

# GENERAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE HEALTH IMPACT OF POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

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**Abstract:** *Health Assessment Policy is a structured method for assessing and improving the health consequences of projects, programmes and policies in the non-health sector. It is a multidisciplinary process combining a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence in a decision making framework.*

**Keywords:** *Health Impact Assessment (HIA), policy, programme, project*

**Rezumat:** *Evaluarea politicilor de sănătate este o metodă structurată privind evaluarea și îmbunătățirea rezultatelor proiectelor, programelor și politicilor din alte sectoare decât cel sanitar. Este un proces multidisciplinar care combină o serie de dovezi calitative și cantitative într-un cadru de luare a deciziilor.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *evaluarea politicilor de sănătate, politică, program, proiect*

- **democracy**, emphasizing the right of people to participate in a transparent process for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies that affect their life, both directly and through the elected political decision makers;
- **equity**, emphasizing that HIA is not only interested in the aggregated impact of the assessed policy on the health of a population but also on the distribution of the impact within the local population, in terms of gender, age, ethnic background and socio-economic status;
- **sustainable development**, emphasizing that both short term and long term, as well as more or less impacts are taken into consideration and;
- **ethical use of evidence**, emphasizing that the use of quantitative and qualitative evidence has to be rigorous and based on different scientific disciplines and methodologies in order to get an assessment as comprehensive as possible of the expected impacts.

## Why do we need to develop Health Impact Assessment at local level?

Social, economic and other policies in both the public and private sectors are so closely interrelated that proposed decisions in one sector may impact on the objectives and other sectors. In recognition of this, specific legal and administrative rules, procedures and methods have already been developed in many countries to assess the impacts of policies for example, on the environment, employment, economic growth or competition, on cultural and social factors, or on ethnic groups and gender. The general objective of such assessments is to improve knowledge about the potential impact of a policy or programme, inform decision-makers and affected people and facilitate adjustment of the proposed policy in order to mitigate the negative and maximize the positive impacts.

Although policies in other sectors can have a considerable influence on health and the production of prevention of illness, disability or death, this has so far only been taken into consideration to a limited degree, mainly in relation to environmental and social impact assessments. Recent attempts to take a more integrated approach to health and development has put HIA high on the agenda of some governments in Europe (at national, regional and local levels), and of international organizations including WHO and World Bank. A similar

It has been long accepted the fact that health and its determinants (1) are strongly influenced by the policies outside the healthcare sector, such as: transportation, regeneration projects and housing. There are countries that have recently introduced **health impact assessment (HIA)**, with a view to try and ensure that the potential effects on health are taken into consideration. This involves identifying disbenefits and benefits to health, interpreting health risk and potential health gain and presenting this information in order to facilitate the decision making process at local level.(2)

In a consensus paper, published by WHO Regional Office for Europe, **health impact assessment** is described as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, programme or project may be judged regarding its potential effects on the health state of a population and the distribution of these effects within that population”.(3) There are also other definitions proposed for health impact assessment. All of them generally agree to:(4)

health gain maximization and loss minimization;

- multidisciplinary, intersectoral and participatory character of HIA;
- focus on health inequalities;
- use both the quantitative and qualitative types;
- the fact that there are four values (5) which are particularly important for HIA:

increased interest is reflected in research circles. An important step forward has been taken in the European Union through Article 152 of the Amsterdam Treaty, which says that “*A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Community policies and activities*”, and the Council Resolution of June 1999 calling for the establishment of procedures to monitor the impact of Community policies and activities on public health and health care. These developments have given a strong impetus to the need for developing common understanding about the core elements of health impact assessment and an international exchange of experience and innovations.

### **Elements of Health Impact Assessment:**

Health Impact Assessment includes the following elements:

- consideration of *evidence* about the anticipated relationships between a policy, programme or project and the health of a population;
- considerations of the *opinions*, experience and expectations of those who may be affected by the proposed policy, programme or project;
- provision of more *informed understanding* by decision makers and the public concerning the effects of the policy, programme or project of health;
- proposals for *adjustments* in order to maximize the positive and minimize the negative health impacts.

HIA should be an integral part of the policy process. HIA process begins in the moment when there is a proposal or intention to continue or to make changes in the existing policy, or to launch a new project or policy. It should be preferable to be implemented early enough for any recommendations to be considered before critical choices are already made. The results of retrospective HIA are however, valuable in informing future prospective health impact assessments.

HIA first step is to explore which policies or programmes could have an impact on health, as well as the type of impact (screening process). If there is need for further information, a scoping process is carried out for determining what further work should be accomplished, by whom and how. Irrespective of the type of approach, this will be followed by reporting on findings, appraisal and adequacy of the report and by the action necessary to adjust the proposed policy, programme and project accordingly.

Health Impact Assessment process comprises six main stages: *screening, scoping, appraisal or risk assessment, preparation of report and recommendations, submission of report and recommendations to decision makers, monitoring and evaluation.*

- 1) The first and essential step in HIA is **screening**. Screening aims primarily to filter out proposals that do not require HIA, so that scarce resources can be targeted on proposals that will benefit from formal assessment. It means searching for potential linkages between policy, programme and project and health, as well as the health aspects that might be affected. This is made systematically, based on the available

information. In case, screening indicates a negligible potential health impact, either positive or negative, or in case health impact is well known, this is reported and the report made available for appraisal by the decision makers and those affected by the proposed policy, programme or project. If screening indicates that more information is needed, the second stage comes in, that is the scope.

- 2) **Scoping** (sometimes called “terms of reference”) gathers the elements or aspects of the proposal to be assessed, the proposal’s non-negotiable aspects, HIA aims and objectives, values supporting HIA; geographical area covered by the proposal implementation; the affected populations or communities, possible vulnerable, marginalized or disadvantaged groups, HIA stakeholders and the nature of their involvement; available resources (human, material and financial), the methods to be used.
- 3) **Appraisal or risk assessment** is the stage in which health impacts (positive or negative) of a proposal are detected. There are a lot of methods that can be used, depending on the model of HIA used, as well as on timescale or resources constraints. This stage defines the length of the process, from *rapid appraisal* (also called mini-HIA (6) – the use of the information and evidence already available or easily accessible) to *comprehensive appraisal* (also called maxi HIA (6) – the collection of new data, that unusually requires a prolonged and substantial time commitment from a number of people and is resource intensive – unpublished data).(7)
- 4) **Preparation of report** is the main output of HIA. It comprises the information gathered from stakeholders during the appraisal stage, findings from other HIAs regarding similar proposals, background information based on the local community and the relevant geographical area. Recommendations should also be tested to ensure that they address the impacts identified and that the interventions they suggest are effective.
- 5) **Submission of reports and recommendations** is the fifth stage of HIA and represents the main mechanism by which the outputs from the appraisal/risk assessment influence proposal development. It is necessary that the reports and recommendations submission should be made within the schedule set for the relevant decision making process. It is important that the information should be presented in an accessible format and comprehensible language as the target audience is seldom public health experts.
- 6) **Monitoring and evaluation**. Although a specific HIA ends here, there are several components that should be taken into consideration:
  - *process evaluation* – it shows how successful HIA was in practice. This is important as a source of learning, for quality improvement or quality assurance.

- *Impact evaluation* – monitors the acceptance of recommendation and implementation of the accepted recommendations.
- *Outcome evaluation* – monitors the indicators and health outcomes after the implementation of the proposal.(8)

### CONCLUSIONS

HIAs are similar in some ways to environmental impact assessments (EIAs), which are mandated processes that focus on environmental outcomes such as air and water quality.(9) However, unlike EIAs, HIAs can be voluntary or regulatory processes that focus on health outcomes such as obesity, physical inactivity, asthma, injuries, and social equity. An HIA encompasses a heterogeneous array of qualitative and quantitative methods and tools. Rapid HIAs can be completed in a few days or weeks; full HIAs may require months to complete. The decision to conduct a rapid or a full HIA is often determined by the available time and resources.(10)

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