

Better Health. Better Environment. Sustainable Choices.

Fact sheet 8

Environmental and Health Impact Assessments

Integrating health into environmental assessments – a tool to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals



Summary

Health Impact Assessments (HIA) support the decision-making process by identifying the health impacts of policies, programmes, plans and projects. HIAs use a participatory approach and identify possible inequalities in the distribution of potential risks and adverse effects, as well as options to prevent or reduce these impacts and promote positive ones. As shown in Fig. 1, the different stages of an HIA can be linked to the policy/decision-making cycle. Integrated into environmental assessments (EAs), they support health ministries and agencies in their role as health brokers and advocates when undertaking intersectoral work. HIA is a key tool for the implementation of the ‘Health in All Policies’ agenda – a concept renewed through the ‘whole-of-government’ and ‘whole-of-society’ approaches of the Health 2020 policy framework of the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

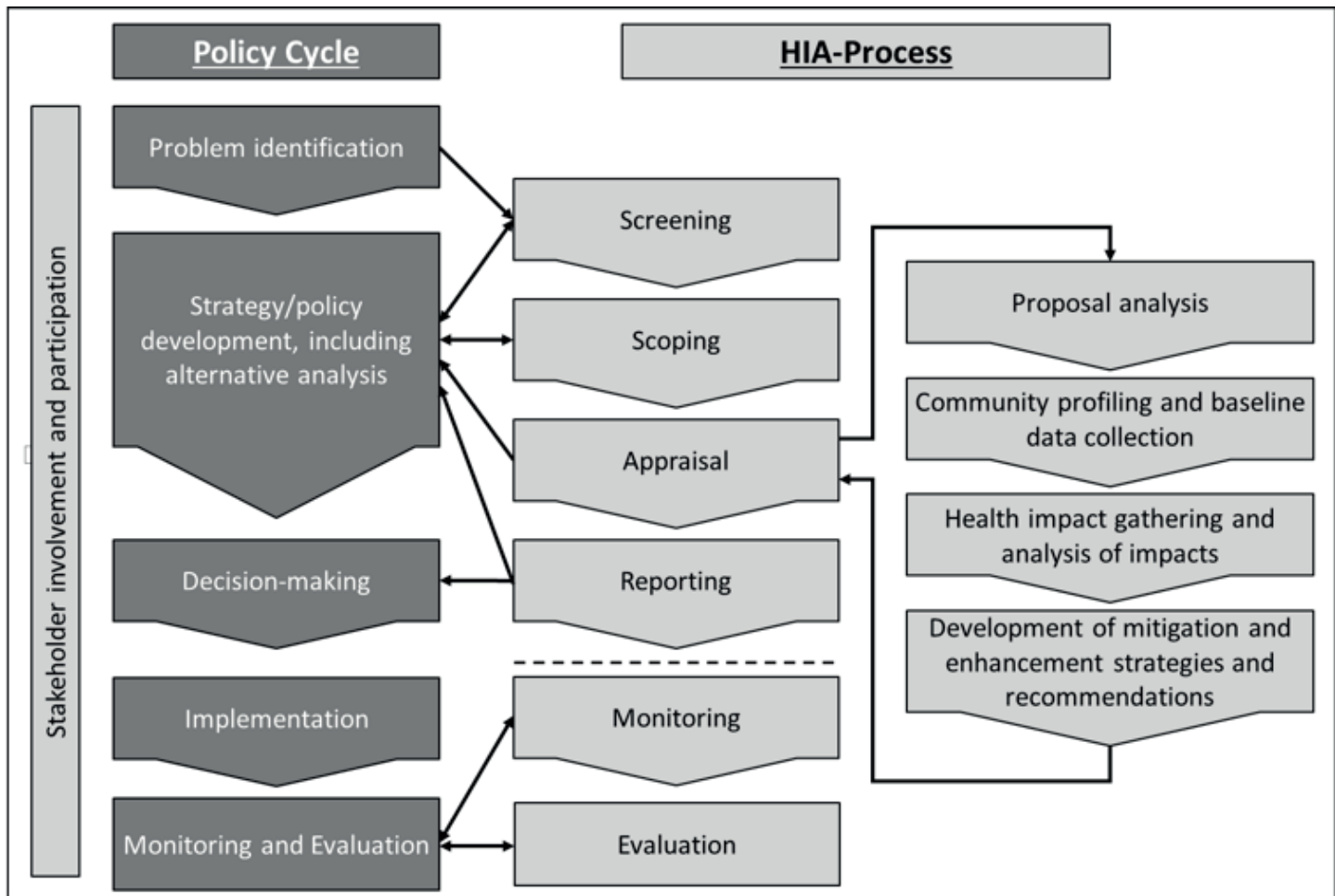
Overview

Health is heavily influenced by decisions on policies, plans, programmes and projects taken outside of the health sector. The main environmental factors contributing to the environmental burden of disease are related to indoor and outdoor air pollution, the provision of safe water and sanitation, exposure to chemical agents and other risk factors. Hence, agriculture, energy, housing, industrial development, transport, and water and sanitation are among the sectors with high primary prevention potential.

Assessing and mitigating the impacts of policies, plans, programs or projects on the environment through environmental assessments (EAs), such as environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and strategic environmental assessments (SEA), are now well-established practices. However, there is still a need to integrate the broader aspects of health and well-being into environmental assessments, such as spatial planning.



Figure 1: Figure 1: Linking the HIA process with the policy cycle



Source: Translated from Nowacki and Mekel, 2012, p. 286

While HIA has legally binding provisions in a handful of WHO European Region Member States, legal or regulatory instruments exist worldwide in almost all countries to assess the impacts of proposals from different sectors on the environment. International legislation on environmental assessment – such as the UNECE Protocol on SEA to the Convention on EIA in a Transboundary Context, and the EU Directives on EIA and SEA – prescribes the need to assess the impacts of such proposals on human health and the population. The Directives must be transposed into the national legislation of the EU Member States and, in addition, have an influence beyond EU borders, such as through the lending policies of development banks. The WHO Regional Office for Europe works in partnership with UNECE, and the EU and European Commission DG Environment, to further promote a meaningful integration of health into environmental assessment processes. The WHO Regional Office for Europe also supports its Member States through: national capacity building workshops on HIA and the integration of health into environmental assessment; developing training materials; collecting good practice examples; and supporting the development of guidance documents.

Within these environmental assessments, the impacts on human health are often limited. Environmental factors that are regularly assessed, such as air, soil or water pollution, are rarely linked to the potential health outcomes of a population.

There remains a need to further implement HIA, and enhance health assessment practices within environmental assessments, across WHO European Member States. Many new projects and policies will likely be developed towards achieving the SDGs and these will have to undergo an EIA or SEA. Seizing this opportunity to bring health into the equation cannot be missed.



Key messages

- ▶ Many countries have legislation in place for environmental assessments but fail to evaluate the full impact of policies, plans, programmes or projects on health.
- ▶ HIAs can help reduce the environmental risks to a population and enhance positive effects by taking into account not only classic environmental factors – such as air pollution, the provision of safe water and sanitation, or exposure to chemical agents – but also socio-economic factors and distributional effects. Hence, they can also help to avoid creating inequalities within populations.
- ▶ HIAs are a key mechanism for maximizing the potential of other sectors to promote health and reduce health threats through evidence-informed policy-making across sectors.
- ▶ Including HIA in legislation, and supporting the implementation of health assessments in environmental assessment through training, guidance and resources, are keys to effectively conducting HIAs.
- ▶ Health experts need to get involved at an early stage in the decision-making and environmental assessment process.

Key facts

- ▶ There is still a need to promote the further use of HIA as a tool for sustainable, ‘no-regret’ policies, by considering health implications from the beginning of planning processes in all sectors, and through integrating the concerned population in the process.
- ▶ Integrating HIA into environmental assessment can help add an equity lens on the impacts of a proposal and hence supports SDG achievement.
- ▶ The assessment of health impacts needs to be further integrated into environmental assessment through an earlier inclusion of public health experts into the environmental assessment process. To achieve this, the capacities of health professionals to conduct or review HIA and health assessments within environmental assessment need to be strengthened.
- ▶ Guidelines adapted to national environmental, social, and regulatory contexts are needed to help environmental and health assessors, as well as decision-makers, to conduct and review the quality of impact assessments.
- ▶ Options for the legal provision of HIA should be considered, including a mechanism for defining responsibilities for its implementation, and specifications on who will bear the costs of the HIA – for example, following the polluters-pays principle.

“Best buys”

Including HIA in legislation – the example of Slovakia: Slovakia has become one of the first countries with legal regulations for HIA in the WHO European Region. The Public Health Act makes HIA obligatory for a proposal when public health authorities consider it necessary. The Act also describes the certification process for HIA assessors. Development of the legislation involved three phases. The first was obtaining policy support at the government level. The second entailed creating the conditions for legislation implementation through: setting up a working group to develop a strategy introducing HIA; the specification of needs; a broad stakeholder engagement process within public health authorities; national workshops in key sectors with decision-makers; capacity building for regional public health authorities; and establishing conditions for the authorization and certification of HIA assessors. The third phase was implementing HIA in practice.

Supporting HIA implementation – the example of the Wales HIA Support Unit (WHIASU), United Kingdom: Based in Public Health Wales, WHIASU was established by the Welsh Government to facilitate the implementation of HIA, including providing training, advice and resources. Since 2004, over 200 HIAs have been completed in Wales, ranging from comprehensive high profile and contentious assessments to local level and community HIAs. The implementation of HIA has involved the national and local level training of a broad range of stakeholders and policy-makers, environmental health officers, planning officers and public health practitioners.



Among other developments supported by WHIASU, the Mineral Technical Advice Notes 1 and 2 (MTAN 1, 2004, and MTAN 2, 2009) for quarrying and open cast mining require the implementation of a broad HIA as part of a mandatory EIA for a planning application.

Source: © WHO/J. Nowacki



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Key references

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