

THE NECESSITY FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL FORUM ON ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need for anthropological forum on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). EIA has become a subject of many academic discourses, as well as a topic of intense policy debates since the enactment of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969 by the United States government. It is the belief of the initiators, And many national governments and funding agencies buy this view, that Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) must precede project actions and these must in turn be preceded by "conceptually unified and truly interdisciplinary studies." The essential aim is to make development projects more "environment-friendly."

Following the expectations required of various disciplines in the process, this paper examines the role of anthropologists in aspects of EIA, where we are particularly knowledgeable. It is against this background that the paper calls for anthropological forum on EIA. The paper proposes the guidelines that will enable us develop appropriate theories and techniques required to meet the challenges of EIA today, and in the future. It contends that concerted efforts need to be made to develop and streamline the guidelines.

Background

Since the enactment of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969 by the USA government, many national governments and funding agencies have made it mandatory for Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to precede project actions. EIS is a document, which

summarizes the findings of an environmental impact assessment (EIA). It summarizes the baseline conditions as well as the likely consequences of the actions on such conditions. It also proposes modifications to the actions where necessary. Environmental impact statement is also called "environmental statement," "impact statement" or "environmental impact report" (Canter, 1975). Such a statement or report is generally preceded by interdisciplinary studies referred to as environmental impact assessment. EIA represents attempts to evaluate the consequences of a proposed action on each of the variables in the baseline conditions. It attempts to "predict the consequences of proposed development projects for the environment (both natural resources and human institutions and practices) in order to allow informed decisions on project design and implementation (Quinlan, 1993).

Three basic steps are essential for environmental impact assessment:

- 1). Prediction of the anticipated change in the baseline conditions or environmental setting.
- 2). Determination of the magnitude or scale of the particular change.
- 3). Application of an important or significant factor to the change (Canter, 1975).

It is the belief of the initiators of NEPA that people of "each generation... are trustees of the environment for succeeding generations. In carrying out this trust responsibility, the present generation may seek the widest range of beneficial use of the environment that can be obtained without degrading the quality of the environment or creating unintentioned undesirable consequences" (Soovill et al, 1977). The essential aim is to make development projects more "environment-friendly". This Act today, forms the basic from which other national governments and funding agencies draw their environmental policy guidelines.

In order to realise the ambitions of the initiators of EIA, prepare a baseline inventory and write an impact statement, an interdisciplinary team, which is appropriate for the types of projects being installed, is often constituted to make inputs on the positive and negative effects of such projects and make recommendations for appropriate actions. According to Stuart (1977): EIA "must not be a patchwork; it must be conceptually unified and truly interdisciplinary." A team of assessors may include physical scientists, engineers, biologists, economists, geographers, archaeologists, sociologists and anthropologists etc. as the case may be. These scholars are often expected to make inputs would, however, be more meaningful if and when they realise the very nature of contributions their disciplines could make in the process.

Anthropologists are particularly associated with social impact assessment (SIA) which is a component of EIA. Like EIA, SIA is a predictive business or exercise. SIA has been defined as "a process which predicts the significant social consequences of an activity, evaluates alternative sites, techniques and technologies in terms of their social impact, and proposes the changes and management solutions that will lead to the enhancement of posi-

tive effects and a reduction of the adverse effects (HSE Manual, 1996). It represents "efforts to assess or estimate in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from specific policy actions..." (NOAA Technical Memo, 1994).

Branch (1984) identified six rationales for conducting SIA:

- 1). To fulfill, or comply with, legal requirements...
- 2). To define problems, clarify issues.
- 3). To predict the ability of a community (population) to adapt to changing conditions.
- 4). To anticipate, and assess, the likely impacts of planned actions on the quality of life.
- 5). To illuminate the meaning (subjective) and impacts (objective) of planned changes.
- 6). To identify needs and strategies for mitigating negative impacts.

To realise the objectives of SIA, therefore, scholars who have appreciation of environmental science, and should have qualifications in a social science discipline such as the following must conduct it:

- 1). Anthropology - the study of the biological and cultural development of humans and the principles guiding human relations in all societies.
- 2). Sociology and social anthropology - the sociological study of human values, rules and conducts in different types of society (ESE Manual, 1996).

Other disciplines may have roles to play depending on local circumstances and need e.g. community health, psychology, archaeology and agricultural development (also see ESE Manual, 1996).

SIA is conducted throughout the entire life cycle of a project. It starts from the planning/policy development stages of the project and moves through implementation/construction, operation/maintenance and ends with decommissioning/abandonment if it becomes necessary. This will help planners to respond to new demands and challenges as they arise. It is generally believed that communities of impact should be involved in all stages of impact assessment. This is because they are in a better position to say how they are affected and what their priorities are. These can then be matched by scientific positions on the issues. In essence, "a compromise must be struck between the subjectivity of value judgements and the objectivity of scientific approach..."

This background information is very relevant and it will enable us establish the role of anthropologists in social impact assessment; discuss the necessity for a forum(s) on such study; and develop the guidelines required to attain the objectives for which the study was conceived.

The Role of Anthropologists

Like other social analysts, anthropologists had over the decades been marginalised in the policy formulation and development planning programmes of most African, and indeed, Third world nations. This attitude emanated first, from the non-utilitarian views held by these governments and sometimes, by anthropologists themselves of their discipline. Either due to ignorance, training or intellectual inclinations, these people tended to see anthropology as sterile intellectual discipline. Yet these people have generally acknowledged the very significance of social investigation in project planning.

Several explanations have been given for this lack of utilization of anthropologists. The first is the technocratic nature of earlier development programmes more often "dominated by economists, engineers, agriculturalists and others who base their success on the attainment of quantitative targets..." (Hall, 1987). Even when they acknowledged the need for community participation, they showed little interest in "the social or welfare ramifications and the ethical questions associated with promoting socio-economic change" (Hall, 1987). Worse still, some of these technocrats generally pretended that they had the skills required to handle the social dimensions of development projects instead of employing the services of expert anthropologists or sociologists. The second explanation is the legacy of academic tradition among early anthropologists and other social researchers, which they handed down to their successors. This tradition "stresses non-involvement with practical issues and (maintained) the persistent belief in a value-free or "objective" study of society, leading to the rejection of any activity which involves social engineering towards pre-determined ends" (Hall, 1987). This tradition has permeated the thinking of many African anthropologists. According to Andah (1988), various departments and faculties in African universities "prefer to tread the easy path of imitating European universities, while ignoring the more difficult tasks of breaking new grounds..." Another reason which is linked to the above, is the lack of integration among the various disciplines at the university level where each discipline has regrettably maintained an unhealthy state of aloofness and hence unable to undertake interdisciplinary cooperative researches. This attitude has made it extremely difficult for anthropologists and other social researchers to develop programmes with full range of skills required for devising short-term solutions to development programmes (Almy, 1979) cited from Hall, 1987).

Today, however, there is an increasing realisation of the relevance of social investigation in project development. This realisation is informed by the success recorded by project actions, which took account of social soundness analysis. "After examining 68 World Bank schemes, Kottak (185) concluded that those which did take account of social issues enjoyed higher economic returns" (Hall, 1987). Failure to consider social and cultural contexts of a project invites inappropriate project design and ultimately leads to projects that are ineffec-

tive and undesirable to the supposed beneficiaries (Cernea, 1985). The positive attitude towards anthropology, even though not generally felt, has influenced a number of international aid agencies like USAID, WHO, UNESCO, etc. to engage the services of anthropologists in social engineering. Some national governments are also toeing this line by employing notable anthropologists in their development schemes. Even though the number is still minute, it is a step in the right direction. The anthropologists so-employed are expected to make social inputs in such development schemes as residential development, road, rail and airport development, tourism and leisure development, agricultural extension, land settlement, mineral processing and exploitation, refugee resettlement, organization of irrigation for farmers, water supplies etc. This development calls for a change of attitude among anthropologist to enable them exploit the growing opportunities for overall benefit. Anthropologists must now embrace issues with practical orientation and development prospects.

It has been generally acknowledged that anthropologists are well trained to conduct community-based researches and by extension social impact assessment in developing nations. They are well-versed in studies concerning community life. Consequently, they are in the vantage position to describe the baseline social context of any action; document through longitudinal studies, any change resulting from such action; and predict social impacts. Their focus in this regard is essentially two-fold. The first is to identify the nature of relationship between project action and the affected communities. They analyze development projects with reference to socio-cultural variables and the relationships between such variables and the change resulting from project actions. The second is to explain how this relationship can be enhanced by recommending strategies that promote equity as well as ensure sustainability while exploiting the opportunities for economic benefits. The conduct of this kind of research thus poses a new challenge to anthropologists who have generally maintained the old tradition of non-involvement in practical issues. The success of anthropologists in the present scheme of things is, however, dependent on their ability to develop appropriate guidelines, strategies and plan of action. Hence further developments in findings, theory and techniques are necessary to harness their inputs.

The Necessity for the Forum(s)

Having appraised the above issues and the very relevance of SIA to Africa, especially now that most African governments are carrying out developmental projects, it is our belief that African anthropologists should play a role. It is also our belief that concerted effort needs to be made to develop appropriate theories and techniques required in meeting the challenges of SIA today, and in the future. Being generally knowledgeable about those societies and/or communities where project actions take place, anthropologists are in the vantage positions to make meaningful contributions to SIA/EIA. It is on this basis that this paper calls for anthropological forum(s) on EIA.

The aims of such forum(s) shall be:

- 1) To sensitize anthropologists on the need for SIA/EIA-based researches.

- 2) To develop and standardize guidelines for anthropological contributions (especially African anthropology) to EIS/EIA.
- 3) To educate them on the ways of handling SIA/EIA-based researches.

In other words, the forum(s) shall develop skills and provide participants with practical ideas and knowledge needed to participate effectively in the SIA.

Participants in such forum(s) shall come from throughout Africa and would be drawn from anthropologists who are particularly interested in environmental studies. A network of African environmental assessors, drawn from ecological anthropologists, cultural resource persons, socio-cultural anthropologists etc., should be constituted to participate in the forum(s). Like the network of African Medical Anthropologists (NAMA), which is currently making positive contributions to health-based researches, anthropological contributions to EIA/SIA will be best realised via an African network.

Specialists in EIA/SIA from Africa and elsewhere who are known to have made valuable contributions to this study area, should be attracted as trainers. If the forum is successful, we will succeed in making anthropology more relevant to current and future development of our continent.

Proposed Guidelines for Anthropological Contributions to EIA/SIA

It could be seen from the above, that anthropologists should be neck-deep in SIA for they possess the wherewithal to conduct effectively, such researches that will help in realising this objectives of SIA in Africa. This paper proposes three main kinds of dialogues that will enable us develop a conceptually unified approach to SIA in Africa.

The first dialogue involves an inventORIZATION of the social variables and other cultural ramifications of SIA with a view to developing a socio-cultural checklist appropriate to SIA in Africa. The second dialogue should concern itself with a critical study of SIA methodologies with a view to arriving at a generally accepted methodology for Africa. We should, however, be flexible in our choice of methodology. We should not adopt wholesale, the US version of SIA (which is heavily quantitative and concentrates on large-scale demographic and economic related social changes) or the Canadian model of SIA (which relies heavily on participant observation and active involvement of the social assessor (Burdge, 1990)). A compromise should be struck between these two types to enable us benefit from their various elements. Some authorities have proposed the learning and appraisal methods which provide a compromise between detailed anthropological studies and cursory studies which lack the depth required of an SIA. (HSE Manual, 1996). The third dialogue proposes a conceptual integration of the various disciplines that will be useful in realising the objectives of SIA in Africa. Such disciplines like agricultural extension, rural sociology, community development, statistics, archaeology etc. when integrated with Anthropology, will be very useful in realising the objectives of SIA in Africa.

As a summary, the discussion shall centre on the underlisted areas to enable us develop and streamline a conceptually unified approach.

- 1) Regulatory and administrative procedures
- 2) Conceptual guidelines
- 3) SIA/EIA methodology
- 4) Appraisal of relevant SIA researches and the role of anthropology
- 5) Computer/Statistical application to SIA research
- 6) Others.

It is hopeful that if participants are adequately exposed to the above study areas, they will be in the position to develop a conceptually unified anthropological approach to SIA in Africa. This will give room for a better conduct and appraisal of SIA researches, which will contribute most effectively to the decision-making process and enhance company-community relations.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights the issues underlining the call for an anthropological forum on EIA in Africa. The paper x-rays the EIA to enable it pinpoint the areas where anthropological contributions are needed. It frowns at the current attitude of non-involvement in practical issues, pointing out that the time has come for anthropologists to have a change of style. It further notes that anthropologists are particularly associated with SIA. This helps in social considerations in project planning and implementation. It points out that such a social angle must be incorporated from the earliest phases of a project, to enable it have a decisive influence on design. Social analysis has a valuable role to play. It has its own technical skills, which are as valid as those of the economists and engineers. The paper therefore proposes the guidelines that will enable African anthropologists finely tune their skills, by making concerted efforts to arrive at a streamlined approach. It is believed that if properly prosecuted, the anthropological forum, which the paper proposes, will help chart a new course for African anthropologists while improving their inputs in SIA. It is hoped that this call will yield positive results to enable us contribute more meaningfully to national and/or continental development.

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