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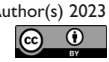
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Reconnecting to the social: Ontological foundations for a repurposed and rescaled SIA

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Abstract

Social Impact Assessment's incorporation into neoliberal management systems did not enhance their capacity to actually respond to social impacts. Efforts to integrate 'social' and 'environmental' assessments largely assumed that Social Impact Assessment rightfully belonged to key practitioners (professionals, academics, and corporate and government decision-makers). This article advocates rethinking ontological foundations for a different sort of Social Impact Assessment. It starts from an understanding that the social domain is always and inescapably connected across scales from the microbial, through the global to the cosmological. Building from experience working with Indigenous peoples, it recognizes that although ontological separation of social, environmental and other categories of impact assessment may well facilitate project approval, it also renders industrial systems deaf and blind to many of the most pressing risks facing coupled human and natural systems at multiple scales.

Keywords

Impact assessment, Indigenous IA, Indigenous planning, ontology, SIA

Despite good intentions, incorporation of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) into neoliberal decision-making, planning and management systems has not enhanced the capacity of those systems to build deep understanding of, nor fostered just and sustainable

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responses to social impacts. SIA regulation is generally dealt with as an element of a wider environmental regulation and assessment processes overseeing planning and development. Economic indicators have been easily accepted and prioritized as surrogates for social impacts. In the wider developmentalist discourses that dominate these systems, two assumptions have been common. First, it is assumed that SIA rightfully belongs to expert practitioners (professionals, academics, and corporate and government decision-makers) rather than wider communities that are affected by and experience the consequences and social impacts of development decisions. And second, it is assumed that money can provide redress for any consequence of development.

This article challenges the neoliberal construction of SIA as somehow marginal or optional in understanding and responding to the consequences of 'development'. It argues that SIA is central to addressing the ways in which environmental regulation has become a means of approving environmental destruction. But it goes further to also challenge the ways in which dominant discourses of impact assessment (IA) fragment and disconnect various deeply entangled domains (environmental, social, health, policy, economic, Indigenous, human rights and various other adjectival descriptors that are often attached to the phrase 'impact assessment' to indicate what become stand-alone fields of inquiry). Reduction of social, cultural and ecological complexity to an economic surrogate that dismisses the past and discounts the future and annihilates space and time with the power of money provides poor foundations for good policy and practice in addressing the consequences of human activities. In contrast, we argue that recognizing the intimate connections between socio-cultural, political-economic and biophysical-environmental domains is essential for systems and societies to understand and respond to the consequences of 'development' in effective, just and sustainable ways. We advocate rethinking the ontological foundations of 'prediction', 'management' and 'planning' as the basis for a very different sort of SIA. Drawing on Indigenous and other wisdoms, we conclude that the short time horizons of much project-focused SIA is inadequate because this fails to construct appropriate accountability to future generations and entrenches social, cultural and environmental trauma into our landscapes and our ecological, economic and social relations. We draw on our experience in working on impact studies and a range of project- and policy-focused programmes with Indigenous groups across Australia (Author 1/Howitt) and 20-year involvement in cultural impact assessments (CIAs) in Aotearoa (Author 2/Jolly). Advocating the urgent necessity for approaches that respect ontological pluralism, we argue for a reorientation towards affected communities, particularly Indigenous groups whose experience of SIA has been at best ambiguous, where their agency and governance resituates them as decision-makers rather than the subjects of or commentators on SIA processes.

The argument starts from an understanding that the social domains at the focus of SIA are always and inescapably connected across spatial and temporal scales from the microbial, through the global to the cosmological (Howitt, 2002). They are also interwoven across those scales with multiple human and natural systems that create dynamic relationships of responsibility. Our argument builds from experience working with Indigenous peoples to acknowledge that, while ontological separation of cultural, social, environmental and other categories of IA may facilitate rapid project approval, it renders key industrial and regulatory systems unable to see, hear or understand even the

most pressing risks facing coupled human and natural systems at multiple scales, and arrogantly disregards Indigenous cosmological views of the relationship between people and the environment. Even more concerning is that current reforms in these systems emphasize 'streamlining', 'fast-tracking' and 'bureaucratic efficiency' rather than identifying justice, equity or sustainability as the key markers of effective assessment (e.g. Fischer, 2022).

Coupled human-natural systems are affected by both the particular and the cumulative impacts of projects that are 'approved' on the basis of technical IA reports that purport to show the predicted impacts will be acceptable against technically defined standards. SIA reports and systemic responses to them remain fragmented and biased towards approval rather than critical assessment. This presents ethical, methodological and conceptual challenges to the discursive communities centred on SIA practitioners and the various stakeholders affected by current arrangements for dealing with the social impacts of development activities. In responding to those challenges, practitioner communities and the disciplines that support them must reorient towards holistic, ethical and cross-scale integrative analysis rather than increasingly fragmented, technical and bounded assessment. Working with affected communities and conscious of responsibilities to future generations in the context of both global and specific climate, environmental and social emergencies, we conclude that practice should shift away from episodic assessment to deeper engagement with planning, governance and accountability.

Why SIA?

The conventional account of the development of SIA refers to the United States' innovative *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) of 1970 – although as the late Rabel Burdge pointed out, the relationship between 'environmental' and 'social' in the NEPA was problematic from the outset (Burdge, 2002: 6–7). The NEPA emerged as a means to protect 'the environment' from 'unintended' and 'unacceptable' 'effects' of 'development' projects. The definition of each of these words, however, was tailored to the understanding that industrial regulation should not impede the overarching imperatives of industrial development and economic growth. That imperative insisted that the 'highest and best use' of resources, places and assets such as land, minerals, water, forests and even strategic locations should always be pursued – regardless of localized or temporary consequences. Because the developmentalist imperative was deeply embedded in state policy discourses that guided state oversight and regulation and reflected in the neoliberal reforms of the late-20th century, the assumption that everything of value could be measured in or converted to a monetary value was barely articulated, let alone challenged or questioned. If there were costs to be addressed, they were balanced against specific benefits. If there were localized or particular concerns to be responded to, they were balanced against generalized or wider-scale public interests (e.g. the many arguments levelled against NIMBY and special interest groups challenging the need for particular projects (see also Buchan, 1992; Feldman and Turner, 2010; Howitt, 1991). And if there were immediate concerns, these were offset by the long-term 'benefits' accumulating to a vaguely defined 'society'.

But what was the underlying purpose of IA in this developmentalist agenda? Fundamentally, it was intended to predict, avoid and manage unanticipated negative consequences of development projects. That is, it was always based on assumptions and evidence about causal relationships. The capacity of human systems to understand, document and regulate 'natural systems' was conceptualized as somehow both infinite and independent of those 'natural systems'. Growth, control and prediction were all predicated on the universal truth of rationality, scientific measurement and what has become broadly referred to as 'Western knowledge' (note the singular here). While the label 'Western' appears to locate this approach in time and space, its colonizing underpinning disarticulates it ontologically from particular places, experiences and data and asserts its universality.

For many communities of interest affected by major industrial projects, however, the definitions of both costs and benefits that were used in Cost-Benefit Analyses supporting various EIA and SIA reports seemed upside-down and back-to-front. These studies listed as benefits things that were experienced as costs. They listed as without value things that they understood as invaluable. They treated as convertible to money things that they understood as irreplaceable. In doing so, they denied the knowledges of local people about themselves and their moral relationships with the natural world (after Dokis, 2016). Professional practitioner communities have struggled to find methodologies to grapple with these tensions, reflecting periodically on 'the state of the art' (e.g. Bond and Pope, 2012; Burdge and Vanclay, 1996; Esteves et al., 2012; Finsterbusch, 1985; Peterson and Gemmell, 1981). But such reflections have largely failed to step outside a self-legitimizing ontological framing. Similarly, contributing disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, Geography and Psychology have similarly defended their own turf and self-importance.

Away from the power structures of colonial and neoliberal systems, therefore, Indigenous peoples (and many local communities) have carried the burden of 'unanticipated impacts' or predicted impacts whose scope or scale was unpredicted or was inadequately conceptualized or monitored. In Canada, for example, environmental studies of hydro-electric developments in Northern Quebec failed to anticipate the release of methyl mercury into reservoirs created by the development projects from submerged trees. Nor did they anticipate the bioaccumulation of mercury in riverine food systems relied on by the region's Cree and Inuit communities. Instead, the decision-makers amplified the negative impacts of development on those communities by fostering new industries to use the new fisheries resources in the reservoirs and thus created a health catastrophe (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Across the globe in Australia, approval of the Ranger Uranium Mine was anticipated to bring opportunities for economic success to Aboriginal people of the Kakadu region, but a succession of social impact studies confirmed the failure of the mine and related changes in environmental management, tourism and town planning to address the region's Indigenous custodians' concerns (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1984; Collins, 2000; Dodson et al., 1997; Katona, 2006; Lawrence, 2021; Lawrence and O'Faircheallaigh, 2022; Levitus and Aboriginal Project Committee, 1997).

Indigenous peoples (and many local communities) have also experienced the consequences of having practitioners and experts interpret and decide the nature and

significance of effects for them. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the significant cumulative effects of a major industrial discharge on the life force of a river, and the ancestral relationship of Māori to that river, as expressed through Māori knowledge and ontology, were discounted and 'talked away' in the proponent's IA as 'concerns'. The IA noted the 'genuine nature of and significance of Māori concerns', but concluded with the 'reality' that the biological and biophysical effects of the activity were 'minor, at worst' (Jolly, 2022). In this case, the proponent was able to fulfil consultation requirements, while diluting capacity to address the cultural, social and environment effects identified by Māori.

Explaining 'social' impacts

Various social science disciplines have negotiated a range of turns in recent decades – 'relevance', 'spatial', 'complexity', 'mobilities', 'cultural' and 'ontological' turns typically had their genesis in efforts to understand and explain social change, social structure and social relations in the complex 'contact zones' of increasingly complex societies.[1] Each identifies what is imagined as a way forward to a solution (for Sociology, for example, see *International Review of Sociology*, 2015). In the case of SIA, the challenge of 'effectiveness', for example, has been identified as compelling (Chanchitpricha and Bond, 2013; O'Faircheallaigh, 2009; Rozema and Bond, 2015; Wong and Ho, 2015). Yet, as O'Faircheallaigh noted, effectiveness in IA is largely judged by vested interests – often the project proponent who is funding the assessment report:

> Given that, for proponents, the major purpose of SIA is to obtain project approval, then 'effective SIA' is SIA that facilitates timely and positive completion of regulatory processes, helps secure project approvals, and avoids the imposition of conditions by regulatory authorities that might undermine project economics. (O'Faircheallaigh, 2009: 97)

Even O'Faircheallaigh (2009), who emphasized the importance of affected communities negotiating and monitoring impact and benefit agreements (see also Cameron and Levitan, 2014; Gibson and O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Moore et al., 2017; O'Faircheallaigh, 2013; Wyatt, 2016), highlighted the roles played by the 'SIA team' and 'specialists' in most of the activities he envisages producing effective SIA. Recent SIA guidelines necessitate that 'respect for Indigenous peoples means doing things with them' (Vanclay et al., 2015). There is much emphasis on the role of SIA expertise to empower and enhance the lives of marginalized, vulnerable and disadvantaged people and for practitioners to facilitate agreement-making processes between developers and communities (Esteves et al., 2012; Vanclay et al., 2015). But as we see it, the problem with centring attention on SIA specialists is that agency is largely seen as resting in the practitioner community – they are addressed as the experts whose insights need to be listened to. In our experience, this shifts attention away from the expertise and agency (and rights) of the affected communities themselves. There is urgent need to shift SIA practice towards listening to and supporting Indigenous governance and expertise rather than reinforcing expert technical communities as the only ones able to identify technically ideal solutions to existential challenges facing Indigenous and other communities.

Perhaps the strongest and clearest challenge to dominant practices of SIA comes from Indigenous peoples themselves and the developing field of Indigenous IA. The 2017 Aashukan Declaration, for example, advocates a profound shift in practice to strengthen IA. Aashukan means bridge in Eastern Cree (Aashukan Declaration, 2017, also Watson et al., 2023) and like many efforts by Indigenous scholars to build bridges to support better understanding of Indigenous diversity, wisdom and integrity (e.g. Cajete, 2000; Johnson et al., 2016; McGregor et al., 2018, inter alia), the Aashukan Declaration casts Indigenous peoples as decision-makers (not as the subjects of SIA reporting). It emphasizes the importance of relationality in Indigenous peoples' values systems and the timelines for decision-making. It recognizes that the affected communities should be the judges of the effectiveness of communications about development projects, impact studies and mitigation proposals. It insists that the outcomes of SIA processes 'must be multifaceted and oriented towards mutual benefits, a commitment towards the prevention of harm, and the enhancement of the well-being . . . ' and that SIA in Indigenous settings is best understood as 'a pedagogical process that involves mutual learning'.

The developing field of Indigenous IA activates the Aashukan Declaration (Jolly and Thompson-Fawcett, 2021). Seeking to improve IA outcomes for communities, Indigenous IA places emphasis on Indigenous communities generating their own IA information rather than the integration of their efforts into other assessments. It responds to the structural and procedural bias of conventional assessments, providing a pathway for communities to identify impacts, assign value and determine significance based on their own ways of being, and knowing, across time and space. Indigenous IA reflects the Indigenous reality that 'sovereignty and rights are the real issues, not inclusion and participation' (Sandercock, 2004: 95).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, CIAs are increasingly framed as assessments rooted in Māori frameworks rather than assessing impacts on Māori. These shifts mark a deep reflection on power in IA processes and an insistence that such assessments should not be reduced to simply an element of a project approval procedures. The origins of Aotearoa's CIAs are in part a response to the way early SIA dealt with Māori and cultural matters, and the question of 'who benefits from SIA reporting' (Nottingham, 1990). CIA enabled Māori to identify effects themselves. However, 30 years of experience shows that CIA has also constrained holistic Māori worldviews into a box marked 'cultural'. CIAs have become another hyphenated sub-theme in IA – an assessment of cultural effects prepared by Māori, rather than the broader application of a Māori cultural lens to decisions about if, how, when and where development should take place, and the scope of 'cultural' has become externally defined, by proponents, consultants, planners and other specialists. As a result, significant impacts, as defined by Māori, can remain unresolved because they are defined as not a cultural impact, outside the spatial and temporal scope of the project, or covered by a different technical report (often social or ecological). In response, there is a clear need to reconceptualize CIA and re-frame IA as a co-production of information. Such reconceptualizing elevates CIA to assessment from the Indigenous side of Aotearoa's Treaty partnership; by, for, and of Māori, based on their own planning traditions, practices and processes and informed by their own values and knowledges (Jolly, 2022). Furthermore, new mechanisms such as legal personhood for rivers (Fisher et al., 2022; Geddis and Ruru, 2020; O'Donnell, 2020; O'Donnell and

Talbot-Jones, 2018) that reflect Māori cosmological relationships to the environment are requiring creative undoing of existing processes, to move into an ontologically diverse approach to IA.

Social impact approval or assessment?

Projects subject to IAs reflect a developmentalist imperative – development is both inevitable and desirable. IA aims to anticipate project impacts ahead of their occurrence in order to intervene in them to reduce negative impacts, amplify positive impacts and manage unavoidable impacts. SIA is easily valorized in the development discourse as providing the foundations for precautionary decision-making, ensuring free, prior and informed consent from affected parties and contributing to (or even assuring) the social licence to operate in complex social and ecological settings. Yet negative impacts – particularly on the already vulnerable, marginalized and disempowered – abound and SIA has seemed incapable of ensuring precisely those things that the practitioner community so often see as the state of the art, but the proponents of development projects valorize approval and profitability over almost any other criterion for judging the utility of SIA. While many jurisdictions offer conditional approval, community capacity to set, monitor and enforce conditions of approval by state regulators is generally limited. There are multiple examples of political intervention to modify legal requirements to monitor, report or respond to breaches of conditions. Resources to monitor the social environment are usually strictly limited and often simply unable to address key elements of social change set in train by project approvals. We think, for example, of the failures in social impact management in the Kakadu region of Australia, in response to the development of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway infrastructure and major coal projects across the Hunter region in New South Wales.

The prospects for project rejection on the grounds of social impacts are also limited in most jurisdictions. Outright rejection, such as in the Rocky Hill Mine Proposal case from Australia discussed by Parsons and Mottee (2024, see also Parsons and Luke, 2021), is rare. Conditional approval is more common, with conditions typically framed in terms of delivering specific and measurable outcomes (employment outcomes, service provision, economic or demographic measures) rather than evaluating social processes and relationships. The dilemma for affected communities is whether to participate in a process biased towards mitigation or to pursue the 'no development' option and risk that the project proceeds without their involvement (Chetham, 2018). Affected groups rarely have power to stop projects in response to breaches of conditions – even where the consequences are life-threatening or existential.

In other words, while the SIA process appears to be delivering an assessment as the basis for decision-making, it has largely been performed as an approval mechanism – a means of framing state consent to cause social impacts. Industry and neoliberal critique of regulatory oversight is increasingly contextualized global (i.e. ostensibly 'universal') market settings and has advocated voluntary self-regulation and industry-approved standards as sufficient to protect affected groups. Similarly, the universal capacity of market mechanisms to address any dis-utility arising from a project is taken as self-evident. Thus, many of the impacts experienced by Indigenous and local communities as

significant and even existential are reframed in SIA reports as minor, insignificant and local impacts in relation to nationally and globally framed economic, trade, political and even environmental and social improvements arising from approval. Any glimmer of efforts to actually regulate is greeted with threats of legal challenge (often imposing financial costs beyond the capacity of community organizations to carry) or political mobilization of industries' financial capacity.

Similarly, when impacts are experienced cumulatively across multiple projects, or sequentially across project phases, developers' practices of fragmenting projects into ostensibly disconnected or stand-alone elements, disarticulating relationships between different elements (e.g. mining from processing and manufacturing, construction from operation and closure) and aggregating benefits while disaggregating or localizing costs all reinforce the developmentalist imperative for project approval rather than assessment. In pluralist and diverse social contexts (and at geographical scales that encompass cultural and social diversity) the assumption that the criteria, indicators and measures adopted to frame assessment processes apply universally reflects the epistemic and ontological power of the dominant developmentalist discourse favouring approval over assessment. That is the refusal to acknowledge ontological pluralism renders the existential risks imposed by project approvals literally unthinkable in dominant IA systems (e.g. Stoffle et al., 2015). Ironically, even the recognition of such risks is glibly represented as an existential risk to law and order and orderly development.

The necessity and inadequacy of project-based assessments

Systemic fragmentation characterizes the industrial societies whose impacts are examined in SIAs. Legislation, regulatory agencies, review processes and advisory bodies are all fragmented to allow complexity (i.e. relationships, connectedness and holism) to be managed in particular ways. Yet the cumulative impact of this fragmentation moves shared planetary systems (both 'human' and 'natural') towards systemic failure – past tipping points and with catastrophic consequences. Colonizing ideologies have long predicted the demise of Indigenous peoples' cultural, linguistic and experiential diversity. Yet Indigenous peoples survive under increasing duress and those same colonizing and industrializing ideologies continue to assert the developmentalist imperative as inevitable and desirable.

In non-developmentalist, non-colonizing societies, the systemic fragmentation that facilitates development is itself quite unthinkable. Responsibility to future generations, to human and non-human kin, and to principles that see custodians of particular places accountable for maintaining balance and relationships across time and space in ways that thread human, environmental and planetary health together as social relationships means that holism and precautionary decision-making rather than rapid approval and minimal interference in projects are understood as the foundation for good decision-making. In erasing such systems of holism and precaution in governance and decision-making, there is a slipperiness at work in conventional SIA that reinforces the transfer of not just decision-making power, but actual sovereignty over key processes to vested interests and reframes diverse publics such as Indigenous and local communities as vested interests and corporations and industries as representative and public interests (Howitt, 1991).

While assessing the impacts of human action on a project-by-project basis, and even disarticulating such assessment into stand alone or barely connected environmental, social, health and cultural dimensions might be the best tools available at times and are therefore a minimal necessity, they are inadequate for the task of supporting responsible decision-making to manage human impacts in integrating human-and-natural systems whose operations remain poorly conceptualized. The proposition that human systems are able to 'manage' impacts that play out simultaneously across multiple human and ecological scales is, at best, a promising imaginary and at worst a catastrophic deception (Howitt & Suchet-Pearson, 2003, 2006).

In other words, relying on SIA in systems that frame decision-making against the idea of project-by-project approvals and assessments offers more of the same sort of processes that have proved themselves to be not only inadequate, but part of the problem affecting the capacity of 'development' to deliver justice, sustainability and equity to human societies. Beyond the common occurrence of unanticipated impacts, or inadequate data to accurately predict anticipated impacts, the ontological incapacity of these systems to address the nature of uncertainty, risk and responsibility has integrated and amplified uncertainty, risk and irresponsibility into multiple systems of human activity and the natural systems coupled to them. These are issues that SIA alone is unable to resolve. But the experience encompassed in SIA discourses offers important windows to support change.

It is worth noting just what project-by-project assessment renders invisible and inaccessible to assessment. The power relationship by which the settler-colonial state claims to govern the IA process, for example, is excluded from the terms of reference for project-based impact studies. The impacts of particular jurisdictional, administrative and institutional histories (which Department oversees assessments, for example) and the record and reputation of particular proponents is similarly excluded from review and assessment. It is not permissible for an impact study to say that a project under review might be acceptable but not with the involvement of a particular proponent whose history of human rights or environmental abuse makes them locally unacceptable. A state's history of erasing Indigenous rights is similarly out of bounds – even though such issues are often hugely influential of how project-based impacts are experienced and understood.

Reconnecting the 'social' to its wider contexts

Fragmentation and disconnection of complexly integrated and interdependent systems is a key driver of systemic failure in mature (and increasingly failing) neoliberal political systems, including their social and environmental IA systems. Insistence that decision-making needs to speed up, to focus on narrowly defined costs, and be held accountable to specific criteria but not to concerns about broader trends regarding justice, sustainability, ethics and equity produces increased bureaucratic complexity, but not clarity. There is a wickedness to this situation. The easy solution is to incrementally address issues as they arise – bringing in new legislation or amending existing laws to refine regulation in response to specific failures or weaknesses; creating a new institution or agency to address a blind spot in existing organizational structures; funding a new research

programme; proposing new training regimes; and so on. Yet each incremental change falls short of a fundamental shift in decision-making away from vested interests and short time horizons. Indigenous principles such as the relationality-as-kin between human and non-human systems and accountability forward for seven generations demand a rethinking of both purpose and process in SIA. Disciplinary expertise in the 'social' cannot excuse ignoring the ways in which 'environmental' concerns of affected peoples are simultaneously social-and-environmental. Similarly, disciplinary expertise in the 'environmental' cannot excuse continuing to work as the landscapes we dwell within are not simultaneously biophysical and cultural.

There is increasing evidence that IA is itself weaponized as a means of achieving state approval of projects almost in defiance of social and environmental costs (Dunlap, 2023; Larsen, 2018). Despite the rhetoric that advocates community-based and community-controlled assessments as one of the 'major opportunities, challenges, changes and paradigm shifts' that will shape the future of IA (Bice and Fischer, 2020: 89), because 'IA must begin and end with concerns for the lives of those most directly affected by a policy or project, local people' (Bice, 2020: 106), Larsen concluded that 'participation in IA has proven to evoke many of the same risks observed in the wider field of natural resource governance, namely co-option by corporate interests and foreign worldviews that ignore or at least partially silence indigenous ontologies' (Larsen, 2018: 208). Indeed, while affected Indigenous communities have sometimes been able to exercise some influence in shaping projects, SIA has 'rarely supported the rejection of unwanted projects altogether' (Larsen, 2018: 208).

So, if SIA is to be a useful process – even weapon – in the fight for planetary survival and justice, it needs to build a different foundation that is rooted in listening methodologies and collaborative decision-making rather than its taken-for-granted framing of prediction, mitigation and compensation as the focus for its work. Seeing it as 'a pedagogical process that involves mutual learning' shifts the emphasis away from technical expertise towards collaborative capacity. It recognizes the 'capacity deficits' (Howitt et al., 2013) that prevail in the government regulatory agencies, corporate proponents and industry consultancies that currently populate communities of SIA expertise. It shifts thinking away from focus on perceived (or imposed) capacity deficits in Indigenous (and other) communities to conform to the needs of the various adjectivalized sub-categories of IA. Rather than further justifying the particular skill set of the SIA practitioner community, it pushes that community to reflect on what its dominant practices actually do. Reframing SIA in this way also anticipates integration of SIA into strategic planning processes that take time to listen, engage and be held to account over time. And it decisively insists that relying on project-by-project assessments as the primary vehicle for pursuing 'good practice SIA' (Vanclay, 2020: 129) is not enough because project-by-project fragmentation is ontologically flawed as a way of understanding impact processes in complexly relational systems.

Perhaps the nature of the challenge to SIA as a field of practice is that it remains embedded in the processes of project approval effectively negotiated between corporate development proponents and states whose unresolved relationships with Indigenous groups precludes or severely constrains options for autonomy, self-government and

transparent and accountable rights-based regimes of assessment, approval and monitoring throughout the life of projects. This is clearly reflected in the general international propensity for Indigenous rights to be considered the domain of SIA. For example, a recent special issue of the journal *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* – Impact Assessment for the 21st century: what future? – identifies '[I]ndigenous people's cultures, traditions and needs' as one of the 'myriad of concerns' that SIA incorporates (Bice and Fischer, 2020: 91). Similarly, Vanclay (2020: 128) proposes that community-controlled assessments are required to ensure communities fully comprehend the implications of projects and therefore enable the meaningful implementation of free and prior informed consent. However, the discourse remains focused on generalities of 'community', 'social licence to operate', 'human rights' and 'social impacts' as opposed to advancing a specific Indigenous agenda or Indigenous forms of IA.

The emergence of Indigenous planning (Barry and Porter, 2011; Jackson et al., 2018; Jojola, 2008, 2013; Jolly, 2022; Jolly and Thompson-Fawcett, 2021; Matunga, 2013, 2017, 2018; Porter, 2013; Porter et al., 2017) as a practice that starts from ontological foundations rooted in practices of relationality, responsibility and reciprocity offers a different framing for SIA from the current practice of project-focused approvals that demand communities' responses to 'development' proposals or offer after-the-event apologies and compensation for unanticipated consequences that affected communities feared and warned of. It accepts affected communities as decision-makers not 'participants' and recognizes local (and environmental) agency rather than conceding agency to institutions of government and industry. The fundamental aim is to improve the ability of communities to plan for their own flourishing futures. In this way, Indigenous planning has an explicit decolonizing agenda (Jolly and Thompson-Fawcett, 2021). Here, social impacts are inseparable from environmental and cultural impacts. They are but one part of the 'the seamless totality of *being* [*Indigenous*] across environmental, social, cultural, economic and political domains' (Matunga, 2018: para 2).

Conclusion

This article advocates rethinking the ontological foundations of SIA as the basis for a different sort of practice and governance of SIA. We advocate rethinking the ontological foundations of 'prediction', 'management' and 'planning'. Rather than the relative short timeframes of 'the project', Indigenous wisdoms encourage our thinking towards longer timeframes and spatial dimensions of intergenerational responsibilities, and a shift away from project-specific framing of viability (i.e. profitability) towards more deeply contextualized notions of sustainability, intergenerational justice and equity.

Why is a different sort of SIA so urgently needed? Because, just as Matunga (2017: 641) argues that 'no one owns planning', SIA does not own the ability to predict, manage and plan for social impacts. And SIA does not belong to key practitioners. Project-by-project delivery of SIA, despite best practice guidelines and intentions, needs an ontological reset. Theory and practice need to change, rather than simply improve. It is often simply doing the wrong thing, rather than doing the right thing poorly.

In a repurposed and reframed SIA, social science would engage with Indigenous and local community interests as decision-makers rather than as passive recipients of

decisions made by others. In Indigenous settings, for example, Indigenous governance would become decisive rather than merely considered. Practitioners would relinquish ontological control over how social and cultural effects are identified, measured and evaluated. Interwoven, co-mingled environmental, cultural and social modes of being would frame the process of assessment rather than Indigenous concerns continuing to be 'eternally grafted to generic EIA or SIA menus as another (albeit worthy) agenda item' (Jolly and Thompson-Fawcett, 2021; Matunga, 2018: 22). Imagine a change in dynamics, where SIA specialists support Indigenous-led IA, rather than compartmentalizing Indigenous cultures, knowledges and aspirations as one of the many domains that SIA incorporates. Imagine a future where SIA practitioners are *invited* to contribute social science expertise to Indigenous-led assessments.

In a time when some national governments are moving to make environmental and SIA faster and simpler (Fischer, 2022), it is critical for SIA to respond in the opposite direction. A deeper engagement with planning, governance and accountability would enhance SIA, and ensure relevance and legitimacy in Indigenous and community contexts. We see a future SIA that respects Indigenous political authority and self-determination, and supports flourishing futures for Indigenous communities, as defined by those communities themselves.

In our experience, there is a legitimacy issue with all forms of IA in Indigenous communities, including SIA. As articulated in the Aashukan Declaration, the outcomes of IA (as approved projects) have had 'profound and lasting' effects on Indigenous lands, cultures and communities. While project assessments focus on a pipeline, or a mine, or a transmission route, societal relations to energy and the broader legitimacy of economic interests in reshaping planetary responsibilities are out of scope and thus rendered as insignificant. How can such 'assessments' ever be legitimate?

Furthermore, in our experience, diverse Indigenous nations, communities and groups offer a vision of what responsible leadership in IA might require. Rather than leaving corporate and state officers as unchallenged decision-makers who may inform, consult with and even negotiate impact benefit agreements, Indigenous groups as planners of their own futures insist that long-term relationships and responsibilities must frame human thinking about the impacts human actions and failures to act have on our coupled human and natural systems. Rather than recipients of decisions made by others based on assessments that fail to encompass Indigenous understandings, Indigenous leadership insists on the rights to make decisions, to challenge the decisions of others and to explore the nature of responsibilities to the past-present-future – and each other (human and non-human alike).

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Note

1. Barry and Porter (2011) drew on Pratt's (1991) articulation of

> contact zones [as] . . . social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (p. 34)

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Résumé

L'intégration de l'EIS dans les systèmes de gestion néolibéraux n'a pas renforcé leur capacité à répondre réellement aux impacts sociaux. Les efforts visant à intégrer les évaluations 'sociales' et 'environnementales' ont largement supposé que l'EIS appartenait de droit aux principaux praticiens (professionnels, universitaires et décideurs des entreprises et des gouvernements). Cet article préconise de repenser les fondements ontologiques d'un autre type d'évaluation d'impact social. Il part du principe que le domaine social est toujours et inévitablement connecté à travers les échelles.

S'appuyant sur l'expérience acquise avec les populations indigènes, il reconnaît que si la séparation ontologique des catégories sociales, environnementales et autres de l'évaluation d'impact peut faciliter l'approbation des projets, elle rend également les systèmes industriels sourds et aveugles à la plupart des risques les plus urgents auxquels sont confrontés les systèmes humains et naturels couplés à de multiples échelles.

Mots-clés

Évaluation de l'impact social, évaluation de l'impact sur les populations indigènes, planification indigène, ontologie, prise de décision, savoirs indigènes

Resumen
La incorporación de la EIS a los sistemas neoliberales de gestión no mejoró su capacidad real para responder a los impactos sociales. Los esfuerzos por integrar las evaluaciones 'sociales' y 'ambientales' dieron por sentado en gran medida que la EIS correspondía legítimamente a los profesionales clave (profesionales, académicos y decisores empresariales y gubernamentales). Este texto aboga por un replanteamiento de los fundamentos ontológicos de otro tipo de EIS, partiendo de la base de que lo social está siempre e ineludiblemente conectado por escalas.
Así, desde la experiencia de trabajo con pueblos indígenas se reconoce que, si bien la separación ontológica entre evaluación del impacto social, ambiental u otros puede facilitar la aprobación de proyectos, también permite que los sistemas industriales permanezcan sordos y ciegos ante buena parte de los riesgos más acuciantes que enfrentan los sistemas humanos y naturales a múltiples escalas.

Palabras clave
Evaluación del impacto social, evaluación del impacto indígena, planificación indígena, ontología, toma de decisiones, saberes indígenas