

Assessing the Impacts of Impact Assessment: a case study on Werribee, Australia

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Abstract

Social enquiry is inherently reflexive. As Blaikie (1993 p. 91) points out: “the investigator, the participants, those who read and communicate the results, will all have their awareness changed”. Yet little, if any, attention has been paid in the literature on social impact assessment (SIA) to the impacts on communities of the experience of being the subject of an SIA (as distinct from the impacts of the development itself).

This paper draws on the experience of the authors in undertaking the social impact assessment in respect of a proposal for development of a prescribed waste facility at Werribee, a city of approximately 76,000 people situated in a growth corridor 25 minutes by vehicle from Melbourne’s central business district. The SIA formed part of a broader ‘environmental impact assessment’ (EIA) process required under Victorian Government legislation.

The paper explores the dynamics and complexities inherent in the context and process of the Werribee SIA, and highlights the contribution of the community’s experience of participating in the SIA process to the emergence of local community cohesion, competence and confidence. It might reasonably be said that this SIA marked the move from victim mentality to empowered citizenship for the Werribee community.

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In all social research, attention needs to be paid to the fact that social enquiry is inherently reflexive. Inevitably, the experience of participating in the research will change the awareness of the participants (Blaikie 1993). Yet, though this is a common premise underpinning general social research, little attention appears to have been given to the implications of it for Social Impact Assessment (SIA).

Lober (1996), in an article published in *Society & Natural Resources*, drew attention to the fact that public attitudes to developments (in particular, to the siting of waste facilities) are affected by three variables: *context*, *process* and *outcome*, rather than simply relying on the one variable, *outcome*, which has been the focus of most environmental policy making in the past. From our work in Werribee, it is clear that Lober's broadening of the agenda is supported. Nevertheless, it is our belief that, in the context of Impact Assessment, there is a fourth factor which needs to be considered: the *process* variable needs to be subdivided into the *process of proposal of the development* (the process to which Lober refers) and the *process of assessment of the development*.

Traditionally, EIA and SIA have focused on the impacts or *outcomes* of a proposed development (or, more rarely, a proposed policy) on the individuals, groups and communities to which they apply. The question we want to pose is: to what extent and in what ways do the *processes of EIA and SIA* impact on the individuals, groups and communities in which they are undertaken?

This paper is based on a study undertaken in Werribee, a city of approximately 76,000 people situated in a growth corridor on the western fringe of the Melbourne metropolitan area. The purpose of this study was to assess the likely social impacts arising from implementation of a proposal to construct a prescribed waste facility and large-scale composting facility in a landfill site adjacent to the existing council tip, 8 kms from the centre of Werribee. The nearest residential development to the proposed facility is 3 kms. away, over which the prevailing winds from the site blow.

The Minister for Planning, in an attempt to involve the community in the assessment of impacts, required that an Environmental Effects Statement (including a social impact assessment) be prepared for the proposal. The case study is used, in the context of 'Forecasting the Future', as a basis for examining the way in which a formal process of SIA in particular has impacted on the struggle of one city and its residents to achieve the kind of future it wants for itself.

SIA - The Werribee Experience

Werribee has a long history of unwanted developments within or near its boundaries, including those linked to waste disposal. For example, Melbourne's major sewerage treatment works are located at Werribee, and the expansion of those works in the early

1980s was opposed (unsuccessfully) by local residents. Around the same period, there was intense community opposition to a proposal for a high temperature incinerator, which did not go ahead. More recently, concern has been expressed about prison developments at nearby Deer Park and Laverton North, the proposal for an armaments storage complex and an adjacent chemical storage facility.

The Werribee community's long history of needing to oppose developments which it feels are being dumped on its doorstep have resulted in high levels of 'streetwise' know-how. It can mount high level public campaigns, including street rallies, media coverage, protest marches, political action, all of which cross the divides within the community. In terms of 'grassroots' opposition, it is highly skilled and experienced, and in this particular campaign it has united the community as one voice.

By contrast, the formal processes of community consultation have appeared to be the hoops through which they have to jump in order to satisfy the statutory requirements, rather than a way of their voice being heard.

This latest proposal for the development of a prescribed waste facility saw unprecedented opposition from local residents, businesses and politicians. As a result, the Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump (WRATD) group formed to fight the proposal. The group was widely representative of the community, involving representatives of disparate sectors. As well, the group used petitions, rallies, media coverage and networking to engage the local community in the battle.

Obviously, the *context* of past experiences of being what residents described as "the wheely bin of Melbourne" contributed to the absolute commitment of Werribee residents to opposing the development. So too did residents' perceptions of the *outcomes* of the development: concerns about declining property values, threats to health, and the potential impact on the export earnings and viability of Werribee South market gardens due to the possibility of groundwater contamination. The *process of proposal of the development* did nothing to overcome these concerns. Among these were:

- inadequate publicity about the proposal;

According to individuals interviewed as part of this study, the only way they found out about the proposal was through a small advertisement in a local newspaper, four days before the public meeting planned as the main consultation exercise for the project was to be held.

- ongoing secrecy surrounding the proposal;

Community members felt that, subsequent to the point at which they learned of the public meeting, "the whole process was shrouded in secrecy", in respect of the process of release of relevant information, its format and the adequacy of its content. Several respondents noted that information they had requested had not been forthcoming. One person commented:

"Their attitude is 'We have the answers. If you don't pick the right boxes, we won't tell you the answer.' There has been no community consultation."

- the failure on the part of some parties to the process to be sensitive to the community's concerns about the project, which manifested itself in what was perceived as inadequate communication.

"(It's the) insulting way of being spoken to by 'experts'. There's no credit for knowledge of local people. They're using expert knowledge to blind us, and they talk down to us. So they're not consulting at all."

"There is a presumption that the locals are not bright enough to understand."

However, in addition to concerns about the process of proposal of the development, there were also concerns about the *process of the EIA*. Within the local community there was a perception of a lack of adequate community involvement in selection and ratification of consultants for the specialist studies associated with the EIA. Similarly, concern was expressed about the process of establishing the briefs for the studies:

"Consultants briefs can be set in such a way (as) to not include critical issues. What does an EES mean? Will it give you the answers to give you the confidence to say 'Yes' to such a proposal?"

The community consultation process associated with the EIA was seen as totally inadequate, and is summed up in the following quote: "The process is a joke - if it wasn't so serious it would be funny."

It was against this background that we were commissioned to undertake the social impact assessment required as part of the EIA process. It appears that, either accidentally or intentionally, the consultants in charge of the EIA process had not arranged for the conduct of an SIA until late in the EIA process. When they discussed the matter with the relevant Victorian Government officers, we were recommended as appropriate people to undertake the study. Several issues concerned us in the initial request: we were asked to complete the work in a period of two weeks; and we were asked to differentiate between 'real' and 'perceived' impacts (an impossibility, since even perceptions have impacts, even if they are different impacts from those which are perceived as likely to occur as a result of the development). Needless to say, we turned down both requests. Nevertheless, we did undertake the study, although the time frame allowed (six weeks) placed constraints on the adequacy of the assessment.

The scepticism with which we were greeted at the first meeting we held with representatives of WRATD was intense. They had seen and heard it all before: past experiences of failed opposition to developments, and recent experiences with consultations which were that in name only, had developed within them an attitude of distrust. They saw themselves as 'victims', and they viewed the SIA process as a 'make or break' issue for the Werribee community:

“If we lose this battle ... the sense of community will be decimated. People will think that anyone can come in and do anything, which will result in apathy and a fortress mentality, with people locking themselves in their home and forgetting the community.”

The process of conducting the SIA was based on the principles specified by the Interorganizational Committee (1994) and outlined in Burdge & Vanclay (1995). In particular, the principle of *Public Involvement* was a central feature of the SIA process. We sought to consult as widely as possible, and to gather data from diverse sources. Householders, business people, welfare and health workers, educators, politicians and administrators, farmers, and many others were among the dozens of people interviewed. By the end of the process, residents’ attitudes and approaches had changed. Even though, at the point of submission of our report, there was still a strong likelihood of the development proceeding, the self-perceptions of Werribee residents had changed. Instead of seeing themselves as victims on whom wrongs were likely to be perpetrated no matter what their views, they began to see themselves as empowered citizens – people whose views should and ultimately will be taken into account. We believe it was the *process of the SIA, which* was the most influential factor in this empowerment.

Mechanisms by which the process of SIA/EIA impacts on individuals, groups and communities

It is our belief that the processes of SIA/EIA impact on individuals, groups and communities just as surely as do the outcomes of such processes. This occurs in a number of ways. On the positive side:

- where SIA processes are conducted in a way which gives credence to the views of local people (as well as to the views of ‘experts’), the processes of SIA can contribute to positive self-perceptions of individuals, groups and communities;
- through providing a forum in which consultation, advocacy and negotiation can take place, SIA processes can contribute to the development of those skills within local communities;
- by providing a forum in which individuals, groups and communities can contribute to decisions about their future, SIA processes can provide them with a sense of having some level of ‘control’, rather than being unwilling victims of futures decided by others.

On the negative side:

- by raising expectations that the views of the community will be taken into account, and then failing to meet those community expectations through the SIA process, the process of SIA may create or build community antagonism towards or distrust in practitioners/processes, corporations, and decision-makers;
- by seeking and/or responding to the views of limited sectors of the community, SIA processes may contribute to community division, (a ‘them versus us’ approach both

within local communities and across community boundaries) instead of creating community cohesion.

Lest this be interpreted as a reason for not undertaking adequate and appropriate SIA processes, for fear that all developments opposed by some or all elements of local communities will be stopped, we should think about the implications of that.

The history of Werribee's development indicates the folly of such an approach. Past failures to integrate mechanisms of expression and recognition of grassroots community opposition into the formal decision-making processes resulted in an oppositional approach by the community to development per se, rather than a selective approach which targets for opposition only the developments (or aspects of developments) which are likely to impact negatively on the community. It is only by giving the community a voice that sensible decisions can be made, resulting in developments which will be supported by the community and will, therefore, be viable in the long term.

References

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