

Policy briefs on health impact assessments and incorporating health into environmental assessments: an overview

This series of policy briefs aims to inform policy- and decision-makers in the WHO European Region about health impact assessments (HIAs); how health and well-being can be further integrated into environmental assessments (EAs); and how these assessments relate to public health practice. It is based on a major report summarizing knowledge about implementation of impact assessment practices (1).

The series of policy briefs addresses the following subjects:

1. HIAs and assessing health impacts in EAs within the public health toolbox;
2. setting up an HIA and health in EA support unit: roles and tasks;
3. methodological challenges and data needs;
4. generic guidelines and tools.

Key messages and implementation tips

- HIAs and health assessments in EAs are processes that offer decision-makers an overview of potential health and well-being implications of the planned activity, whether a policy, plan, programme or project.
- HIAs can help to reduce likely significant negative impacts on the health and well-being of an affected population, and to support further health gains.
- The integration of broader determinants of health such as social, economic and behavioural determinants beyond biophysical determinants in a proportionate manner can support win-win situations for planned activities.
- Health authorities can engage proactively with EAs to protect and improve public health and well-being. This requires development of human capacities and availability of resources.

Background

Health impact assessments (HIAs) aim to protect and improve the health of a specific population by assessing future impacts on health of policies, strategies, plans, programmes and projects, and by supporting the decision-making process. The term “health impact assessment” was first defined in the 1990s, formally established by the Gothenburg Consensus paper in 1999 (2), and further defined by Winkler et al. in 2021 (3) as:

a process which systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a project, program, plan, policy, or strategy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA generates evidence for appropriate actions to avoid or mitigate health risks and promote health opportunities. HIA guides the establishment of a framework for monitoring and evaluating changes in health as part of performance management and sustainable development.

EAs have a longer history. Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) were established in

1969 (4) to assess the likely significant effects of infrastructure projects. Strategic environmental assessments (SEAs) were developed in the late 1980s to address the likely significant effects at higher decision-making tiers, and thus at an earlier stage in the process (5).

Within the WHO European Region the need to assess human health in SEAs was explicitly included in the Protocol on SEA (6) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and human health was added to EIAs through Directive 2014/52/EU of the European Union (EU) (7). EU Directives have influence beyond EU Member States, for example, through the rules for environmental and social policy standards of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank.

Nevertheless, an assessment beyond the classical environmental determinants of health (such as air, noise, soil and water) that includes the broader determinants of health (such as social, economic and behavioural determinants) is still not performed systematically across countries (1).

Overview of the policy briefs

To support national implementation of HIAs and enhanced assessment of health impacts in EAs, WHO has developed a series of policy briefs covering the following topics:

Policy brief 1. A place in the public health toolbox

This policy brief gives a short overview of the HIA process and its linkages to EAs and legal obligations. It situates HIAs and health assessments in EAs within public health practice and discusses the role of health authorities within the HIA and EA processes.

Policy brief 2. Setup, roles and tasks of a support unit

This policy brief describes how to set up a support unit within government institutions to strengthen HIAs and enhance assessment of health in EAs.

Policy brief 3. Methodological challenges and data needs

This policy brief discusses key methodological issues of both types of assessment, and reviews the types of data necessary to conduct the assessments.

Policy brief 4. Generic guidelines and tools

This policy brief presents available guidance documents and tools to support HIAs and assessment of health in EAs.

References¹

1. Implementation of health impact assessment and health in environmental assessments across the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368238>).
2. Health impact assessment: main concepts and suggested approach – Gothenburg consensus paper. Brussels: European Centre for Health Policy; 1999 (http://www.healthedpartners.org/ceu/hia/hia01/01_02_gothenburg_paper_on_hia_1999.pdf).
3. Winkler MS, Viliani F, Knoblauch AM, Cave B, Divall M, Ramesh G et al. International best practice principles: health impact assessment. Fargo, ND: International Association for Impact Assessment; 2021 (Special Publication Series No. 5; <https://www.iaia.org/best-practice.php>).
4. Hanna K, editor. Routledge handbook of environmental impact assessment. Abingdon: Routledge; 2022.
5. Fischer TB, González A, editors. Handbook on strategic environmental assessment. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing; 2021.
6. Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context. Geneva: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; 2017 (<https://unece.org/environment-policy/publications/protocol-strategic-environmental-assessment-convention>).
7. Directive 2014/52/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 amending Directive 2011/92/EU on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment. O. J. E. U. L 124:1–18 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32014L0052>).

¹ All references accessed 23 August 2023.

Acknowledgements

The series of policy briefs was developed by Gabriel Gulis (University of Southern Denmark) and Julia Nowacki (WHO European Centre for Environment and Health).

The WHO Regional Office for Europe wishes to thank the following reviewers for their support in developing this series of policy briefs on HIAs and incorporating health into EAs: Ben Cave (BCA Insights Ltd; University of Liverpool, United Kingdom; and University of Groningen, Netherlands (Kingdom of the)), Thomas B Fischer (Environmental Assessment and Management Research Centre, School of

Environmental Sciences, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom), Liz Green (Wales Health Impact Assessment Support Unit, Public Health Wales, United Kingdom), Jana Loosová (Regional Public Health Authority of the Liberec region, Czechia), Sinaia Netanyahu (WHO European Centre for Environment and Health) and Manuel Valero (Health Impact Assessment Sector, Regional Ministry of Health, Andalusia, Spain).

The project was supported by funds generously provided by the German Government through the Federal Ministry of Health.

Member States

Albania	Greece	Portugal
Andorra	Hungary	Republic of Moldova
Armenia	Iceland	Romania
Austria	Ireland	Russian Federation
Azerbaijan	Israel	San Marino
Belarus	Italy	Serbia
Belgium	Kazakhstan	Slovakia
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kyrgyzstan	Slovenia
Bulgaria	Latvia	Spain
Croatia	Lithuania	Sweden
Cyprus	Luxembourg	Switzerland
Czechia	Malta	Tajikistan
Denmark	Monaco	Türkiye
Estonia	Montenegro	Turkmenistan
Finland	Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	Ukraine
France	North Macedonia	United Kingdom
Georgia	Norway	Uzbekistan
Germany	Poland	

© World Health Organization 2023. Some rights reserved. This work is available under the CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO license.

WHO/EURO:2023-8253-48025-71135

Suggested citation: Policy briefs on health impact assessments and incorporating health into environmental assessments: an overview. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023.

Cover picture: © WHO/Julia Nowacki