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Socio-economic assessment and improving EIA

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Neil Waterson from Bidwells discusses the important role of assessing socioeconomic impacts in improving environmental impact assessment (EIA) practice

The assessment of socio-economic impacts is an increasingly important aspect of EIA in the UK. The publication of the National Planning Policy Framework (<http://www.environmentalstonline.com/article/2012-03-30/revised-nppf-stronger-on-sustainability>) (NPPF) by the government in March 2012 has brought further emphasis to the importance of social and economic impacts arising from development with its emphasis on achieving "sustainable development".

The NPPF defines sustainable development as having not just an environmental role, but an economic and a social role. The clear inference of government guidance in the NPPF is that a holistic approach to the assessment of the merits of a development proposal should be taken and that a balance needs to be drawn between economic, social and environmental factors in decision making.

While EIA (<http://www.environmentalstonline.com/management/impact-assessment>) has historically tended to focus on the protection of the environment, account must now also be taken of the degree to which development helps to build a strong, competitive economy and supporting "strong and vibrant" communities (<http://www.environmentalstonline.com/management/community-engagement>). EIA should therefore include consideration of a project's impact on humans, as well as the bio-physical environment and any interactions between the two.

In many instances, a robust assessment of socio-economic impacts of the proposal can help to ensure that the impact of a development on communities and the economy are fully understood, and that any adverse impacts can be reduced while positive impacts can be emphasised.

However, the approach taken to socio-economic assessments in EIA varies considerably and this area has historically been regarded as the "poor relation" in EIA. This was highlighted by academic studies by John Glasson and Donna Heaney in 1993 ("Socio-economic impacts: the poor relations in British environmental impact statements") and Andrew Chadwick in 2002

("Socio-economic impacts: are they still the poor relations in UK environmental statements?"). Research has highlighted that many EIAs do not include any assessment of socio-economic impacts and that, where they do, the approach taken and the range of issues considered vary significantly.

In many respects, this can be attributed to the limited references in the EIA Regulations and the lack of good practice guidance on socio-economic assessment. Yet, Schedule 4, Part 1 of the EIA Regulations 2011 clearly states that EIAs and the accompanying environmental statement should include impacts on population in the description of environmental aspects likely to be significantly affected by the development.

Moreover, guidance published by the government in 1995 on the preparation of environmental statements advises that possible impacts on humans that should be considered include those relating to "changes in population, such as changes in the demand for housing and services including schools, hospitals and recreation facilities."

While the limited guidance within the 1995 Guidance is of some help, it fails to reflect the range of different socio-economic issues relevant to all types of projects. These can vary widely depending upon the nature of development and the communities in which they are situated. A more comprehensive and useful set of potential impacts is provided by Glasson in 2009 ("Socio-economic impacts 1: overview and economic impacts"), when he identified a range of potential impacts, including:

- direct economic impacts;
- indirect/wider economic/expenditure impacts;
- demographic impacts;
- impacts on housing;
- impacts on other local services;
- socio-cultural impacts; and
- distributional effects.

Research by Glasson and Chadwick and more recently Laura Fisher in 2011 ("The treatment of socio-economic impacts in environmental impact statements") has highlighted that the assessment of socio-economic impacts, where it is undertaken, tends to focus on the direct economic impacts of development, but that impacts on population, socio-cultural aspects and local services are less commonly considered. This is because such issues can be harder to define and measure and often rely on qualitative judgements. Yet with many developments, particularly those of an urban nature, these impacts are often of most concern to communities and can be critical to determining the suitability of a proposal.

Without a full assessment of these issues, it is difficult for the decision maker to understand the extent to which proposals contribute to sustainable development, having regard to the economic and social roles identified within the NPPF, as well as the environmental role. It is therefore important that practitioners carefully consider the socio-economic impacts of the proposals to ensure they respond effectively to this and the requirements of the EIA Regulations themselves.

It is also important that the government, and organisations such as IEMA (<https://www.iema.net>), help to lead the development of best practice in socio-economic assessment by more clearly defining what it is, what it should cover and the most appropriate means by which different types of impacts should be assessed. This will ultimately ensure that EIA is more effective in contributing towards achieving sustainable development that meets the needs of the present, without comprising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs.

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