Insights from the eighties: early Social Impact Assessment reports on rural community dynamics

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Introduction

The value of social impact assessments (SIA) is that they usefully document the state of a place and its communities at times before and after specific events have wrought change on that place and its people. Such assessments may also provide planners, policy analysts and politicians with insights into how places and their communities are likely to change should major developments or new policies occur. Where accurate and careful assessments are undertaken, action can be taken in advance to mitigate negative effects and enable communities to take advantage of potential benefits. The early history of SIA in New Zealand would suggest that many SIAs (other than supervised academic research) were under-resourced and rushed and/or findings were put in the political 'too-hard/hot potato' basket and ignored. Consequently, the value of the initial flush of SIA work in rural New Zealand during the 1980s was not recognised and SIA as a discipline in its own right did not gain sufficient traction to be at the forefront of planning and decision making.

Early days of SIA

Possibly the earliest SIA studies in New Zealand were university-based thesis work: Ann Gillies' 1977 Masters thesis investigated the likely value of irrigation to a stock farming (downlands) community neighbouring the lower Waitaki Valley, and Susan Maturin's 1981 Master thesis on the prospects of the town of Hari Hari (Westland) following the demise of the local timber industry, which she later wrote up for the Commission for the Environment (Maturin, 1983). The former plotted population, service and employment changes that were attributed to irrigation development in the lower Waitaki valley, and compared them to the social situation and outlook predicted for the non-irrigated neighbouring, drought-prone lands [1]. Maturin used her study of Hari Hari to explore the concept of SIA for planning purposes and its value in improving quality of rural community life. She reviewed the options available to all interested parties affected by the environmental, social and economic impacts of different approaches to the management of the West Coast's sawmilling industry.

Maturin's thesis included a history of the Hari Hari community, an analysis of population, employment, business and service trends, a description of the structure and characteristics of the community, a review of community needs based on data collected from 82 interviews

(17 percent of the community), plus an assessment of the effects of the local sawmill closure on the community, and possible alternative employment opportunities. It was of particular interest because the analysis took place just a few years prior to the mid-80s, neoliberal restructuring that resulted in privatisation of key government agencies on the Coast (particularly of the NZ Forest Service) and subsequent major redundancies and unemployment. With a population of just over 600 people in 1981, the bulk of male employment in Hari Hari was in farming, sawmilling and in the NZ Forest Service. While both men and women were engaged in farm work, Maturin noted that in the other sectors (forestry and government) it was a male dominated society with very few real occupations for women. Apart from those who were teachers, most women worked because they needed the money and something to do. "Work is as important for them as it is for the men. However, in general the women are less satisfied with their jobs than the men" (Maturin, 1981:125). Changing attitudes to the conservation of native timbers signalled the end of indigenous timber milling [2]. The district was expected to continue to lose people, and it did.

SIA takes off

Possibly the first published work in SIA was Tom Fookes' (1981) analysis of the potential impacts of the construction of the Huntly Power Station on Huntly and its surrounding community, including the Waahi marae. While nominally an analysis of environmental impacts, Fookes included a partial exploration of social and cultural impacts. Fookes' work was followed by an SIA analysis taken from a Māori perspective by the Centre for Māori Studies and Research (CMSR) at Waikato University, published in 1984. Both pieces of work were funded by the Ministry of Energy. The project brief stipulated that the CMSR study was to outline the reasons for a Māori perspective, and justification for it. The report was to provide an account of Tainui arrival and occupation of the Waikato, contact and conflict with Pākehā, land confiscations and their effects, and the concerns of the Tainui people for the Waikato river. The CMSR report also documented the present position of Tainui, their aspirations and issues arising from the proposed power station site and expanded coal-mining activity. The report argued that given Māori made up a fifth of the region's population they should receive a fifth of the benefits of the power stations, and that to overcome underdevelopment: "Tainui needed better education, vocational training and restoration of their community life. The low standard of educational achievement was seen as a direct result of inequality of opportunity in education and mono-cultural policies" (CMSR 1984: v). Although the government ignored the CMSR's recommendations it was agreed that Ngāti Mahuta should be compensated for the impact of the project on their traditional way of life. Compensation would be in the form of a major upgrade to Waahi marae, along with new housing, community, and recreation facilities (Whittle, 2013).

Other early social impact work included Ruth Houghton's study of the farming communities in the lower Waitaki River delta funded by the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme for the Ministry of Works [3] (Houghton, 1980); Melser, Lloyd, Moore and Levett's study for the Ministry of Works of the closure of the Patea freezing works in 1982; and an independent study by Yvonne Landon (1982) on the impacts of the methanol plants' construction in Taranaki.

Houghton's study aimed to provide information about New Zealand's rural population in general and the relationship of local residents to the Lower Waitaki River delta (in view of possible further hydro-electric power generation and irrigation development) as background on possible social impacts of resource development on the local communities.

The study by Melser *et al* (1982) identified the likely outcomes facing the Patea community and its residents from the loss of the town's major employer. Despite being identified as the

most disadvantaged (since they made up almost 70 percent of the freezing works' workforce), Māori concerns were largely ignored. The study suffered from a lack of Māori research input and the focus was on middle-class Pākehā males. The outcomes of hui at the six local marae were not covered. Melser *et al*'s study assumed that because most of Patea's retail businesses and its service sector were predominantly dependent on the farming community they would be relatively unaffected by the freezing works' closure. However, Peck's (1985) study for the Ministry of Works found that lost investment and business confidence had had a ripple 'spill-over' effect on the rest of the community affecting retail, transport, facilities, amenities and infrastructure - the latter particularly impacted by decreased property values which had led to a diminished rating base (Peck, 1985: 12-13). The closure had also accelerated the migration of younger people from the town. Government job creation schemes (Project Employment Programmes: PEP) of the time were short-lived, failed to provide permanent jobs for 79 percent of participants, and sometimes cut across engagement by people in other ventures.

In the same period Yvonne Landon (1982) studied the socio-economic changes in North Taranaki from the development of two synthetic methanol plants at Motunui near Waitara in north Taranaki. She concluded that the most critical and often repeated issue was the lack of forward planning, and lack of co-ordination and communication between developers, local and central government and the community which was experiencing negative impacts on service provision. Locals who had spent considerable time on submissions and attending hearings felt their efforts had been a costly waste. Issues included:

- housing (people were living in cars, garages and caravans, and landlords were evicting tenants to getter higher rents from construction workers)
- education services (likely closure of a school due to the plant being sited next door, lack of capacity in areas where transient workers' families were being housed, particularly lack of pre-school and child-care places)
- employment (there was a mismatch between the skills required of the new workforce and the unemployed, and while training programmes were introduced these were likely to be too late to be useful, and local firms were losing their skilled staff to the higher paying development projects)
- environmental degradation and health issues (shellfish contamination and other health issues from uncontrolled effluent discharges, the local boroughs and council unable to manage the problems arising from a fast-tracked 'Think Big' development)
- lack of infrastructure (including strain on roads and communications from the rapid build-up of construction traffic).

The report profiled the age, ethnicity, occupation, and industry structure/engagement of each affected community and identified the key issues expressed by locals about the development.

From the early to mid-1980s, Nick Taylor [4] and colleagues at the Centre for Resource Management at Canterbury University, and Lincoln University, then with Foundation for Research Science and Technology funding through Taylor Baines and Associates, began documenting the impact of economic change in a number of rural communities. They paid particular attention to the impact of major resource developments (including the 1980s 'Think Big' projects) on rural populations and concluded that while development (such as electricity generation, petrochemicals and metal processing) could bring economic growth locally (and this had regional and national benefit), local benefits tended to be short-lived. Once projects finished, the local community was often faced with a range of social, economic, and environmental problems, especially in the wind-down phase.

Taylor and McClintock looked at settlements and communities directly involved in the first stages of exploitation of natural resources, noting that such development was often characterised by rapid population growth, "the establishment of either totally new settlements, or the expansion of existing towns. In both cases there is an abrupt change in the physical landscape, a rapid increase in employment, disruptions to the existing rural economy, and an increased demand for public and private infrastructure" (Taylor and McClintock, 1984: 378). The consequent social problems, fiscal pressures and disrupted housing markets lowered the quality of life and led to high labour turnover, low productivity and financial problems (Taylor and McClintock, 1984). While arguing for social impacts of development to be analysed at a regional level Taylor and McClintock put forward a strong case for recognising the consequences of social and economic change on communities, particularly impacts on the working class, women and indigenous people (Taylor and McClintock, 1984). The study became the precursor and framework for more in-depth analysis of the social impacts of development and research on the boom and decline of rural areas which the authors (and others) carried out over the following decades.

SIA becomes official - but not for long

In mid-1986 a Social Impact Unit was established within the State Services Commission. The Unit was tasked to research and minimise the negative aspects of widespread job losses expected (especially in rural areas) to arise from state sector restructuring. Privatisation saw 5000 state servants shifted to state corporations (such as Electricorp, NZ Post, and Tranzrail) on 1 April 1987 and a further 5000 staff, chiefly in the new Forest Corporation and Coal Corporation entities, were made redundant (SSC 2013). The Unit had 15 regional committees which were established to undertake social impact assessments and related activities, but with time short, assessments were rushed and of limited assistance in fashioning government policy (Boston, 1987). The Unit and other entities compiled a range of social impact assessments and reviews for several main urban areas and for rural communities, predominantly the East Coast Region, Northland, Waikato (Huntly and Te Kuiti), Tutira (north Hawke's Bay), West Coast, North Otago and Southland between December 1986 and February 1987. These were not focused on local single industry impacts but on a diverse range of impacts introducing change at the regional and national levels. The regional committee reports make for sad reading. Staff were overwhelmed with the magnitude of the problems of mass unemployment in places with limited or no job opportunities. There were also too few staff to cope with the numbers of clients, and most officials lacked enterprise development experience. In 1989, the Social Impact Unit was closed (SSC, 2013).

Calls for SIA-centred public policy

Meanwhile Nick Taylor and others continued their work on SIA and rural research, querying the lack of rural social research, particularly research analysing the processes and underlying causes of change. They were particularly critical of the dearth of public policy on SIA in light of the major changes taking place in rural communities, such as the relocation of rural employment and population, institutional reform, and "new strategies for economic growth which emphasise the use of local resources and entrepreneurship" (Taylor *et al*, 1987: 1). Their analysis led to them reinforcing proposals to review social development alongside the development of natural resources, and for a national social policy and, at the very least, on-going social monitoring of specific policy changes or developments in rural areas (Taylor, 1986). Such analysis was needed to reflect changes in the socio-economic composition of rural New Zealand, particularly as a consequence of tourism.

In the early-1990s the newly-fledged Society for Social Assessment approached the government to undertake social assessment as a regular part of policy analysis. The

proposal was ignored. This was particularly problematic for rural areas which had changed significantly. Over 50 percent of the rural population was engaged in activities other than primary industry, but with a limited social policy function [5], a lack of rural social research, and with policy and delivery functions in government split apart, policymakers were increasingly out of touch with the sectors and groups for whom their policies were designed (Webber and Rivers, 1992; Wheatstone, 1994). Despite a Rural Affairs/Rural Resources Unit being established in the Ministry of Agriculture in 1991, then its closure with a change of government in 1998, then re-establishment of a Rural Communities Portfolio within the Ministry of Primary Industries in 2017, these units were narrowly focused on farm communities with little or no recognition given to the broader components of rural areas.

The needs for an understanding of the social impacts of resource developments, of major policy shifts currently taking place and affecting rural New Zealand, and of the social inequality endemic in New Zealand's rural areas (Pomeroy, 2019), are still not being addressed fully through the approach and insights provided by SIA

Note: This article is based on research prepared for the fifth report in the Bishop's Action Foundation series on rural New Zealand. Report 5: *Summary of Research on Rural New Zealand from a Social Perspective* was part funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and is part of the suite of projects in the National Science Challenge Series: *Building better homes, towns and cities* managed by the Building Research Association of New Zealand (BRANZ).

[1] The downlands irrigation development scheme did not go ahead immediately. A study of the area undertaken a decade later (satisfyingly for the author) showed predicted population, employment and service growth were starting to occur on the irrigated plains verses the downlands (without irrigation) with continued population and service loss.

[2] Following the signing of the West Coast Accord in 1986 indigenous tree felling on the West Coast was slowed, then following further legislation in 2000, halted.

[3] The role of the Ministry of Works at that time included measuring impacts of development proposals on communities, coordinating co-agency discussion, and identifying communities at risk of economic decline (Bennett, 1980).

[4] Nick Taylor with Hobson Bryan and Colin Goodrich authored the seminal texts on SIA in New Zealand.

[5] The Social Policy Agency established in 1992 under the umbrella of the Department of Social Welfare had a narrow welfare focus. The stand-alone Ministry of Social Policy was equally narrow. Established in October 1999, it had a three-year life span, being merged into Social Development in October 2001.

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