



# Evaluating the effectiveness of impact assessment instruments: Theorising the nature and implications of their political constitution

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## ABSTRACT

The central role of impact assessment instruments globally in policy integration initiatives has been cemented in recent years. Associated with this trend, but also reflecting political emphasis on greater accountability in certain policy sectors and a renewed focus on economic competitiveness in Western countries, demand has increased for evidence that these instruments are effective (however defined). Resurgent interest in evaluation has not, however, been accompanied by the conceptual developments required to redress longstanding theoretical problems associated with such activities. In order to sharpen effectiveness evaluation theory for impact assessment instruments this article critically examines the neglected issue of their political constitution. Analytical examples are used to concretely explore the nature and significance of the politicisation of impact assessment. It is argued that raising awareness about the political character of impact assessment instruments, in itself, is a vital step in advancing effectiveness evaluation theory. Broader theoretical lessons on the framing of evaluation research are also drawn from the political analysis. We conclude that, at least within the contemporary research context, learning derived from analysing the meaning and implications of plural interpretations of effectiveness represents the most constructive strategy for advancing impact assessment and policy integration theory.

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## 1. Introduction

“Agreement about effectiveness is mainly an agreement to disagree.” (Cameron, 1986: 539).

Scientists and other actors working at the policy–science interface have long been interested in evaluating the outcomes and effectiveness of policy interventions, yet interest in evaluation has both increased substantially and altered substantively in the last decade. The political ascendancy of evidence-based policy-making in many Western countries (Nutley et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2006) and of the notion of the knowledge society more generally (Jasanoff, 2004) has been particularly influential in this regard. The principle underlying the evidence-based policy agenda is that interventions should be based on ‘what works’ (i.e. empirical evidence of effectiveness), rather than political beliefs; thus, Pawson (2006: 2) describes it as the “anti-ideological turn” in policy-making. The evidence-based policy agenda

is also a response to demands for greater accountability in the use of public funds (Schweigert, 2006).

Evidence review techniques have been applied to a broad range of sectors and policies: from clinical trials of medicines in health policy to interventions designed to produce behavioural reforms in the social welfare and criminal justice sectors (Nutley et al., 2007). The evidence-based policy agenda has also had a particularly pronounced impact on philanthropic activities, notably, in the context of impact assessment, in the development aid field, where policy failure (i.e. failure to deliver stated goals, generation of unanticipated spillover effects, etc.) has been a particularly significant problem. This has led to a considerably higher profile for evaluation activities associated with development aid, often under the motto of ‘management for results’ (see, for example, OECD, 2005).

The implications for impact assessment of demand for evidence-based policies and greater accountability in expenditure of public funds have been at least twofold. Firstly, increasing reliance has been placed on impact assessment instruments to process data on the probable effects of policy initiatives: their use has proliferated both in terms of the amount of assessments undertaken and the variety of contexts in which they are used (Cashmore et al., 2008; Hertin et al., 2007). Secondly, the effectiveness of impact assessment instruments themselves has come under the spotlight, particularly within the

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context of efforts to promote economic competitiveness through deregulation and the simplification of existing legislation (see, for example, Cashmore et al., 2009; GHK, 2008; Swedish Government, 2007; UK Government, 2007). It is this second concern—the evaluation of impact assessment instruments themselves—which is the focus of this article.

Evaluating effectiveness is conceptually and methodologically problematic, and it is arguably the case that rejuvenation of interest in, and growth in demand for, evaluation has yet to result in significant advances being made in relation to these issues. A seemingly intransigent issue in evaluation research, that has given rise to enduring debate, concerns the meaning of effectiveness itself. Typically, effectiveness has been defined as a measure of goal attainment, although in cases this definition is expanded to include notions of cost efficiency (Etzioni, 1964; Georgopoulos and Tannenbaum, 1957; Independent Evaluation Group, 2007). Whilst an apparently simple notion, as Rawls (1972: 130) notes, “[t]he merit of any definition depends upon the soundness of the theory that results; by itself, a definition cannot settle any fundamental question”. It is when consideration is given to moving from simple definitions of effectiveness to empirically useful theory that significant difficulties have emerged. These difficulties include issues such as whose interpretation(s) of effectiveness underpins analyses (notably in relation to defining goals and goal attainment), where boundaries are drawn (e.g. spatial and temporal scales, issues considered, etc.), and legitimate procedures for arriving at such decisions (e.g. how do we decide which interpretation of goals and goal attainment are prioritised?) (Adger et al., 2003; Emmelin, 1998; Rolf, 2006).

Enduring debate over the concept of effectiveness has led in some disciplines to calls to abandon the term (Goodman et al., 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1977). Yet unrelated research provides an alternative lens for interpreting and valuing debate on the meaning of effectiveness. Firstly, in their examination of debate concerning sustainable development in the UK planning system, Owens and Cowell (2002) challenge conventional wisdom by suggesting that it is unrealistic and probably undesirable to expect a preformed, consensual definition of sustainable development to be implemented in such an arena. The main contribution of the planning system, they suggest, has been to provide a concrete forum in which understandings of sustainable development can be negotiated and constructed. Secondly, Emmelin (1997) criticises as conceptually misguided the technocratic tendency of seeking to reduce political concepts (in the case of his analysis, sustainable development) to a single, supposedly authoritative interpretation.

Whilst arguably viewed as unsatisfactory by actors competing to bring to the fore their beliefs, drawing on the insights of Owens and Cowell (2002), debate on effectiveness could be viewed as an important component of constructing opinions about the purpose and use of impact assessment instruments. As such, it serves to clarify and open-up for analysis beliefs underpinning actors' interpretations of, for example, the goals of these instruments and legitimate ways of achieving them. This is significant partly because the basis of actors' beliefs have rarely been explicitly considered in discussions on impact assessment instruments (Cashmore, 2004; Lawrence, 2003), but have potentially far reaching consequences for how they are conceptualised, used and interpreted. Additionally, taking forward Emmelin's (1997) critique of technocratic tendencies to de-politicise political concepts (of which the goals of impact assessment instruments are clearly an example) then it follows that the theoretical implications of plurality need due consideration.

This article contributes to theorising effectiveness evaluation for impact assessment instruments through the examination of a neglected, but arguably pivotally important, component of their constitution: politics. We analyse both how political considerations are embedded in notions concerning the design and use of impact assessment instruments and the implications for evaluation research.

The focus of this article is thus resolutely on sharpening the theory of effectiveness evaluation, rather than the effectiveness of impact assessment instruments per se, although there are clearly inter-linkages between these two goals. Furthermore, we deal with theory at a level of abstraction that is intended to encompass multiple types of impact assessment instruments and multiple scales or levels of evaluation (e.g. system performance, individual cases, elements of individual cases, etc.).

In choosing to focus on the political constitution of interpretations of effectiveness and the theory of effectiveness evaluation, we are neither underestimating nor seeking to downplay the methodological challenges of evaluation research, such as measurement, attribution and, invariably in policy arenas, the absence of a control case. Rather, we choose to address conceptual aspects of effectiveness evaluation based on a belief that without a concrete understanding of these issues, sound methodology in evaluation studies is unachievable. Furthermore, a great deal of attention has already been devoted to methodological improvements designed to reduce epistemic uncertainties, both in terms of impact assessment instruments per se and the evaluation of their effectiveness (e.g. Hertin, Turnpenny, 2007; Radaelli and De Francesco, 2007; Wismar et al., 2007). The conceptualisations of effectiveness underpinning these efforts have received considerably less attention (Emmelin, 1998; Schweigert, 2006). We distinguish, therefore, between two forms of contribution to effectiveness evaluation: those designed to reduce epistemic uncertainties (e.g. pertaining to the accurate measurement of goal attainment) and those that address conceptual uncertainties (e.g. pertaining to the meaning or intention of the goals) (Rolf, 2006; Törnqvist, 2006). This article focuses upon the latter type of uncertainty.

The remainder of the article unfolds as follows. In the next section, we explain how the term politics is interpreted and analysed in this article and introduce the fundamentally political characteristics of impact assessment instruments. The ways in which politics impinges upon impact assessment instruments are then explored more concretely and in greater detail in three analytical examples, which were purposefully selected to illustrate a variety of sources and types of political influence. Next, we consider the implications of the political constitution of impact assessment instruments for theory on effectiveness evaluation, focusing on what we perceive as the central contemporary issue in evaluation research: how the concept of effectiveness is interpreted and used. We conclude with recommendations for advancing the practice of evaluation and for future research.

## 2. The politics of impact assessment

A number of commentators have suggested that impact assessment instruments are inherently and inescapably political (e.g. Elling, 2009; O'Faircheallaigh, 2009; Richardson, 2005; Turnpenny et al., 2009). In the context of the knowledge society, it is axiomatic that political activity converges around sites of knowledge creation and use (Jasanoff, 2004). Yet what is it that makes impact assessment instruments inherently political, in addition to arenas in which politics are played out? In order to explore this issue, it is first necessary to explain how the term politics is interpreted in this analysis.

Politics is a term that is used in a variety of ways; indeed, parallels can be drawn between the protracted debates on the meaning of politics and effectiveness (Palumbo, 1987). Popularly, politics may often be equated to activities associated with the administration of sovereign states, or what can be described as the macropolitics of nationhood (Jasanoff, 2004). In the political sciences, however, the term tends to be interpreted considerably more broadly. The influential political scientist Harold Laswell, for example, suggested politics constituted the struggle over, “who gets what, when and how”

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