

Social Capital Impact Assessment (SCIA)

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1. Purpose

Communities lack the tools to assess the potential impact that new government, business and/or not-for-profit initiatives might have on the community's social capital (the social networks and the trust and reciprocity that arise from them). Programs created to meet a specific community need can have unanticipated consequences, enhancing or undermining the community's social capital.

A Social Capital Impact Assessment (SCIA) provides a framework and tool for the analysis and discussion of the impact of proposed initiatives on social capital. SCIA can be like a dye that causes social capital, otherwise invisible and unacknowledged in the public debate, to be revealed and made visible. It can remind parties of the importance of social capital, of the likelihood that social capital can be substantially affected by initiatives originally developed to respond to other problems, and can help focus attention on the impact of these initiatives on social capital.

We envision SCIA as a factor (but not the sole factor) to be weighed in determining policy, but ensuring that decision makers and residents affected have full information about the impact of a proposed initiative on a community's social capital.

The goals are to get all participants to incorporate SC considerations into their thinking and to create a process that calls attention to the likely impact of a proposal on SC.

Note: We think SCIA is likely to be most useful for actors that were not thinking about social capital in the design of their initiatives rather than ones who were. So, for example, we think SCIA would have less utility if it was required among all grantees to a foundation who were proposing plans to increase community social capital, and more useful as a step, for example, in community development plans.

Stage of development: we are still in the early stages of developing a social capital impact assessment tool. We are working on developing the right questions and the best approaches for eliciting this information, but in this document we are sharing our thoughts about how this tool would best be used. [This document does not discuss the relative merits or downsides of folding SCIA into the Environmental Impact Statement process. For a discussion of this, see the paper by Abigail Williamson, elsewhere on the Saguaro website at: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/impactstatement.htm>.

2. Who uses?

Useful at all levels: The SCIA is a tool that can be usefully applied at all levels ranging from the block and neighborhood to the state and the nation.

Used by a wide range of organizations: The SCIA is a tool that can be applied to assessing: the work of governments; nonprofit such as United Ways, Arts Councils and foundations; and businesses.

3. **Useful either if Mandatory or Optional**

Mandatory: For example, a unit of government could formally adopt an SCIA and require its application in a defined set of situations, spelling out the process to be followed, issues to be addressed, timelines, public notice, and an appeals process. Thus, a town could adopt a SCIA and require its application in all zoning and land use issues, or its application on all major government decisions.

Non-governmental funding or decision bodies such as foundations or United Ways could require that *every* grant application address the impact of the proposal on the community's social capital.

Optional: we also believe that the SCIA can be useful if purely advisory, with no standing under the law. Such an SCIA would help a geographic community, a community of interest, or an organization frame an issue, conduct the review and assess the impact of a particular issue on the stock of social capital by providing a framework and tools for considering the impact of alternative policies and projects.

4. **Information to Gather**

Communities could try to gather two types of information to help assess the SCIA. The first are correlates of social capital (things that are strongly positively or negatively correlated with levels of social capital) or try to gather information directly about the levels and types of social capital.

a) [Impact of action on correlates of social capital \(things that will have impact on social capital\).](#)

For example, will the proposed action:

- 1) Increase mobility or lower resident tenure (negative for social capital)
- 2) Increase the size of the community (negative for social capital)
- 3) Increase average commuting times (negative for social capital)
- 4) Reduce the amount of public space or the amount of highly used public space (negative for social capital)
- 5) Increase the average levels of education (positive for social capital)
- 6) Increase the learning of effective civic skills, like how to chair a meeting, organize others, set agendas, etc. (positive for social capital)
- 7) Increase the amount of time average residents spend watching commercial entertainment television (negative for social capital)

b) [Asking social capital questions directly](#)

Social ties with neighbors:

- 1) Will the policy create more/less occasions for people to interact?
- 2) Will the policy create more/less occasions for people to work collaboratively?
- 3) Will the policy create more/less occasions for public interactions (e.g., town meetings, planning boards, or neighborhood organizations)?
- 4) Will the initiative create more/less occasions for private interactions (e.g., bridge clubs, sports leagues, or religious meetings)?
- 5) Will the initiative create more/less occasions for informal meetings (e.g., guys hanging out on the corners, queues for shopping tickets, etc.)?

Bridging social capital:

- 1) Will the policy create more/less occasions for people to interact with those that differ from them (by race, religion, age, etc.)?
- 2) Will the policy create more/less occasions for people to work collaboratively with those that differ from them (by race, religion, age, etc.)?
- 3) Will the policy create more/less occasions for public interactions (e.g., in town meetings, planning boards, or neighborhood organizations) with those that differ from them (by race, religion, age, etc.)?
- 4) Will the initiative create more/less occasions for private interactions (e.g., bridge clubs, sports leagues, or religious meetings) with those that differ from them (by race, religion, age, etc.)?
- 5) Will the initiative create more/less occasions for informal meetings (e.g., guys hanging out on the corners, queues for shopping tickets, etc.) with those that differ from them (by race, religion, age, etc.)?

Family Ties:

- 1) Will the proposed initiative increase or decrease people's discretionary time?
- 2) Will the proposed initiative increase or decrease the time that family members spend together?
- 3) Will the proposed initiative shift responsibilities for certain functions from family members to non-family members?
- 4) Will the proposed initiative increase or decrease the range of possible structures that are treated as a family unit?

Trust in institutions:

- 1) Is the acting institution (the one proposing the initiative) suggesting a process for securing approval of this initiative in which all parties have confidence?
- 2) Is the acting institution providing opportunities for citizen involvement in the delivery or the planning, oversight and ongoing review of the proposed initiative?
- 3) Is the acting institution going to undermine an existing, respected community organization?
- 4) Is the acting institution proposing an initiative that is likely to be successful?

5. How to gather this information

There are four approaches of which a community or organization could undertake, none of them mutually exclusive:

- a) Employ an expert/sociologist in residence for some period (days or weeks) to observe and report to the community on the social interactions that are likely to be affected
- b) Conduct literature reviews on the intersection between X and social capital (e.g., if a proposal was going to increase residential mobility in a community, learning what scholars knew about the impact of increased mobility on social capital)
- c) Interview community residents about, for example, their social use of a facility, or where they met their friends in a community, etc.
- d) Have community residents or others testify or submit opinions, followed by debate.

6. Examples

A strong historical example of where social capital impact assessment would have helped was the razing of the West End in Boston. The West End was a relatively run-down ethnic community, with a vibrant community structure. In the name of slum clearance, the residents were moved to better housing, but in the process they lost all of the community connectedness that they had in the West End (as later documented by sociologist Herbert Gans in the Urban Villagers). Residents in the new housing didn't function well as a community because of these severed social ties. The decision to raze the community was based solely on the physical housing stock and not on the levels of social capital; attention at the time to the levels of social capital in West End might have led to a different (and more optimal decision).

Here are some contemporary examples of situations where the application of a SCIA might have enriched the discussion and given weight to factors otherwise perhaps undervalued:

- a. A town is proposing closing a local branch of the post office. The SCIA could illuminate whether the local branch turns out to be a vital place where residents congregate to talk.
- b. The University of Kentucky is proposing building its own basketball coliseum on campus and abandoning the local civic center, Rupp Arena, which is a centerpiece of downtown Lexington. This action would have an impact on the social capital of the city that should be taken into account.
- c. Indianapolis proposed a tax to help rectify a storm drainage problem. Unfortunately, the very design of the tax structure could hit nonprofits especially hard. The proposed calculation method is based on the square footage of roof and parking lot space, a formula that will heavily tax churches, since very often their roofs and parking lots are quite large.
- d. The town of New Boston, NH (population 4,000) has proposed moving the elementary school, now located in the middle of its small downtown, to a new location two miles out of town. Residents protest that this relocation will disrupt and undercut a principal

anchor of this small community. The present location is within an easy walk of the principal store in town, and the library, bank, post office, town offices and two town churches.

e. The State of Vermont has greeted Wal-Mart's announcement that they are moving to open stores throughout northern New England by saying that Wal-Mart will be welcome in Vermont only if located in the midst of shopping areas and cities, and have a far smaller footprint and total square footage than their customary stores, and would be opposed if they followed their usual practice of locating outside existing shopping areas on heavily used highways.

f. Business practices that might be impacted by a SCIA include mergers, acquisitions, and plant closings.