Does he who pays the bill call the shots? Sitting astride client and public interest – the dilemma of maintaining credibility in impact assessments

Although the initial intention was to tackle the difficulty of retaining credibility within the realms of social impact assessments, it soon became evident that this is a dilemma faced by other forms of impact assessments. So, although the focus of this discussion remains mainly with the social, as this is where I come from, much of what will be address here will, in general, be applicable to most other forms of impact assessments. This series commences with the aim, not of providing solutions as we are unlikely to have all the answers, but rather of stimulating debate amongst a wider audience through which a range of solutions may eventually be forthcoming.

As Beder (1993)[1] points out "Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) have lost credibility with environmental and resident groups over recent years because they are being increasingly perceived as biased public relations documents." The crux of the client – community conflict is highlighted by Beder when she continues to point out that "… the community generally expects that an EIS should be an objective scientific report whilst many consultants and project proponents view an EIS as a supporting document prepared as part of the procedure for gaining approval for a project."

I would like to suggest that not much has changed since Beder wrote this and that this conflict is exacerbated by the fact that it is usually the project proponent who pays the bill for most assessments. Together with paying the bill comes at least a psychological contract between project proponent and consultant. A psychological contract based on certain expectations on both sides, one of which is that consultants should act in the interest of the client and ensure that the project proceeds expeditiously.

Although, at the theoretical level, this may not be within the spirit of the intentions of the environmental legislation, at a more practical level, it is probably closest to reality as economic and other pressures urge developers to swiftly proceed with their projects and consultants to deliver on this requirement. Project proponents have the

[1] Beder, S. 'Bias and Credibility in Environmental Impact Assessment', Chain Reaction, No. 68, February 1993, pp28-30.

freedom to choose consultants, and for that matter peer reviewers, a choice often made based on past experiences and these expectations.

The question therefore posed is: Can this dilemma be managed, and if so how? Immediately a number of things spring to mind. Firstly, the requirement that impact practitioners be registered and subjected to a code of ethics, that peer reviews are enforced and that sanctions are attached to those who transgress this code. Although the 'professionalization' of the practice may help, whether it is the solution remains highly debatable.

There are a number of professions who have traditionally been subjected to professional bodies, codes of ethics and peer group supervision but this has not necessarily been the ultimate answer. For example there are strict rules, procedures and ethical codes in place for accountants, yet the Enron scandal, involving one of the big five US auditing firms, Arthur Anderson, occurred. Unethical practices, or at least perceptions of unethical practices, have also occurred in the highly regulated medical field and these are often linked to who is funding research. In this sense consider how accepting funding from the tobacco industry to undertake medical research negatively affects the credibility of the researchers who accept these funds (Smith, 2008; University of California, 2007; Yamey, Savage & King, 2000)[2]. Or the conflict of interest accepting funding from certain pharmaceutical companies can cause researchers (Raeburn, 2002; Boston Business Wire, 2008; Saul, 2008)[3].

These issues considered then, what is the common factor? – Money. The crux of the matter remains or at least the perception is created that, he who pays the bills calls the tune. As long as there is a basis for such perception credibility will always be at

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[2] Smith, S. 2008. MIT and Others Funded Disease Research Using Tobacco Company Money. The Boston Globe: Boston. April 1, 2008.
The Regents of the University of California Meeting as a Committee of the Whole. September 20, 2007. Mondavi Center, Davis campus. Item RE89: Adoption of Policy Requiring Special Review/Approval Procedures Prior to University Submission of Research Proposals to Tobacco Industry Funders.
www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/minutes/2007/cw920.pdf [04:12 PM 2008/12/10]
Yamey, G. Savage, R. King, J. 2000. Why journals should not publish articles funded by the tobacco industry. British Medical Journal.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0999/is_7268_321/ai_67442824/pg_1?tag=artBody;col1 [04:20 PM 2008/12/10]

[3] Raeburn, P. June 24, 2002. Commentary: The Credibility Gap in Drug Research. BusinessWeekOnline.
www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/02_25/b3788088.htm [04:38 PM 2008/12/10]
Boston (Business Wire). Apr 17, 2008. Pharmaceutical Ghostwriting Trend Mars Credibility of Research and Negatively Impacts Patient Safety. http://www.drugs.com/clinical_trials/pharmaceutical-ghostwriting-trend-mars-credibility-research-negatively-impacts-patient-safety-4014.html [04:26 PM 2008/12/10]
Saul, S. April 16, 2008. Merck wrote drug studies for doctors. The New York Times, Business.
www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/business/16vioxx.html [04:28 PM 2008/12/10]

risk. This leads me to suggest that there is a wide range of things that would help to raise the credibility of impact assessments not the least of which is the source of funding. I am quite aware that this is not the first time that the matter of funding and credibility has been raised in impact assessment circles. Notwithstanding this, I would like to suggest that, by raising it here and through a joint effort amongst members of this community, solutions could be found. I also understand that the issue of funding is a highly complex and sensitive matter, nonetheless, it needs to urgently be confronted.

I also believe that credibility is not only eroded through the impartiality of the source of funds but also by a range of issues related to how the practice as a whole is administered. In this sense, in the next few issues of this Newsletter, I intend to raise various other issues related to credibility. The first of these is trust and gaining the confidence of both the public and the client, a topic that can be linked to matters such as the need to professionalise the industry, and here I specifically refer to the social impact industry. This will be linked to the necessity to ensure the availability of proper and adequate training in the field which stretches across various levels, from undergraduate to post graduate, as well as onto a technical level. The importance of finding an academic ‘home’ for social impact assessments as well as the necessity of developing appropriate guidelines and methodology.