



Impact Assessment (IA) is the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action.



AUTHOR

Maria Partidário
with significant input from
Lea den Broeder
Peter Croal
Richard Fuggle
William Ross

FASTIPS

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Impact Assessment

Over the years IA has been recognized as a forward-looking instrument that is able to proactively advise decision-makers on what might happen if a proposed action is implemented. Impacts are changes that are judged to have environmental, political, economic or social significance to society. Impacts may be positive or negative and may affect the environment, communities, human health and well-being, desired sustainability objectives, or a combination of these.

Impact Assessment can help us design and implement better policies, plans, programs and projects that will face up to important challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, a growing population, urbanization, conflicts over increasingly scarce resources, inequities, and new technological opportunities. By critically examining development actions while they are still being conceptualized, IA contributes to fostering a balanced and sustainable future, and to shaping, and making better, the society that future generations will be living in. IA has the capacity to magnify the positive effects of development by turning problems into opportunities. Informed decision-making provides options for early and smart integration of environmental, social and economic issues; it helps to develop proposals for action, for enhancing opportunities, avoiding risks and mitigating detrimental effects.

IA HAS A DUAL NATURE. IT IS BOTH TECHNICAL AND PROCEDURAL

- In its technical guise, IA seeks to evaluate and synthesize the efforts of disciplinary specialists, stakeholders, and regulatory authorities. By providing considered unbiased information, decision-makers are helped to develop or select policies, plans, programs, and projects, that will be sustainable as well as acceptable to people who will be affected.
- In a regulatory and institutional context, IA is a legal procedure, integral of the decision-making process to which a planned intervention will be subjected. It seeks to ensure that all stakeholders, both private and regulatory, have been engaged, their interests recognized, relevant laws and regulations addressed, and that pertinent information to the pending decision has not been omitted or exaggerated.

Since its introduction in 1970 in the United States, IA has evolved as a family of instruments, some of which are formalized through regulatory procedures. These include environmental impact assessment (EIA), social impact assessment (SIA), health impact assessment (HIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA). Other non-formalized instruments of the IA family include Technology Assessment, Ecological impact assessment, and Biodiversity impact assessment. In 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, IA received international endorsement. Principle 17 of the Final Declaration is dedicated to EIA and article 14 of the Convention of Biological Diversity is about IA. IA is also incorporated in the Equator Principles to which most of the World's International Financial Institutions and large Investment Banks subscribe.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. The social contract between impact assessment professionals and civil society and decision-makers is that (a) impact assessments will be conducted with integrity and will be free from misrepresentation or deliberate bias, and (b) impact assessments will respect citizen rights to participate in decisions that affect them.
2. An IA priority is the assessment of alternative development options to ensure more sustainable and low environmental and social risk solutions are given full consideration.
3. The aim of IA is to optimize positive and minimize residual negative effects. Mitigation measures to reduce the magnitude of negative impacts must be adopted where it is not possible to avoid impacts through appropriate design.
4. It is not professional to produce an IA report solely to meet a legal requirement when an impact assessment must be submitted. Ticking boxes is not good practice. A genuine effort must be made to evaluate and properly describe a range of development options.
5. It is desirable to integrate the environmental, social and economic dimensions of impact assessment unless the jurisdiction for which the assessment is being prepared constrains IA to an analysis of specific types of impacts.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Promote IA to address and incorporate into strategic and project development decision-making important challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, a growing population and urbanization, and conflicts over increasingly scarce resources and inequities.
2. Ensure that IA makes a positive contribution to the environment and the well-being of the people living in it, by suggesting ways to avoid, or reduce, risks and enhance benefits of actions.
3. Promote transparency, participation, and the full engagement of all relevant stakeholders, including the public, in decision making.
4. Ensure good quality information in IA and evaluation of the IA process and its outcomes, to enhance IA effectiveness.
5. Shift IA thinking away from the licensing stage and closer to the key decisions on future development options to increase IA influence on concept and design.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS

That require extensive and highly detailed impact assessments:

- Long linear developments:
 - Pipelines
 - Roads and railways
 - Electricity transmission lines
 - Irrigation canals.
- Water storage and transfer
 - Large dams
 - Irrigation schemes
 - Large hydroelectric facilities
 - Inter-basin water transfer
- Coastal developments
 - Harbor construction and expansion
 - Estuary modification
 - Industrial and residential estate development
- Mining
 - Large open-cast mines
 - Underground mining
 - Oil and gas extraction
- Clearing of virgin land
 - Deforestation
 - Developments in biodiversity hot-spots
 - Developments in areas cherished by indigenous peoples

That require strategic assessment

- Policy-making, planning and programme development relating to
 - Spatial planning at macro and local geographical scales
 - Energy, Water, Transportation, Agriculture, Urban expansion and other sectors
- Policy or strategic intentions on
 - Adaptation and mitigation of climate change
 - Ecosystem services and human well-being
 - Coastal and marine development
- Actions that will affect large numbers of people
 - Poverty reduction schemes
 - Resettlement plans
 - Upgrading of informal settlements

Want to know more?

www.iaia.org/publications/
Special Publications, IA Principles and Guidance documents

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Contact Maria Partidário (mpartidario@gmail.com), Fastips Series Editor.