

Social Impact Assessment and housing developments

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Abstract

Social considerations are usually only considered relatively late in the process of developing low cost housing or other housing estates. By the time a social impact assessment is requested by the relevant authority, if it is requested, it is almost a given that the development will proceed. In general, little consideration is given to how the development will change the sense of place, or what the specific needs that will be created by the development will be. Developers, engineers, town planners and architects seem to take little cognisance of the social impacts that result from their designs or developments. This includes the physical design of the houses as well as the layout and surrounding structures and facilities. The aim of this paper is to take a step towards creating awareness about social impacts that can be experienced in housing estates and to bring to the fore special needs that have been identified by being involved in the field of low cost housing. Designs that are energy efficient, apart from having a positive environmental impact, can also have a positive social impact.

1 Introduction

There is a severe shortage of adequate housing in South Africa. The South African government aims to address this by supplying low cost housing. In many instances low cost housing developments are placed on land that was not zoned for residential use. According to Section 21, 22 and 26 of the Environment Conservation Act (ECA) [1], the rezoning of land requires an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). In many, but not all instances, a new low cost housing development will thus require an EIA. The relevant decision-making authority might further request a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to be conducted. The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of SIA to technical personnel, and to point out the value that an SIA can add to the planning process when a low cost housing development is planned.

2 Social Impact Assessment

The philosophy of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) developed as a specialised branch of environmental impact assessments. SIA is a philosophy about development and democracy that considers the pathologies of development (e.g. harmful impacts), goals of development (e.g. poverty alleviation) and processes of development (e.g. participation, capacity building) [2]. SIA plays an important role in creating social awareness and bringing home the fact that the environment does not only comprises of natural phenomena, but also incorporates human nature. The International Association for Impact Assessment [3] states that Social Impact Assessment includes the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by these interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment. The Inter-organizational Committee on Principles and Guidelines for Social Impact Assessment [4] defines Social Impact Assessment in terms of “efforts to assess, appraise or estimate, in advance, the social consequences that are likely to follow from proposed actions”.

Traditionally there are two approaches to SIA, a technical approach or a participatory approach. A technical approach entails that a scientist remains a neutral observer of social phenomena. The role of the scientist is to identify indicators, obtain objective measures relevant to the situation and provide an expert assessment on how the system will change [5]. A participatory approach uses the knowledge and experiences of individuals most affected by the proposed changes as the basis for projecting impacts. In this case the role of the scientist is facilitator of knowledge sharing, interpretation and reporting of impacts [5]. Both of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages, but such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Given the nature of the South African society and personal experience, it is the opinion of the author that a participatory approach is best suited for the South African context. Most communities have both political and traditional leaders – often with different opinions about what is the best for the society. Community infrastructures are well developed and there is an abundance of social capital. Social capital, something that does not have a monetary value in the traditional sense, can add to the wealth of a community. Social capital can be defined as a public good comprised of trust among a diverse group of citizens within the same community and as such it facilitates cooperative networks among those citizens [6]. Barrow [7] supports this by stating that social capital comprises the abilities, traditions and attitudes that help ensure that a group of people will support each other, respond to challenges in a constructive manner, and innovate. A

community that possesses social capital will thus participate more in community matters and work together for collective benefits.

SIA is a tool designed to assess the impacts of development on communities, but also to find social capital and built on its strengths. One of the aims of SIA is to create sustainable communities. An example of where SIA can be utilised to create sustainable communities is in the field of housing. There is an urgent need for formal housing in South Africa. Between 40% and 50% of the population in the cities of South Africa lives in informal settlements [8]. There are approximately 189 informal settlements scattered in and around Johannesburg [9]. Over 24% of the population of Gauteng, which is also South Africa's most urbanized province, lives in informal settlements. The situation is similar around other big cities. Although the poorest of the poor lives in these communities, the author found an abundance of social capital amongst these people. If the necessary capital, support and mandate were available, these communities could be empowered to become fully sustainable.

Within a developmental framework, SIA could be linked with Social Development, an approach to social welfare that has been officially adopted by South Africa to reconstruct its social welfare system. Social Development may be viewed as an approach for promoting people's welfare or social well-being [10]. Barrow [11] defines it as the incorporation of a people-oriented focus into general development efforts. Social Development is characterised by an emphasis on linking social and economic interventions within the wider framework of a dynamic developmental process that promotes social progress and human welfare for all [12]. It is clear that SIA can play a much more important role in the developmental context in South Africa than merely being a minor component of an EIA report.

3 Typical social impacts to consider in a low cost housing development

A social change process is a discrete, observable and describable process which changes the characteristics of (parts of) a society, taking place regardless of the societal context (that is, independent of specific groups, nations, religions etc.). These change processes may, in certain circumstances and depending on the context lead to the experience of social impacts [13]. Social change processes are set in motion by project activities. Change has a way of creating other changes. Social change processes can lead to several other, second-order, social change processes. Depending on the characteristics of the local social setting and mitigation processes that are put in place, social change processes can lead to social impacts. For example, resettlement can lead to processes of urban-to-rural migration and changes in food production. Adding to that, the way in which people experience the change can result in them changing their behaviour, and this can trigger more social change processes. Direct social impacts result from social change processes that result from a planned intervention. It may be intended or unintended. Indirect social impacts are a result of changes in the biophysical environment. An example of this is the degradation of land, which will result in a decrease of the agricultural stock produced on the land. As a result there will be a loss of income from farming activities. This is the indirect social impact [13].

The social change processes are likely to be found in the following groupings;

- Demographic processes - changes in the number and composition of people.

- Economic processes - the processes relating to economic activity in society and the way that people make a living.
- Geographical processes - processes affecting the land use patterns of a society.
- Institutional & legal processes - processes relating to the efficiency and effectiveness of institutional structures including government and non-government organizations.
- Emancipatory and empowerment processes - processes leading to an increase in the ability of local people to contribute to decision-making that affects their lives.
- Sociocultural processes - processes that affect the culture of a society, implying all aspects of the way that people live together.
- Other processes – new processes continuously occur and it is impossible to predict the likely impact that it might have, e.g. the social impact of internet.

A social impact is the consequence to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs and general cope as members of society. It includes cultural impacts involving changes to the norms, values and beliefs that guide their cognition of themselves and their society. Social Impacts must be experienced or felt. Seven categories of impacts are mentioned, and it covers a wide variety issues. Some impacts are experienced on individual level, others on family level and some on community level. There are impacts that are felt as a physical reality, whilst other impacts can be perceptual or emotional. Impacts can be positive or negative. The following seven categories should be investigated in any given SIA [13]:

Health and social wellbeing

Health is an essential category of social impacts. Health aspects are included from a social perspective and should be expressed in non-medical terminology. Low cost housing developments are often placed close to industrial areas, mine dumps or decommissioned slimes dams and whether it is a perceived or a real impact, members of the community often feels that their health is impacted on in a negative way.

Quality of the living environment

The quality of the living environment refers to the liveability of the neighbourhood and workplace. Some of the impacts relate directly to the biophysical environment. This concept includes a perceived and actual dimension. In the instance of low cost housing developments, the areas are often isolated from central metropolitan areas and services are not accessible, or not consistent. The biophysical environment is often degraded in sites that were previously hosting informal settlements because of the lack of formal structure like sewage and refuse collection.

Economic impacts & material wellbeing

This relates to the wealth and prosperity of individuals and the community as a whole. There is a high incidence of unemployment and scarcity of work in South Africa in general. Often the people targeted to live in a low cost housing development, lived in an informal settlement before. Many informal businesses exist in informal settlements, and moving to another area, although there will be an improvement in physical conditions, might lead to a loss of income. It can also be a positive impact in the sense that new opportunities for business can arise. Low cost housing developments do have a negative impact on property prices. Persons living on smallholdings in areas where there is a boom in these kinds of developments struggle to sell their properties. There is a conflict of interest between the desperate need for housing and the protection of the rights of landowners.

Cultural impacts

This include all impacts on the culture or cultures in an affected area, including loss of language, loss of cultural heritage or a change in the integrity of a culture, affecting the culture to persist. Residents in

low cost housing developments are usually from culturally diverse groups, and thus often form their own, unique sub-culture.

Family and community impacts

Impacts may be related to the family, social networks and the community in general. When people relocate to low cost housing developments, there are often impacts on the community in the area they have left behind. Often communities do not relocate to the same place, and this result in losing community cohesion.

Institutional, legal, political and equity impacts

A range of impacts are included here, most importantly those that affect the capacity of organisations, regulatory authorities and institutions to cope with the workload generated by the proposed interventions. Local government, schools, clinics and social services can often not cope with the pressure of a huge influx of people into one area. In many instances these authorities find out about the developments in a much later stage of the process. It is the experience of the author that provision for essential services other than water, electricity and sewage is often not included in the planning process.

Gender relations

Women tend to bear the largest and most direct social impacts. In many counties, especially developing countries there are significant gender gaps and discrimination against woman. Gender is a core SIA issue. This is no different in low cost housing developments. Woman is often expected to perform traditional tasks at home, and to be economically active.

Social change processes are part of life. When a new project is initiated, these processes speed up. Social change processes can lead to positive or negative social impacts. Proper planning and management of impacts will add to the quality of any project, especially for the recipients of the impact.

4 Conclusion

Social issues should be considered in all the phases of a proposed low cost housing development. SIA can be used as a planning tool. In the planning stages of any low cost housing development, the project team should consult a social scientist familiar with the relevant community. Social issues are seldom considered in the selection of sites for low cost housing developments. Important factors like how the development will impact on the sense of place, what value the people attach to the area where they live, what possibilities there are for the new community to integrate with the existing community, and to what extend segregation and conflict can be avoided should be considered early on. Very diverse communities with different issues are often expected to become an amalgamated community. It is important to weigh the desperate need for housing against the rights and concerns of existing land owners. Valid concerns like a drop in the value of their property and safety issues are often raised in the EIA process. If these could be picked up earlier in the process, the chances of the issues being successfully addressed are better. Infrastructure like schools, clinics, open spaces and community services should be provided for, or at least considered in the designing phase of the project. Children need areas to play, especially if their house and yard is very small. Poor people do not have the luxury of having their own transport. If houses are put in an isolated area far from transport networks, bigger social problems are created. Social and environmental issues are often not considered until it is too late. Time and money can be saved if these matters are considered earlier in the process. In addition to social issues, designs that can have a positive social impact should be implemented. People living in

low cost houses are poor. Energy efficient house designs can cut electricity bills. Plots should be big enough to accommodate a food garden – this can have a positive cultural and physical impact. If no provision for gardens on every plot can be made, a communal garden should be included where residents can grow food. Vegetables grown in the gardens can feed families, but also provide income, and thus creating a positive psychological impact by enhancing the self-worth of community members. Environmentally friendly designs like solar ovens and solar water heaters could be provided with each unit. This will have a positive impact on the resources of the earth, whilst residents can cut their electricity bills at the same time. A participatory approach to Social Impact Assessment should be followed. Low cost housing is often erected on the same site as the existing informal settlement, or adjacent to existing neighbourhoods. Community boundaries differ from physical boundaries. Communities can provide useful inputs in designs and give insight in their specific needs.

Socially conscious designers and developers can make a big difference in the lives of many people. What might be a few small adaptations to one person might be a huge difference in quality of life to another. The perception that all development is good should be revisited. Desperate, poor people who have nowhere to live will say yes to almost any thing. If the choice is between having no shelter and living in a house, even if you are exposed to environmental risks, the choice is obvious. There is a responsibility on each professional working with a low cost housing development to be the voice of reason and to consider what the best solution will be – socially, economically and environmentally.

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