

About time

Events that have shaped the development of SIA in Australia

Dr Sheridan Coakes

National Social Practice Lead- Umwelt

Change can be fast or slow, can bring with it both positive and/or negative effects, and can be easier or more difficult to cope with. While we all appreciate that change is inevitable, we also know that it can impact us in quite different ways, depending upon our individual and household circumstances, the attachments that we hold with others and with our environment, and whether it brings benefits or costs to us personally and/or the communities in which we live.

Social Impact Assessment (SIA), in essence, is about managing change, it is about proactively identifying the likely social impacts of proposed development or change, and the extent and duration of these impacts; it's about greater fairness in how the impacts of planned change are distributed; it's about giving communities a voice in the matters that affect them directly and/or indirectly; and it's about being clear about the consequences that change brings from a personal, social/community and cultural perspective - ensuring that appropriate strategies are in place to better manage and/or enhance predicted impacts.

Appropriate attention to social issues and impacts, at the onset of development planning processes, and throughout a project's operational life cycle, can result in the development of more sustainably managed projects and operations, that are more readily accepted by key stakeholders and host communities. Furthermore, in a transition context, SIA can assist in facilitating a smoother adjustment for communities and regions.

SIA can facilitate relationship building and partnerships between relevant parties, thus reducing conflict and building trust; it can reveal solutions to project design and impact management that might not have been envisaged; and it can result in a range of benefit sharing and shared value initiatives that can support and enhance local and regional livelihoods and further develop a community's capital assets.

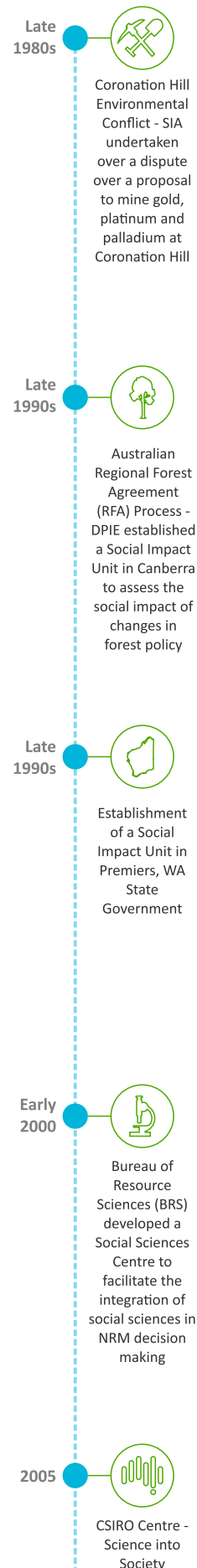
Putting people at the centre of the projects that affect them is important, and those of us trained in the area understand and appreciate the theory, methods and analytical approaches that afford good social practice. Our experience tells us that by involving stakeholders in matters that affect them, listening better, sharing knowledge (local and technical), and being open to doing things differently, results in improved project design and more sustainable and balanced project outcomes.

As a seasoned SIA practitioner in Australia for the last 25 years and having developed my own specialised national social impact consultancy in the late 1990s, I have been very fortunate to have been involved in the development and implementation of SIA across Australia, through my involvement in many large-scale SIA programs across a diversity of industry sectors. Now in my current role as the National Social Practice Lead for Umwelt, I remain just as passionate about ensuring that SIA has its rightful place around the project development and operational table, and that both industry and government are conscious of the impacts that development and operational activities may have on individuals and local communities, providing stakeholders with a genuine voice in project and policy development.

In 1982, Charlie Wolfe, one of the great pioneers in SIA, outlined that advance in the 'state of the art' of SIA, must be sought in four linked area of field development – theoretical, methodological, professional, and institutional. Despite the years that have passed, Charlie's comments are still as true now as they were in the early 1980s. While theoretical and methodological advances have been made in the field, the institutionalisation of SIA within organisations/agencies, and the development of SIA as a professional practice, requires further advancement.

Despite these issues, for those that have integrated and applied SIA in their decision-making processes, there is consensus on what is good SIA. As Esteves, Franks and Vanclay (2012) outline, it is participatory; it supports affected peoples, proponents, and regulatory agencies; it increases understanding of change and capacities to respond to change; it seeks to avoid and mitigate negative impacts and to enhance benefits across the life cycle of developments; and it emphasizes consideration of the potential disproportionate effects on vulnerable and disadvantaged people. From a practitioner's perspective, SIA practitioners work with communities to achieve improved development outcomes for communities; they work with development agencies and private sector companies to influence the planning and design of projects and policies; and they liaise with regulatory agencies to inform the development approval process and integrate social effects or consequences into the ongoing regulation of projects.

From a proponent's perspective, the benefits of good social practice at a company level makes business sense. Most companies have a strong Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Social Performance agenda - reflected in company standards and guidelines, in the development of corporate social and community investment programs, and in the provision of local and regional employment and economic strategies and supply chains. However, sometimes the nuance of these program objectives may get lost on the ground – creating misalignment between the narrative of social performance and the practical application and implementation of it in practice. Events such as Juukan Gorge bring into question, the degree to which social aspects are institutionalised in industry decision making processes, and whether appropriate checks and balances are in place to ensure that social and cultural impacts are identified and managed effectively through avoidance, mitigation, and enhancement.



At a government level within Australia, the application of SIA has wavered over the years. A close colleague of mine, who was considering social impacts in her PhD thesis at the time, asked me why I felt that SIA had not been more instrumental in influencing decision-making processes, and was not more readily adopted by industry and government to inform project development, despite many constructive case studies across Australia and internationally. My response at that time was that if we look closely at when SIA has influenced project development and assessment most centrally, this is largely when there is a political driver and/or where there is strong community opposition to a proposed change.

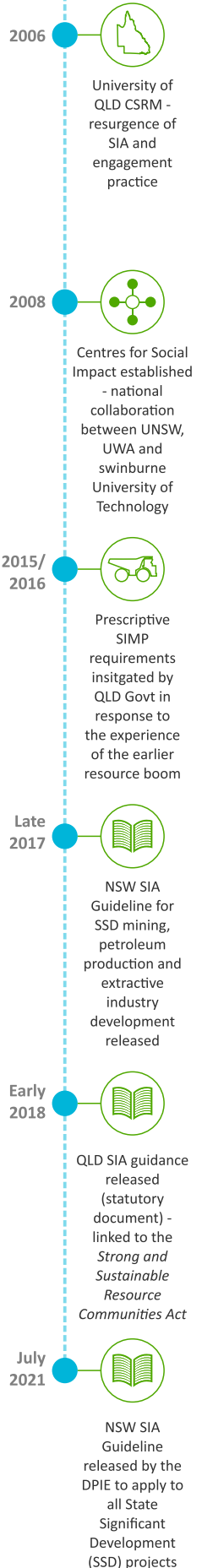
For instance, one of the first applications of SIA at a government level was in relation to the Coronation Hill Environmental Conflict in the Northern Territory in the late 1980's/early 1990s. The SIA in this instance was initiated by a Federal Government public inquiry to inform Government on how the dispute over a proposal to mine gold, platinum and palladium at Coronation Hill should be resolved.

Analogous to the McKenzie River pipeline project in Canada (Berger, 1977), the Coronation Hill proposal was bitterly resisted by many of the Jawoyn People – an Indigenous Australian nation with custodial rights to the area - and a diversified environmental movement which sought the area's inclusion in an expanded Kakadu National Park. Given the highly politicised context of the assessment, the implementation of social impact assessment methods put knowledge systems, especially the beliefs and values of all key parties – mining, Aboriginal communities, conservation and government – at the core of the impact assessment, enabling perspectives to be documented and providing an opportunity to integrate both indigenous and western knowledge in the assessment process (Ross, 1990; Dale and Lane, 1994).

Around 10 years later, a further large-scale application of SIA was seen in the Australian Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) Process, where the then Commonwealth Department of Primary Industry and Energy (DPIE) established a Social Impact Unit in government (in which I worked at the time) to assess the social impacts of changes in forest policy on communities across Australia, due to conflict over the continued logging of Australia's native forests.

The SIA unit's development was motivated due to a blockade of Parliament House by members of the forest industry – people power in action - who drove their logging trucks into Canberra and camped on the lawns of Parliament House with their family members, to protest the Commonwealth Government's decision to reclaim woodchip licences from the States, and to assess the implications of reducing access to native forest areas across Australia for production.

The blockade caused the then Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, to walk to his office for approximately two weeks, and resulted in the SIA unit being directed to assess the social impacts of proposed changes in forest policy on forest communities; with a key objective of ensuring that appropriate strategies were in place to effectively document and manage predicted social impacts of the policy change.



Since the RFA process, we have seen several Social Science Centre's develop in the Bureau of Resource Sciences (BRS) in Canberra and within the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), providing advice on the integration of social science in natural resource planning and decision making. Social impact units were also established in both the WA and QLD governments in the early and late 1990s respectively, largely to better understand the social impacts associated with the boom-and-bust cycles of the resource sector and company reliance on fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforces. At that time, some of the early SIA literature was published on the effects of FIFO on rural and regional communities, an issue which has continued to be reflected in project assessment reports; and in Queensland which has resulted in greater guidance around workforce arrangements through the development of the *Strong and Sustainable Communities Act* (2017) (SSCA) and the development of a SIA guideline (Queensland Department of State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning, 2018). Extensive resource activity and new mining ventures in the Bowen Basin coal region, Northwest minerals region, and investment in coal seam gas extraction in Southwest Queensland facilitated this change, with many resource communities having expressed concerns that the increased use of non-residential FIFO workers by companies had a detrimental effect on their local communities (akin to the drivers in the late 1990s in WA).

Now firmly in place, the *Queensland SSC Act* ensures that residents of communities near large resource projects benefit from the construction and operation of resource projects; and is applicable to large resource projects for which an environmental impact statement is required, or those that hold a site-specific environmental authority and have 100 or more workers. The Act states that projects are prohibited to operate a 100% fly-in, fly-out workforce; must demonstrate anti-discrimination; and are required to undertake a SIA.

In the absence of explicit government guidance, some industry proponents have chosen to seek out social specialists within Australia to provide expert SIA advice and to assist in developing social performance standards and approaches. The driver for industry, in this instance, has been to ensure uniformity in approach across their international business operations; and has been driven by companies' appreciation of international guidance developed by the International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) and/or requirements of the International Finance Corporation, Equator Principles, the World Bank and the United Nations. Such companies have undertaken sound SIA practice and, in many respects, have assisted in paving the way for guideline development and improved government regulation.

In 2017 in NSW, the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) was the first state to develop a comprehensive SIA guideline for state significant mining, petroleum production and extractive industry development, with the Department recently (1 July 2021) extending this guidance to apply to all State Significant development (SSD) projects across the state – the first state to apply SIA guidance broadly. Forces of change in relation to the development of this guidance, in Parson's (2019) view, includes community pressure and shifting expectations, industry desire for greater clarity and certainty, departmental leadership, a collaborative approach to policy development, and perceived legitimacy of the guideline itself. Recent outcomes of Land and Environment Court Decisions in NSW (e.g., Gloucester Resources v Minister for Planning, 2019) have also emphasised social aspects in court decisions, such as community cohesion, sense of place, and distributive equity, reinforcing the need for adequate consideration of social impacts in development planning, and the importance of providing an adequate voice for stakeholders and communities in matters that affect them directly and indirectly.

While SIA to date has largely been considered a more implicit requirement of project development and assessment planning in Australia, reflected under the standard definition of the 'environment' as specified in the *Environmental Protection, Biodiversity and Conservation Act* (1979); there is an obvious shift to define the role of SIA more explicitly in development planning and decision making across certain states. The level of acceptance of the new SIA guidance by NSW applicants / proponents is yet to be determined.

Like anything new, it will take time for some applicants to digest the guidance and requirements; and appropriately factor in sufficient scope, time, and budget to meet the new standards that have been set. In this vein, practitioner capability will also need to be further developed in industry, government, and within professional environmental and social consulting companies, providing an opportunity for greater understanding, recognition and ultimately certification of the practice as a specialist discipline – a position for which I have long been a strong advocate.

So don't be left behind. The introduction of clear expectations and strong guidance around SIA in NSW provides a solid benchmark for other states and territories across Australia. SIA is not rocket science, but it is social science at work. The guidance provides opportunities to deliver improved social practice, facilitate enhanced project design, ensure impacts are managed appropriately and make sure that more equitable project outcomes are achieved for all stakeholders. Quality SIA is good news for all – practitioners, community, government, and industry.

Dr Sheridan Coakes

National Social Practice Lead
Umwelt



Dr Sheridan Coakes is an experienced social practitioner with over 25 years' experience working with industry, government and communities in applying robust SIA and engagement programs across Australia. Originally involved in the development and implementation of the SIA for the Commonwealth Government's Australian Regional Forest Agreement process in the late 1990s, Sherie has, and continues to be, a strong advocate for the inclusion of good SIA practice in development planning and decision making. Currently, as the National Social Practice Lead for Umwelt, and having also directed her own specialist social consultancy practice for over 10 years, she has a solid knowledge of the benefits of applying good social practice to inform more sustainable and equitable project outcomes. In May 2021, Sherie was also appointed as a Commissioner to the NSW Government's Independent Planning Commission for a 3 year term.

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