BACKGROUND

Impact assessment is a method for predicting and assessing the consequences of a proposed action or initiative before a decision is made. The aims of impact assessment are better decision making processes and better outcomes from decisions.

Economic and environmental impact assessments are well established processes in planning and are widely used. Social impact assessment (SIA) refers to the assessment of the social consequences of a proposed decision or action, namely the impacts on affected groups of people and on their way of life, life chances, health, culture and capacity to sustain these. A triple bottom line approach to planning decisions includes social impact assessment in impact assessment processes.

To date, most planning practice has given less attention to social impact assessment than to environmental and economic impact assessment. Many impact assessments omit social issues altogether while others consider too narrow a range of issues. It is common to find that demographic profiling and community consultation have been substituted for social science research findings and that the impact statement is based on speculation rather than assessment. As a result of these practices, PIA is concerned that actions have sometimes been taken, and decisions made, on an ill-informed basis and which did not foresee some serious social consequences before they eventuated.

PIA POSITION

1. Impact assessment is an important part of planning and decision making processes.
2. Proposals for change which require an environmental or economic impact assessment also require a social impact assessment.
3. Social impact assessment of policies or plans should be sufficiently robust to anticipate the impact of proposals made under the plan and minimise the need for further assessment.
4. Without limiting the matters in regard to which a social impact assessment may be appropriately required, proposals for:
   - larger developments, including: major retail, sports or social infrastructure proposals,
   - a significant change of land use, including: new highways, loss of agricultural land,
   - sale or rezoning of publically owned land,
   - new planning policies and plans amendments to them, and/or,
   - controversial uses or increases in intensity (e.g. brothels or gun shops, or of gaming or liquor outlets),

should be fully assessed for their social impacts in a SIA.

5. Social impact assessment should be undertaken by appropriately trained and qualified personnel using rigorous social science methodologies and with a high degree of public involvement.
6. A social impact assessment should be a public document.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

PIA recognises that planning practitioners are increasingly aware of the importance of social impact assessment and that inadequate treatment of social issues in impact assessment is not good practice. This policy statement supports good impact assessment practice by planning practitioners and the improvements in planning and decision making which SIA is intended to achieve.

A number of guidelines are available to assist social impact assessment practitioners. These documents confirm that the following are critical aspects of an adequate SIA:

i. The process is undertaken by a competent, professional social scientist and uses rigorous social science methodologies.
ii. The process includes effective, timely and transparent public involvement.
iii. The baseline (pre-change) situation is adequately researched and documented.
iv. The scope of proposed changes is fully described.
v. Examples of similar changes are identified, including impacts likely to affect minority groups, different age, income and cultural groups and future generations.

vi. Direct as well as indirect, long term and short term, positive and negative, passing and accumulating impacts are identified.

vii. The relative equity of impacts is identified. It is important to identify how the benefits and losses will be distributed to different sections of the community.

viii. Impacts over time and location are considered (e.g. local as opposed to state and national benefits and losses.)

ix. Impacts which are not amendable to precise measurement are not excluded from consideration – the assessment is and evaluation not a proof.

x. A review mechanism is included where appropriate.

xi. The precautionary principle is applied in making an assessment.

A social impact assessment may give rise to recommendations for mitigation if the proposed change goes ahead. Like social impacts, mitigations should be properly researched to establish their effectiveness in dealing with identified impacts and should address inter- and – intra-generational equity. However, mitigations are not impacts of the proposed change.

REFERENCES