



Psycho-social impacts reflect perceptions of past events and expectations for the future.



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Psycho-social Impact Assessment

WHAT ARE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACTS?

Major environmental changes can diminish the social and psychological well-being of individuals and their communities. Consider mining projects, natural disasters, urban redevelopment, and industrial pollution.

Psycho-social impacts can be seen in how people experience their world—their “lifescape” and their patterns of daily activities—their “lifestyle,” as well as their mental health. Stress can increase, coping resources within the community can diminish, and overall psychological functioning can decline—“lifetrain” (Edelstein, 2004).

Psycho-social impacts can result from shared perceptions of betrayal and unfairness, distrust of government or big business, and fear of unknown health impacts, such as possible illness from pollutants. Triggers range from historical trauma experienced by groups who feel socially, economically, or politically marginalized to concerns about rising sea levels.

Psycho-social impacts that are overlooked can contribute to greater opposition to a project, conflict, and poorer long-term outcomes for affected communities.

WHAT IS PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT?

Psycho-social impact assessment (PSIA) explores real and potential impacts on “lifescape,” “lifestyle,” and “lifetrain.” PSIA can inform strategies to mitigate negative effects, such as stress loads, and enhance the ability of individuals and communities to cope or flourish.

Like environmental, social and health impact assessment, PSIA ideally helps to achieve a just, equitable, positive outcome for affected communities. Participatory processes can enable those who are likely to be more vulnerable or less resilient to be heard.

SIA involves an interplay of professions, including social and environmental psychology, community psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and community health. Combining these disciplinary perspectives and views of multiple stakeholder groups creates challenges. Add to that a need to address cumulative psycho-social impacts with multiple causes.

EXAMPLE

Psycho-social impacts of open-cut coal mining on residents of Somkhele, South Africa, were recently characterized in a report subtitled “*Everything for Dust*,” commissioned by the nonprofit All Rise Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice. The author (p.11) identifies major “traumas” and accumulating stressors experienced in the community as:

The multiple losses associated with relocation (e.g., disconnection from land ...); 2) the horror and sacrilege of exhumation and reburial of deceased family members associated with relocations; 3) disruptions to identity and belonging through changes to social ecology; 4) impoverishment through loss of livelihoods and intergenerational wealth; 5) chronic environmental (health) stressors and perceived contamination; 6) community conflict and interpersonal violence. Additionally, ... elements of betrayal trauma where those who are responsible for protecting communities (e.g., Tendele mine, government, traditional leadership and local authorities) are perceived as perpetrating wrongdoings [and] neglecting or scapegoating those who raise complaints ...

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. **Sources of impact.** Psycho-social impacts can have real, negative consequences for populations near a proposed project, a facility set for closure, an area affected by a flood, earthquake, or fire, or near a site of existing or potential water or air pollution, such as a landfill, waste incinerator, or refinery. Central are prolonged effects on culture, lifestyle, place attachment, livelihoods, trust, and control.
2. **Triggers.** Psycho-social impacts result from emotions and social interactions—fear, changes in who talks with whom, perceptions of marginalization, and denial of procedural fairness. In other words, PSIs are not solely a direct response to changes in the bio-physical environment, and that renders traditional EIA insufficient.
3. **Community support is affected.** Widespread impacts in a locality can diminish the resilience and capability of community support systems — there are fewer “shoulders to lean on.”
4. **Addressing the vulnerable.** Existing vulnerability can increase the severity and duration of psycho-social impacts. A keen focus on vulnerable sections of the community and an emphasis on participation and justice means that PSIA aligns with aspirations of “good” SIA.
5. **Not consistently reported.** Psycho-social impacts are not recognized, analyzed or reported consistently in more traditional social impact assessments. That inhibits the ability to mitigate negative effects and enhance positive impacts. The requirements, opportunities, and resources to assess and report psycho-social impacts vary by jurisdiction, client, and project or event.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. **Listen and ask big questions.** Capture the lived experiences, values, concerns, and expectations of those who feel the greatest impact. Do they fear for the health of their children? Can they still make a living? How do they see the community compared to five years ago? Do they trust the government to protect them from impacts?
2. **Assess mental health.** Investigate depression, psychological distress, and experiences of trauma. A trained specialist can administer internationally-recognized mental health surveys in writing or through interviews. They employ common sense questions such as, “Are you losing sleep?” Record individual histories.
3. **Clearly define the scope covered in the assessment.** When reporting, describe the context, such as a history and profile of the community and their general experience with a mine, natural disasters, urban development, or polluting industries. Focus on “psychological wounds.” Note health-related issues, and explain collective community responses to impacts. Identify impacts that deserve greater scrutiny. Explain who was approached and why and who was not asked.
4. **Work with communities in all steps.** Listen to, recognize, and validate those affected. Understand the time needed for them to trust you, and note how community members perceive your role. Also, build trust with organizations that are causing impacts, or can mitigate them, to boost the report’s impact.
5. **Check your conclusions.** Share draft findings with community members. Cross check your impressions with other reports on the affected community, such as a preliminary assessment or more general social impact assessment. Your conclusions need to be seen as credible.

FURTHER READING

Edelstein, Michael R. (2004) *Contaminated Communities: Coping with residential toxic exposure*. 2nd edition. Routledge, New York.

Barnwell, Garrett. (2022) *Psychological Report: Everything for Dust – The Collective Trauma of Opencast Coal Mining on Residents in Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*. Expert report commissioned by All Rise – Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice, South Africa.

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Amnesty International. (2004) *Summary of “Clouds of Injustice – Bhopal Disaster 20 years on.”* Amnesty International Report ASA 20/015/2004. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/asa201042004en.pdf>.

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