

What is Health Impact Assessment (HIA)?

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Definition

The most common definition of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is the one set forth by the European Office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1999 in what is known as the “Gothenburg consensus paper.” HIA is presented as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population” (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1999).

The application of HIA to policies is supported by a social model of health which assumes that the health of a population is closely tied to the conditions in which people live and work and that these conditions are influenced by decisions made in all government sectors (Whitehead & Dahlgren, 1991). HIA also rests on the idea that all sectors are responsible for the health of the population. Thus, HIA is generally applied to policies, programs and projects developed in sectors other than health services and generally comes under the responsibility of health departments.

5 Steps

HIA offers a systematic five-step process for structuring actions aimed at identifying which health determinants a proposal will affect, at planning and conducting a study of the potential repercussions on a given population’s health, and at interacting with policy developers on the basis of the results. In addition to drawing on public health information produced through research, the HIA process is designed to accompany the process of public policy development, encouraging decision makers and groups within the population to take part in identifying potential health effects. Thus, HIA must be seen as part of a larger process that involves more than following a procedure and producing a scientific report,

because it presupposes interaction between the public health sector, those responsible for the proposed policy and the population, whenever possible.

The 5 steps of HIA

- Screening
- Scoping
- Appraisal
- Reporting
- Monitoring

Origins

The application of HIA to policies is a field that developed from two sources of influence: the environmental impact assessment of development projects, which generally includes consideration of their impacts on human health, and the health determinants approach developed in the area of health promotion. The latter influence gave rise to a type of HIA that is practised outside of environmental impact assessments and relies on a broader definition of health, which includes concern for health inequalities. This approach assigns as much importance to the process of influencing policy as to the production and use of evidence.

This approach to HIA is developing significant support throughout the world, particularly in Europe where a wealth of experience and a variety of tools are now being shared on the internet. Recently, a large-scale study on the effectiveness of HIA carried out in 19 European countries confirmed the ability of this practice to influence the decision-making process and to raise decision makers’ awareness of the broad determinants of health (Wismar, Blau, Ernst, & Figueras, 2007). In addition, an independent British study established a positive cost-benefit relationship for the practice of HIA (O’Reilly, Trueman, Redmon, Yi, & Wright, 2006).



The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy and HIA

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP) has a mandate to identify effective strategies for promoting healthy public policy.

Health impact assessment is one such strategy. This practice is enriched by the extensive experience gained in the environmental health sector, from which it is possible to draw useful lessons for the application of HIA to local and national policies. Moreover, its use on an international scale helps create a body of knowledge that can be used beneficially in the Canadian context. The Canadian Round Table on HIA held in February 2008 (St-Pierre, 2008) made it possible to define the role that the NCCHPP can play in supporting the development of this practice in Canada. Thus, the Centre intends to promote the establishment of a pan-Canadian network of users interested in this approach, to produce an inventory of Canadian HIA initiatives, to make these known, and to ensure the existence of training in this area. The goal is to create an environment favourable to this practice by, among other things, raising awareness among partners and decision makers about the important role public health actors play in the development of socially sustainable public policy. In addition to focusing on these areas of intervention, the NCCHPP intends to develop tools and documents not only to support this practice in Canada, but also, more generally, to further reflection in this field of practice.

More HIA resources can be accessed on the NCCHPP website at: <http://www.ncchpp.ca>.

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