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25 years of the UK EIA System: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Urmila Jha-Thakur *[,1], Thomas B. Fischer [2]

Environmental Assessment and Management Research Centre, School of Environmental Sciences, University of Liverpool, England

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a review of the UK EIA system, providing insights into its evolution and reflecting on perceptions of effectiveness of the EIA system. The work adopts a similar approach used by Glasson in 1999, where he provided a review of the first 10 years of EIA in the UK, complimented by a SWOT analysis. In conducting the SWOT analysis, the authors make use of (1) a UK EIA survey which was conducted in 2011; (2) an interactive session organised at a 2013 workshop at the University of Liverpool on 25 years of the EU EIA Directive; and (3) a systematic literature review of publications since 1999. The results indicate that the internal factors (i.e. strengths and weaknesses) of the EIA system have not actually changed much in the last 15 years. Changes are more apparent for the external factors, especially with regards to opportunities. However, EIA may be suffering from a mid-life crisis at this point and a lot may be owing to perceptions towards EIA which may be influenced and inversely related to the length of experience in EIA. This opens up avenues for further research in the area.

1. Introduction

It has been over a quarter of a century since Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was formally introduced in the UK in 1988 through inclusion in the Town and Country Planning Regulations for England and Wales and in Environmental Assessment Regulations for Scotland and Northern Ireland. This was based on European Directive 85/337/EC. Since then EIA practice in the country has evolved and so has its conceptual understanding, in particular through the reviews provided by a number of authors, including Glasson (1999); Wood (2000a); Arts et al. (2012) and IEMA (2011a). This paper reflects on the UK EIA system using a similar approach to Glasson (1999), who conducted a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis of the first 10 years of the EIA. Whilst Glasson discussed the prospects of the then amended EIA Directive (97/11/EC), in this paper we will focus on the changes brought about by the new EIA Directive (2014/52/EU), which will have to be adopted by 2017. Contrary to Glasson (1999) who focused on quality, the subsequent emphasis will be on effectiveness.

2. Methodology

SWOT analyses were originally used for analysing business prospects. However, over the years they have also been applied elsewhere, including planning and EIA (see e.g. Vonk et al., 2007; Paliwal, 2006). In SWOT analyses, strengths and weaknesses are internal factors of a system. Opportunities and threats are external to it. Glasson's (1999) SWOT analysis of the UK EIA system is the evaluative framework against which the 2015 EIA system is reviewed (see Table 2). In this context, use is made of (1) a UK EIA survey which was conducted in 2011; (2) an interactive session organised at a 2013 workshop at the University of Liverpool on 25 years of the EU EIA Directive; and (3) a systematic literature review of relevant publications since 1999. The following sections explain the data collection further.

2.1. EIA survey

This was conducted in spring 2011. It was designed to explore effectiveness as perceived by EIA stakeholders and consisted of three parts – relating to the background of the participants, their perception of the EIA system in the UK and what they thought were the attributes of an ideal EIA system. The first part of the survey established professional details as well as EIA experience of the respondent. This helped to create a basis for the subsequent interpretation and discussion of results and to develop an understanding of expectations. The survey was semi-structured and allowed participants to comment on wider issues. In total, 181 respondents contributed to it. Findings of the survey informed the

* Corresponding author at: University of Liverpool, 74 Bedford Street South, L697ZQ Liverpool, England
E-mail address: urmila.thakur@liv.ac.uk (U. Jha-Thakur).

[1] Urmila specialises in environmental assessment and management and takes special interest in international comparative research. She has over 12 years of research experience and works as a lecturer at the University of Liverpool.

[2] Thomas has 25 years of applied, private and public sector, as well as research experiences in environmental and other types of assessment. He has published extensively on the topic.

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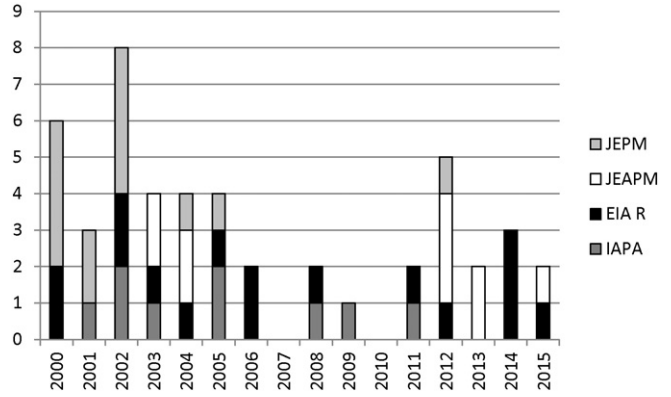

Fig. 1. EIA in UK related articles published in leading journals since 1999.

discussion on the effectiveness of EIA in the UK. Questions from the survey also supported the SWOT analysis. Survey results were used in an earlier paper on Dutch and UK EIA experiences (Arts et al., 2012).

2.2. Interactive EIA session

This was carried out during an International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) Ireland-UK branch workshop on 'Celebrating 25 years of EIA in the UK', held on the 10th of June 2013 at the Environmental Assessment and Management Research Centre of the University of Liverpool. Attended by 25 delegates, including consultants, academics and students, the findings of the workshop were interpreted in the light of Glasson's (1999) SWOT review and were presented in a conference report and later circulated amongst participants.

2.3. Systematic literature review

This was conducted for published works between 2000 and 2015 (i.e., focusing on the literature after Glasson's, 1999 review). Four key English language journals were used; a) Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Review; b) Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal (IAPA); c) Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management (JEAPM); and d) Journal of Environmental Planning and Management (JEPM). Articles focussing on UK EIA practices were identified and evaluated. Findings from the literature review were collated to inform the arguments presented in the SWOT analysis. The review identified 48 articles across the four journals of which nine are from IAPA, 16 from EIA Review, 13 from JEPM and 10 from JEAPM (see Fig. 1). Overall, within the international literature on environmental assessment, for the UK (Fischer et al., 2015), it was found that 40% of the papers focused on EIA, 28% on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and 10% on Sustainability Appraisal (SA)

Table 1
Progressive learning in EIA (based on Bloom, 1956; Jha-Thakur et al., 2009).

Levels of Learning	Learning in EIA
Evaluation Synthesis **(EIA effectiveness)**	Reflecting and questioning personal, organisational or social beliefs as a result of the EIA experience **Learning *through* EIA**
Analysis Application **(EIA understanding, quality & skill development)**	Preparing or participating in the EIA process **Learning *about* EIA and Learning *through* EIA**
Comprehension Knowledge **(EIA understanding & Quality)**	Understanding about appraisal (legal requirements, procedures) **Learning *about* EIA (EIA understanding)**

3. EIA effectiveness

Whilst setting the context for the review of the UK EIA system in 1999, Glasson focussed on EIA quality. Back then a total of about 300 Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) were produced every year with an annual average peak at 350. In comparison to this, since the year 2000 around 600 EIAs were undertaken each year (IEMA, 2011a), with the numbers recently reaching to about 800 annually (Fischer et al., 2015). Considering the maturity of the EIA system then, a quality review of the EISs was perhaps indicative of the progress made within the first 10 years. In Glasson's (1999) paper itself the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE, 1991) was quoted as saying 'that over-emphasis on the EIA, and in particular on EIS quality, has diverted attention away from the effectiveness of the overall EIA process' (p.363).

In establishing the quality of EISs, Glasson's discussion focussed primarily on the stakeholders' 'EIA knowledge, understanding and skills' (1999, p. 363) which essentially relate to lower levels of learning in appraisal. However, as EIA has evolved and practical experience has been developed and shared, the emphasis has shifted to higher levels of learning within appraisal which focusses on learning through EIA and its outcomes. This practically translates into EIA effectiveness, as was explained by Jha-Thakur et al. (2009) (see Table 1).

EIA effectiveness can be sub-divided into two categories. The first is concerned with "procedural effectiveness of EIA", looking at the extent to which formal procedures are followed. Based on what is presented in Table 1, such an approach enables us to learn about analysis and application of EIA and therefore fits somewhere in between the different learning levels of appraisal.

The second category of effectiveness is substantive in nature and looks at the extent to which EIA has actually been able to raise the level of environmental values of stakeholders (Arts et al., 2012). Furthermore, it may explore whether EIA has resulted in better decision-making with regards to incorporating environmental considerations (Fischer et al., 2009). As is illustrated in Table 1, this can lead to higher levels of learning, based on evaluation and synthesis. The various levels of learning are complementary to each other. Subsequently, when discussing effectiveness of the EIA system, the focus will be on the latter definition, i.e., in exploring the role of EIA in incorporating environmental values in the decision-making process and in raising environmental awareness of the actors involved.

3.1. Stakeholders' perceptions of EIA effectiveness in the UK

Stakeholders' perceptions were established through the questionnaire survey. The 181 survey participants included (see also Fig. 2):

(1) RTPI members (Royal Town Planning Institute; 35% of the respondents);

(2) CIWEM members (Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management; 25% of respondents);

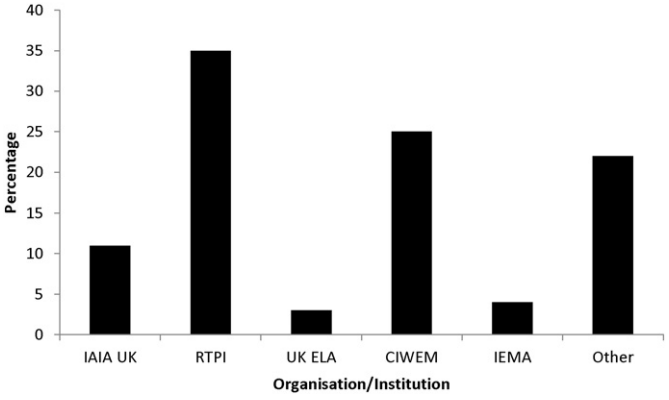

Fig. 2. Organisations/Institutions respondents to the survey.