific Island Infrastructure.

It is useful to consider these papers and the issues they raise for impact assessment practitioners by referring to the strategic direction set by Rautaki Hanganga o Aotearoa 2022-2052, a strategy developed by Te Waihanga, the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission (NZIC). The NZIC undertook extensive consultation with the sector and the public. The Commission recognises in the strategy that a combination of factors are creating pressures on infrastructure in Aotearoa NZ, including migration and increases in population, economic and social changes, natural hazards, climate change, and the drive to a low-emissions future. There is a long-standing deficit of capital allocation and expenditure on maintenance and new projects. The strategy sets out key objectives that are very pertinent to Impact Assessment practitioners:

- Enabling a net-zero carbon emissions Aotearoa
- Supporting towns and regions to flourish
- Building attractive and inclusive cities and regions
- Strengthening resilience to shocks and stresses, and
- Moving to a circular economy.

The Pacific Islands also face complex issues and needs in planning for, designing, and implementing infrastructure projects that provide wide benefits and meet the requirements of social and environmental safeguards. The Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF) is a multi-partner coordination and technical assistance facility for improved infrastructure across multiple sectors that

supports enhanced regulations and planning. The Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) are promoting good practice and building local capacity in impact assessment. It is notable that the Pacific Island approach is to promote strategic environmental assessment (SEA) focused on sustainable outcomes, setting the strategic context for project impact assessments as outlined by Nick Taylor and Greg Barbara in this issue.

While the NZIC also argue for a strategic approach to infrastructure planning here in Aotearoa NZ, there is no clear call for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) which could provide a much stronger planning tool than is evident at present (Morgan and Taylor, 2021). The call for streamlined planning by NCIC provides an opportunity to conduct SEAs in advance of strategic decisions about infrastructure programmes. Most notable are infrastructure programmes in complex regional settings with multiple stakeholders and components, such as wastewater upgrades or the City Rail Link.

Let's Get Wellington Moving (LGWM) is an example discussed by Rebecca Foy (in this issue). She identifies that LGWM involves multiple agencies and funding sources with potential impacts over a large geographic area and several territorial authorities. As this programme is planned and later implemented there is an opportunity for the SEA work already completed to establish a planning framework. Taking different spaces and places into account as argued by Foy, a planning framework might include specific standards such as noise controls or residential intensification suited to the Wellington urban context. In this example, the SEA work could help to streamline future impact assessments and processing of consents for individual components of a programme. This sort of streamlining is consistent with the advocacy of organisations such as NZIC.

Sufficient and affordable housing is identified by NZIC as an important part of the infrastructure gap and the need to expand housing supply is a central part of the rationale for changes to a planning system that is seen to slow down decisions on infrastructure projects. In fact, infrastructure planning is a multi-faceted activity in which resource planning and consents are just a part. The NZIC strategy (page 135) identifies that poor coordination and delays by funding bodies are a principal source of delays in projects. The paper by Rodney Yeoman (in this issue) points out that planning for urban infrastructure such as public transport and planning for urban growth are inevitably intertwined. Using Auckland as a case study he shows that policies around urban intensification need to be much more consistent with planning for public infrastructure or there is little hope of achieving the goals of smart, sustainable cities – as laid out in the strategy. Yeoman argues that the effort to centrally direct decisions on intensification can easily have unintended consequences for planning and building infrastructure such as public transport at the level of individual cities or suburbs.

A common suggestion for streamlining planning and consents is to narrow the focus of impact assessments. For instance, when the NZIC argue for speeding up infrastructure planning and consents they call for a number of measures, some of which could prove counter to improved impact assessment and decision making. On the one hand, their call, for instance, for improved spatial planning and better use of consistent measures and standards for effects such as noise and dust, which makes a lot of sense. On the other hand, they call for less focus on “human values and preferences (for example heritage, character and amenity)” and for “narrowing the definition of ‘effects’ to those relating to the natural and physical environment” (NZIC, 2022, page 140). Experience with impact assessment in Aotearoa NZ and the Pacific Islands shows that in fact human values and social impacts are of central concern to infrastructure programmes and projects.

In his article in this issue, Charles Crothers examines the role of the Ministry of Works and Development as the central agency for infrastructure development in Aotearoa NZ from the 1950s through the 1980s. The Town and Country Planning Directorate was a key part of this agency and

over time they developed a strategic approach to regional and sectoral developments. The Directorate soon found that social concerns lay at the heart of efficient project planning, developing what is now called the social licence to operate for projects. As a result, the Directorate were early leaders in the development of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) including development of the first Aotearoa NZ guidelines on SIA (Conland, 1985).

In their paper, Mackay and Taylor (in this issue) suggest that SIA provides essential information to decision makers, affected people and communities when planning for infrastructure well before an action is taken. “Social impacts can be described as changes to peoples’ lives, planned or unplanned, positive or negative, that arise either from human activity (an infrastructure development for example) or from naturally occurring events.” Their research pointed to the need for new guidelines that provide a practical approach to SIA. The guidelines they wrote cover the basic steps in preparing an SIA from the initial steps of scoping an SIA through to preparation of social impact management plans. They also note a shift towards community-based approaches to project development (Taylor and Mackay, 2022). Their guidelines for SIA are consistent with the approach of the new SIA guidelines for state significant projects in New South Wales (NSW Government, 2021).

In her paper in this issue, Terry Calmeyer addresses practical needs for improved impact assessment and decision making, especially in respect to better use of scoping as an essential start to any impact assessment. Scoping includes methods for identifying and prioritising the key issues and focuses impact assessments on addressing them. Her paper considers impact assessment practice in South Africa where scoping is defined by legislation as a requirement for any impact assessment. South African infrastructure projects include a distinct scoping phase and produce a scoping report that is available for public comment before being submitted to the consenting authority, and before any detailed studies and assessments are done. In this approach public participation is an important part of any scoping exercise as is the analysis of alternatives. The experience in South Africa suggests that practitioners here in Aotearoa NZ could pay heed to improved scoping as a means to achieve a more cost effective and focused process of impact assessment in future infrastructure developments.

Together these papers reinforce the need for enhanced capacity in impact assessment practice in Aotearoa NZ and the Pacific Islands. Enhanced capacity will provide for infrastructure development focused on a range of positive outcomes because impact assessment strengthens and progresses planning and decision making when applied throughout the strategic and project levels. NZAIA and the PNEA are assisting with improved capacity including organising and hosting conference, courses and webinars and facilitating networking though their websites.

We hope you enjoy this set of papers and thank the authors for the effort they have made in putting pen to paper and contributing to our thinking about practice issues. We also thank Richard Morgan and Kate McNab for their work in helping to produce Impact Connector. If you are interested in proposing a theme and editing an issue please get in touch with NZAIA Admin.

References

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