# Defra Strategy Unit: input on defining 'social impacts'

**by**

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## 1. Introduction

This response should be read in conjunction with our current project on measuring the social dimension of sustainable development. An overview of the project, which is due to be completed in September 2009, is provided in Appendix 1. More information on the study and related publications are also available at
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/be/oisd/sustainable_communities/

This response does not on the definition of social impact, as there is an extensive and comprehensive literature on this issue (see for example Barrow, 2000), which is synthesised in the definition of social impact provided by the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) in 2003, already being considered by DEFRA.

Instead, the response focuses on:

(i) the definition of social sustainability in the light of increasing calls to integrate social impacts with economic, environmental and political impacts within a sustainability perspective;

(ii) the themes or dimensions of Social Sustainability Assessment (SSA), which provides the framework for Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to appraise and monitor the effectiveness of policies, programmes and plans; and,

(iii) the desirable characteristics that sustainability indicators should have, as well as the limitations of the current indicators currently suggested by DEFRA and ONS to monitor the social dimension of sustainable development and sustainable communities.

## 2. Definition of Social Sustainability

*Social sustainability concerns how individuals, communities and societies live with each other and set out to achieve the objectives of development models, which they have chosen for themselves taking also into account the physical boundaries of their places and planet earth as a whole*. (Colantonio, 2008)

At a more operational level, social sustainability stems from actions in key thematic areas encompassing the social realm of individuals and societies, ranging from capacity building and skills development to environmental and spatial inequalities (see Colantonio, 2007, for a complete list). In this sense, social sustainability blends traditional social policy areas and principles, such as equity and health, with issues concerning participation, needs, social capital, the economy, the environment, and more recently, with the notions of happiness, well being and quality of life.

## 3. Social Sustainability Themes and Social Impact Assessment Domains

The chronological review of social sustainability themes, indicating some of the broad domains in which SIA should be conducted, suggests that traditional themes, such as equity, poverty reduction and livelihood, are increasingly been complemented or replaced by more intangible and less measurable concepts such as identity, sense of place and the benefits of 'social networks'. Table 1 illustrates this broad shift from 'hard' themes towards 'softer' concepts within the sustainability discourse, although it is worth clarifying that even traditional 'hard' themes such as ageing and migration are increasingly being approached from a more qualitative perspective. For example, the study of migratory flows has moved from the simple analysis of statistical figures to include qualitative profiling of migrants, according to their perceptions, stories, choices and expectations, whenever possible.

**Table 1. Traditional and Emerging Social Sustainability Key Themes and Social Impact Assessment Domains**

| Traditional | Emerging |
|---|---|
| Basic needs, including housing and environmental health | Demographic change (aging, migration and mobility) |
| Education and skills | Social mixing and cohesion |
| Employment | Identity, sense of place and culture |
| Equity | Empowerment, participation and access |
| Human rights and gender | Health and Safety |
| Poverty | Social capital |
| Social justice | Well being, Happiness and Quality of Life |

## 4. Social Sustainability Assessment

From a social sustainability perspective, there is a paucity of specific sustainability assessment methodologies. The assessment is often conducted through SIA, which is extended to include other sustainability pillars. For example, Hacking and Guthrie (2007) maintain that the extended coverage of sustainability appraisal is being accommodated by 'stretching' Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and broadening the definition of 'environment' and hence the thematic coverage of theme-specific assessment such as SIA. However, they question the real level of integration of these techniques because in their views SIA may be undertaken on its own, as a component of EIA, in parallel with EIA, or as part of an 'integrated' Social & Environmental Impact Assessment. It is also worth pointing out that these diverse impact assessment techniques were not designed for sustainability appraisal *per se*. As a result, their semantic or substantive integration may not be able to capture, address and suggest solutions for a diverse set of issues that affect stakeholders with different values and span over different spatial and temporal scales (Gasparatos *et al*, 2007).

At a broader level, several other concerns have been raised in the context of sustainability assessment. These include, for example:

- superficiality and lack of quantification (RCEP 2005) of the assessment, which is often due to insufficient provision of benchmarks or difficulty in establishing how and who should set critical threshold levels for non-environmental variables;
- stakeholders' involvement is often deemed in practice more consultative rather than participative due to the complexity of the overall assessment process and the availability of resources (Sheate *et al*, 2008);
- environmental, economic and social factors are often considered separately, with an emphasis on balancing the trade-offs between these dimensions rather than exploring the linkages and interdependencies between them (George, 2001);
- lack of consensus concerning the meaning of integrated assessment (Scrase and Sheate, 2002); and,
- the existence of subjective judgments within the appraisal process concerning integration, win-win solutions and trade-off (Therivel 2004), which make the process not entirely 'scientific'.

## 5. Social Sustainability Metrics

In terms of social sustainability metrics, previous work from Colantonio (2007) has argued that:

- The evolution of indicators shows how early sustainable development indices prioritise the basic needs component whilst indicators developed more recently

seem to emphasise the importance of governance, representation and other institutional factors (see Colantonio, 2007 for a review of this evolution).

- In older indices the elements taken into account were technically weighted together with other dimensions of sustainable development in an attempt to deliver an integrated approach to sustainability. However, in more recent sustainability indicators the final decision about trade-offs is de facto left to 'sound judgement', as well as leadership and communication skills (Egan, 2004).
- The 'community' and the 'local level' have re-emerged as the main spatial and operational spaces for the pursuit of sustainability.
- There has been a shift from purely statistics-based indicators toward hybrid sets of indicators that mix quantitative data and qualitative information.

Broadly speaking, the review of recent developments and trends in social sustainability assessment and measurement also suggests a broad distinction between 'traditional social indicators' and 'social sustainability indicators', which is summarised in Table 4.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Traditional Social Indicators and Social Sustainability Indicators**

| Traditional Social Indicators | [Emerging] Social Sustainability Indicators |
|---|---|
| Static | Intergenerational and incorporating uncertainty |
| Predominantly quantitative | Hybrid |
| Product | Process |
| Descriptive | Strategic |
| Mono-dimensional | Multi-dimensional |
| Target oriented | Principles and objective driven |
| Top down selection | Deliberative and reiterative selection |

The development of indicators is hindered significantly by the shift in the social sustainability discourse from the in-depth analysis of hard themes towards the inclusion of soft themes. As a result, new sustainability indicators are increasingly focused on measuring these emerging themes rather than improving the measurement of more traditional concepts such as equity and fairness. For example, on the one hand, a growing number of variables and factors are being proposed to deconstruct and measure the happiness and well being of individuals and communities worldwide (Veenhoven and Hagerty, 2006), but on the other, hand the main approach to equity still relies on the analysis of income and relative prosperity, as shown for example by recommendations contained in the Green Book (HM Treasury, 2005). In other words, there is the risk that this new focus on the measurement of emerging social themes is being pursed at the expense of more in-depth analysis of traditional pillars of social sustainability, such as equity and poverty, which have received less attention in recent social sustainability works and metrics.

Furthermore, in the HM Treasury Green Book the relationship between marginal utility and well-being is still approached in narrow monetary terms. According to the Green Book the impact of proposals on individual well-being varies according to personal income because an extra pound may give more benefit to a person who is deprived than to someone who is better off. This economic interpretation of the concept of 'diminishing marginal utility of additional consumption' clearly approaches equity from a monetary point of view and fails to cast lights on how to take into account the broader issues of access to resources, opportunities and skills. Similarly, whenever a cost-benefit analysis to achieve sustainability objectives cannot be carried out because costs and benefits cannot be readily quantified in monetary terms, the Green Book recommends a comparison of unvalued costs and benefits by weighting and scoring them together through multi-criteria analysis. However, the

document provides little guidance on how to use weights and scores apart from stating that weighting and scoring can be used to clarify the decision-making process by making the preferences decision-makers place on different objectives explicit.

Recent sets of sustainable development indicators also illustrate the tendency of favouring the investigation of softer themes at the expenses of sophisticating the measurement of more established social sustainability pillars. For instance, the latest set of sustainable development indicators released by ONS and DEFRA 2007 contains a 'Sustainable Communities' and a 'Fairer World' cluster of indicators, addressing social sustainability concerns. This cluster suggests several indicators to assess different aspects of sustainable communities, including well-being and life satisfaction. However, it does not recommend any index to deal with the interlinked subjects of social justice, equity, fairness, and cohesion (ONS and DEFRA, 2007: 96). Similarly, a recent study commissioned by the EU Parliament (EP, 2007) to look at the implementation of the Sustainable Communities approach in the EU concluded that fairness cannot be adequately measured through existing indicators and further work is needed in this area.

## 6. Conclusions

New 'soft' themes, such as happiness, well-being and social capital, are becoming central to the social sustainability debate, and should be included in Social Impact Assessment together with more traditional 'hard' concepts which include basic needs, equity, employment. If on the one hand this sophistication mirrors the changing social needs of individuals and communities, on the other it is adding complexity to the interpretation and measurement of social sustainability

The shift toward the analysis of more elusive concepts in the social sustainability debate may continue for the foreseeable future as larger sectors of communities and societies become more affluent and less worried about the satisfaction of basic needs. It is important, however, that this new focus on emerging themes is not pursed at the expense of more in-depth analysis of traditional pillars of social sustainability, such as equity and poverty, which have received less attention in recent social sustainability works.

The progress toward sustainability is increasingly being appraised by extending and integrating 'impact assessment' and 'strategic impact assessment' methods into 'sustainability assessment'. Techniques such as Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Social Impact Assessment, Health Impact Assessment and so on. are being amalgamated into a new independent form of assessment rooted in the philosophical and methodological framework provided by sustainability. However, these early forms of impact assessment were not designed to address the complexity inherent in the measurement of sustainability. As a result, there is widespread uncertainty concerning, for example, how different typologies of impact and assessment techniques should be integrated.

In our view, future research should focus on unravelling the underlying inter- and intra-linkages between social sustainability themes (for example equity and happiness or well-being and identity etc.), It will also have to investigate how these can be 'quantified' using simple and user friendly methods which are capable of deconstructing and monitoring these elements without losing the richness of information that is embedded within them.

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**Appendix 1**

**The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development - Measuring social sustainability: best practice from urban renewal in the EU**

This three year research programme examines how the 'social dimension' of investment projects is a fundamental component of a Triple Bottom Line Approach to urban sustainability, together with economic and environmental dimensions. It is one of only four programmes funded in Europe by the European Investment Bank as part of its EIBURS research framework (www.eib.org). The project began at the beginning of 2007 and it is due to be completed in September 2009

Within the framework provided by the EU Cohesion Policy, Europe's urban renewal agenda and the Bristol Accord on 'sustainable communities', the research focuses on the following issues, examining a range of urban renewal projects and related infrastructure covering commercial and residential development across Europe:

- Definitions of 'social sustainability'
- Examination of approaches to social sustainability and urban regeneration in five EU cities, including Cardiff (UK), Rotterdam (NL), Turin (IT), San Adria de Besos (ES) and Leipzig (DE)
- Critical review of governance models and vehicles to deliver socially sustainable communities in urban areas, with special emphasis on Public Private Partnerships (PPPs)
- Analyse current sustainability indicators and tools used by the public, private and NGO sectors in case study cities to deliver social sustainability
- Examine best practices to measure and monitor socially sustainable urban regeneration

**Website:**
**http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/be/oisd/sustainable_communities/index.html**