Chapter 2: Social Objective and Stakeholder Engagement

Introduction

In Chapter 1, we have outlined the concepts and steps of conducting SIA. In this Chapter, we shall start our discussion on the cornerstone of SIA, namely, social objective. As briefly mentioned before, the problem of the “social” embedded in the concept of social objective makes stakeholder engagement an inevitable and inseparable topic of discussion in deliberating social objective. We therefore are going to discuss both concepts together.

Defining Social Objective

In social service settings, most of the service programme or projects are set out to achieve a set of objectives which are almost always “social” in nature. A couple of years ago, the government embarked on an initiative to provide additional funding for District Elderly Community Centre and Neighborhood Elderly Centre in Hong Kong to help identify hidden elders in the community. The primary objective is to get these elders connected with formal service network and informal social network. The underlying belief is that older persons who live alone should not be left alone and that our community should give the older persons a feeling that they are cared. The programme was also a response to advocates in the society in view of the prevalence of elderly suicide or accidental deaths or injuries due to their being alone and disconnected.

This service programme is particularly useful in illustrating the concept of social objective, for it inevitably touches upon the relationship between the objective of this service programme at the social level and the need of older persons at the individual level. We understand that many older persons choose to be alone, and they really do not want to get connected with formal service network or informal social network, though the government, advocates or many members of the society believe that the government or the society should take care of these older persons by connecting them with the larger society and rendering more care and support to them. The question therefore is whether this objective cannot be said to be a social objective when some older persons who do not want
to get connected to the larger society, while a reasonable majority of singleton elderly in Hong Kong may welcome for its being able to meet their individual needs of social affiliation.

As much as the social objective defined by the government for the elderly as a social group is met, the need of affiliation of a majority of individual single older persons is also met. For those who do not want to get connected, the programme does not impose its objective on them. Their individual choices or preferences are also respected though the society or the government would still hope that they can be connected in some ways. At least in the context of Hong Kong, achieving a social objective does not necessarily jeopardize individual rights to choose. Social objective and individual end are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Also, the fact that social objective is “social” in nature does not necessarily mean that it concerns something beyond individuals. More often than not, a social objective serves both individual and social ends. It usually serves the social end through serving the individual ones.

We should always be vigilant that there are always persons of the directly concerned target who do not think this programme represents their interest and think that their rights are jeopardized by the introduction of the programme or intervention. For example, two decades ago, a Bill was enacted to grant women in the New Territories rights to inherit properties, which used to be the exclusive rights of men in the New Territories. The proponents argued that the introduction of this law would not jeopardize the rights of those who still insisted on passing their properties onto their sons. While this is true, the opponents thought that by letting some to do otherwise, the entire tradition of the New Territories would be called into question and eroded gradually. From their perspective, intervention like this may not be just meaningless but highly undesirable. The very existence of such a perspective implies that a social objective, though being social in nature, is never completely representative of the view of all members of the society.

In fact, as in the example of hidden elder service, other than the expected benefit for the society as a whole (the benefit for the reasonable majority of single older persons), some more benefits may be generated for the operators themselves or other stakeholders in the process of achieving the programme objective. The latter benefits, if any, are not the government’s intended outcome, but in the programme for hidden elder, do contribute to changes like re-engineering of
service delivery mode in District Elderly Community Centres (DECC)/
Neighbourhood Elderly Centre (NEC), inspiration for service development, or
increase of capacity of the service operators in appealing for further funding to
support other needs being identified. Unintended though, these changes, for a
good majority of stakeholders in the society, are still desirable objectives to have
achieved unintentionally.

Yet, as the intended objectives, these unintended objectives will never be shared
by all in the society. For example, some might question whether the
strengthening of NGO capacity might in fact be detrimental to the entire society’s
development.

In short, a social objective, in an operational sense, may be better seen as a
contingent statement of social change expected by the people in the society on its
development, both development process and development outcome. In the
illustration above, it is not difficult to understand how a social objective is a
“statement of social change expected by the people in the society”, i.e. hoping
that the singleton elderly can in some ways get connected with the society and
not left isolated. And there are outcomes of process and end result.

What needs to be explained in this definition is the word “contingent”. As the
statement of expected social change is contingent, we have to be aware of how it
is always subject to and should be open to redefinition. It is contingent on
time, for what the society desires to achieve may change over time. What
prevails at this moment may not be uphold in future. Individuals’ or groups’
views are also bound to be changing due to temporal and contextual factors.

As it is not easy to get a precise representative view of the entire society,
engagement of different groups of individuals or entities may produce entirely
different sets of objectives that are said to be representative of the society. This
qualifying term of “contingency” necessitates a step of stakeholder engagement,
which will be discussed later.
Intention and Social Objective

All objectives have their owners. They should somehow be coming out of the intention of the owners. However, the owner of the social objectives cannot be simply understood as the society as an entity above all individuals. In the context of Hong Kong society, there is not a “superstructure” up there to impose a social objective on every individual.

That said, the government is usually thought of as such an entity above individuals that represents the society’s view. Thus, the Policy Address by the Chief Executive of HKSARG may have a list of policy objectives which are presented as representing the common ends that the people of Hong Kong desires to reach. Although the Policy Address is written by the government officials or the CE, it is presented as something representing what is on the mind of all the residents in Hong Kong. Through the government, as a public authority, the social objectives can be understood as owned by the people.

An objective is social because it is shared by at least some individuals in the society. Individuals in the society as well as the society itself can be said to be the owners of the social objective. The social objective reflects what they intend for the society and themselves.

However, rarely would individuals in the society or the society itself be having an opportunity to deliberate specific social objective. Using the hidden elder programme above, the society or many Hong Kong people would intend to help singleton older persons to get connected with the community, but in fact, the people of Hong Kong would not all be consulted. We could claim with a bit of confidence that there would be such a social intention (usually based on our reflexive understanding of the value of the members of the society, being a member ourselves).

That said, the social intention should never be over-claimed. Hence, there has to be a mechanism through which we can engage a reasonable range of stakeholders to identify the social objectives.
Unintended Consequences and the Boundary of Social Objectives

What is intended to generate a certain level of welfare may end up creating much more or somewhat less than expected. Also, what is intended to achieve may produce positive or negative externalities which are entirely out of the original expectation. For example, there has been a big consensus in our society that land in Hong Kong is limited and we have inadequate land supply in Hong Kong to provide adequate housing for people in Hong Kong. The government’s plan to develop the North Eastern New Territories should be a socially welcome objective as the intended consequence will be an increase of land for housing.

Along the positive line, many villagers who own the farmland see this plan as a good opportunity for them to capitalize their land asset. The housing developers will also benefit from the development project. These latter two at least are not the objectives which the government or the society intends to create.

For some people, pursuit of private interest by the villagers and developers may not be thought as positive consequences. They think that the development would only benefit developers. Claiming in the interest of the public, they think that the development will damage the back garden of Hong Kong and the general public will lose a place where they can enjoy the nature.

There is a group of villagers who have been farming in the zoned area and they do not want the land to be developed. They would like to stay in the same place and to keep their existing life intact. Destroying the home of these people and their lifestyle is obviously not the intended consequences of the development project. However, such a project is obviously doing negative unintended consequences on them. Yet, for some people in Hong Kong, farming is no longer a viable industry and is very costly for Hong Kong to farm. They maintain that not developing the area is a private interest of the farmers, not social interest of the people of Hong Kong.

While the positive or negative intended and unintended consequences of a big development project at this scale are more observable, those of a smaller scale in the welfare sector may not be easily observable or accountable. Take for example an organization implementing a hotmeal canteen in a community with highest ratio of low-income households. Providing affordable and diet meals to
people who have limited means for even basic quantity and quality of food would of course be seen as something good. This positive intended consequence is obvious. The unintended consequences are usually not paid attention to, particularly those of the negative type.

Let's focus on the positive unintended consequences first. A programme like this may be subsequently known to a wider community and many ordinary citizens may find this programme worth supporting. They may volunteer themselves to help in the service implementation. They may donate money to help sustain the programme. The project may then be able to scale up, and so may the entire institutional system supporting the project. What's more, a successful programme may attract the attention of many other operators and donors concerned with this group of target participants, and more such programme may join the service market, benefiting a lot more people. As more and more stakeholders are involved, this kind of hotmeal programme may even be scaled up to be a food assistance campaign at the societal level, which is capable of drawing the entire society's attention.

We should not however think that a hotmeal programme like this does not produce any negative social consequences or that the abovementioned positive consequences are essentially positive. Social stigmatization, for example, may be one such negative consequences experienced by the recipients. Similarly, as much as the project may scale up, the stigmatization may grow with the number of recipients. It is not uncommon to find in the world of social media that the recipients have been portrayed so negatively that some may not even dare to apply for such assistance of food or cash.

This list of unintended consequences of social nature can be as long as anyone can possibly think of. The question thus arises is: how would it be possible that a social impact assessment, underlined by a concept of unintended consequence, could include all these consequences? How are we going to delimit the boundary or scope of social impacts in a social impact assessment?

Inherent in any outcome evaluation or social impact assessment has always been such a question. Think about conducting a clinical trial for a newly invented drug or a counseling therapy. The experimenter focuses on examining the outcome or impact of the experimental condition (the drug or therapy). Other conditions, positive or negative, naturally do not fall within the scope of concern
because they are said to have been randomized. True though that they are randomized in the experiment, they do constitute real impacts on some people in the real world when the drug is put on sale in the market. A lot of drugs in the world can stand the test of clinical trial well, but they may be something which even the medical practitioners would not prescribe for themselves in spite of their claimed effectiveness evidenced by the clinical trial. The unintended consequences, i.e. the side-effects, are either not known or not clearly articulated in any way more than some anecdotal notes in the instruction.

Assessment of unintended consequences therefore requires at least two things: (1) a general level of intention to measure unintended consequences; (2) existing knowledge about the likelihood of occurrence of consequences which are unintended. Stigmatization, for example. Although this is certainly not the intended consequence of a programme, the assessor/programme worker’s awareness of possible consequences would determine whether it would be assessed at all. Of course, even if the assessor was aware of such consequence, s/he would still need knowledge about the baseline level of stigmatization against which the resulted level can be compared.

Social Impact: Conceptual Framework for Social Service Sector

An assessment driven by an intention of measuring social impact can measure consequences which are unintended by the organizer of a social programme, but it can never measure consequences which the assessor does not intend to measure. That is, the unintended consequences can be measured so long as they are within the intended scope of concepts or measurement of the assessment. In other words, delimiting the indefinitely long list of intended and unintended consequences requires the assessor to take reference to the organizer’s objectives or intended outcomes as well as to go beyond those objectives or intended outcomes to identify some relevant unintended consequences.

Obviously, it is not fair to assess a social programme based on a set of objectives which are entirely irrelevant to the organizer’s original plan or intention. However, focusing narrowly on the organizer’s original plan or intention may miss out a lot of unintended consequences generated by the programme. To resolve this problem, some conceptual tool may be needed to specify areas of
social impact which go beyond individual programme objective but reasonably capture relevant unintended consequences.

In specifying a framework, the assessor will have to go beyond individual project’s intended objectives to a higher societal level thinking. The individual project’s objectives, as explained above, are already embedded with social meanings and can be understood as contingent statement of expected social changes of the individuals of the society. Beyond this set of objectives, the assessor will have to have a reasonable grasp of the social values, preferences or objectives of the society that any social programme is usually expected to achieve.
During the period of its development, our initial framework emerged is a “3-level 6-dimension” as tabulated below:

Table 1 Initial SIA framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-awareness and self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Involvement in society</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment in social capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project/Organization</td>
<td>Sustainability of the project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Skills improvement</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After about 15 months of experiences in conducting social impact assessments, the initial framework is modified. The latest model has regrouped the dimensions into 2 tiers as shown below:

Table 2 Second version of SIA framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary tier</th>
<th>Impact dimension</th>
<th>Assessment objective</th>
<th>Impact indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>To assess how a social intervention could cause changes to the directly-involved individuals.</td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>- Self-esteem</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Information acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Skills and knowledge development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Health and physical change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>To assess how a social intervention could cause changes on interpersonal level, and individual’s interaction with the society that could cause immediate effect on their living.</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>- Social network</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Community participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Financial integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Volunteerism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economical</td>
<td>To assess how a social intervention could cause changes on resources and revenue usage on public expenditure.</td>
<td>Financial sustainability - Financial adjustment on the service - Community resources allocation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary tier</td>
<td>Mode of service delivery - Effectiveness - Programme restructuring - Stakeholders involvement - Service continuity - Service expansion Organisational development - Organisation restructuring - Inter-organisational collaboration - Cross-organisation collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>To assess the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of intervention design and execution; and the subsequent changes that may cause to the executing entity as a whole.</td>
<td>Community development - Demographic change - Public participation in community affairs Policy change - Subsequent policy change - Other policy area adjustment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>To assess whether an intervention could induce changes on community composition and on policy level.</td>
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Subsequent to this revision, further attempts were made and we came to an understanding that both versions of the framework may be useful in terms of providing a guide for us to look beyond the intended consequences/outcomes of a programme. Which framework is to be used depends on the project in question.
In the context of the social service sector in Hong Kong, it is composed of various NGOs who have been maintaining constant contacts with diverse groups beneficiaries and working partners, involving hundreds of thousands of individuals. While we may not be able to comfortably claim knowledge about the social objectives of the entire society, our work does enable us to spell out a theoretical model of social impact. As social objective is defined previously as a contingent statement of expected social changes of the society on its development, our understanding of the social service perspective's on social objectives is also contingent. Thus, we should treat this task of specifying a framework of social impact as a process in which the framework itself can be constantly modified.

The implications of this are at least three: (1) different pieces of social impact assessment may not be entirely comparable unless the components or dimensions of impacts are consistently included over a given period of time; (2) while the framework of social impact may be a starting reference for any social impact assessment, how the framework is adopted and the assessment conducted should be a localized decision; and (3) it is practice-oriented or practice-based that we do not seek to arrive at a static theoretical model about social impact, but an evolving tool of social impact that it can be applied when needed.

The above 2 versions of the framework have clearly assumed that the impact level/tier and dimensions are widely agreed ones. At the very least, they are supposed to be widely agreed upon by stakeholders within the social service sector. The problem of this claim is obvious: we have never done any systematic process of engagement or consultation/survey to arrive at this conclusion. That said, it does not mean that it is based entirely on wild guess. Rather, it is obtained by an extensive review of literature together with the opinion of selected individuals in both the academia and the sector.
Social Impact and Stakeholder Engagement

However, how does a framework of social impact come up, as the one shown above?

This again brings us back to stakeholder engagement: the social values, preferences or objectives of the society are to be understood through engaging different stakeholders. Yet, in an attempt to engage stakeholders, we inevitably come across a problem of delimitation: Who are we going to engage, so that we can ascertain our framework of social impact is conceptually rich enough to cover a reasonable and relevant scope of social impact? Like social impact, social engagement requires both a definition and a process of delimitation. That is, what do we mean when we talk about social engagement in SIA? Are we going to engage every single individual in the society? If not, how are we going to delimit the boundary?

It seems that we are being trapped in an endless process in which we cannot fully ascertain what are truly valued by the society as a whole:

- In defining social objectives in terms of intended and unintended consequences, we rely on the stakeholders to determine what is valuable to the society.
- Yet, the scope of those who can tell the answer, the stakeholders, is to be delimited by some insights on social objective.

Mindful of the importance of being open to opinions from a wider circle, we have to approach the issue in a practical manner by contextualizing it in a certain social setting and determining what social objectives are most agreeable and which groups of stakeholders are most relevant, notwithstanding that the judgment is bound to be limited.

There are essentially a few tips/principles for handling this issue:

1. We need to recognize our limitation: There is no way we can fully ascertain whether an objective or value is truly representative of the people in a society.
2. Recognizing this limitation though, we need to be confident that there are two practical ways through which we can get insights into the objectives or values which are largely shared by the society:
   i. We ourselves are socially competent members of the society and we do have practical knowledge about what our society values
   ii. We ourselves are living or working in a social situation where many members sharing the situation do give you information or feedback on what our society values.

3. Recognizing the limitation means more than just recognizing, but subjecting our judgment to feedback from your stakeholders.

4. You will never know in full who are to be engaged but you must have practical knowledge about which groups are more important than the others to engage, given limited time and resource.

5. As there must be stakeholders and their views being left out, your social impact assessment is always subject to review and reconsideration.
Stakeholder Engagement and Its Purposes

In any literature about social impact assessment, stakeholder engagement is said to be one of the cornerstones. Some talk about both stakeholder analysis and engagement. However, not many can clearly spell out what is stakeholder engagement and what are the purposes of it.

Stakeholder engagement can be defined as a process of making attempts to arrive at a consensus of social objectives. Some would confuse the stakeholder engagement process and the data collection process as we usually think that the beneficiary of a programme, for example, is an important group of stakeholders and therefore the process of asking for feedback from them after the programme is a process of stakeholder engagement.

It is true to say that the beneficiary is an important group of stakeholders whom we should engage, but stakeholder engagement in SIA should refer to a process of engagement before and after the assessment commences. The beneficiary, for example, should be engaged to express their opinion on what constitutes an achievement of a social objective, and they are usually the most relevant group when we talk about the impact of a programme on themselves.

In the definition stated, we emphasize that social engagement is a process of making attempt to arrive at a consensus. This requires more elaboration. As discussed above, social objectives are contingent in the temporal and contextual senses, its fluid nature prevents any possibility of a real consensus of an everlasting nature. And in a society full of differences, it sometimes is practically impossible for a group of people to arrive at a consensus. Many in the group may not be really convinced before a decision is taken. To stress that it is an attempt is however not to emphasize only its impossibility, but to appreciate the process of social assessment is always open and stays ready for critical scrutiny. SIA shall never take a set of social objectives, defined at a given moment or in a given context, as if they were always representing what the society embraces.
Scope of Engagement and Stakeholder Analysis

The other reason of saying that it is a process of making attempt is that stakeholder engagement requires delimitation of the scope of engagement. That is, who are to be engaged?

Although defining social objectives is important, it is impossible for us to engage everybody in the society for any impact assessment exercise, for the simple reason of practicality. Indeed, it may not be necessary based on theories of social organization. Values are never fixed. Neither are they entirely unstable and individual. Any group of stakeholders involved can in one way or another reflect the values of the society, but only partially. A group of stakeholders engaged has, as a delimited set among all, always already implied that the social objectives agreed upon among them may be disputed when some more different individuals or groups are engaged.

How are we going to delimit and identify a group of relevant stakeholders? To do so, we will have to start an exercise of stakeholder analysis.

Social impact assessment is essentially a type of practice-based research/assessment. Primarily, it is not an academic exercise of enquiry or theory building. Rather, it is conducted in response to some practical concerns. Many SIA projects that we previously conducted are donor-driven projects. Experiences elsewhere in the West also show that at the beginning stage, as we are now in Hong Kong, SIA would tend to be driven by funders, for the obvious reason that they would like to understand what impact their social investment can generate.

Given the above, the scope of engagement can only be practically assessed case by case. Assessors can brainstorm with the project holders and list out all possible stakeholders of the project concerned. Based on this list, they can make a decision on which groups among all are most relevant and materially impacted. Again, the word “social” in social impact assessment has already implied all social beings in the society will in theory be in one way or another affected by any action of anybody. But in a practice-based setting, which groups are most relevant and materially impacted are not difficult to determine. Drawing a map of stakeholders may help you get some insights.
So long as we adhere to the most basic principle of scientific inquiry of transparency, and we provide a clear account of how that decision is made, subjecting the entire piece of assessment to public scrutiny, the assessors should be able to make a reasonable decision as to what is the scope of engagement. For practical purpose, only if the boundary is delimited can a proper stakeholder engagement, hence social impact assessment, be conducted.

A certain defined scope of engagement at any given point of time should be subject to further modification throughout the process of engagement. Usually, the stakeholder groups you have decided to engage may provide you with good insights on other groups you should be consulting even though it may not be within your initial scope. It is always advisable to treat your stakeholders’ opinions seriously. SIA starts with stakeholder engagement because they give you most important insights on social objectives.

Steps in Stakeholder Engagement

1. Conduct a stakeholder analysis by asking a number of basic questions: Who are the stakeholders? How many types of stakeholders? General tips are:
   - The target beneficiary of the project is always the most important group of stakeholders.
   - The funder/investor of the project is another important group of stakeholders.
   - There is another group of stakeholders who can be identified “social observers.” They usually are the policy advocates, practitioners, researchers or experts of the social cause concerned.
   - The group which is taking the role of catalyst is the implementer.

2. Draw up a map of stakeholders.

3. Starting with the implementer and funder, who have a set of outcome in mind to achieve, identify different groups of stakeholders of at least two levels of significance: The core stakeholders and the non-core ones.

4. Asking why they are so distinguished

5. Using our social impact model to map out, as hypotheses, how those impact dimensions may be relevant to these stakeholders

6. Setting up meetings or focus groups to talk with your core stakeholders.
7. If the stakeholders involved are regularly met in your day-to-day operation, then you can make a judgment on whether separate meetings are required.

8. For new group of stakeholders, you should always set up meeting to discuss with them what they consider as impacts.

9. Determining which of the non-core groups of stakeholders you can practically arrange to meet up with.

10. Verifying social objectives and outcome areas/impact dimensions

11. Relating the programme objectives with some bigger social objectives which your stakeholders identify with.

12. Identification of indicators where the stakeholders see as most important or relevant.