



Assessment of health risks of policies



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ABSTRACT

The assessment of health risks of policies is an inevitable, although challenging prerequisite for the inclusion of health considerations in political decision making. The aim of our project was to develop a so far missing methodological guide for the assessment of the complex impact structure of policies. The guide was developed in a consensual way based on experiences gathered during the assessment of specific national policies selected by the partners of an EU project. Methodological considerations were discussed and summarized in workshops and pilot tested on the EU Health Strategy for finalization. The combined tool, which includes a textual guidance and a checklist, follows the top-down approach, that is, it guides the analysis of causal chains from the policy through related health determinants and risk factors to health outcomes. The tool discusses the most important practical issues of assessment by impact level. It emphasises the transparent identification and prioritisation of factors, the consideration of the feasibility of exposure and outcome assessment with special focus on quantification. The developed guide provides useful methodological instructions for the comprehensive assessment of health risks of policies that can be effectively used in the health impact assessment of policy proposals.

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Introduction

Health is determined by a wide range of factors, most of them falling outside the scope of the health sector. Because health determinants

represent virtually all areas of life, a political decision very likely affects health. The aim of conducting healthy public policy appears as an action area in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion followed by the Adelaide Recommendations on Healthy Public Policy. Both documents emphasise the need of political commitment for promoting health at the population level (WHO, 1986, 1988). The inclusion of human health and well-being as one of the main principles of policy development in all sectors is the concept of Health in all policies (Ståhl et al., 2006; WHO and Government of South Australia, 2010). However, it is not an easy task since evidence based consideration of health issues is not readily accommodated in the policy process of non-health sectors even in areas closely related to health, though it can be substantially facilitated by appropriate methodology.

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a methodological framework for predicting health impact of policy proposals and consequently to assist decision makers (WHO European Centre for Health Policy, 1999),

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although its incorporation in the decision-making process is cumbersome (Ádám, 2012; Davenport et al., 2006; Mannheimer et al., 2007). The standard HIA methodology consisting of screening, scoping, risk appraisal, decision making, monitoring and evaluation works well on projects and programmes where well-defined hazards are identified. The involvement of all stakeholders, combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches and use of risk assessment methodology provide sound tool to quantify the risks related to hazards. If HIA is applied to policies a similar risk assessment method which would allow identification and quantification of risks is missing. Methods exist to quantify health effects in the risk factor-health outcome relation (Lhachimi et al., 2010; Lhachimi et al., 2012; Manuel et al., 2012; Steenland and Armstrong, 2006), especially the effects of environmental factors acting in a single causal pathway (Basham, 2001; McCarthy et al., 2002; Mesa-Frias et al., 2013; Utley et al., 2003). A concise, applicable guide that aids the impact assessment of the complex causal web of policies including social determinants of health is, however, not yet available.

The recognition of this deficiency in knowledge and methodology for conducting risk assessment on policy health effect led to the launch of the Risk Assessment from Policy to Impact Dimension (RAPID) 2009–2012 EU-funded project (RAPID, 2013). It had the primary aim to develop a methodological guidance for the assessment of health risks related to policies that analyse the “full chain” of causal pathways from policy level through health determinants and risk factors to health outcomes in an integrated manner. This article introduces the product of a series of methodological findings that provide a useful tool either for the HIA community or for those engaged with the assessment of policies, enabling them to effectively assist the political decision-making process regardless of the level and sector of the policy proposal.

Methods

The guidance for the top-down approach of assessing health risks of policies in an integrated manner was elaborated in a consensual way in the RAPID project. Ten partners from universities and national public health institutions of nine EU countries participated in the work. Each project partner selected a specific national policy and carried out its assessment. They could freely decide on the application of adequate methods and national and international information sources, only the main steps of the assessment were determined in advance. The assessment meant to analyse the policy and to describe all wider, including socio-economic, determinants of health influenced by the policy. Risk factors linked to these health determinants and health outcomes related to selected risk factors were finally identified and assessed. A strong focus of the project was to include quantitative risk assessment techniques in the analysis. The guidance was formulated with recommendations on various aspects of conducting quantitative assessment, like information need and feasibility, integration of quantitative and qualitative assessment elements in specified pathways, evaluation of horizontal interactions between elements of the same impact level, and characterization of uncertainty.

The case studies provided the basic input for the development of the guidance. The methodological findings, experiences and considerations that were found useful in the preparation of the case studies were presented and discussed on several work meetings of the project and the most expedient elements of the consensual methodology were summarized. After the consensus discussion the developed tool was circulated for final comments and approved as a working version. The first version of the agreed guidance was used to analyse selected parts of the EU Health Strategy (2008–2013). The experiences of the pilot testing allowed for its further improvement. The tool was then presented on a series of national workshops that were organised for experts involved in various risk assessment practices in the participating countries. The participants were invited from a database of risk assessors that was constructed in a previous phase of the project. They represented diverse areas (health, economics, construction, etc.) and organisations

(academic, governmental, private). The expert opinion of participants provided feedback to finalize the guidance as well as opportunity to distribute it in the professional community of risk assessors as potential users.

Results

Guidance for the assessment of health risks of policies

Policy

The assessed policy (strategy, programme or regulation) is preferably of substantial importance from a population health point of view, regardless of the sector and level of its initiation that can be either central, regional or local government, industry or other organisations. The commission for the conduct of assessment can come from policy makers. If the tool is applied within an on-going HIA the task can come from the scoping part of the process; if not used within an HIA then all following issues need to be considered at the beginning of assessment. In case a policy is not given at forehand or the policy is too broad that should be narrowed down, a transparent selection process is important. The most appropriate way is to have a set of criteria for the pre-selection of policies that should include the importance of the topic and the need of policy makers for assistance in the decision-making process. It is recommended to analyse the pre-selected policies by feasibility issues like availability of verifiable objectives, definable target group, valid data and dose-response functions and evidence on influenced health determinants and risk factors.

After the policy to be assessed is defined, a good understanding of the policy context is of crucial importance in order to be able to link the policy to impacts on health and health inequalities: map the impact structure, prioritise impact pathways and identify where the challenges come from. At first, problem identification and demand for action should be described in a concise way. Placing a national policy into an international context helps to identify the driving forces of policy making, meanwhile allows for finding similar policies implemented in other countries the experiences of which can be fruitfully applied then in the assessment process. It is worth reviewing the history of the policy, how it developed with time. The understanding of the legal environment and the relationship between the assessed and other related policies allows for the consideration of their interactions. The construction of a map about the policy's context in the national and international legal environment can be useful. The policy context regarding stakeholders and interests should be described in order to explain the development and main drivers of the policy in an objective manner. Detailed description of the policy content is needed in order to demonstrate the main goals of the policy, tools of implementation and methods of monitoring and evaluation if it is relevant. Force and effect of the legislation should be examined in order to identify target population and time course of the implementation. A policy can be well prepared, however, its implementation rather poor. To be able to assess the predictable effects of a policy, the feasibility of its measures should also be taken into account; the complexity of implementation, availability of resources (institutional, human and financial) as well as public acceptance and compliance should be all considered. A policy that has clear implementation plan is easier to be assessed for feasibility. The costs involved in implementation gives a starting point to cost-benefit considerations. The analysis of different scenarios, including the status quo, can effectively assist the choice between various policy options.

Health determinants

Health determinants are to link policies to the direct risk factors of health in the assessment process. In this way, the factors that are considered as the determinants – or wider determinants, upstream determinants, causes of causes – of health have typically rather qualitative nature in the assessment process. Determinants of health are defined by the Health Promotion Glossary of WHO as “the range of personal,

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