

Scottish Health and Inequality Impact Assessment Network (SHIAN)

Report

Health Impact Assessment and Policy Evaluation

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Introduction

A wide range of policies and programmes can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing. While some of these have health as a prime objective, many of those with the potential for greatest health impact are not primarily focused on health outcomes. Health in All Policies (HiAP) is increasingly recognised as an approach which encourages consideration of health and wellbeing when making policy decisions.¹ Health Impact Assessment (HIA) and Policy Evaluation are two methods which can be used in such consideration of health and wellbeing impact.

HIA is a structured, prospective methodology for identifying potential health impacts of a policy, helping to inform decision-making and guide policy development.² Policy Evaluation, on the other hand, is a retrospective assessment of the real-world impact a policy has had. This document seeks to delineate the two approaches to assessing policy, plans and programmes and how these tools can be used to maximum effect.

Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

The International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) defines HIA as follows:

“Health Impact Assessment is a combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a policy, plan, programme or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage those effects.”³

Key to the HIA approach is its prospective nature, guiding decision-making around a specific, defined proposal, affecting the nature of resulting policy. Key to the ethos of HIA is that it assesses impact upon health for policies of all kinds, not only those which have a stated aim of having a health impact. As such, HIA is a valuable component of the HiAP approach. The assessment should be impartial, articulating positive and negative impacts of the proposed policy, programme or project, as well as those of any other options being considered.²

The values and principles of HIA have been formally articulated by both the WHO⁴ and the IAIA.⁵ These are:

- Democracy
- Equity
- Sustainable Development
- Ethical Use of Evidence
- Comprehensive Approach to Health*

HIA guidance suggests that the last stage of the process is monitoring and evaluation. This has been broken down into three aspects: process evaluation (did the HIA go to plan?); impact evaluation (of the HIA on final policy/decision); and outcome evaluation (which focuses on time trends related to health determinants and health outcomes identified in the assessment). In practice, outcome evaluations are very rare.

*This last value is delineated by the IAIA publication but not the WHO consensus statement.

Policy Evaluation

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define Policy Evaluation as follows:

*“Policy Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of information to make judgments about contexts, activities, characteristics, or outcomes of one or more domain(s) of the Policy Process. Evaluation may inform and improve policy development, adoption, implementation, and effectiveness, and builds the evidence base for policy interventions.”*⁶

The Treasury of the UK government offers detailed guidance on Policy Evaluation in its “Magenta Book”. It makes it clear that Policy Evaluation is a catch-all term referring to evaluation of projects, policies and programmes.⁷ This is differentiated from the process of assessing policy alternatives before implementation – this is described instead as “appraisal” and is dealt with in the “Green Book”.⁸ With such broad definition, Policy Evaluation can take a variety of forms and does not inherently include consideration of health unless this is a stated objective of the policy. The CDC policy evaluation framework divides Policy Evaluation into three types, while recognising that these are overlapping and normally take place in a cyclical, not linear, process:⁹

- **Evaluation of Content** – This aspect of Policy Evaluation asks whether the goals of the policy and the underlying logic by which it will meet its stated aims are well articulated. This is perhaps an aspect which is amenable to an HIA approach, if the evaluation is undertaken during the development of the policy rather than afterwards. The UK government Magenta Book, however, does not regard this as Policy Evaluation, categorising it instead as “appraisal”.⁷
- **Evaluation of Implementation** – This aspect asks whether the implementation of the policy proceeded as planned. Evaluating this aspect of policy allows a greater understanding of barriers and facilitators to implementation.
- **Evaluation of Impact** – This aspect asks to what extent the policy produced the outcomes intended in its development.

Table 1. Summary of key differences between HIA and Policy Evaluation

Health Impact Assessment	Policy Evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifically addresses impacts upon health and health inequalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluates the impacts of policy on the areas described in the policy’s aims. This may or may not include health impacts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaken prospectively, during policy development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaken retrospectively, after policy implementation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of policy options, with guidance on different impacts, intended and unintended. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive piece describing the development and implementation of a policy and delineating its impacts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of actions or policy alternatives to be taken to avoid or mitigate potential negative consequences; enhance positive consequences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides information on measurable positive and negative consequences of the policy and/or its implementation. Can inform future policy development.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on evidence of impact from previous policy implementation or relevant study. Dependent on quality of available evidence, including context-specificity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on evidence of impact produced during/after policy implementation. Dependent on what outcomes have been measured or on routinely available data.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to influence the design, development and implementation of the policy being assessed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to learn lessons from policy design and implementation so that future policies, plans and programmes or implementation can be improved.

HIA or Policy Evaluation?

HIA and Policy Evaluation both aim to improve policy development and implementation to increase the positive impacts and decrease, mitigate or avoid the negative impacts of policy. The key difference between the two approaches is when they take place – HIA always takes place prospectively so that its recommendations can be considered before implementing policy whereas Policy Evaluation retrospectively assesses the impacts of the policy which has been implemented to assess to what extent its stated objectives have been met. In this aspect, Policy Evaluation does not appear to differ from “summative evaluation”, perhaps the most common evaluation process used for policies, programmes and projects.

Good policy-making should include both HIA and Policy Evaluation approaches, ensuring that the latter includes consideration of impacts upon health and health inequalities. The two approaches are not in conflict but can be complementary, making evaluation of health impacts an iterative process beginning at the start of policy development and concluding with recommendations for changes to the implemented policy and for future policy development and implementation.

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