SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

What Would Make It Work Better?

Survey Findings prepared by Insight into Impact

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Executive Summary

This report analyses 22 responses to "Social Impact Assessment in Practice: What Would Make It Work Better?," a survey distributed on LinkedIn between 19 August and 1 September 2026 via SurveyMonkey. The survey is a direct follow-on from the 7 July 2026 Tuesday Dialogues session hosted by The Brisbane Dialogues, exploring Social Impact Assessment (SIA) from three points of view: the project view (companies and consultants), the people-in-place view (affected communities), and the regulator view (government and decision-makers). The purpose of this report is twofold: to stand alone as a piece of research, and to sharpen the agenda for a forthcoming Brisbane event bringing social impact assessment practitioners, project proponents, regulators and community and Indigenous representatives into the same room.

The headline finding is that trust in the SIA process is genuinely split: the average sits at 3.0 out of 5, but this average hides a real divide. Twenty-seven percent of respondents report low trust and 32% report high trust, with the largest single group (41%) sitting in the middle. That divide tracks a respondent's position in the process: those closer to delivering SIA (company and project teams and practitioners, 12 of 22 respondents) report meaningfully higher trust on average than the community and public respondents in this sample. This is a pattern, not proof, given how small some of the underlying groups are. However, it is consistent with what came out of the 7 July session, and this survey extends it in a specific, useful way (Section 2).

The single most trust-damaging concern in this data is the independence of who pays for and conducts an assessment. It shows up as a leading answer in two separate questions, and respondents whose top concern is this funding relationship report the lowest average trust of any concern group. A second, less obvious finding is that "being consulted earlier" and "having real influence over outcomes" are experienced as two different things by respondents: wanting real influence tracks with low trust, while wanting earlier involvement does not. Finally, no respondent in this survey identified as a regulator, yet project and practitioner respondents are the only ones who said they specifically want to hear a regulator's answer to these questions. That is a genuine gap in this evidence, and an argument, from the data itself, for why the event needs a real regulator voice in the room.

About This Survey

"Social Impact Assessment in Practice: What Would Make It Work Better?" is a short, three-minute survey run on SurveyMonkey and promoted on LinkedIn from 19 August to 1 September 2026. It follows directly from the 7 July 2026 Tuesday Dialogues session hosted by The Brisbane Dialogues, at which Marcus Curcija (Insight Into Impact) presented on SIA in Queensland from three points of view: the project view (companies and consultants), the people-in-place view (affected communities), and the regulator view (government and decision-makers). The survey is a direct follow-on from the presentation and the discussion that ensued.

How to read the numbers that follow

This is a small, self-selected sample drawn from a professional LinkedIn network, not a random or representative sample of the Queensland public, project sector, or regulators. At 22 responses, a single answer is worth 4.5 percentage points, so percentages can look more precise than they really are. This report leads with counts (“6 of 22”) and treats percentages as a secondary, rounded read.

Section 1: Main Findings

This section reports each question as surveyed, in order. Section 2 presents more interesting patterns that emerge when questions are read together.

Q1. Respondent profile

“What perspective do you most relate to?” (22 responses)

Group	n	%
A company or project team delivering major developments	8	36.4%
None of the above, a member of the public with an interest in the topic	7	31.8%
An SIA practitioner or consultant	4	18.2%
A community affected by a major project	2	9.1%
Prefer not to say	1	4.5%
A regulator, government, or policy role	0	0.0%

Two-thirds of respondents (12 of 22) are on the delivery side of SIA: company and project teams, or the practitioners and consultants who carry out assessments. Community respondents are a small minority (2 of 22), and no respondent identified as a regulator. This shapes every average in this report and is treated as a standing limitation, not a one-off footnote.

Q2. Trust in the SIA process

“On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you currently trust the Social Impact Assessment process?” (22 responses, average 3.0 out of 5)

Response	n	%
1, Not at all	3	13.6%
2, Slightly	3	13.6%
3, Moderately	9	40.9%
4, Very	5	22.7%
5, Completely	2	9.1%

An average of 3.0 could describe a group that is quietly satisfied, or one that is sharply divided and happens to average out to the middle. This is the latter: 6 of 22 (27.3%) sit at “not at all” or “slightly” trusting, and 7 of 22 (31.8%) sit at “very” or “completely”, a near-even split either side of a moderate middle. Section 2 shows this split is not random. It tracks who the respondent is.

Q3. The single biggest lever for trust

"If you had to pick just one thing most likely to make Social Impact Assessment more trustworthy, what would it be?" (22 responses, including four written-in answers folded into the closest matching option below)

Option	n	%
Independent checking, separate from the company paying for the assessment	6	27.3%
Giving communities real influence over outcomes, not just a chance to comment	5	22.7%
Getting communities involved earlier, before major decisions are locked in	4	18.2%
Stronger follow-through and monitoring after approval	3	13.6%
Setting clearer, more realistic expectations from the outset	2	9.1%
Something else	2	9.1%

Once the written-in answers are folded into the closest matching option, independent checking becomes the clear top pick with 6 of 22 responses (27.3%), just ahead of giving communities real influence over outcomes (5, 22.7%). Two written-in answers did not fit any of the listed options: one called for assessments to focus on genuinely high-risk activities rather than smaller ones, and the other for communities to always be told when an assessment is being carried out on them.

Q4. The concern that resonates most

"Which of these specific concerns resonates most with you?" (22 responses)

Concern	n	%
Political pressure can shape which projects get approved	7	31.8%
Assessments are paid for by the very company being assessed	6	27.3%
Communities aren't always told why a specific request won't be met	3	13.6%
The process can be slow or costly without a clear payoff for anyone involved	2	9.1%
Expectations aren't always realistic on either side, community or company	2	9.1%
It's not always clear whether these reports are genuinely available for the public to see	1	4.5%
Something else	1	4.5%
None of these particularly concern me	0	0.0%

Political pressure in approvals edges out funding independence as the single most-selected concern, extending an important pattern from the 7 July session that is discussed in Section 2. Nobody selected "none of these particularly concern me". Every respondent named a live concern.

Q5. Whose answer would you most want to hear?

“If a company representative, a community representative, and a regulator sat down together to answer these questions in person, whose answer would you be most curious to hear?” (22 responses)

Answer	n	%
I'd want to hear all three equally	14	63.6%
The community representative	4	18.2%
The regulator	3	13.6%
The company / project representative	1	4.5%

A clear majority want all three voices, which reads as direct support for the event's own premise: a genuine cross-sector conversation, not another single-perspective session. Section 2 shows exactly who is asking for the regulator specifically, and it is not who you might expect.

Q6. “The one question you'd want to put to them directly”

Open text, 19 of 22 answered, 3 skipped. We read all 19 written answers and grouped them into common themes:

Theme	n	%	What it's really asking
Community wellbeing, rights and fairness	5	26.3%	Who actually benefits or is harmed, and whether that's weighed fairly
Quality and scope of the assessment itself	5	26.3%	Whether impacts (cumulative, long-term, overall) are being measured carefully at all
Process, standards and purpose	3	15.8%	Whether the other side understands, or is even trying to meet, a shared standard of “good”
Engagement and collaboration	2	10.5%	How and when different groups should work together
Accountability and integrity of the process	2	10.5%	Whether promises are kept and personal or political agendas are kept out
Decision-making transparency	1	5.3%	Whether trade-offs between options are made visible
No answer given	1	5.3%	Not applicable

Read together, over half of all written answers (10 of 19) split cleanly into two different critiques that are easy to mix up but shouldn't be: whether SIA is fair to the people affected by it, and whether it measures impacts carefully and accurately in the first place.

Q7 and Q8. Ongoing engagement

15 of 21 respondents to Q7 (71.4%) said yes to receiving survey results and event notifications, and all 15 followed through with a usable email address at Q8, a clean and consistent signal of genuine interest in where this goes next, from an audience that already leans toward people close to SIA delivery.

Section 2: Cross-Analysis, Deeper Patterns in the Data

This section links each respondent's answers across questions, rather than reading each question in isolation. Every group figure below states its own number of responses. Several are small and are read as directional rather than conclusive.

2.1 Trust is higher among those closer to delivering SIA

Group	n	Average trust (out of 5)	Range
Practitioner / consultant	4	3.50	3 to 4
Company / project team	8	3.38	2 to 5
Public (no stated role)	7	2.86	1 to 5
Community affected by a project	2	2.00	1 and 3
Prefer not to say	1	1.00	1

The two groups closest to actually delivering SIA, practitioners and company or project teams, report the highest average trust, while community and public respondents report the lowest. This is an early signal rather than a settled finding: the community group is only 2 respondents, and the single “prefer not to say” respondent is also the survey's most disaffected voice.

The pattern is nonetheless consistent with a well-known effect: the same process, experienced differently depending on where someone sits in it.

2.2 “Real influence” and “earlier involvement” are different requests

Q3 choice	n	Average trust of respondents choosing it
Giving communities real influence over outcomes	5	2.20
Something else	2	2.00
Setting clearer, more realistic expectations	2	2.50
Independent checking, separate from the payer	6	3.33
Stronger follow-through and monitoring	3	3.67
Getting communities involved earlier	4	3.75

Among the named options, respondents who want real decision-making influence report the lowest average trust (2.20). Respondents who want earlier involvement, a more procedural and less power-related request, report among the highest (3.75). On the numbers alone it would be easy to treat “involve communities earlier” and “give communities real influence” as two versions of the same request. This data suggests they are not: one is a timing fix that low-trust and high-trust respondents can agree on, while the other is a question of power that specifically low-trust respondents are asking for. An event or reform agenda that only commits to earlier involvement risks satisfying the wrong half of this concern.

2.3 The funding-independence concern is where trust is thinnest

Q4 concern	n	Average trust of respondents choosing it
Something else	1	1.00
Report availability unclear	1	2.00
Assessments paid for by the company being assessed	6	2.67
Political pressure shapes approvals	7	3.00
Expectations aren't realistic on either side	2	3.00
Communities not told why a request won't be met	3	4.00
Process is slow or costly without a clear payoff	2	4.00

Political pressure is the more frequently chosen concern (Q4, Section 1), but funding independence is the concern most closely tied to actual distrust. Respondents who chose it average 2.67, well below the survey average of 3.0, while respondents worried about communication gaps or process cost report above-average trust. Being the most picked concern and being the most damaging to trust are not the same thing here, and a report that only reads Q4's ranking would miss which concern is doing the most damage.

A related pattern: of the 7 public respondents, 4 (57%) named the funding relationship as their top concern, a higher share than any other group, while none of the 4 practitioner respondents did. The group with the most first-hand experience of how independence works in practice is the least likely to name it as a top concern. The group with the least exposure is the most likely. That could mean practitioners see the conflict as more manageable in practice than it looks from outside. It could also mean that a group whose income depends on the current model is, understandably, less likely to flag it as a problem. This data cannot tell us which explanation is right, and this report will not pretend otherwise.

2.4 The missing regulator, and who's asking for one

No regulator took part in this survey. Interestingly, the only people who said they most wanted to hear from a regulator were themselves from company or project teams: 3 of the 8 (more than a third). Nobody from the community, public, or practitioner groups picked this option. In other words, the people delivering major projects are among the most curious about what regulators think, and this survey cannot answer that for them. That is a good reason to make sure a real regulator is in the room at the event, not just as good practice, but because it is what respondents themselves are asking for.

2.5 How this compares to the July discussion

During the discussion at the 7 July 2026 Tuesday Dialogues session, funding independence was the room's biggest concern, raised three times by different people, while political pressure in approvals came up only once and was never resolved. This survey confirms the first point and adds a new one. Funding independence is still a top concern here (6 of 22 at Q4, 27.3%, and independent checking is now the top Q3 pick at 27.3%), so the room's original concern holds up with a wider audience. But political pressure on approvals, barely touched on in July, is now the single most-selected concern of all 22 respondents

(31.8%). This suggests a wider audience sees political pressure as just as important as who pays for the assessment, if not more so.