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INDIAN SIA: THE SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF RAPID RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ON NATIVE PEOPLES

By C. GEISLER, R. GREEN, D. USNER, and P. WEST, Eds.
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1982. Pp. 448. \$6.00, s.c.

“As used in the present volume, social impact assessment (SIA) refers to the thorough and methodical study of human trauma associated with the rapid exploration of natural resources.” And so begins this book which both analyzes the process of SIA and provides commentary on actual SIAs which have taken place in native communities throughout this hemisphere. The book is divided into four sections: the first provides an overview of the SIA process and raises the cultural, economic and political issues that accompany the process; the second, third, and fourth sections contain examples and commentary on particular SIAs in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. As a whole the book is well edited, compiled and organized. The emerging discipline of social impact assessment has been furthered by the contribution of this book. The broad use of examples creates a concrete sense of reality as opposed to the abstractions often found in theoretical or hypothetical approaches to the same concepts.

The first section of this book brings to light two closely related and very important aspects of the SIA process. Those questions relate to the role of the social impact assessment. Even when assuming objectivity in the SIA, often the SIA will contradict the intentions of industry. As the opening line of the book implies, the SIA will focus on the trauma or negative impact of a development project. This focus seems to create an advocacy role for the SIA. Is such a role ethical in the sense of the SIA's scientific objectivity? However, once the ethical issue is raised, the political issue of conflict resolution comes into focus.

The first section of the book also treats certain assumptions that have arisen since the inception of the SIA concept. The book points out that these assumptions serve to insure that there will be little if any change of policy as a result of social impact assessment. As one reads through the second, third, and fourth sections of the book, those assumptions of conflict avoidance, social responsibility on the part of public officials, and the use of the SIA as a mitigating factor in resource development are brought under scrutiny.

Rapid resource development seems to be best described as development that is fully controlled by the expediencies of the market. The greater the market imperative, the less time there is for local populations to adjust

to dramatic changes in their social, economic, and political environment. This is true of all communities, but the problem is intensified when the cultural patterns of the local population differ from that of the incoming developers. The rate of change and the quality of the change create a conflict between the development which seems to have no concern for the local interests and the local interests which want control over the development. The SIAs place this conflict into context and thus focus and intensify the conflict. But the SIA process does mitigate the impact. If anything, the process enhances the issues in conflict.

How these conflicts are to be resolved is the political question. The issue seems to be one of finding a forum that would give as much weight to the social impacts as it gives to the economic impacts. Throughout the book the reader is shown examples of how native communities in several countries have worked to find a forum that would allow for local control over resource development decisions. A few success stories are pointed out and described, most notably, the Northern Cheyenne Research Project. However, it becomes painfully apparent that the successes are few and far between. When one looks at the actions of Brazil, Guatemala, and Panama, the distance between the needs of the communities and the efforts of the governments become very apparent. But that gap does not exist only in Latin America, although it is most pronounced there. Native communities throughout the United States and Canada are often deprived of any control over development in or near their communities. The solutions of the political issue are very complex and require the manipulation of public and private institutions of which the native people have little knowledge. The inability of the native people to build support among the various governmental agencies and the lack of a forum to resolve the conflicts brings the assumption of social responsibility on the part of public officials into question.

In a broad sense, this book explores resource development in a manner that stresses the importance of local communities. The issues, although viewed from the perspective of native peoples, transcend any particular local situation. Any local population, native or otherwise, will feel the social fabric of its community tear as rapid resource development pre-empts local decision making. The boomtowns of Gillette, Wyoming, and Grants, New Mexico, are well known examples of how non-native communities are impacted. *Indian SIA: The Social Impact Assessment of Rapid Resource Development on Native Peoples* effectively examines the processes and impacts of such development on native communities.

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