Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
SCIENCE DIRECT®
ELSEVIER
Environmental Impact Assessment Review 26 (2006) 57–78
Environmental Impact Assessment Review
www.elsevier.com/locate/eiar

Bridging the gap between theory and practice in integrated assessment

Norman Lee*

Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

Received 1 November 2003; received in revised form 1 January 2005; accepted 1 January 2005
Available online 25 April 2005

Abstract

There is growing support for the use of integrated assessments (IAs)/sustainability impact assessments (SIAs), at different government levels and geographic scales of policy-making and planning, both nationally and internationally. However, delivering good quality IAs/SIAs, in the near future, could be challenging. This paper mainly focuses upon one area of concern, differences between research and other technical contributions intended to strengthen assessment methodologies and the types of assessment methods considered usable by practitioners. To help in addressing this concern, the development of a *common assessment framework* is proposed, which is based on a shared, practitioner–researcher–stakeholder understanding of what constitutes a satisfactory integrated/sustainability impact assessment. The paper outlines a possible structure for this *framework*, which contains three interconnected elements—the *planning context* in which the assessment is to be carried out; the *process* by which the assessment is to be undertaken and its findings used; and the *methods*, technical and consultative, by which impacts are to be assessed. It concludes with suggested 'next steps', addressed to researchers, practitioners and other stakeholders, by which the assessment framework might be tested and improved, and its subsequent use supported.

Keywords: Integrated assessment; Sustainability impact assessment; Assessment context; Assessment process; Assessment methods

* 111 Longhurst Lane, Mellor, Stockport, SK6 5PG, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: norman.lee1@virgin.net.

0195-9255/$ - see front matter © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.eiar.2005.01.001

1. Introduction

For the purposes of this paper *integrated assessment* (IA) covers three types of integration:

- *Vertical integration of assessments* i.e. linking together separate impact assessments, which are undertaken at different stages in the policy, planning and project cycle (hereafter, the planning cycle).
- *Horizontal integration of assessments* i.e. bringing together different types of impacts–economic, environmental and social–into a single, overall assessment at one or more stages in the planning cycle. It may also involve horizontal co-ordination between contemporaneous assessments for separate, but inter-related, planning cycles.
- *Integration of assessments into decision-making* i.e. integrating assessment findings into different decision-making stages in the planning cycle (Lee, 2002).

The main focus is on strategic-level integrated assessments applied to policies, plans and/or programmes (PPPs). These PPPs are very diverse and, for example, may vary in their geographic scope between the international/national and regional/local scale. The particular form of integrated assessment, with which the paper is primarily concerned, is sustainability impact assessment (SIA). Therefore, it assumes that economic, environmental and social impacts are to be assessed according to criteria consistent with sustainable development. It also assumes that the assessment process incorporates ex ante appraisal and ex post evaluation i.e. it covers all principal stages in the preparation, approval and implementation of the PPP being assessed.

It draws upon the author's own research and practical experience in integrated assessment. Additionally, several EU[1] and UK[2] assessment studies and guidance documents have been consulted. However, no attempt is made to present a comprehensive review of this broad and diverse literature or a critique of individual studies.

The paper is primarily concerned with the following problem:

- On the one hand, IA (and, more particularly, SIA) is a potentially valuable assessment instrument in the promotion of sustainable development and, currently, at least, there is some influential support for its practical application (see, European Commission, 2002a; DETR, 2000a; DTLR, 2002).
- On the other hand, securing good quality IA/SIA application is likely to prove very challenging and, if this cannot be achieved within a reasonable period, the window of opportunity for its widespread use is likely to close.

First, it explores, in Section 2, different causes of this problem, highlighting one of these for more detailed examination. This is the gap between the nature of many recent and on-going research contributions to strategic-level IA/SIA methodology and the types of

[1] See ECOTEC, 1997; ERM, 1998; Moss and Fichter, 2000; GHK, 2002; European Commission, 2002a,b.
[2] See DETR, 2000a,b,c,d; ODPM, 2003; NWRA, 2000, 2002; DTLR, 2002.