Guide to Social Assessment

A Framework for Assessing Social Change

Kristi Branch, Douglas A. Hooper,
James Thompson, and James Creighton

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Social Impact Assessment Series

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Preface

Large-scale industrial or resource development projects, infrastructure development, social policy changes, the introduction of new technologies, and alteration of the economic structure all can produce considerable change in how people in the affected areas live. During the last decade, increased attention has been given to the effects of large-scale projects and rapid technological change on the natural and human environment. Efforts to anticipate and evaluate these effects have been expanded.

As with the other natural and social sciences, the characteristics and methodology of social assessment have evolved through trial and error, as sociologists, decision makers, and the affected population have struggled with the problems of forecasting and mitigating the social effects of diverse resource decisions and technological changes. The purpose of the guide is to provide assistance to those concerned with the social effects of change. The objectives of the guide are to provide an analytic framework, a theoretical model, and a method of research and analysis that will help social scientists design and conduct social assessments that are informative, defensible, and useful. Some users will be most interested in the guide for its contribution to their ability to examine and understand the dynamics of social change from a research or academic perspective. Others will be more concerned with the effectiveness of the guide in assisting them to conduct assessments that will influence decisions. It is designed to do both.

The guide was written for sociologists and other social science or planning practitioners with an interest in social change. It therefore assumes some background in one of the social sciences or planning areas, although those with training in resource management or business and an interest in social change could also use it effectively. To the extent possible, a minimum of special social science terminology has been used; logic, analytic thought, and applied research skills are emphasized. This is not to suggest that the methodology in this guide is somehow less "scientific," only that considerable effort has gone into developing a sound analytic framework which is stated as simply as possible and which emphasizes practical application.

Much of the work that went into the development of the guide was instigated by the need for social assessments that helped decision

makers by providing the social information necessary for more informed decisions. For this reason, considerable attention has been paid to the development of procedures that produce usable information. An assessment methodology should produce documents that effectively identify the issues, analyze the information, and present the conclusions in a manner that enables the decision makers to understand and have confidence in them, and, most importantly, to use and apply them. Given the broader and somewhat less instrumental interest that some readers have in analyzing or anticipating social change, however, attention has also been paid to the development of a generally applicable and theoretically based approach that would enhance social science research on these topics.

For social assessment to be valued, it must be rigorous and valid, it must help people solve problems, it must be presented in terms that have meaning to people, and it must exhibit sensitivity to practical realities. We hope the guide can help you accomplish these goals.

Kristi Branch, Douglas A. Hooper,
James Thompson, and James Creighton

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K. B., D.A.H., J. T., J. C.

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Section I:
General Principles

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Since the mid-1960s, a combination of national events and public values have caused renewed interest in communities and social change. The environmental movement, the reversal in urban-rural migration patterns, the energy crisis, new technologies for resource development, the decentralization of economic activities, and an increased concern for individual well-being and local political participation shifted attention from the processes and problems of urbanization and the major urban centers to smaller towns and rural areas. As a result, a wide variety of social scientists and public administrators have reevaluated the importance of the community and of the changes occurring in rural areas and the smaller towns of the country. The community as a functional social and administrative unit has reemerged as a central element in efforts to understand or control the processes of social change. The theoretical framework developed in the guide reflects this renewed emphasis on the community as a functional unit and the importance of community resources and social organization to the lives of their residents.

1.2 How to Use the Guide

The guide has been prepared as a reference manual that can be consulted either for general advice or for more specific direction on particular problems. For this reason, the guide includes a great deal of information. To make it easier to use, it is organized into sections so that you can refer to the material appropriate to the assessment you are conducting. In some cases, information that has been presented in one section has also been included in another. This has been done to make the guide more efficient as a reference document.

The complexity of social change precludes the development of a method for assessment that prescribes each analysis and anticipates each conclusion. The purpose of the guide is not to provide a specific answer for each of your questions, but to help you develop an approach that will lead you to ask the salient questions, obtain the pertinent information, and conduct an informed and rigorous analysis

of your data. Social assessment is not a rote task; it requires conceptualization and complex analysis. It is difficult, but it is also very interesting and challenging. Much remains unknown about the mechanisms and meaning of social change. The guide has been designed to help you make optimal use of the knowledge that does exist, and to encourage research and analysis that will further our understanding of these complex processes.

1.3 Organization of the Guide

The guide is divided into three major sections: Section I, General Principles; Section II, A Framework for Social Assessment; and Section III, Research Methods and Techniques.

The first section presents an overview of the assessment process. It discusses the purposes of social assessment and the particular problems and issues involved in the social assessment process. The general approach advocated by the guide is then described, followed by presentation of the analytic and theoretical framework that underlie the methodology that is developed in Section II.

Sections II and III are more technical. Section II is a "how to" guide explaining how to design and conduct a social assessment that effectively meets the institutional and scientific goals set for it. Procedures for integrating and adapting the social assessment effort to the larger planning and decision-making process are suggested. Section III provides guidance on the use of social assessment research methods such as field trips, interviews, and surveys. Two technical appendixes, one on demographic forecasting and one on facilities/services/fiscal assessment, are included for those with an interest or responsibility in these areas.

This three section structure with appendixes has been utilized to ensure that the principal issues and analytic framework of the social assessment process are not obscured by too much technical detail and to allow those with different interests to more readily pick and choose what they need. The index has been designed to facilitate this type of reference use.

2. The Purposes of Social Assessment

2.1 Introduction

Many decision makers and managers do not have a clear understanding of the purpose and utility of social assessment. This chapter describes some of the major applications of social assessment information and discusses why this information is important to policy makers and managers as well as to social scientists.

2.2 Background

Throughout history, communities and their residents have been shaped by the interplay of forces that cause social change. The American West, for example, is sprinkled with ghost towns that stand as monuments to the power such forces can exert on communities and their residents. In the United States, such changes have traditionally been viewed as part of the natural course of things, with the outcomes interpreted as demonstration of economic forces that were beyond anyone's responsibility or control.

Recently, however, in large part as a consequence of the environmental movement, a quiet revolution has taken place in what we believe can and ought to be controlled and what must be attended to when making decisions, formulating policy, or evaluating alternatives. Although undeniably important, it is now less frequently assumed that economic justifications are the only criteria to be considered. It is now generally accepted that health and safety, environmental enhancement, mitigation of social impacts, and equitable distribution of benefits and costs, along with long-term organizational consequences, must also be taken into account.

There is continuing disagreement about just how these considerations should be incorporated into the decision-making processes of our country. There is no common agreement on just how much responsibility belongs to companies, which problems are properly the responsibility of government instead of the private sector or the individual, or on how much regulation is appropriate. There is, however, increasing agreement that it is appropriate to identify and consider this wider range of impacts, to make them visible, and to

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