

SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT: CURRENT PRACTICE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is one of the most effective tools of achieving social sustainability. Simply defined, social sustainability is the state of ensuring the normal social evolution with minimum disruption. SIA attempts to ensure social sustainability in the face of changes and disruption to the normal social evolution that are likely to be created by deliberate human interventions such as development through the introduction of policies, programs and projects.

SIA treats society as a system in a state of dynamic equilibrium and deliberate disruptions are considered a negative impacts needing mitigation. In Sri Lanka, SIA is still in its infancy both in theory and practice. Although SIA is a stand alone tool that can be applied to policies, programs and project level development interventions, its practical application in Sri Lanka is limited to Environmental Impact Assessment and Resettlement Action Plans.

The study critically reviews the SIA components of five EIA reports in the light of the potential of SIA in ensuring sustainability and the comments obtained from academics and government officials on the SIA in Sri Lanka. The EIA reports were purposively selected - only those with significant social impacts were selected.

The study led to the following conclusions:

1. SIA has not been fully comprehended
2. The potential benefits of SIA has not been fully understood.
3. SIA is limited to descriptions of the state rather than an assessment of impacts.
4. SIA practioners have not received formal training in SIA

These conclusions led to the following recommendations:

1. SIA should be made a compulsory course in social science programs specially in sociology at both undergraduate and post-graduate level
2. SIA should be made a compulsory course in all traditional science based degree programs.
3. Social Scientists should pressurize the policy makers to integrate SIA into the decision making process at policy, program and project level
4. Formal SIA training programs should be conducted for the government officials involved in the EIA and RAP processes.