

'It can never be the same': understanding social dimensions of landscapes

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Social Impact Assessment: a new era

During the past ten years, as the mining boom intensified through rural New South Wales, the quest for energy security, regional development, progress and state revenue engendered new forms of inequality. A process of dispossession and displacement took place within certain localities in the pursuit for coal. In contrast to regional centres, such as Singleton, Mudgee and Muswellbrook, in which there was also a boost of economic activity and concurrent positive social impacts, communities at the coal face were often left largely with direct negative impact. Despite the process of Environmental Impact Assessment, which includes a Social Impact Assessment, the negative impacts facing these communities have often been neglected and local people at the coal face have suffered ongoing environmental and social depletion.

In the recently released **Social Impact Assessment Guidelines**, the Department of Planning and Environment (2017) states that in relation to a State significant resource project, social impact may involve changes to people's: way of life; community; access to and use of infrastructure, services and facilities; culture; health and wellbeing; surroundings; personal and property rights; decision-making systems; and, fears and aspirations. Impacts can be positive or negative; tangible or intangible; direct, indirect or cumulative; and quantifiable or descriptive. Social impact is defined as 'a consequence experienced by people due to changes associated with a State significant project' (NSW DPE 2017: 5).

Impact assessments have conventionally emphasised quantitative measures of change and social impact assessment has reflected this approach, largely adopting a technocratic frame that gives preference to quantifiable variables, such as dust, noise and economic impacts. The new guidelines attempt to extend such prescriptive measures and incorporate variables that are more difficult to gauge with quantitative methods. The guidelines imply that impact is a **matter of experience**. Acknowledging that impacts may be 'perceived' and emphasising the 'cumulative' (successive, incremental and combined) nature of impacts subsequently necessitates reconsideration of the epistemological and methodological approach of social impact assessments.

My research demonstrates that social impacts are **lived and relational**; they manifest within and through the relationships that individuals have with their local environment. To understand social impact it is important to seek insight into these relations that constitute individuals' everyday lives and wellbeing. This requires a **qualitative understanding of impact** supported by a methodology that views impacts through the lens of those experiencing them. This approach will foster insight into how social impacts are experienced differently between people and groups within a community, across different locations, times and stages of the project.

The matter of equivalence

I just don't know what to do; where can I go? This cannot be bought...it's my life. I planted these golden gums and watched them grow...how can I leave?

The approach that I advocate expands the focus of analysis from **what** consequences (impact) a project will have to **how** these are experienced and **why** they are experienced in this way. Such analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of the forces underpinning land use conflict and can better address questions of mitigation and compensation across different locations and times. Existing assessment regimes have emphasised technical solutions and scientific arguments, subsequently excluding other forms of knowledge. Efforts to address land use conflicts—generally tailored under the agenda of obtaining a 'social licence to operate' and Corporate Social Responsibility schemes—have often proved fruitless, with resource related conflicts continuing to manifest within local communities. This conflict relates to what Li (2015) calls 'a logic of equivalence'. The notion of equivalence points to the process of negotiation of value—costs and benefits, damages and reparations—embedded in the evaluation of impact and mitigation. In contrast to the logic of markets and exchange advocated by industry and sometimes government, local communities often adopt a rationality underpinned by different temporal and material scales that distort the dominant notion of value as calculable, monetary, fixed and immediate. For local communities, compensation is more complex than offering monetary reimbursement; change can be understood not as temporary impact but rather permanent consequences that cannot be redressed – **'it can never be the same'**.

Creating a mining activist

I don't really want to do it, but I have to do it. It's my home!

I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Wollar, a small, rural village in the Mid-Western Regional Council, for the past three years. Wollar is surrounded by three large, open-cut coal mines. The mine closest to the village, Wilpinjong, was the first green field mine in NSW in the 21st century. At the onset, local residents were open and positive to the mine. However, 12 years after it opened, local residents are standing on the barricade, some willing to break the law to gain the attention of the authorities. Since Wilpinjong opened, Wollar has become depleted; less than 10% of the pre-Wilpinjong population remain. The community has dissipated, and the remaining residents have lost access to most services, including the local fire brigade, mechanic, veterinary and health services. Increasingly isolated, the locals are exposed to new vulnerabilities and risks, with no opportunity to get out of their situation. Having exhausted the formal opportunities for recognition of impacts (e.g. through the EIS and PAC process) they staged a protest outside Wilpinjong's main gate in 2017. During this protest, three were arrested—including two local residents. Their activism has not come from an inherent opposition to the mine but rather from their experience of impact; the disempowerment and dispossession that has happened during their encounter with the mine. Better planning and understanding of the lived experience of mining—as a social, as much as environmental phenomenon—would improve the situation not just for local residents but also for industry and government.



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