

**Purpose/Background**

*This document was prepared over a five year period as an official IAIA Project. Workshops to develop these Principles were held at several IAIA and other conferences across six continents. Several hundred people were consulted in the process of drafting the document and some fifty people made substantial contributions.*

*The International Principles is a living document that will continue to be modified. This, and all subsequent versions, will be accessible on the IAIA website ([www.iaia.org](http://www.iaia.org)).*

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## SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

### International Principles

SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (SIA) IS ANALYSING, MONITORING AND  
MANAGING THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF DEVELOPMENT.

### Why have Principles for Social Impact Assessment?

There has been considerable interest in producing "International Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment". An international document produced under the auspices of a major organisation such as the International Association for Impact Assessment could:

- Assist in the development of legislation and policy at the national level;
- Provide standards for SIA practice in international contexts (transboundary projects, development cooperation, foreign investments, international banking);
- Increase the appeal of SIA to a wider range of audiences, through increasing its legitimacy/standing;
- Establish minimum standards for SIA practice;
- Provide an articulation of best practice in SIA as a model to aspire to;
- Remove confusion over terminology by establishing a definitive glossary;
- Establish the appropriate scope of the social component of impact assessments;
- Promote the integration of SIA in all impact assessments (especially environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment).

The process of developing international guidelines and principles however has been difficult. In a truly international context, there are many issues to consider and little can be taken for granted. The regulatory context varies, the cultural/religious context varies, and social and economic priorities for development vary. As the process of developing international guidelines and principles progressed, increasing pressure was placed on the conventional understanding of SIA, and a new concept of what SIA was about emerged. This resulted in a revised definition of SIA.

It also became apparent that a definitive document containing the "International Guidelines and Principles" was a flawed concept. Firstly, because most such documents tend to emphasise guidelines rather than principles. They fail to realise that guidelines need to be deduced from principles, and principles need to be derived from core values. Only by first establishing the core values of the community of practice, then deriving the principles, and only then developing guidelines, can truly appropriate guidelines emerge. The second flaw is that guidelines and principles are often developed in non-participatory processes. Even where participatory processes are involved, too often they do not include the people to whom the guidelines are directed. These are the people who ultimately need to develop 'ownership' of the guidelines if they are to be adopted and utilised.

This document serves as a discussion document for the impact assessment community. It promulgates a new understanding of SIA. It is intended that this be available to practitioners around the world. It can provide them with the basis for developing national guidelines in consultation with a range of stakeholders and users in their own countries.

# Defining and describing Social Impact Assessment

In general terms, SIA is analysing, monitoring and managing the social consequences of development. However, there are different levels by which to understand the term 'SIA'. SIA is a field of research and practice, or a paradigm consisting of a body of knowledge, techniques, and values. Various individuals identify themselves as SIA professionals, or list SIA as one of their disciplines or specialty areas. There is a community of individuals engaged in research and practice of SIA. These people practice the methodology of SIA and undertake associated social and environmental research to inform the practice of SIA. As a methodology or instrument, SIA is the process that SIA professionals follow in order to assess the social impacts of planned interventions or events, and to develop strategies for the ongoing monitoring and management of those impacts. SIA should not be understood only as the task of predicting social impacts in an impact assessment process.

**SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT** INCLUDES THE PROCESSES OF ANALYSING, MONITORING AND MANAGING THE INTENDED AND UNINTENDED SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES, BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE, OF PLANNED INTERVENTIONS (POLICIES, PROGRAMS, PLANS, PROJECTS) AND ANY SOCIAL CHANGE PROCESSES INVOKED BY THOSE INTERVENTIONS. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE IS TO BRING ABOUT A MORE SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE BIOPHYSICAL AND HUMAN ENVIRONMENT.

The important features of this understanding of SIA are that:

1. The goal of impact assessment is to bring about a more ecologically, socio-culturally and economically sustainable and equitable environment. Impact assessment, therefore, promotes community development and empowerment, builds capacity, and develops social capital (social networks and trust).
2. The focus of concern of SIA is a proactive stance to development and better development outcomes, not just the identification or amelioration of negative or unintended outcomes. Assisting communities and other stakeholders to identify development goals, and ensuring that positive outcomes are maximised, can be more important than minimising harm from negative impacts.
3. The methodology of SIA can be applied to a wide range of planned interventions, and can be undertaken on behalf of a wide range of actors, and not just within a regulatory framework.
4. SIA contributes to the process of adaptive management of policies, programs, plans and projects, and therefore needs to inform the design and operation of the planned intervention.
5. SIA builds on local knowledge and utilises participatory processes to analyse the concerns of interested and affected parties. It involves stakeholders in the assessment of social impacts, the analysis of alternatives, and monitoring of the planned intervention.
6. The good practice of SIA accepts that social, economic and biophysical impacts are inherently and inextricably interconnected. Change in any of these domains will lead to changes in the other domains. SIA must, therefore, develop an understanding of the impact pathways that are created when change in one domain triggers impacts across other domains, as well as the iterative or flow-on consequences within each domain. In other words, there must be consideration of the second and higher order impacts and of cumulative impacts.
7. In order for the discipline of SIA to learn and grow, there must be analysis of the impacts that occurred as a result of past activities. SIA must be reflexive and evaluative of its theoretical bases and of its practice.
8. While SIA is typically applied to planned interventions, the techniques of SIA can also be used to consider the social impacts that derive from other types of events, such as disasters, demographic change and epidemics.

SIA is best understood as an umbrella or overarching framework that embodies the evaluation of all impacts on humans and on all the ways in which people and communities interact with their socio-cultural, economic and biophysical surroundings. SIA thus has strong links with a wide range of specialist sub-fields involved in the assessment of areas such as: aesthetic impacts (landscape analysis), archaeological and cultural heritage impacts (both tangible and non-tangible), community impacts, cultural impacts, demographic impacts, development impacts, economic and fiscal impacts, gender impacts, health and mental health impacts, impacts on indigenous rights, infrastructural impacts, institutional impacts, leisure and tourism impacts, political impacts (human rights, governance, democratisation etc.), poverty, psychological impacts, resource issues (access and ownership of resources), impacts on social and human capital, and other impacts on societies. As such, comprehensive SIA cannot formally be undertaken by a single person, but requires a team approach.

## The nature of SIA in an international context

The objective of SIA is to ensure that development maximises its benefits and minimises its costs, especially those costs borne by people (including those in other places and in the future). Costs and benefits may not be measurable or quantifiable and are often not adequately taken into account by decision-makers, regulatory authorities and developers. By identifying impacts in advance: (1) better decisions can be made about which interventions should proceed and how they should proceed; and (2) mitigation measures can be implemented to minimise the harm and maximise the benefits from a specific planned intervention or related activity.

An important feature of SIA is the professional value system held by its practitioners. In addition to a commitment to sustainability and to scientific integrity, such a value system includes an ethic that advocates openness and accountability, fairness and equity, and defends human rights. The role of SIA goes far beyond the ex-ante (in advance) prediction of adverse impacts and the determination of who wins and who loses. SIA also encompasses: empowerment of local people; enhancement of the position of women, minority groups and other disadvantaged or marginalised members of society; development of capacity building; alleviation of all forms of dependency; increase in equity; and a focus on poverty reduction. SIA complements the economic and technical models that characterise the thinking of many development professionals and agencies.

SIA can be undertaken in different contexts and for different purposes. This creates difficulties in defining or evaluating it. The nature of an SIA done on behalf of a multinational corporation as part of that company's internal procedures may be very different to an SIA undertaken by a consultant in compliance with regulatory or funding agency requirements, or an SIA undertaken by a development agency interested in ensuring best value for their country's development assistance. These, in turn, may be very different to an SIA undertaken by staff or students at a local university on behalf of the local community, or an SIA undertaken by the local community itself. Each of these applications of SIA is worthwhile, and none should pretend to be the definitive statement. Evaluation of an SIA needs to consider its intended purpose.

Some conceptualizations of SIA are related to protecting individual property rights, with clear statements of adverse impacts required to ensure that individual rights are not transgressed. Where these rights are violated, SIA could be seen as contributing to mitigation and compensation mechanisms. In these situations, SIA tends to concentrate on the negative impacts. In other contexts, however, particularly in developing countries, there should be less emphasis on the negative impacts on small groups of individuals or on individual property rights. Rather, there should be greater concern with maximising social utility and development potential, while ensuring that such development is generally acceptable to the community, equitable and sustainable. SIA should also focus on reconstruction of livelihoods. The improvement of social wellbeing of the wider community should be explicitly recognized as an objective of planned interventions, and as such should be an indicator considered by any form of assessment. **However, awareness of the differential distribution of impacts among different groups in society, and particularly the impact burden experienced by vulnerable groups in the community should always be of prime concern.**

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## What are social impacts?

SIA is much more than the prediction step within an environmental assessment framework. Social impacts are much broader than the limited issues often considered in EIAs (such as demographic changes, job issues, financial security, and impacts on family life). A limited view of SIA creates demarcation problems about what are the social impacts to be identified by SIA, versus what is considered by related fields such as health impact assessment, cultural impact assessment, heritage impact assessment, aesthetic impact assessment, or gender impact assessment. The SIA community of practitioners considers that all issues that affect people, directly or indirectly, are pertinent to social impact assessment.

A convenient way of conceptualising social impacts is as changes to one or more of the following:

- people's way of life – that is, how they live, work, play and interact with one another on a day-to-day basis;
- their culture – that is, their shared beliefs, customs, values and language or dialect;
- their community – its cohesion, stability, character, services and facilities;
- their political systems – the extent to which people are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives, the level of democratisation that is taking place, and the resources provided for this purpose;
- their environment – the quality of the air and water people use; the availability and quality of the food they eat; the level of hazard or risk, dust and noise they are exposed to; the adequacy of sanitation, their physical safety, and their access to and control over resources;
- their health and wellbeing – health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity;
- their personal and property rights – particularly whether people are economically affected, or experience personal disadvantage which may include a violation of their civil liberties;
- their fears and aspirations – their perceptions about their safety, their fears about the future of their community, and their aspirations for their future and the future of their children.

## Activities comprising Social Impact Assessment

SIA comprises most of the following activities. It:

- participates in the environmental design of the planned intervention;
- identifies interested and affected peoples;
- facilitates and coordinates the participation of stakeholders;
- documents and analyses the local historical setting of the planned intervention so as to be able to interpret responses to the intervention, and to assess cumulative impacts;
- collects baseline data (social profiling) to allow evaluation and audit of the impact assessment process and the planned intervention itself;
- gives a rich picture of the local cultural context, and develops an understanding of local community values, particularly how they relate to the planned intervention;
- identifies and describes the activities which are likely to cause impacts (scoping);
- predicts (or analyses) likely impacts and how different stakeholders are likely to respond;
- assists evaluating and selecting alternatives (including a no development option);
- assists in site selection;
- recommends mitigation measures;
- assists in the valuation process and provides suggestions about compensation (non-financial as well as financial);
- describes potential conflicts between stakeholders and advises on resolution processes;
- develops coping strategies for dealing with residual or non-mitigatable impacts;
- contributes to skill development and capacity building in the community;
- advises on appropriate institutional and coordination arrangements for all parties;
- assists in devising and implementing monitoring and management programs.

# Guidelines, Principles and Core Values

**I. Core Values:** *Fundamental, ideal-typical, enduring, statements of belief that are strongly held and accepted as premises (is-statements).*

**II. Principles:** *General statements of either a common understanding or an indication as to a course of action about what ought to be done (ought statements).*

**III. Guidelines:** *Statements by which to plan a specific course of action and which clarify how it should be done (action statements).*

Guidelines can be described as statements which provide advice or direction by which to plan a specific course of action. They are written as specific statements of instruction about what to do and/or how to do it. Typically they are “action-statements”. A principle is a macro statement that provides a general guide to a course of action about what ought to be done. They are written as “ought-statements”. Core values are statements about fundamental beliefs that are deeply held. They are typically “is-statements”. Values determine principles, from which guidelines can be written.

## I. The core values of SIA

The SIA community of practice believes that:

1. There are fundamental human rights that are shared equally across cultures, and by males and females alike.
2. There is a right to have those fundamental human rights protected by the rule of law, with justice applied equally and fairly to all, and available to all.
3. People have a right to live and work in an environment which is conducive to good health and to a good quality of life and which enables the development of human and social potential.
4. Social dimensions of the environment – specifically but not exclusively peace, the quality of social relationships, freedom from fear, and belongingness – are important aspects of people’s health and quality of life.
5. People have a right to be involved in the decision making about the planned interventions that will affect their lives.
6. Local knowledge and experience are valuable and can be used to enhance planned interventions.

## II(a). Fundamental principles for development

The SIA community of practice considers that:

1. Respect for human rights should underpin all actions.
2. Promoting equity and democratisation should be the major driver of development planning, and impacts on the worst-off members of society should be a major consideration in all assessment.
3. The existence of diversity between cultures, within cultures, and the diversity of stakeholder interests need to be recognised and valued.
4. Decision making should be just, fair and transparent, and decision makers should be accountable for their decisions.
5. Development projects should be broadly acceptable to the members of those communities likely to benefit from, or be affected by, the planned intervention.
6. The opinions and views of experts should not be the sole consideration in decisions about planned interventions.
7. The primary focus of all development should be positive outcomes, such as capacity building, empowerment, and the realization of human and social potential.
8. The term, ‘the environment’, should be defined broadly to include social and human dimensions, and in such inclusion, care must be taken to ensure that adequate attention is given to the realm of the social.

## II(b). Principles specific to SIA practice

1. Equity considerations should be a fundamental element of impact assessment and of development planning.
2. Many of the social impacts of planned interventions can be predicted.
3. Planned interventions can be modified to reduce their negative social impacts and enhance their positive impacts.
4. SIA should be an integral part of the development process, involved in all stages from inception to follow-up audit.
5. There should be a focus on socially sustainable development, with SIA contributing to the determination of best development alternative(s) – SIA (and EIA) have more to offer than just being an arbiter between economic benefit and social cost.
6. In all planned interventions and their assessments, avenues should be developed to build the social and human capital of local communities and to strengthen democratic processes.
7. In all planned interventions, but especially where there are unavoidable impacts, ways to turn impacted peoples into beneficiaries should be investigated.
8. The SIA must give due consideration to the alternatives of any planned intervention, but especially in cases when there are likely to be unavoidable impacts.
9. Full consideration should be given to the potential mitigation measures of social and environmental impacts, even where impacted communities may approve the planned intervention and where they may be regarded as beneficiaries.
10. Local knowledge and experience and acknowledgment of different local cultural values should be incorporated in any assessment.
11. There should be no use of violence, harassment, intimidation or undue force in connection with the assessment or implementation of a planned intervention.
12. Developmental processes that infringe the human rights of any section of society should not be accepted.

## II(c). Other guiding principles

There are many International Agreements and Declarations that contain notable statements. Principle 1 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, for example, states that “*Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.*” Principle 17 calls for impact assessment to be undertaken. Article 1 of the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development states that:

*“The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. The human right to development also implies the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, which includes, subject to the relevant provisions of both International Covenants on Human Rights, the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources.”*

In International Agreements and Declarations social issues are often implied but rarely given adequate emphasis. Nevertheless, the statements that are given in those Declarations can be rewritten to refer to social issues more specifically. The following is a list of international principles in common usage rewritten to apply more directly to social issues.

**Precautionary Principle:** In order to protect the environment, a concept which includes peoples’ ways of life and the integrity of their communities, the precautionary approach shall be applied. Where there are threats or potential threats of serious social impact, lack of full certainty about those threats should not be used as a reason for approving the planned intervention or not requiring the implementation of mitigation measures and stringent monitoring.

**Uncertainty Principle:** It must be recognised that our knowledge of the social world and of social processes is incomplete and that social knowledge can never be fully complete because the social environment and the processes affecting it are changing constantly, and vary from place to place and over time.

**Intragenerational Equity:** The benefits from the range of planned interventions should address the needs of all, and the social impacts should not fall disproportionately on certain groups of the population, in particular children and women, the disabled and the socially excluded, certain generations or certain regions.



**Intergenerational Equity:** Development activities or planned interventions should be managed so that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**Recognition and Preservation of Diversity:** Communities and societies are not homogenous. They are demographically structured (age and gender), and they comprise different groups with various value systems and different skills. Special attention is needed to appreciate the existence of the social diversity that exists within communities and to understand what the unique requirements of special groups may be. Care must be taken to ensure that planned interventions do not lead to a loss of social diversity in a community or a diminishing of social cohesion.

**Internalization of Costs:** The full social and ecological costs of a planned intervention should be internalised through the use of economic and other instruments, that is, these costs should be considered as part of the costs of the intervention, and no intervention should be approved or regarded as cost-effective if it achieves this by the creation of hidden costs to current or future generations or the environment.

**The Polluter Pays Principle:** The full costs of avoiding or compensating for social impacts should be borne by the proponent of the planned intervention.

**The Prevention Principle:** It is generally preferable and cheaper in the long run to prevent negative social impacts and ecological damage from happening than having to restore or rectify damage after the event.

**The Protection and Promotion of Health and Safety:** Health and safety are paramount. All planned interventions should be assessed for their health impacts and their accident risks, especially in terms of assessing and managing the risks from hazardous substances, technologies or processes, so that their harmful effects are minimized, including not bringing them into use or phasing them out as soon as possible. Health impacts cover the physical, mental and social wellbeing and safety of all people, paying particular attention to those groups of the population who are more vulnerable and more likely to be harmed, such as the economically deprived, indigenous groups, children and women, the elderly, the disabled, as well as to the population most exposed to risks arising from the planned intervention.

**The Principle of Multisectoral Integration:** Social development requirements and the need to consider social issues should be properly integrated into all projects, policies, infrastructure programs and other planning activities.

**The Principle of Subsidiarity:** Decision making power should be decentralised, with accountable decisions being made as close to an individual citizen as possible. In the context of SIA, this means decisions about the approval of planned interventions, or conditions under which they might operate, should be taken as close to the affected people as possible, with local people having an input into the approval and management processes.

### III. Developing Guidelines

Because guidelines are specific recommendations for action, they need to be developed in the context in which they are to be applied and they need to be addressed to a specific audience. Therefore, they need to be developed in conjunction with the relevant parties. They need to become accepted as the guidelines of that group rather than being imposed.

There are many different groups who are potentially interested in guidelines for SIA. They include:

- **SIA practitioners** – require guidelines to improve their practice;
- **Regulatory agencies** – require guidelines in order to specify or audit the scope of SIA activities they commission as well as the quality of SIA reports they receive;
- **Policy and program developers** – require guidelines to ensure that policy and program development considers social impacts;
- **Affected peoples and NGOs** – require guidelines to be able to participate effectively in SIA processes. Local action groups (resident action groups) and NGOs often act like a regulatory agency in checking the appropriateness of SIA processes.
- **Developers (proponents) and Financiers** – require guidelines to be committed to good practice in environmental and social impact assessment, to adequately resource such practice, to liaise effectively with practitioners and interested and affected parties, and with regulatory agencies.
- **Development agencies** (multilateral and bilateral aid organisations) – require guidelines to ensure that the most benefit is obtained from their aid projects, that SIA components are adequately resourced, and that the aid projects themselves do not have unintended environmental or social consequences.

In addition, various sectors of the community may have special interests, and it may be appropriate for guidelines to be developed to address those special interests, such as Indigenous Peoples.

IAIA seeks to liaise with the groups listed above to develop SIA Guidelines applicable to their practice.

#### IAIA VISION

IAIA is the leading global authority on the best practice in the use of impact assessment for informed decision making regarding policies, programmes, plans, and projects.

#### IAIA MISSION

IAIA provides an international forum for advancing innovation and communication of best practice in all forms of impact assessment to further the development of local, regional and global capacity in impact assessment.

#### IAIA VALUES

- IAIA promotes the application of integrated and participatory approaches to impact assessment, conducted to the highest professional standards.
- IAIA believes the assessment of the environmental, social, economic, cultural and health implications for proposals to be a critical contribution to sound decision-making processes, and to equitable and sustainable development.