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# Principles for social impact assessment: A critical comparison between the international and US documents

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## Abstract

The “International Principles for Social Impact Assessment” and the “Principles and Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment in the USA”, both developed under the auspices of the International Association for Impact Assessment and published in 2003, are compared. Major differences in the definition and approach to social impact assessment (SIA) are identified. The US Principles and Guidelines is shown to be positivist/technocratic while the International Principles is identified as being democratic, participatory and constructivist. Deficiencies in both documents are identified. The field of SIA is changing to go beyond the prevention of negative impacts, to include issues of building social capital, capacity building, good governance, community engagement and social inclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

Two significant documents were published in 2003: the International Principles for Social Impact Assessment (‘International Principles’ for short) and the Principles and

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Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment in the USA ('US Principles and Guidelines' for short). Each document is important in its own right, with each being a landmark document representing a codification of the field of social impact assessment (SIA). The two documents make an interesting comparison because together they embody several of the tensions in the discipline, particularly relating to the contextual setting in which SIA occurs.

The US Principles and Guidelines is attributed to a collective authorship of 12 people, the 'Interorganizational Committee', which was convened by Rabel Burdge who is, in effect, primary author of that document. By contrast, the International Principles is largely developed by Frank Vanclay (the author of this commentary) and published as a sole authored paper (Vanclay, 2003a) but with acknowledged input in the form of ideas and comments from a wide range of people numbering several hundreds in total, with some 50 or so making a substantial contribution. As discussed in an editorial (Vanclay, 2003b), the International Principles was subject to the editorial scrutiny of a somewhat dynamic 'Task Force' of around 5 people at any time, but which over time included a total of 12 people, including Rabel Burdge. Thus, while the two documents were developed independently, they were not in ignorance of each other. They are both direct descendents of a 1993/1994 document, Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment ('G&P' for short). This commentary is written by the primary author of the International Principles (Vanclay), so it is perhaps a somewhat one-sided account. Nevertheless, the comparison is interesting because it highlights varying understandings of SIA.

## 2. A little history

With the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in the USA on the 1st of January 1970, environmental impact assessment (EIA) was formally established. NEPA required that social issues be considered as part of the definition of the environment (unlike legislation in some other countries). However, there was little comprehension about what considering social issues really meant, and how this would or could actually be done. It was not until the 1973 environmental impact study for the Alaskan Pipeline from Prudoe Bay on the Arctic Sea to Valdez on Prince William Sound, that social issues really came to the fore: "Now that we have dealt with the problem of the permafrost and the caribou and what to do with hot oil, what about changes in the customs and ways of my people?" (cited by Dixon, 1978:4; Burdge and Vanclay, 1995). This concern then led to the establishment of strong interest in social impact assessment as an issue, and a specific methodology and theoretical basis to the field gradually developed.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, SIA flourished in the USA. It was an era of a boom economy, with many large-scale energy projects requiring SIA studies. Gradually, people in the SIA business realized that there was not sufficient control over the quality of the SIA projects being undertaken. Agencies were unable to properly assess the quality of SIA reports, and many consultants were not properly trained. A further problem was that there was confusion over what social impacts were legitimate to consider. One of the members of the original Interorganizational Committee, Charlie Wolf (personal commu-

nication) attributes the initiative for the development of the G&P to Gary Williams who could not convince his employer at the time (a US government agency) that quality of life issues were valid issues to consider in an SIA of the proposed superconducting super-collider. It was thought that by creating a formal statement that had the endorsement of many professional associations, regulatory agencies and other bodies could be encouraged to consider social issues more thoroughly. The statement would certainly give more power to individual SIA practitioners who were arguing that a broader range of issues should be considered in SIA.

Consequently, a committee was formed in 1989 containing one or two representatives from a range of social science organizations which had a membership base in the USA. The committee was called the Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment (usually abbreviated Interorganizational Committee). The organizations represented included the International Association for Impact Assessment, the Rural Sociological Society, the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association (together with the Society for Applied Anthropology), the Agricultural Economics Association, and four members at large who were recognized as having specific experience that would be useful in the development of the guidelines and principles.<sup>1</sup> As most members of this Committee were members of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), even if they were not formally representing IAIA, it was agreed that IAIA would be the lead association, and when the Committee finalized their report, copyright in the report was assigned to IAIA.

The first version of the report was completed in 1993 with the formal copyright date being given as December 14, 1993, but most public versions of the report were released in 1994. The report was subsequently published in May 1994 by a consortium of US agencies, and as a Technical Memorandum of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).<sup>2</sup> It was also published in IAIA's journal, *Impact Assessment* (1994a,b) and in the *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* (1995).

Intellectually, at least, the initial G&P document was well received by the SIA community at large, judging by discussions at IAIA conferences. However, the actual cited use of the G&P was disappointing (Burdge, 2002). Even though they were developed for the USA context, the document had an international standing. However, consistent with their purpose, they were strictly only appropriate to the US NEPA jurisdictional setting. Even in that context, they had a number of problems; primarily that it was not always clear whom they were addressing (see below). Because of their desired use outside of the original USA-NEPA context, some criticism of the G&P developed and it became evident that the document needed updating.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the members of the Interorganizational Committee and the associations represented changes between the various versions of the document. The information here is from the original 1993 IAIA version of the document — the same information is contained in the version published as a NOAA Technical Memorandum.

<sup>2</sup> The Consortium included the US Department of Commerce, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Marine Fisheries Service. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-F/SPO-16. Available on line (access date 22 September 2004) in both HTML <http://www.st.nmfs.gov/tm/spo/spo16.pdf> and PDF versions <http://www.st.nmfs.gov/tm/spo/spo16.pdf>.

At IAIA's New Orleans conference in 1997, two committees were established to revise the G&P. One committee was to modify the G&P for application within the American context, while a second committee 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. Vanclay (2003b) provides more information about the process of development of the International Principles. The [International Principles and the US Principles and Guidelines published in 2003](#) are the products of those committees.

### 3. Brief outline of the original Guidelines and Principles

The original document comprised seven sections, commencing with a brief introduction that contained a specific (narrow) definition of SIA and of social impacts (see discussion below). The second section outlined the relevant sections of NEPA and the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act. Section 3 outlined a basic model for SIA including a checklist (or matrix) of SIA variables. The fourth section outlined the Steps in the SIA process, entrenching a particular model of SIA. The fifth section identified nine 'Principles' for SIA. Sections 4 and 5 presented lengthy explanations of the steps in the model, and a full discussion of the nine principles. A final two sections presented a very short conclusion, and a list of SIA literature.

### 4. Critiquing the original Guidelines and Principles

There were a number of problems with the original G&P which were identified through workshops held in the process of developing the International Principles and the 2003 US Principles and Guidelines. There have also been various mentions in the literature about problems with them (e.g. Seebohm, 1997; Lockie, 2001). Burdge and Vanclay (1995) and Vanclay (1999) have provided improved wording for the principles mentioned in the G&P.

From an international perspective, the primary criticism was that they were developed for the US NEPA-CEQ regulatory framework. This is hardly a fair criticism, since it was the document's stated purpose. However, this criticism was an indication of the need for an international version of the document, which is now provided by the International Principles.

Because the G&P were based on the US regulatory context, the document reflected a proponent-adversary approach to SIA, where SIA was seen as a discrete activity that occurred at the beginning of a project cycle, rather than as a process of participation, or as a process of ensuring optimal development from the community's perspective. The model and philosophy of SIA that were articulated in the G&P were focussed on the protection of individual property rights—impact prediction, mitigation and compensation mechanisms (the negative impacts on affected parties)—and not on the betterment in

wellbeing and improved sustainable livelihoods of the whole community. This might be an unimportant distinction in industrialized countries where most projects are activities where benefits largely accrue to the private sector and costs are borne by the public sector and the community, but in development (where the intention is the betterment of the whole community) the balance of macro-public good versus (minor) harm on a small group of people may be assessed differently.

Although the word ‘policy’ was mentioned in many places in the G&P, consistent with the proponent-adversary approach of SIA/EIA embedded in NEPA, the G&P tends to reflect project-based thinking. Despite the mention of policy, there was no addressing of policy issues.

There were some practical problems with the G&P. The document failed to identify its target audience. Potentially, guidelines and principles can be directed to many different groups, each of whom have different interests. For SIA, the potential list of audiences could include: policy makers (who need to consider environmental management policy); regulatory agency managers (who need to consider what should be specified in tender documents, and whether a particular SIA study adequate); advocates for SIA within agencies (who need to convince the agency what must be done); SIA practitioners (consultants) (who need standards for practice so as to justify the cost indicated in a tender, or to prove to a client/agency that investigation of a wide range of issues is necessary); developers (who need to be convinced why SIA is necessary); and the community and academics with an interest in SIA. The G&P document seemed to be addressing different audiences in different places and therefore it was not clear which audience was being addressed at any one location. The document also suffered from internal inconsistency and from a confusion about its purpose. The principles and guidelines that are discussed seem to be at different levels, and were not necessarily, strictly speaking, principles or guidelines.

## **5. What was new in 2003**

As indicated above, one of the major initiatives in the development of the second round of the G&P was the creation of a separate document for international purposes, as well as an explicit statement in the title that the American document was for use in the USA. However, despite that purpose, it is curious to note that the US document has been generalised, rather than being made more specific. In addition to cosmetic and formatting changes and a slight re-ordering of content, one section that was present in the original version has been deleted—the section on the legal and regulatory basis of SIA in the USA. In other respects, however, whereas the International Principles presents quite a different view of SIA, the underlying philosophy and approach to SIA in the US Principles and Guidelines is rather similar to that in the original G&P.

Some changes that are noteworthy include the expansion of the number of stages of a project or policy from four to five, with the planning stage being split into preliminary planning and detailed planning stages. The principles have changed considerably in both scope and tone becoming more technocratic. The short conclusion

remains the same, and the Bibliography has been updated but remains US-centric and patchy.

The 2003 version of the US Principles and Guidelines (p. 232) claims that they “have benefited from almost ten years of comments” but it is not clear that the Interorganizational Committee has fully responded to all the concerns raised above. In the section headed ‘*What is new in the 2003 version?*’, about the only major statement of change is that “the new version expands the focus away from projects to include policies, plans, and programs” (p. 232). But the original G&P version was always meant to include policies—the definition of SIA being: “In this monograph, however, we define social impact assessment in terms of efforts to assess or estimate, in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from specific policy actions (including programs, and the adoption of new policies), and specific government actions” (p. 1). It is true that it was a major criticism of the original G&P, that even though policies were mentioned, there was very little attention given to anything other than the project level. Despite the comment in the 2003 version, there has been very little change to give increased recognition to the policy level, and it is true to say that the same criticism applies—there is inadequate attention of the policy, plan and program levels.

## 6. Principles, guidelines and values

In the process of developing the International Principles, it became apparent that there were varying understandings of what ‘guidelines’ and ‘principles’ were, and few people had any understanding of a formal definition of these terms. It became necessary to define these terms and to constantly remind the Task Force and other participants of the definitions adopted. In defining them, and thinking about the meaning of them, it became clear that guidelines derive from principles, and principles derive from values. Guidelines, therefore, should not be developed in advance of clarification of principles, which in turn should not be developed before a discussion about values. This is the reason why both the International and US documents have put principles first.

It also became obvious to the International Task Force that it would be a pointless exercise for a non-government organization like IAIA to independently develop a set of guidelines to foist on to industry without their engagement in that process. Guidelines so developed would have no legitimacy, no ‘ownership’ by industry, and would not be adopted by industry. Guidelines become relevant and effective, not by being written on paper, but through a process of development which engages with the people they are intended to influence. The benefit of guidelines, therefore, is not the having of them, but the process of their development. It is through this participatory process that the guidelines gain legitimacy and commitment by industry.

The International Principles Task Force therefore resolved that it would not develop guidelines, but it would articulate the values of the SIA community, and the principles that SIA should address. The US Interorganizational Committee agreed with the International Principles Task Force in prioritising principles over guidelines, a change between 1993 and 2003.

The International Principles Task Force (Vanclay, 2003a: 8) defined the key terms as follows.

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Core Values:	<i>Fundamental, ideal-typical, enduring, statements of belief that are strongly held and accepted as premises (is-statements).</i>
Principles:	<i>General statements of either a common understanding or an indication as to a course of action about what ought to be done (ought-statements).</i>
Guidelines:	<i>Statements by which to plan a specific course of action and which clarify how it should done (action-statements).</i>

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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.

It will be observed that the majority (if not all) of the nine original principles in the 1993 G&P, and the six principles in the 2003 US Principles and Guidelines, do not conform to the above definition of principles.

## 7. Comparing the International and US documents

### 7.1. Definition of SIA

SIA was defined by the US Interorganizational Committee in 1993 (p. 1) as follows:

In this monograph, however, we define social impact assessment in terms of efforts to assess or estimate, in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from specific policy actions (including programs, and the adoption of new policies), and specific government actions (including buildings, large projects and leasing large tracts of land for resource extraction), particularly in the context of the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 or “NEPA” (P.L. 91-190, 42 U.S.C. 4371 *et seq.*).

Their 2003 definition is substantially similar, although broadening the scope to include private projects and state regulations as well as the federal setting (NEPA) (pp. 231–232).

In the 2003 version, we continue to define social impact assessment in terms of efforts to assess, appraise or estimate, in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from proposed actions. These include: specific government or private projects, such as construction of buildings, siting power generation facilities, large transportation projects, managing natural resources, fish and wildlife; and preserving or leasing large tracts of land and the adoption of new policies and resulting plans and programs. The actions and their consequences are considered

particularly in the context of the NEPA (P.L. 91-190, 42 U.S.C. 4371 *et seq.*) and state laws and regulations that reflect NEPA.

In contrast, the International Principles (Vanclay, 2003a: 6) presents a very different concept of SIA.

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.

About the only point of agreement in these definitions is the focus on planned actions (interventions). The International Principles recognizes that the methodology can be applied to events other than planned interventions, such as disasters, demographic changes and epidemics, but the primary intention is the consideration of planned interventions. The significant differences in the definitions, from the perspective of the International Principles Task Force, are the following:

- SIA should not necessarily be tied to a regulatory context. SIA can and should be undertaken in many situations and not just when a specific jurisdiction requires it. Private sector companies ought to routinely and systematically do SIA as part of their corporate social responsibility, good neighbour, or triple bottom line processes. Communities ought to do SIA in planning development. SIA is beneficial in any context and should not just be seen as part of a regulatory process, initiated because of environmental regulation.
- SIA should not just be *ex-ante* or ‘in advance’. The emphasis on ‘in advance’ highlights a view that SIA is a project-driven, responsive or reactive (rather than proactive) once-off event, and not a community-driven process leading to appropriate sustainable development.
- SIA needs to consider how to ensure the achievement of the intended positive consequences or goals of development as well as preventing unintended negative outcomes. Therefore, SIA needs to be goal-oriented and proactive and not just reactive.

The International Principles also indicates that there are three different levels in the meaning of ‘SIA’: (1) a paradigm or field of research and practice; (2) a social research process or methodology, and (3) a discrete step (or specific task) of predicting social impacts in some impact assessment process. The concept of SIA embodied in the US Principles and Guidelines hovers between level (2) and level (3). The concept of SIA in the International Principles rejects level (3) and straddles levels (1) and (2).

## 7.2. *SIA variables*

There is minimal change between the 1993 G&P and 2003 US Principles and Guidelines in the description of social impact variables that should be considered. Table 1

in the 2003 version lists 32 variables categorised under five headings. Although a note to the table (p. 243) states that “These variables are suggestive and illustrative and are intended to provide a beginning point for the social assessor”, there are many reasons to avoid using a checklist, one of which is to avoid the development of a checklist mentality (Vanclay, 2002). The presentation of the variables in a matrix format emulates a Leopold Matrix, one of the original methodologies of EIA (Leopold et al., 1971). This creates an impression of the US Principles and Guidelines as being technocratic, something that was undoubtedly intended.

The International Principles does not contain a list of impact variables, this being a deliberate decision by the author and the Task Force. Instead, the International Principles suggests that SIA is an umbrella or overarching framework that embodies the evaluation of all impacts on humans, and it then goes on to include a long list of areas that should be considered. It also describes social impacts in very general terms.

Analysing the 32 variables of the US Principles and Guidelines reveals many deficiencies. It is disappointing that there is no engagement with Vanclay’s (2002) analysis of SIA variables which reveal some 80-odd concepts and which was a solid critique of the variable listing of the 1993 G&P. Given the minimal change between 1993 and 2003, the listing of variables in the US Principles and Guidelines would be subject to the same criticisms made by Vanclay (2002).

### *7.3. The basic framework for SIA*

Both the 1993 G&P and the 2003 US Principles and Guidelines articulate a basic model for SIA. While the 2003 version has updated the model, the essential elements are the same. “We use a comparative SIA method to study the course of events in a location where planned environmental change has occurred and to extrapolate from that analysis what is likely to happen in another location where a similar action is proposed” (p. 239). An experimental method showing an experimental group (the impact study), a control, and a prior comparative study is provided in Fig. 2, giving the appearance of scientific rigor. Ten steps are outlined in a linear flow chart of action (Fig. 4).

In contrast, the International Principles provides a list of 17 dotpoints of things that SIA comprises, not prescribing a specific order. The International Principles Task Force considered that it was not necessary to endorse a specific model as there were sufficient textbooks to provide this type of information.

### *7.4. The principles themselves*

The US Principles and Guidelines (p. 233) outlines six principles which inform a total of 16 guidelines.

1. Achieve extensive understanding of local and regional populations and settings to be affected by the proposed action, program or policy.
2. Focus on the key elements of the human environment related to the proposed action, program or policy.

3. The SIA is based upon sound and replicable scientific research concepts and methods.
4. Provide quality information for use in decision-making.
5. Ensure that any environmental justice issues are fully described and analyzed.
6. Undertake project, program or policy monitoring and evaluation and propose mitigation measures if needed.

The International Principles contains eight fundamental principles that relate to development in general and seek to influence the shape of policies and projects. It then specifies a further 12 principles that relate specifically to SIA practice. As a bonus, it then outlines how 12 leading international environmental principles from International Agreements such as the Rio Declaration can be interpreted to have a social dimension. The principles that relate specifically to SIA practice are (Vanclay, 2003a, 9):

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.

Comparing the 6 principles from the US Principles and Guidelines with the 12 principles from the International Principles reveals the different approaches of the two documents. The positivist/technocratic character of the US Principles and Guidelines is obvious in contrast to the more democratic, participatory, constructivist International Principles.

## 8. Conclusion

If the US Principles and Guidelines, instead of being published because it is an official statement, was a paper submitted to a journal for refereeing, and I was the referee, I would have to reject it. It failed to engage with the literature, and it has not considered a range of developments in the field of SIA. While I was a strong advocate of the original 1993 Guidelines and Principles, I am disappointed in the lack of updating of the 2003 version of the now US Principles and Guidelines. The Interorganizational Committee failed to do the hard work that was necessary to update their document. They have instead made minimal changes, many of which have failed to address the critiques of the original version. Given that the Interorganizational Committee was constantly kept informed of the development of the International Principles, saw draft versions of the International Principles especially in the last 2 years or so of their development, and that the International Principles was published first, the complete lack of acknowledgement or reference to the International Principles is surprising. Whereas the expectation was that the US Principles and Guidelines would become more attuned to the US NEPA-CEQ regulatory context, leaving the International Principles to become the general statement of SIA, the US Principles and Guidelines has also become generalised. Instead of more connection with US legislation, there is less—the only major change from 1993 to 2003 being the removal of the section on legal mandates and administrative procedures.

In contrast, while the International Principles is some ways incomplete, it presents a very different picture of SIA to that presented in the US Principles and Guidelines. While the document, too, is inadequate and is unlikely to fulfil all of the objectives listed at the beginning of the document, it at least does address the criticisms made of the original G&P, and the various critiques of SIA in general. It genuinely does attempt to consider a broad range of social issues, and to extend from the project level to the policy level.

The need for SIA is as great now as it ever was, and internationally at least (if not in the USA), there is increased demand for SIA, or at least for social analysis of some description. Unfortunately, whereas a technocratic appearance to SIA might be necessary to gain legitimacy in the USA (given the asocietal nature of American society, politics and culture), the technocratic appearance of the American model of SIA makes it unattractive to an international audience. Internationally, new concepts, approaches and methodologies are emerging, which SIA is having to compete with, and integrate. These approaches include social risk assessment, sustainability assessment, triple bottom line accounting, and corporate social responsibility (Becker and Vanclay, 2003; Vanclay, 2004). There is a concern, not with the prevention of negative impacts, but on building social capital, on capacity building, good governance, community engagement and social inclusion. None of these terms are mentioned in the US Principles and Guidelines. To survive into the future, SIA will need to include the new language and to adapt to new expectations of a wide range of regulatory and de-regulated contexts. Becoming established as a quality assurance process, like a social version of an environmental management system (ISO 14000) may be desirable.

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