



I focus

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Studying social impacts

Let us imagine that a new development for touristic purposes is being planned in a coastal locality. Let us imagine that the respective decision makers opt for an evidence-based approach before deciding whether to give the go ahead to the proposal.

The decision makers may wish to verify the possible positive and negative impacts of this touristic project. Thus, they would consult with experts in policy fields such as the environment, the economy and society. The experts would carry out respective studies in the areas, and they may find a mix of both positive and negative impacts. For example, they might find that the project would damage the coastal environment and put more pressure on the local infrastructure. They might find that income and employment may be generated in the respective locality, and at the same time, residents would have different, and at times contrasting views on the development proposal. For example, some might be concerned about the disruption of their lifestyle, others might be aspiring to increase their household income through the spin-offs of the project, and yet others would be excited with the possibility of more social activities in the locality.

Consequently, the experts carrying out these studies might put forward recommendations in relation to the project proposal. Eventually, if, for argument's sake, the development is approved, there subsequently might be further studies to cater for eventualities, unintended consequences, opportunities, and constraints, and new recommendations may be put forward. This process may help foster a more sustainable approach in policy making. The social impact assessment is a very important tool for such purposes.

In this regard, during February 2024, the University of Malta will be launching a Master of Arts in Social Impact Assessment (SIA). By means of this degree, we hope to equip students with the necessary academic and professional skills to commission, design, implement and/or interpret SIAs.

According to the International Association for Impact Assessment, "Social Impact Assessment includes the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programmes, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human



environment."

The SIA can be applied to a broad range of policy fields. These include, but are not limited to, economic development, community development, and environmental change. Thus, one can examine how economic activities and development projects affect social life, for example in terms of employment, health, and quality of life.

Through an SIA, one can assess social dimensions such as cohesion, conflicts, empowerment, resilience and social networks of community members such as residents. The SIA can also help establish more participatory decision-making, community organisation, and social innovation. It helps understand the lived experiences, aspirations, and grievances of different groups and members of a community.

The social impacts of environmental changes such as climate change and natural disasters can also be assessed through an SIA. For example, one may analyse social adaptation, social rights and responsibilities, as well as human interaction with non-human actors.

Social Impact Assessment can be integrated with forms of impact assessment (such as environmental and economic, respectively), and they can help

provide policy recommendations based on evidence and ethical standards, to enhance positive impacts and mitigate negative impacts of policy interventions. A comprehensive SIA would also be an ongoing exercise which continuously consults affected stakeholders.

Thus, the SIA is an essential tool for informed decision-making and sustainable development. Both the carrying out of an SIA, as well as its interpretation, are important for policy making. The former identifies and measures the social impacts, whilst the latter engages with the findings to verify their scientific validity and social applicability.

The Masters in Social Impact Assessment being launched in February aims to equip students with various skills related to the above. These include: defining the legal and policy contexts within which SIAs are undertaken; conducting the drawing up and implementation of an SIA; establishing the contents and methodology of an SIA; the reviewing, evaluation and appraisal of an SIA; analysing and critiquing the SIA policy process; and performing services in the respective fields involving SIAs.

Graduates of this degree will be well-equipped to work in various sectors, including Government

agencies, non-profit organisations, consulting firms, and research institutions. The demand for such professionals exists both in Malta and internationally, as various development proposals are requiring SIAs. Moreover, one expects that there will be more policy fields requiring SIAs in the near future. Hence, this course will cater for both Maltese and international students. Additionally, this programme provides a solid foundation for those interested in pursuing doctoral studies or academic positions in the field of social impact assessment and evaluation.

Current policy frameworks such as the green deal, the blue economy, ESG (Economic Social Governance), as well as local and regional Government, are all potential sites for social impact assessments.

The Master of Arts in Social Impact Assessment is being offered by the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, and one may apply online via the University of Malta website. As course coordinator, I will be more than happy to reply to any queries on this exciting new course.

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