Social impact assessment: an interactive and participatory approach

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ABSTRACT

Current policy shifts world wide are tending towards eliminating or minimizing the continuing trends of environmental degradation. Realizing the urgent need to reconcile industry and community interests in the Delta of Nigeria which had, and continues to witness, some tensions and volatile outbursts, and to ensure that development is managed so that it is both sustainable and hence contributes to industrial and community stability, development projects can only go ahead after mandatory Environmental Assessment (EA) studies of such proposed projects.

Consideration of the social impact of project development generally – let alone of oil industry development specifically – was until comparatively recently an adjunct of EIAs. It would appear to be very much so even today in Nigeria, where more emphasis continues to be placed on the biophysical environment. Nonetheless, social impact analysis is gaining ground and momentum. But even then it poses special problems which make it far more than a methodological shadow of EIA. Social Impact Assessment (SIA) represents a novel and far more complex domain.

Social Impact Assessment (SIA) studies of three different projects in three varied socio-cultural zones of the Niger Delta have yielded better socioeconomic results, utilizing the 'participatory assessment' methodology alongside questionnaire surveys. This way, it has been possible to assess community needs and expectations, identify priorities for development activities and successfully implement project execution strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A human action such as oil exploration activities (mining) simultaneously affects both the natural and the social environment, not only displacing plants and polluting water but creating jobs and relocating people. Clearly a comprehensive assessment of mining impacts would have to consider both ecological and social effects, and the higher order cumulative effects that result from their interaction (Westman, 1985).

Yet when, in the late 1980s, environmental impact assessment studies were first being conducted, these were limited to the webwork of effects on the

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natural environment. It took a series of communal clashes, violence and the destruction of oil & gas pipelines and installations, on the platform of fights for territoriality and compensation, for the scope of impact studies to be gradually broadened to encompass a range of social and economic concerns.

Examination of the full social and ecological impacts of a proposed action requires a 'holistic' approach, in the sense that examination of the effects on natural and social systems separately will not reveal the full scope of interactive effects. Hence the generic term or approach 'integrated impact assessment' has long been proposed for the study of the full range of ecological and social consequences of the introduction of a new technology, project, or programme.

Be that as it may, the special skills required for an assessment of ecological impacts derive from a distinct, though overlapping, set of disciplines from those required for social impact assessment. And because the consideration of the social impact of project development generally – and of oil industry development on which most developing countries like Nigeria depend – was until comparatively recently an adjunct of EIAs, the methods and techniques for effective and efficient study have tended to be less developed and understood. SIA we must acknowledge poses special problems which make it far more than a methodological shadow of EIA. SIA represents a novel and far more complex domain beyond that often applied to the assessment of the bio-geophysical environment.

Over six million people live in the 70 000km^2 Niger Delta where most of Nigeria's oil is produced, providing some 80 per cent of the federal government's revenue. Exploration and production of this oil necessarily brings many of the oil companies into contact with more than 12 major ethnic groups divided into about 800 communities. These communities increasingly feel disadvantaged by a deteriorating economy, lack of job prospects, limited amenities and general development, environmental degradation and a very complex political situation.

Consideration of social impact assessment within the integrated impact assessment framework is even more complex when placed against the multi-socio-cultural-cum-political background of a developing country such as Nigeria. To ensure that development is managed so that it is both sustainable and contributes to industrial and community stability, major policy shifts have favoured the proper assessment and understanding of community interests.

It is against the foregoing background that social impact assessments have to utilize 'interactive and participatory methodology' to achieve better socio-economic results. This way, it is possible to assess communities' needs and expectations, identifying priorities for development activities and successfully executing effective project strategies.

NATURE AND SCOPE OF ISSUES

The Niger Delta of Nigeria is the richest part of the country in terms of natural resource endowment. Ironically, in spite of the Delta's endowment, its immense potential for economic growth and sustainable development, the region is, and continues to remain, in a parlous state; it is under increasing threat from rapidly deteriorating economic conditions and social tensions which have remained largely unaddressed by current and past policies as well as behaviour patterns. The degree of disaffection which the lack of development in the resource-endowed areas has generated has reached palpable heights.

By nature of its resource endowment, the major industrial activity to be found in the Niger Delta is oil related. Therefore, projects requiring environmental assessments are mainly field developments, flowstations, pipelines and flowline network installations, drilling activity etc. While the environmental assessments of these oil related activities are of recent development, their main focus until of late was basically the impact on the natural environment, with little or no regard to the communities within the immediate vicinities of these projects.

In any case, the wave of environmental awareness which has swept through the area, skewed towards oil pollution, has tended to generate very high feeling with, very often, some political undertones. While environmental assessment has become a major policy issue, the social conflicts which now frame an effective assessment include, but are not limited to, the obnoxious Landuse Act of 1978 which deprived or rendered communities landless in terms of economic rent, environmental degradation in the form of oil pollution and the attendant monetary compensations accruing from these.

Against the sociopolitical-cum-economic backgrounds of the Niger Delta, the imperative for effective social impact assessments within the framework of EIA cannot be overstressed. A well conducted SIA must find answers to communities' social well being by actively engaging the people for whom such assessments would benefit.

Perhaps in an attempt to forestall further environmental degradation in the resource-rich Niger Delta in particular and in the general Nigerian environment, an Environmental Policy was enacted. It is not as if the statutory framework for environmental protection did not exist in the country before 1988 when the regulatory framework was established with the all-encompassing empowering status. An overview of the existing Environmental Protection Laws in Nigeria will show that pre-1988 laws abound in many fragmented forms. Although most of these laws are not strictly environmental protection laws, they contain provisions which have a bearing on the preservation of the environment. However, 1988 marked a watershed with the enactment of Decrees 42 and 58, regulating harmful wastes management and establishing the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) respectively. Several policies and laws followed

subsequently: these include in 1991 effluent limitation and pollution abatement in industries and facilities generating wastes, and Decree No. 86 of 1992 setting the framework for Environmental Assessment (EIA) as mandatory.

The FEPA EIA Decree No. 86 of 1992 made the preparation of Environmental Impact Assessments mandatory for all industry planning new projects. This involves the assessment of socioeconomic/ecological status of the project area and production of a report.

While SIA tries to find answers to the community's social well being within the framework of EIA studies, one other law is in place which severely limits its effectiveness; the Landuse Act of 1978. The most comprehensive piece of legislation ever enacted in Nigeria on land issues, it divested individuals or communities of different forms of land ownership and tenureship which existed before its enactment. This is an obnoxious law which negates communal territorial right to land, and hence adds to the tension in the Niger Delta environment.

THE STATUTORY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIA.

An overview of the existing environmental protection laws in Nigeria indicate that the laws can be classified into two distinct areas: pre-1988 and the laws enacted since 1988. These laws contain specific provisions that prohibit certain activities or conduct which are detrimental to the wholesomeness and safety of the environment and impose varying sanctions for violations and non-compliance with the pertinent provisions of the respective laws.

Promulgated under the auspices of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (the national regulatory body), the EIA Decree requires the preparation of Environmental Impact Assessments by industry undertaking new projects, in order to mitigate and ameliorate the potential adverse environmental impacts of the project activities. This too involves the assessment of socioeconomic/ecological status of the project area and the production of a report.

By the same token, the petroleum industry in particular, whose activities are concentrated in the Niger Delta, although under the same regulatory framework, is supervised directly by the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) of the Petroleum Ministry. The DPR *1991* Environmental Guidelines and Standards for the Petroleum Industries in Nigeria, provide detailed statutory requirements to which the oil and gas industry is supposed to adhere. Part VIII, Section A (Environmental Impact Assessment Process), Articles 1.3 and 1.6 require that EIA study be conducted before E & P operations in order to protect and prudently enhance the environmental resources for a better environment for man. Article 1.4 gives the applicable

regulations and makes the preparation of an EIA report mandatory. It is against the above statutory background and institutional framework, and the necessity to comply with the environmental laws as well as operate within the principles of sustainable development, that the EIA tool is applied by many of the E & P companies who plan new development projects.

The DPR's environmental guidelines and standards have standardized environmental abatement procedures under which the EIA process is expressly stated. As one of two tools being used to protect and preserve the Niger Delta's and Nigeria's ecosystems – the other being an Environmental Evaluation (post-impact) Report (EER) – the Environmental Impact Assessment process and Report is being vigorously pursued and implemented in Nigeria.

The systematic process to be followed in preparing the report starts with a project proponent/operator determining the preliminary assessment of impacts through a screening process before an initial report is submitted to DPR. It is only when significant impacts are identified for a project or activity that full EIA studies and report preparation is commissioned. Draft EIA reports are expected to be accepted by the regulators within 21 days. And such studies and reports are supposed to be handled by persons or parties who possess a certificate of eligibility issued by the regulators themselves. EIA reviewers are expected to be competent individuals.

The EIA process and procedure do not however end with the DPR institution (i.e. oil industry and related EIAs). The national body is also a powerful regulator and it alone has authority to present all EIAs to the public for hearings and comments. Public presentations of EIAs are usually implemented by displaying such reports in designated centres/zonal offices for a period also of 21 days for the public to make reviews and offer comments on any aspect of the EIA report. Comments of significance are to be incorporated in final EISs (Environmental Impact Statements).

The DPR documents, Environmental Guidance Standards (EGS) mentioned earlier, have provisions for procedures to be followed in collecting and analyzing samples and regulating parameters of interest. Unfortunately there are no comparable guidelines for socioeconomic (social impact assessment) studies.

By necessity, social impact assessments are conducted simultaneously with EIAs. However, few companies have determined explicit guidelines for conducting SIAs, and as a result the majority of industry social assessments provide only a limited description of potential impacts and the range of alternative management practices available to a company. While it is widely acknowledged today that 'social analysis' must be an integral part of integrated project planning, the process of devising appropriate techniques for social analysis is still ongoing, although the SIA Guidelines/Manual of

the SIEP released in 1996 tries to streamline methodologies for conducting SIAs in the oil and gas industries.

While some of the lessons of EIA are applicable, others are not, and SIA in particular represents a novel and far more complex domain. Specifically, while SIA must be concerned with the potential consequences of a project for a given human population and its way of life, it is necessarily concerned as much with the possible implications of that social environment for the success of the project itself. For unlike the natural landscape, human behaviour does not conform to simple rules (Ross, 1994).

ASSESSMENT METHODS AND APPROACHES

Environmental systems are functionally and structurally complex. This is especially true of deltas which integrate land and water systems. Not only is the Niger Delta complex but, as numerous researchers have pointed out, it is not well understood (Bourn, 1992). More importantly, the intricate social systems of the hundreds of riverine communities are equally poorly known. General policies that ignore complex details, while often appropriate at the central planning levels, should by necessity be adapted to local conditions before implementation (Ascher, 1990). By implication, it can be pointed out that ignoring this complexity, policies are frequently poorly matched to the communities and ecosystems they are intended to benefit or modify. A cascade of unanticipated side effects usually result.

On a project level, social and environmental impact assessments can provide the necessary information to maximize the net benefits from policy decisions. Social impact assessments within the general framework of environmental assessments of E & P operations, if properly conducted, are expected, to become necessary for ensuring that activities in the Delta consider the complex interrelationships that constitute the Niger Delta.

THE INTERACTIVE AND PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO SIA STUDIES: The Niger Delta examples

Two field development plans/projects of oil and gas were planned in two different ecological zones but essentially the same social cultural setting of present day Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta. The third case study involved a seismic lines rehabilitation/revegetation project, again in a very volatile sector of Delta State. The economy of the study areas is mainly agrarian, with farming as the occupation of over 75 per cent of the population and a third involved in subsistent fishing. Personal incomes, however, are very low in all of the study communities with a population of over 6000 people; over 50 per cent earn less than N25,000 (US$300) annually. At the other FDP, communities nearby earn even less; slightly over 21 per cent earn anything over N24,000 (US$282).

In one of the three case studies which involved seismic lines revegetation, the project schedule unfortunately coincided with a time when there were serious communal clashes.

Armed personnel were of necessity strategically located in the most visible and larger communities. However, socioeconomic data gathering was seriously hampered as tempers were hot and strangers were looked at suspiciously. The level of aggression was so high that in one of the communities consultants were almost lynched, being mistaken for an enemy.

Against the above background, representative communities and people were selected. Instead of the more generally accepted method of questionnaire surveys aided by video and photographic coverage, the interactive approach alone was used and a selected group of community representatives were contacted and information sought. Consultants were warned that they should not even walk around communities, and should not become involved in household interaction.

Realizing the logistical problems imposed by the terrain, poor information and education and the very high sensitivity of the people occasioned by the feelings of long years of neglect, strategies were planned so as to take advantage of the knowledge at hand.

Since the integration of social impact assessments in environmental assessment, project developers have come to realize that an SIA properly executed could be a strong and powerful PR strategy for soft entry/landing into the project sites. While SIAs are conducted simultaneously with EIAs, the EIA practice would be to send the SIA consultants in advance so as to soften the mood of the locals before others could come in.

The SIA process includes the following steps:

- A reconnaissance survey of the project area is initiated, using the project developers' representative/supervisor, a community liaison officer in charge of the area (CLO), the EIA team leader and the SIA consultant. At such visits, all settlements, permanent and temporary (camps) within the project area are identified.

- The traditional/cultural hierarchy is also identified and a formal request for a community forum comprising the elders, chiefs, youth and women leaders, as well as other opinion formers, is initiated for a scheduled date and time.

- Recognizing the socio-cultural heritage of the people of the Niger Delta where kola nuts and drinks are a traditional part of such occasions, adequate provision for these is made at the community's scheduled meeting.

- At the meeting, community representatives are given details of the proposed project and study, citing the necessary statutory backing. While the SIA consultant acts both as company's PRO and community/socio-economics studies consultant, a community's spokesperson is at hand to interpret all that is said.

- While permission for work is being sought, peaceful coexistence and cooperation is solicited.

- At these meetings, knotty issues such as number of workers to be employed from the community, the wages to be paid etc. are reconciled. This also includes the community development/assistance project(s) to be embarked upon by contractors or major client depending on the magnitude of the project proposed. At this stage of the SIA study however, the main tools are the video and photographic cameras which are used for documentation.

- It is only after permission is granted by the community that the SIA enters its second stage. Here interviewing and questionnaire survey methods are employed to gather the necessary information. Utilizing traditional knowledge, groups of members of the community who have been identified to be knowledgeable enough about the community's affairs are regarded as the key informants. At less formal group discussions group opinions are tapped to enrich the SIA objectives.

- Questionnaire surveys are also undertaken as the last tier of the SIA information gathering hierarchy process. Well structured open ended and closed ended questionnaires are administered to households, assisted by well trained/instructed personnel from outside and within the communities. The major drawbacks of this technique in the field are logistical (transport) and socio-cultural problems. Communities which are not contiguous are difficult to reach while people were suspicious of personnel and questionnaires. Above everything else, the low level of educational awareness compounds the situation. However, attempts are made to conduct the surveys in the most comfortable manner, choosing a representative fraction/sample which ensures that the views of important categories of the population are gathered, especially those relating to household data. Individual responses reflecting knowledge and attitudes towards the proposed projects and their impacts, including how they feel, and how the perceived negative impacts associated with the project should be handled are collected.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Educational attainment of the inhabitants is usually less than encouraging. At Okoroba community, for example 31 per cent of the people had no formal education, over 40 per cent primary education and about 24 per cent had attained secondary education. At Diebu FDP however, with over five main communities spread within 25 km of the project site, 40 per cent of the people had attained primary school education, and about 34 per cent secondary, with some 20 per cent having no formal educational training. Against the foregoing background, one can conclude that unless a proper and much more interactive participatory approach is undertaken, attempts to improve community participation in development activities are easily hampered by poor information and education. Participation quickly becomes limited to the most articulate and well connected individuals. The divide and rule tactics or attitudes of most project developers (and especially the oil companies in the Niger Delta) have tended to increase friction between them and the rural people.

All too often, environmental surveys/assessments get trapped in the mechanical acquisition and calibration of data because they lack a clear focus on the social meaning of the exercise and a sense of its political context. Concern for people and their fate which ought to form the chief interest of all technical endeavours unfortunately is relegated to the background. In its place diagrams and equations are elevated.

Rising indignation and social unrest/tension engendered by the realization of continuing neglect in the face of abundant resources by the rural people in most part of the world, and the Niger Delta of Nigeria in particular, has brought to the fore the necessity for detailed community/socioeconomic understanding within the general framework of environmental assessments.

Sustainable development, as it is being espoused, encompasses all social, economic and political activities aimed at improving the quality of human life within the self regenerative capacity of the supporting ecological system. It implies community control over the natural resources of the community. This much the local people are clamouring for.

It is in the understanding of the above requirements that the participatory and interactive approach was considered most appropriate in the social impact assessment studies of E & P field development plans/projects and other related activities. The results obtained were very satisfactory and statistically appropriate for the projects needs.

In the first place, an understanding of the social and natural environment was established. With full interaction and participation of the community's members, all interests were seen to be respected, and differing shades of opinion were sifted for better data collection, analysis and policy consideration.

It was also discovered that when communities are actively involved in the data gathering, interpretation and subsequent usage, an openness is displayed, better quality information is obtained and minimum time is expended in the process. The confidence placed in those chosen for group discussion and considered repositories of local knowledge bolstered morale and locals are always very ready to make available any information on hand. Unlike most assessments based on literature and conjecture, quality data based on facts are easily gathered and informed analyses carried out.

Aware of the documentation process (video and photographic coverage), community members are more careful about the truth since they could be called upon to defend whatever they have proffered in the way of information or advice.

The use of local people in questionnaire administration (mostly teachers) also enhances the data gathering process. The capacity building potential of this methodology is obvious. Local knowledge is utilized to facilitate the impact assessment process.

Communities also fare better when this open system is adopted. The cause of social tensions in some of these communities is usually the charge of impropriety against the so called community leaders by the youth. The attitude of most project developers whereby a select few of the articulate and politically conscious are patronized, and in most cases bribed, to the total neglect of the community, is considered most unwholesome. So, to be seen to be consulting with the majority of community members is much more representative of opinions of how the communities feel about their situation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is abundant evidence that a project has little chance of success if it runs counter to, or ignores, the traditions, values, and social organization of the intended beneficiaries, or if its objectives are too abstract to be understood by them or too remote from their everyday concerns. While social analysis now forms an integral part of integrated project planning, appropriate techniques have to be devised for thorough understanding.

SIA is a novel and far more complex domain. Unlike the environmental assessment of the biophysical environment, SIA, concerned with the potential consequences of a project for a given human population and its way of life, appears much more demanding. The fact is that the range of considerations is potentially vast. And when placed against an even more complex ecological system as the Niger Delta with is vast socio-cultural and environmental systems, then the tasks would appear more than daunting. Difficult as it may be to develop a satisfactory methodology for SIA with universal acceptance, which can provide credible predictive insight into the processes of social change, far more problematical is the task of drawing

local people into a meaningful consultative process. While the temptation is always to regard this as a form of social management, the fact remains that it is by far the most important dimension of SIA, the aspect that is most likely to provide the needed facts and data which would inform governments and companies about local sensitivities and needs. In the words of the World Bank, credible impact assessment must be based upon 'participatory assessment'.

Good environmental assessment practice requires meticulous handling of the socioeconomic dimensions of the study to be able to make meaningful decisions which can be cost-effective and sustainable for the companies as well as the host communities of project sites/areas. Undertaking social impact assessment in the Niger Delta must take cognisance of the politico-economic and social contexts and factors which may mar or make accurate studies.

By necessity a reconnaissance visit must be made to the project sites at the planning of environmental assessment studies to identify communities within the area. At such times too, minimal contact is made with the inhabitants, but enough to identify in the process the cultural-traditional hierarchies.

Interaction at these three levels is also useful – first at the community level where elders, youths and women leaders are consulted on a village-wide issues, and secondly at a group discussion level, involving key informants, to tap relevant group opinions and knowledge.

At the third level of interaction is the household which will be involved in questionnaire survey. Questions must be simple enough – closed and open ended formats preferred – to allow for individual opinions. Content analysis of a well structured questionnaires can be made easier if local personnel, well instructed, are used so that interpretation of questions and filling in of answers is enhanced.

In summary, attempts have been made for sometime now to integrate social impact assessments in the general environmental assessment framework. Until recently however, it can hardly be said that a systematic methodology or approach has been devised to undertake such studies. Several SIA techniques have been suggested. The present study tries to reinforce the notion that far more successful socioeconomic data and impact prediction can be generated and made by a combined interactive and participatory approach. By examining the prevailing environmental assessment regime, E & P operations can be more effectively executed if social analysis is undertaken with regard to the relative socioeconomic importance of an area, characterizing the diverse population as a consequence and involving the people in the study process itself.

A general recommendation in the execution of environmental assessment processes is, therefore, not to emphasize and strive for biophysical data

collection alone but to establish a well integrated, interactive and participatory assessment, self-sustaining structure founded on local involvement, for the sake of gathering more accurate socioeconomic data and SIA predictions.

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