Social licence or social science? The role of social impact assessment

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ABSTRACT

Established frameworks for social impact assessment (SIA), both internationally and in Australia, emphasise the fundamental need for rigorous social science methods, alongside complementary principles such as impartiality, a life-cycle approach, and transparency. For example, the New South Wales SIA guideline for resource projects (NSW DPE, 2017) notes that SIA should use "appropriate, accepted social-science methods and robust evidence from authoritative sources," and that SIA should be "undertaken in a fair, unbiased manner."

The rationale for these principles is that decision-makers, and people potentially affected by major projects, should be able to rely on the findings and conclusions in forming a balanced view of their merits. On this basis, rigorously investigating the community's level of approval – or 'social licence' – for a proposal becomes a critically important process in SIA. After all, canvassing the views of potentially-affected people is the only way to understand how they expect the project to affect them.

Yet, in a great many cases, SIA practice seems more concerned with asserting social licence than with practising social science. That is, SIA reports often demonstrate little understanding of social science methods, may use evidence of community opinion selectively to portray the project in a positive light, and can be biased in favour of dominant voices and interests. At the same time, SIA reports typically convey a tone of technocracy, in which contestable assertions are buttressed by a plethora of quantitative 'facts' to suggest objectivity.

With reference to case studies of resources projects in Australia, this paper examines some of the dimensions of this tension between social licence and social science. It then considers what attributes of SIA might represent a more genuinely scientific approach while avoiding the technocratic style that characterises much SIA work.