

Chapter 16

CONCLUSIONS

The current scope of impact assessment – the categories of effects and linkages that are typically considered in development decision making – is being broadened all the time. Early institutional development of this process centred on EIA systems, which primarily are applied to large scale projects and typically take limited account of social, health and demographic issues. More recently, attention has focused on SEA of policies, plans and programmes. Now the interest is in developing more integrated approaches to impact assessment to respond to the imperative of sustainable development and to bring together the substantive and the institutional sides of this challenge. This can be undertaken using EIA and SEA as entry points; or using other economic or social appraisal processes or strategic planning processes (eg sustainable development strategies, poverty reduction strategies – see Chapter 15) as the drivers for integration. In the UK and within the EC, integrated policy and planning processes are evolving that incorporate sustainability-type appraisal.

There is no single best approach. Yet there is also no shortage of promoters of particular frameworks and methodologies, and brand names abound. In this chapter, we do not intend to enter this debate but instead try to pull together the main threads in a generic process of SA. At base, SA is an integrated assessment that is applied proactively to address:

- the environmental, equity and economic consequences of major proposals, ie full-cost policy and project appraisal; and
- within an explicit sustainability framework based upon agreed principles, criteria and indicators.

Within this context, we define the conditions for the three pillars of SA as:

- economic appraisal;
- social appraisal; and
- environmental appraisal - this should also take account of all existing as well as proposed activities that have significant adverse impacts, including cumulative effects, on natural processes and resources.

Linking impact assessment to other tools and processes is also a critical part of an integrated approach to SA. We address this issue in more detail in a companion report prepared for UNEP (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler 2004).

A key issue is the scope of the changes that need to be made to deliver an integrated approach that approximates to SA. Gibson (2004) argues that sustainability assessment processes can be built on the general model of progressive environmental assessment regimes (integrating strategic as well as project-level processes) and that only three basic changes need to be involved – SA should:

- force attention to sustainability requirements and act as a means of identifying and judging trade-offs in light of a commitment to making positive contributions to achieving sustainability objectives;
- act as a means to specify these requirements and trade-off judgements – and associated values, objectives and criteria – in specific contexts, through informed choices by the

relevant parties (stakeholders); and

- apply these insights in the full set of process elements recognised in progressive environmental assessment processes:
 - identifying appropriate purposes and options for new or continuing undertakings;
 - assessing purposes, options, impacts, mitigation and enhancement possibilities, etc.;
 - choosing (or advising decision-makings on) what should (or should not) be approved and done, and under what conditions; and
 - monitoring, learning from the results and making suitable adjustments.

Following this, Gibson suggests that the basic design features for sustainability assessment processes (Box 16.1) are no significantly different from those for 'strong' environmental assessment regimes.

Box 16.1: Best practice sustainability assessment process

- “Begins with explicit commitment to sustainability objectives and to application of sustainability-based criteria;
- Covers all potentially significant initiatives, at the strategic as well as project level, in a way that connects work at the two levels;
- Focuses attention on the most significant undertakings (at the strategic and project levels) and on work that will have the greatest beneficial influence;
- Is transparent and ensures open and effective involvement intended beneficiaries, local residents, potentially affected communities and other parties with important knowledge and concerns to consider and an interest in ensuring properly rigorous assessment;
- Takes special steps to ensure representation of important interests and considerations not otherwise effectively included (eg disadvantaged populations, future generations, broader socio-ecological relations);
- Gives integrated attention to social, economic, cultural, political and environmental factors, with guidance from a set of essential sustainability considerations that respect the inter-relations among these factors;
- Incorporates means of specifying and integrating sustainability considerations particular to the local and broader context of individual assessments;
- Addresses indirect and cumulative as well as direct and immediate effects;
- Emphasizes enhancement of positive effects as well as avoidance or mitigation of negative ones;
- Is initiated at the outset of policy, programme and project deliberations when problems and/or opportunities are identified;
- Requires critical examination of purposes and alternatives;
- Favours options incorporating adaptive design and requires preparation for adaptive implementation of approved undertakings;
- Seeks to identify alternatives that offer the greatest overall benefits and avoid undesirable trade-offs (rather than merely enhance/mitigate the effects of already chosen options);

- Specifies and applies explicit rules and/or requires explicit rationales for trade-off decisions;
- Includes effective means of monitoring implementation and effects, and of ensuring appropriate response to identified problems and opportunities;
- Recognizes uncertainties, favours caution, designs for continuous learning and follows initial decisions for adaptive adjustment through the full lifecycle of assessed undertakings;
- Ensures that proponents of undertakings and responsible authorities are aware of their assessment obligations before they begin planning and that they have effective motivations (legal requirements or the equivalent) to meet these obligations.

No existing jurisdiction has incorporated all of these features in the design and implementation of processes with a more limited environmental assessment objective. Sustainability assessment, a newer idea that has so far enjoyed only limited and largely experimental application, also lacks ideal examples. There are, however, plenty of reasons to expect more attention to advanced development and regular implementation of sustainability assessment processes”.

Source: Gibson (2004)

Gibson then argues that a transition to sustainability assessment will require attention to four main areas:

- **General process design:** translation of the basic design feature qualities listed in Box 16.1 into explicit and effectively imposed obligations - with careful, open attention to sustainability requirements in the conception, planning, approval, implementation and adjustment of all important undertakings at the strategic and project levels, in all jurisdictions;
- **Basic decision criteria:** translation of the core requirements for sustainability into strong generic guidance on the relevant sustainability objectives, priorities and criteria, and trade-off rules (see Box 1.9), for all the main kinds of undertakings and locations, and covering all the main steps of environmental assessment (including strategic assessments to guide project level work);
- **Case specific process guidance:** appropriate processes for elaboration of the general process rules and the basic decision criteria for specific places and undertakings;
- **Methods:** well tested methodologies for sustainability deliberations, plus baseline data, indicators, systems depictions, desired future scenarios and approaches to conflict resolution, for example concerning trade-offs.

Others argue for a more far reaching change, recognizing that SA is a more pluralistic approach, extends beyond impact assessment and requires an explicit tripartite assessment framework. Examples include....

We contend that much can be done by drawing on work to date in developing national strategies for sustainable development. Some of the necessary work to put a broad-based framework for sustainable development is already well advanced. For example, numerous process elements and a wide array of analytical tools are discussed in an OECD/UNDP resource book on sustainable development strategies (Dalal-Clayton & Bass 2002). But there remains a strong need to elaborate basic guidance for sustainability assessment process design and application, particularly covering:

- The construction of a working understanding of the core sustainability requirements that are to be used as evaluation and decision-making criteria; and
- How to address the compromises and trade-offs that inevitably will need to be made between and among these requirements in particular cases.

Our recommendations on these aspects are to be developed.

[MORE TO BE ADDED]

