

# Guest editorial

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## International Principles for Social Impact Assessment: their evolution

**Frank Vanclay**

**T**HIS ISSUE OF *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* (IAPA) is special because it contains the long-awaited International Principles for Social Impact Assessment (SIA). They are the output of a formal International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) project, initially approved as a project by the IAIA Board in 1998, with the final document being endorsed in early 2003.

To some extent, the Principles were inspired by the US Interorganizational Committee's Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment which were published in IAPA's predecessor journal, *Impact Assessment*, in 1994. Their Guidelines and Principles (G&P) were well received by the SIA community at large. However, consistent with their purpose, they were strictly only appropriate to the US National Environmental Policy Act jurisdictional setting. Even in that context, they had a number of problems; primarily that it was not always clear whom they were addressing.

At IAIA's New Orleans conference in 1997, two committees were established to review the G&P. One was to consider them for application within the American context, while the second was charged with the responsibility of developing a set of International Guidelines and Principles. Rabel Burdge, an original member of the Interorganizational Committee, became Convenor of the US-based Committee, while

Frank Vanclay was appointed Convenor of the International Committee.

Establishing the membership of the International Committee was a fraught process. There were many willing volunteers, but mostly from the developed world. Even so, without funding, how could the International Committee actually meet to do its business? Furthermore, there was an awareness that developing truly international guidelines and principles would be difficult. Once the regulatory context is removed, different cultures are considered, and different development priorities are comprehended, it becomes a rather unsettling process. Therefore it was decided to have a small Project Team that would oversee the process of development, provide comment to the Convenor at strategic points, and maximise input through a series of participatory workshops at a number of venues around the world.

Initially, this proved to be a good strategy. Over time, however, problems emerged. It became apparent that the concept of an impact-predicting SIA as part of a regulatory system was not a suitable model for SIA in a development context. What this meant was that no consensus emerged in the workshops that were held. Various meetings did make major leaps of understanding, but when these were revisited at subsequent workshops, which often contained different people, the discussion would start from square one again.

Therefore, it took several years before sufficient discussion had occurred for the Project Team to have the faith to agree that the concept (and later the document) was finalised. Even so, because the change in the concept of SIA is considerable, people who are locked into old ways of thinking may find it hard to accept the new understanding of SIA.

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Ultimately, part-day workshops were held at IAIA conferences in Christchurch (1998), Hong Kong (2000) and The Hague (2002), with full-day workshops being held in Glasgow (1999) and Cartagena (2001). In addition to IAIA conferences, additional input was gained from workshops or presentations at: (1) the IAIA South Africa Affiliate's conference at Cathedral Peak (1998); (2) Community Development conferences in Bangkok (1998) and Ho Chi Minh City (2000); (3) a Capacity Building workshop in Hoi An (2001); (4) the World Congress of Rural Sociology in Rio de Janeiro (2000); (5) the International Conference on Impact Assessment in the Development Process at the University of Manchester (1998); (6) the World Bank (2001); and (7) at several presentations in Australia.

All in all, several hundred people participated in the process and over 50 made a substantial contribution. The final text was drafted by the Convenor and was subject to the editorial scrutiny of the Project Team.

Membership of the Project Team changed over time, but the following people participated at some time: James Baines (SIA Section Convenor); Hobson Bryan; Di Buchan; Rabel Burdge; Gary Cox; Allan Dale; Amber Frugte; Stewart Lockie; Abdoulaye Sene; Pierre Senecal; Roel Slootweg; Nick Taylor; and Frank Vanclay (Convenor).

At the beginning of the process, the discussion mostly centred on what international G&P ought to represent: a statement of minimum standards or an ideal model. It also considered whether it was desirable for there to be a single specified model for SIA. Central to that debate was the question "what exactly is SIA; a practice, a process, or a philosophy?" Ultimately, it was decided that SIA is a multi-level concept and that it should be more mindful of its proactive community development role.

The process therefore led to the development of a new definition of SIA, the precise wording of which has been discussed at great length. Like all definitions developed by a committee, it represents

something of a compromise. Irrespective of the precise wording, however, there was strong agreement on the concept being conveyed. Nevertheless, the International Principles are intended to be reviewed periodically and to change over time. They are also intended to be the basis of several sets of guidelines to be developed with relevant industry groups and in national contexts.

Several lessons were learned in the process. The most important for a general audience is that there is widespread uncertainty about what 'principles' and 'guidelines' are. It became necessary to define these terms and to constantly remind ourselves of these definitions. In defining them, and thinking about the meaning of them, it became clear that guidelines derive from principles, and principles derive from values. Guidelines should not be developed in advance of principles, which in turn should not be developed before a discussion about values.

It also became clear that it was a pointless exercise for an organisation such as IAIA to develop guidelines to foist on to industry. Guidelines so developed would have no legitimacy and would not be adopted. Guidelines become relevant not by being written on paper, but through their legitimacy and the commitment industry would have to abide by them. The gaining of this commitment and legitimacy requires a participatory process. It requires 'ownership' by industry. The benefit of guidelines, therefore, is not the having of them, but the process of their development.

It was also clear that in a rush to develop guidelines, there would be a lack of reflection about the discipline. It is only through discussion of core values, fundamental principles, key objectives and so on, that true reflection and learning occurs. We believe that this has occurred in the SIA community and that this new learning and understanding of SIA is documented in the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment (pages 5–11 in this issue). I commend them to you.