

SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT MODELS

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Abstract

The aim of impact assessment in the public domain is to estimate accurately the largest possible extent to which interventions or actions achieve their objectives. Such estimates are, inevitably, to a certain degree plausible. But as the model used is more rigorous, the results will be more accurate. But what is a rigorous model for social impact assessment? And, most importantly, what model would be appropriate to estimate the social impact for the public sector in Romania? This paper is meant to analyze the main trend of models for social impact assessment in public sphere in general and in Romanian public administration in particular.

Introduction

Social Impact Assessment (SIA) process usually begins with an analysis of the context in which the project is implemented, during which the status quo problems are identified and all possible alternatives are described. Social impact assessment process continues with the social factor analysis of the basic problem and the estimation of social change associated with each of its alternative solutions. SIA process ends when the analyst prepares its assessment of the impact, and those who have the necessary powers integrate results of the evaluation of social impact in running projects and/or activities.

Social Impact Assessment (SIA) Methodology

Social impact assessment involves the use of classical methods of sociological research, both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (observation, interviews, case studies etc.).

Each EIS will involve research into context: community size, the group of direct and indirect beneficiaries, the social, educational, economic and ethnic backgrounds, values and needs. Expertise is usually required. Interaction with affected communities and groups is critical since the social and cultural context and individual values are intrinsically related. There are many methods by which this interaction is feasible. From participatory observation (in which the analyst lives in the community to learn how it works) to group interviews, individual and opinion polls. Choice of methods will be based on the time and financial resources available, depending on the type of community and experts' opinion towards the social problems and the community needs.

Experts agreed that SIA methodological design must take account of at least two competitive pressures: on the one hand rigorous assessments that lead to clear conclusions are necessary and, on the other hand, practical constraints, relating either to resources (time, money) or institutional and interregional cooperation or to the protection of subjects are felt. These constraints considerably limit the options of design and methodological procedures that can be used to assess the social impact. (Rossi and Freeman, 1993)

Given the ultimate goal of public decisions – the wellbeing of individuals - naturally, the specific impact assessments in public field will have a design methodology specific to social and human sciences. For example, analysis of the impact of a program which provides social housing can be achieved by comparing the information obtained from subjects involved in such a project, with information obtained from subjects not involved, repeated measurements on participants or by measurements made before and after intervention - methods used successfully to analyze the impact of organizational changes in organizational socio-psychology, or even a new treatment in psychology and medicine. Just as the analytical results in these areas are based on a particular implementation of large-scale change (the need for corrections to strategy changes, modifications or maintenance treatment, etc.), the results of impact

assessments in the public sector can be based on decision amending a draft law, amending some decisions or projects, to extend their application or termination of their implementation.

Social Impact Assessment Models and Stages

There are many approaches to specific stages of a typical SIA. Especially when it comes to small actions or projects relatively simple, if SIA is necessary, it can be done relatively quickly. It is based on existing documents and data sources easily accessible in public institutions, in the libraries, on the Internet and on brief consultations with stakeholders in the project. The project and its effects are more complex with the SIA will be more complex. Social impact assessment involves the use of classical methods of sociological research, both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (observation, interviews, case studies, etc.).

Although each project is different and each SIA is unique, in most cases certain standard steps of analysis are agreed in order to reach the goal. Most sources suggest in some form the following eight steps used by the World Bank including:

1. Identification of needs and social problems;
2. Identification of participants and beneficiaries;
3. Identify and describe the action;

The alternatives are designed based on the scope and need for action. EIS analyst must determine the alternatives and gather the data necessary for each. The following basic information needs to be identified:

- Location;
- Laws and regulations under which the project falls;
- Infrastructure needs;
- Implementation timetable;
- Size of the workforce;
- Necessary size and nature of facilities (if any);
- The need for local labour;
- Institutional resources.

4. Defining initial conditions then establishing methods of interaction with affected groups and obtaining basic data for each alternative;

The analyst is supposed to define conditions in each of the areas potentially affected. In short, it is necessary to analyze the social context. Analyst will seek answers to some of these questions:

- What groups of individuals will be affected? Are they concentrated or dispersed?
- How does each group fit to its environment of life?
- What is the historical context of each group?
- What kind of cultural values and attitudes characterize each group?
- What are the demographic and economic characteristics relevant?
- Is there access to utilities? education? transport?
- Are there any stable patterns of immigration and/or emigration?

Of course, this is are the minimum necessary information. Data can be gathered from official documents or from previous research published, by consulting the experts and the community. For a more complex project further research is needed.

5. Measuring the direct impact of the project or program by analyzing data obtained through monitoring system;

But what happens when there is no monitoring system? In this issue we should try to identify a solution in the impact assessment model that we propose, adapted to the Romanian institutional context.

6. Assessment of indirect and cumulative impacts of the project;

This is seen as a step in the analytical process but it is rather a part of several steps. It is often not about a direct social impact. It may become evident long after project implementation. It is also possible that the impact is felt in areas and locations not directly connected with the project.

7. Recommendation for alternative action;

With the identification of a significant negative impact should be offered alternatives that could improve the situation. By working closely with project coordinators and stakeholders evaluators should observe whether these alternatives can be implemented. Before that, however, the social impact of these alternatives has to be examined.

8. Developing a plan to counter the effects of undesirable social effects;

Undesirable effects can be counteracted by project coordinators and by the involvement of the affected groups. While for monitoring programs there must be developed a plan to ensure implementation of changes. Collection and use of information that leads ultimately to understanding the impact of intervention requires a methodological design that fits the type of investigated project. This requires first a careful formulation of questions which identify the specific impact of the project that is going to be investigated. Subsequently, it is necessary to define the key problems, to specify the significance of various types of impact and to identify cases in which social impact can be measured. These operations are followed by: identifying methods and techniques of data collection, obtaining necessary data, preliminary analysis of the impact and integration of study results in intervention.

A new assessment model adapted to the Romanian realities

The study of the applicability of several methods in Romanian public institutional context, proposes the following model to evaluate the social impact of a program especially when we can not rely on a monitoring system and we can not apply experimental methods. The proposed assessment includes the following ten stages:

1. Presentation of the program/project

The Romanian Government has not yet made the transition to a budgeting system based on projects and programs. Hence numerous activities of public institutions were not designed in the form of projects or programs, but activities could be evaluated and monitored. They are non-standardized projects that do not have clear objectives,

activities, and timetable. In order to be evaluated, these non-standardized projects need to be standardized.

Standardization of the activities

Standardization of the activities of an institution is required whenever we want to transform the activities into programs or projects in order to assess and monitor them, or to attract additional financial resources. Standardization of the activities is a necessary first step in order to move to the budgetary system based programs. Standardization process is done by completing a project record or a project sheet. Project sheet must contain elements related to the context of the program: a brief history of the program (details on origin, initiator), a summary of activities and methods of delivery/information on similar programs conducted by the same institution or by other institutions/organizations, and details of the uniqueness of the program.

Another element of the program schedule is the organizational structure (distribution of responsibilities), program documents, which have extracted information on: the purpose and program objectives, strategies to achieve goals and objectives of the program implementation plans, the short-term, medium and long-term list of performance indicators, the monitoring results of previous actions, etc. For program schedule, the assessor should not miss the description of program activities which will be included, elements relating to the name of all the project activities, location, initial schedule of activities and any changes in the current state of progress of activities. The project record will disclose all available information related to the actors involved, the resources employed, the results expected, internal and external evaluators, marketing and advertising methods (where applicable). A scoreboard is appropriate to include a section of comments and additional notifications. Project sheet must be completed by repeated interviews with the parties.

The initiators of the program can provide information about the program context. Organizational details will be provided for those who implement the program. They will be those who can give information about the program documents, and may even make these documents to reach the evaluator. Documents of a program may refer to: demand for establishing a program and/or application for funding, contracts signed for grant funding, for contracting and subcontracting activities, methodological tools used to implement the reports and annual work plans, budget and budget implementation and other reviews conducted previously. After analyzing all this information, we have an overview of the program and we are ready to move on to design the evaluation of the social impact. Information categories that we propose are not fixed. Depending on the specific program under investigation, the type and purpose of the evaluation, these categories of information may be modified, detailed or cancelled.

2. Specifying the objectives of social impact assessment study

At this stage there are presented social impact assessment objectives. Sometimes, quantifying the net impact of a program can not be achieved, mostly due to lack

of monitoring systems, and to the weak control of external variables. However, in these circumstances we can measure some aspects of impact, such as software effects perceived by a group of people, actors involved in the program development. Multiple perspective is required when social impact is assessed (the perspective of beneficiaries, the perspective of all actors involved, the perspective of the financier, the implementer, etc.). Here it should be noted if it is desired the quantification of direct and indirect impacts, of the positive and negative impacts or other specific types of social impact. By these provisions we can set the scope of the investigation.

3. Conclusions of previous reviews

Where there have been some previous assessments, we need to specify their summary of findings. It is useful to be stressed particular strengths and weaknesses previously identified. In previous social impact evaluations category we may have self-evaluations and interim and ex-post evaluations.

4. Construction of a system of indicators and indices for measuring social impact

The indicators and indices can be built through the process of turning the basic concepts into quantifiable variables. This is a specific case of social research methodology. The first step is to turn concepts into variables. Variables obtained are indicators of the future monitoring and evaluation model. Based on their calculations can be made and can be derived indices to express, condensed, different trends. Also, in this stage we should determine the type of indicators (impact, net impact, efficiency, effectiveness, performance, etc.).

5. Selection and application of research methods used in assessing the social impact of the program

From the research methodological arsenal there can be used both quantitative research methods and qualitative ones. Moreover, according to the type of program, different combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods may be used. It is therefore preferable in the paradigm of multi-classification method.

6. Interpretation of data and expanding the system of indicators

Data is interpreted with either statistical methods and/or qualitative data interpretation methods. The purpose of this process is to complete and validate the system of indicators.

7. Assessment of direct and indirect impacts and of positive and negative impact

Even if done in a brief social impact assessment, the system of indicators is absolutely necessary in order to achieve reliable results.

8. Developing a plan to counter the undesirable effects

This is a process that is rather related to internal management of the institution. The social impact assessment may be without a significant in-put, without explanation of the things which do not work, which have a positive impact and have a negative impact. However, the plan to counteract negative effects is not part of the assessment itself.

9. Drafting of the social impact evaluation report

The final report should include a summary of the social impact evaluation study. It does not make part of the assessment itself, but is a document very useful for the management of institutions, for donors and those involved in the decision-making process. The evaluation report should include elements related to the purpose and methodology of assessment, with an emphasis on evaluation findings.

10. Drafting a plan for integrating social impact assessment results to design future activities and programs

Drafting a plan for integrating social impact assessment results to design future activities and programs is useful in order to counteract negative effects and extremely useful for improving performance in future activities.

These models used for social impact assessment have specific elements from different evaluation models such as the Program Theory Model (Birkmayer and Weiss, 2003), the CIPP Model (Stufflebeam, 2002), the Qualitative Model (Patton, 2002) and from Utilization-focused Evaluation Model (Patton, 2002)

When the social impact is not measured

Social impact is not always measurable. The main reason that can prevent us from measuring the social impact of a program could be the lack of necessary data or data sources. Sometimes there is a political decision, or a community choice. When community members see no need for all the efforts involved in undertaking a social impact assessment, they may decide not to identify the net social results of a project or of a program. However, in order to make public data related to the living standards, in order to make comparisons and benchmarking and in order to identify implications of projects on public policies, a quantification of data is necessary. This is not the case when the measurement itself is arbitrary and artificial that the results produce more questions than answers.

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