



Article

The necessary confluence of sociology and social impact assessment in the era of global change

Current Sociology Monograph
2024, Vol. 72(4) 601–611
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DOI: 10.1177/00113921231203182
journals.sagepub.com/home/csi



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Abstract

Despite the intrinsic and natural connection between sociology and social impact assessment, the latter often does not hold a prominent place in the academic theory and practice of sociology. This monograph aims to justify and reclaim the rightful position of social impact assessment within the sociological discipline, through the contributions of some of the most renowned international experts in this field. This introductory article reflects on the necessary mutual contribution between sociology and social impact assessment, which, through their epistemological, methodological and axiological dialogues, establish an applied working space aimed at providing solutions for real-world problems. Sociology and social impact assessment must join forces to become agents not only of knowledge production but also of improvement of the living conditions of those in situations of social vulnerability, being this an urgent task in the face of contemporary global changes and growing inequalities.

Keywords

Climate change, consequences, evaluation, social change, social sciences

Introduction

The Western development project has undoubtedly brought about both successes and failures. It has played a fundamental role in the technologically advanced industrial society and has facilitated material prosperity for millions of people who continually consume the resources and end-products that sustain the system, from minerals or industrial

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agriculture to the energy produced by hydropower or fossil fuels. However, this progress has come with significant trade-offs, including the environmental crises and the consequential social emergency that have been triggered by this machinery of production and continuous growth (Schnaiberg et al., 2002). In addition to these global consequences, development projects, large infrastructures or intensive extractive industries have direct and indirect social impacts experienced by local communities in a diversity of ways and that have been commonly assumed as collateral costs of progress (Mancini and Sala, 2018). These effects are often characterised by their unequal distribution, with an especial burden on vulnerable groups or even by their invisibility and concealment during the decision-making and management of plans, programmes and projects. To address these issues, social impact assessment (SIA) emerged as a valuable tool that allows for the identification, analysis and management of these social effects (Esteves et al., 2012). It provides rigorous information to the various stakeholders so that they can take actions to manage social impacts, that is, to prevent, mitigate or compensate them and to offer a just governance framework in development processes (Vanclay, 2003).

However, the task of conducting SIAs is not without its problems, obstacles and conflicts, primarily because large-scale development projects frequently take place in territories characterised by increasing socioeconomic and cultural vulnerability. The power disparity between promoters and major public or private corporations contrasts sharply with the political and economic weakness of the most vulnerable populations. This power imbalance leads to the neglect and invisibility of impacts that are intangible, immeasurable and challenging to translate into the language of modernity, science or the modern market.

SIA, in very simplified terms, is ultimately aimed at defining impacts as positive or negative, therefore relying on referential elements of an epistemic nature (how to access the knowledge that is going to support the final assessment) as well as axiological (the value frameworks that are taken as a reference in the assessment tasks). Furthermore, SIA practice has a strong political dimension in the sense that it openly acknowledges that its focus is not merely on objects of study that need to be understood, but on subjects, and moreover, on vulnerable subjects (Aledo and Domínguez-Gómez, 2018). Vulnerable populations, their visibility and the equalisation of unjust power structures have been a political cornerstone of SIA. SIA operates within this framework of political, axiological and epistemological conflicts, immersed in complex social environments with multiple conflicting interests. Evaluators find themselves working amid such tensions and become part of the conflicts created by all actors who seek to influence the assessment process. Also, the endeavour to normalise SIA as a requirement, alongside other legally enforced assessments such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), faces tensions and numerous challenges. Undoubtedly, one of the main obstacles encountered by SIA practitioners is working in environments characterised by a strong neoliberal ethos and in projects where their sponsors demand swift legal and social approval. The critical positioning and the execution of SIA based on the powerful conceptual frameworks and robust methodologies offered by social sciences are not always well understood in corporate settings (Ortiz and Climent-Gil, 2020). Within this framework of disciplinary evolution in SIA, it is worth questioning the role sociology should play in enhancing the transformative capacity as an applied social science.

This monographic issue delves into all of these matters, addressing topics such as inequality, conflicting epistemologies or political conflicts. Moreover, it explores these themes in the context of profound technological and socio-ecological changes that are transforming the way in which SIA activities are conducted. In subsequent articles of this monograph, we will explore the various dimensions of SIA, shedding light on the complexities and challenges involved in its theory and practice. By examining the inequalities, epistemologies and power dynamics at play, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role and significance of SIA both in contemporary society and in current sociological debates.

In the epilogue of this special issue, Frank Vanclay, one of the most prominent academic figures in the field of SIA, provides a comprehensive review of the evolution of this discipline from its origins in the 1970s in the United States to the recent years when international development organisations have started requiring the implementation of this tool for managing the social impacts of their large projects. Although it appears as an epilogue at the end of this issue, we believe readers who are unfamiliar with SIA will benefit from beginning with this article. Vanclay offers an updated definition of SIA and discusses certain terminological confusions arising from the convergence of different epistemic communities within the SIA professional field. The author also provides a description of the paradigmatic evolution of SIA, from its early conception as a tool for environmental licencing processes (EIAs) to its current status as a paradigm that enables the understanding of projects as complex eco-techno-sociological systems, while also serving as a tool for effectively managing projects' social aspects. In this diachronic review of SIA, Vanclay introduces new fields of work for SIA and emphasises the necessary incorporation of principles and interests stemming from advancements in areas such as gender and development (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2011), human rights (Esteves et al., 2017) or climate change and disasters studies (Aznar-Crespo et al., 2021; Kruger et al., 2022).

While there is an undeniable and intrinsic connection between sociology and SIA, it is unfortunate that extensive research on this subject is not commonly found in the most prominent journals within the field. Despite SIA making significant strides in the discipline during the late 1970s and 1980s, with seminal works by Freudenburg and Keating (1982), Freudenburg (1986) and Dietz (1987) published in some of the leading sociological journals, its presence has noticeably dwindled in recent years. Instead, SIA has found its place primarily in highly interdisciplinary outlets closely associated with EIA. While this shift may reflect the intricate nature of SIA theory and practice, it is important for sociology not to overlook the significance of this relevant area of work and its deep sociological roots. Thus, it becomes imperative for sociology to reclaim its focus on SIA and recognise the reciprocal contributions that sociology and SIA can make to one another. This monograph and its research pieces offer valuable insights into this necessary relationship, shedding light on the interconnections, opportunities and challenges that emerge when sociology engages with SIA in the current context of social change and climate emergency. By examining the dynamic interplay between the two fields, we can uncover new avenues for understanding and addressing social impacts, grounded in sociological theories and methodologies. Through this exploration, we can foster a deeper appreciation for the symbiotic nature of sociology and SIA and ultimately enrich both disciplines through their mutual exchange of knowledge and perspectives.

Sociology and SIA: intersections and areas for mutual contribution

Sociology, as a discipline, offers valuable contributions to the field of SIA. By drawing on its methodology, data collection techniques and theoretical foundations, sociology enriches the practice of SIA and provides a broader perspective on societal changes and power dynamics. This monographic issue provides the perfect opportunity to highlight some key aspects where sociology can significantly benefit SIA, from theory to practice, and vice versa.

First of all, sociology has a long-standing tradition of studying social change in its most various forms, including the transition to a post-technological society. The sociological contribution to the comprehensive understanding of the social systems and impacts of development is of the utmost value to SIA. By leveraging sociological theories, SIA gains insights into the broader social, cultural and economic contexts within which impacts occur, enabling a more nuanced and robust assessment. Moreover, SIA has a clear connection to critical sociology (Fasensfest, 2006) and its focus on deconstructing power structures and relationships that impose specific conditions on individuals (Climent-Gil et al., 2018). It analyses the complex interactions between powerful groups and marginalised communities, examining the interplay between structural constraints and agency limitations and possibilities. SIA can benefit from this approach by ensuring that evaluations do not reproduce the existing power structures that underpin the production of impacts. In this special issue, several authors emphasise the relevance of equity as a value to strengthen the practice of SIA, as part of the objective of promoting well-being and sustainable development proposed by international SIA guidelines. Parsons and Mottee, in their article for this monograph, highlight the difficulty of translating these ideal principles into practice. Drawing on theoretical advancements in environmental justice, they propose implementing equity in its distributive, procedural and participatory dimensions, with a particular focus on prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

Sociology is also reflective about its own knowledge construction process, and it encourages reflection on the production of knowledge within SIA, the role of evaluators as knowledge producers, the involvement of affected parties and the conflicting interests at play. The theoretical, critical and reflexive aspects of sociology can be effectively applied to SIA to promote a more just and equitable assessment process. This critical contribution from sociology, in addition to being transferred to its methodological applications – as will be presented in the following paragraphs – significantly influences the paradigmatic foundations of SIA (Aledo and Dominguez-Gómez, 2018). Sociology of science has questioned the neutral nature of science, emphasising the need to clarify the principles and values underlying the evaluative process. The contribution by Howitt and Jolly to this monograph delves deeper into this matter. The authors explore the tensions that exist between the worldviews of indigenous groups and mining companies to illustrate that the evaluative process needs, first and foremost, to establish or agree upon the guiding principles that will shape the assessment. The imposition of a neoliberal worldview that disenchant, objectifies, quantifies and dissects reality makes it challenging to conduct an SIA that is capable of understanding the experiences of affected

communities. A classic stream of sociology has also delved into the social construction of reality, thereby helping to recognise the social processes involved in the construction of impacts. Sociology teaches us that impacts are not independent movements generated by an external and autonomous technological project but rather the result of a complex interaction of eco-techno-sociological elements. In this regard, the seminal work of Vanclay (2002) has enabled the understanding of the distinction between processes of change and impacts, with the latter being understood through the experimentation and interpretation of those affected by the changes brought about by the project on their community and territory. Finally, theories of social conflict and studies on power-knowledge have powerfully influenced the epistemological projections of SIA, acknowledging a conflict of knowledge, experiences and powers among different groups affected and interested parties.

Second, from the practice standpoint, sociology brings to SIA both a strong commitment to applied sociological research with social transformation, equality and progress and a long tradition of robust and high-quality empirical research and methodological approaches. SIA is a knowledge production process that looks at social sciences to find the tools that guarantee the validity and reliability of the assessment outcomes. While common sociological methods have been applied to the practice of SIA since the beginning, from surveys to ethnography, modern methodological developments are also entering the field, and it is possible to find SIA experiences that use big data, social media resources or social network analysis (SNA). In this monograph, examples are provided of how the updating of sociological observation and analysis procedures has been utilised to advance the field of SIA. In this line, Aznar-Crespo et al. demonstrate, in an applied manner, how SNA enables a systematic understanding of the generative processes of social vulnerability. Through a set of relational parameters, these authors identify, interrelate and prioritise factors of social vulnerability to flood risks. By employing SNA, the authors obtain a mapping of key hotspots of social vulnerability that determine the local population's capacity to cope with flood impacts. This network analysis of generative processes of social vulnerability is highly valuable for the emerging field of SIA applied to natural disasters, as it offers precise and strategic insights into the key contextual forces that mediate the generation of social impacts during such events. Gaining control over these elements in SIA not only provides a holistic understanding of the social impacts of natural disasters but also enables the identification of risk management strategies with broader scope and effectiveness. Also, in their contribution to this monograph, Sherren and co-authors propose the use of social media tools and their integration into SIA. The authors present three case studies in Canada to discuss the challenges and opportunities associated with these new resources for SIA practitioners. These studies highlight the use of Instagram as a source of relevant information for SIA and present advanced analysis strategies such as natural learning processing, among others. Their work is an example of how new digital technologies and analytical methods can enhance the understanding of social impacts by providing additional and complementary information to combined traditional methods.

Throughout the different phases of an SIA (Vanclay et al., 2015), sociology applies these methodological and technical contributions to its practice on the field. During the baseline study phase, SIA describes the community before being impacted by the project

or process of change and compares it with the community once affected by the change processes caused by the intervention. A detailed analysis of the community in its previous state is essential. Sociological theory has reflected on the concept of community and the processes of change at this scale (Barrett, 2015). Sociology has moved away from an idealised view of the community, understood as a homogeneous entity, to highlight its heterogeneity and internal conflicts that are exacerbated by the unevenly distributed social effects. The project itself is also the subject of study in this initial phase. Sociology adds to the technical analysis of projects its comprehension of them as a social process in which dense relationships are formed between macro-social change processes and their local expressions. The contribution of Martínez to the present monograph provides a good example of this. In line with situating the analysis of local impacts in relation to the global context – in this case, applied to the energy transition process – Martínez describes in detail the local effects of energy public policies in Mexico. Through a review of wind energy projects, the author demonstrates the tensions between the necessary change in the energy matrix and the consequences of imposing it on local communities characterised by the significant social vulnerability.

The second phase of SIA involves the analysis of the diverse social groups involved in the conflict socio-space (Aledo and Domínguez-Gómez, 2018) in which the SIA process takes place. This phase is necessary to subsequently identify the uneven distribution of impacts and to understand the social network of support and opposition within which the project is situated (Vanclay, 2003). Sociology provides techniques for analysing the social networks and structures that enable an understanding of the complex interplay of forces mobilised by the project or process of change. In addition, as stated before, critical sociology (Burdge and Vanclay, 1995; Gismondi, 1997) and discourse analysis techniques (Aledo and Domínguez-Gómez, 2018), among others, have advanced the deconstruction of certain terms subtly employed to depoliticise the social conflict associated with project implementation. For instance, within certain impact assessment models, the terms ‘affected parties’ or ‘affected communities’ have been replaced by ‘stakeholders’, thus distorting the recognition of the uneven distribution of impacts. The application of Foucauldian theories (Ijabadeniyi and Vanclay, 2020) or conflict analysis (Prenzel and Vanclay, 2014) stimulates the necessary reflective exercise that should accompany evaluative tasks.

The third phase of SIA involves identifying and evaluating the impacts and understanding their distribution among different groups of stakeholders and those affected. In this regard, sociology provides valuable quantitative and qualitative tools (Becker et al., 2004) that allow for the collection and analysis of necessary information and the incorporation of diverse intersubjective experiences of the impacts into the evaluative process (Aledo and Domínguez-Gómez, 2018). Also, both applied sociology and SIA have found in participatory methods a way to involve stakeholders and affected communities in the social analysis and assessment process. Participatory approaches foster inclusive decision-making, ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are heard and their interests and needs are considered (Becker et al., 2003; Ortiz et al., 2018). These participatory techniques, despite the challenges associated with their implementation, are essential to avoid epistemic impositions that reinforce the unequal distribution of impacts and the generation of new processes of vulnerability. In this monographic issue, the proposal of

Demajorovic and colleagues on the potential contributions of SIA to measuring community support for mining projects through the tool of social licence to operate (SLO) is an excellent example of how the inclusion of opinions and values from local communities enhances social engineering instruments (such as SLO) and transforms them into mechanisms for more just and sustainable local development.

The fourth phase of an SIA should be interpreted as the primary objective of SIA, that is, the design, execution and monitoring of effective management proposals for the prevention, mitigation or compensation of the impacts that have been identified and analysed along the SIA exercise. The dominant SIA paradigm in academia insists that the goal of social evaluation is the fair and sustainable management of impacts (see Vanclay, 2024). As in the previous phases, the participation of different groups of affected and interested parties is a crucial requirement for achieving social acceptance of the proposals. The sociologist has the capacity to observe conflict from a multifaceted perspective, by understanding the social systems in which the actors participate and their particular structural positions. In the phase of proposal design and implementation, sociology can surpass the limited vision of technological solutions and incorporate elements of structure and agency to provide solutions that are more tailored to local contexts.

In conclusion, sociology provides not only techniques aimed at evaluation but, most importantly, a critical strategy that warns against the unreflective and fashionable use of these techniques. This is one of the main tasks of sociology: to introduce a critical review of concepts, methods and techniques to prevent the simplistic reproduction of evaluative models that reinforce unjust orders and ultimately contribute to the social reproduction of the negative effects of the modernity project.

SIA not only benefits from sociology in all the aspects presented above but also offers significant contributions to the discipline. SIA provides sociology with a distinct that complements the theoretical and methodological advancements of the sociological academic field. While theoretical developments are crucial for understanding social phenomena, sociology also has a responsibility to engage socially and politically in solving human problems. SIA offers a practical avenue for applied Sociology to actively address these issues. Particularly in development projects that generate significant suffering to the most vulnerable, SIA enables sociologists to apply their knowledge, frameworks and tools to contribute to problem-solving efforts. By participating in SIA, sociology becomes a discipline that actively engages in the resolution of social challenges, ensuring that theoretical insights are translated into practical solutions. SIA goes beyond theoretical analysis to focus on the tangible impacts of development projects on individuals, communities and the environment. By incorporating SIA methodologies and practices, sociology gains a practical dimension that connects theory with real-world implications. This application-oriented aspect of SIA allows sociologists to bridge the gap between academia and practical interventions, making their work more relevant and beneficial to society.

On the contrary, SIA with its recognition of the intricate interplay between a diversity of impact types (economic, environmental, socio-cultural and more), has a strong tradition for inter- and trans-disciplinarity. It is common practice to find sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, engineers, ecologists and non-expert citizens working together when assessing the impacts of planned interventions. The demand for interdisciplinarity

becomes increasingly relevant as SIA begins to extend into new fields, such as climate change and its consequences or the effect of new technologies on collective behaviours. In this line, the contribution by Imperiale and Vanclay demonstrates the possibilities of SIA as a guiding tool for public policies that enhance community resilience in the face of environmental threats. The authors propose an SIA that goes beyond project-based impact assessment and is articulated with a wide range of stakeholders to influence decision-making that affects macro- and meso-planning and management processes. Also, emphasising the flexibility of SIA for examining the social consequences arising from environmental threats, as well as the imperative of interdisciplinary collaboration with other managing tools, Kruger and collaborators argue in their article for the reconsideration of SIA's potential as an instrument for natural disaster management when used in conjunction with disaster risk assessment. The authors suggest that employing these two approaches together would not only strengthen each of them individually but would also result in greater benefits for at-risk communities. This perspective encourages sociologists to engage in interdisciplinary collaborations and develop a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between different dimensions of social impacts. SIA's emphasis on multiple interconnected impacts aligns with sociology's goal of comprehending and addressing social phenomena in their entirety. By establishing bridges with other disciplines involved in SIA, sociology can enrich its own understanding and contribute to a holistic analysis of societal challenges.

Conclusion

Through the contributions of renowned international experts on SIA, this monograph for current sociology provides a landscape of relevant theoretical and methodological advancements in the field and a wide array of case studies that allow interested readers to explore new ways of approaching contemporary social processes of change and their consequences. After several decades where academic sociology has shown distance from this field of work, this issue has made an effort to highlight its relevance and the important role that sociologists have to play. This issue addresses two major contemporary threats to humanity: inequality and climate change. Without abandoning a critical stance, the authors make a notable effort to demonstrate the impact that SIA can have in addressing these threats. Also, the contributions to this issue reflect the ongoing process of reviewing the traditional topics and approaches within the scope of SIA. Classic themes and methodologies for addressing the consequences of plans and projects are updated through the application of new approaches and the questioning of the ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of the discipline (see the works of Howitt and Jolly, 2024, Demajorovic et al. 2024, Parsons and Mottee 2024 or Sherren et al. 2024). Alongside this necessary paradigmatic renewal, and driven by the climate emergency scenario, the field of SIA has moved towards new areas of observation. In this sense, the SIA community has been applying its experience in project evaluation to the development of SIA for natural disasters and energy transition processes. Works in this issue by Imperiale and Vanclay, Aznar-Crespo et al., Kruger et al. and Martínez are examples of the changing direction that the SIA field of study is undergoing.

By incorporating sociological theory and methods, SIA can enhance its ability to identify, understand and address social impacts in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. Sociology offers a framework for critically examining power dynamics, facilitating the deconstruction of inequalities and promoting social justice. Moreover, it encourages a reflexive approach to knowledge production within the assessment process, acknowledging the influence of evaluators and the need for active involvement of affected parties and stakeholders. Through integrating sociology's contributions, SIA can become a more robust and transformative tool for guiding sustainable development and mitigating the adverse social effects of development.

By embracing SIA, sociology gains an applied and practical space to actively engage in problem-solving efforts. It expands the disciplinary boundaries and encourages trans-disciplinary collaborations, acknowledging the interconnected nature of social impacts. SIA's focus on understanding and addressing a complex network of impacts aligns with sociology's holistic perspective on social phenomena. Ultimately, by integrating SIA methodologies and practices, sociology can enhance its relevance, utility and social impact, ensuring that theoretical insights are translated into meaningful interventions and positive social change.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Résumé

Malgré la connexion intrinsèque et naturelle entre la sociologie et l'évaluation de l'impact social, cette dernière n'occupe souvent pas une place prépondérante dans la

théorie et la pratique académique de la sociologie. Cette monographie vise à justifier et à revendiquer la position légitime de l'évaluation de l'impact social au sein de la discipline sociologique, grâce aux contributions de certains des experts internationaux les plus renommés dans ce domaine. Cet article introductif réfléchit à la contribution mutuelle nécessaire entre la sociologie et l'évaluation de l'impact social, qui, à travers leurs dialogues épistémologiques, méthodologiques et axiologiques, établissent un espace de travail appliqué visant à fournir des solutions à des problèmes concrets du monde réel. La sociologie et l'évaluation de l'impact social doivent unir leurs forces pour devenir des agents non seulement de production de connaissances, mais aussi d'amélioration des conditions de vie de ceux en situations de vulnérabilité sociale, ce qui est une tâche urgente face aux changements mondiaux contemporains et aux inégalités croissantes.

Mots-clés

Changement climatique, conséquences, évaluation, changement social, sciences sociales

Resumen

A pesar de la conexión intrínseca y natural entre la sociología y la evaluación de impacto social, esta última a menudo no ocupa un lugar destacado en la teoría y práctica académica de la sociología. Esta monografía tiene como objetivo justificar y reclamar la justa posición de la evaluación del impacto social dentro de la disciplina sociológica, a través de las contribuciones de algunos de los expertos internacionales más renombrados en este campo. Este artículo introductorio reflexiona sobre la necesaria contribución mutua entre sociología y evaluación de impacto social, que, a través de sus diálogos epistemológicos, metodológicos y axiológicos, establecen un espacio de trabajo aplicado destinado a proporcionar soluciones a problemas reales del mundo. La sociología y la evaluación de impacto social deben unir fuerzas para convertirse en agentes, no solo de producción de conocimiento, sino también de mejora de las condiciones de vida de aquéllos en situaciones de vulnerabilidad social, siendo ésta una tarea urgente ante los cambios globales contemporáneos y las crecientes desigualdades asociadas a ellos.

Palabras clave

Cambio climático, consecuencias, evaluación, cambio social, ciencias sociales