



ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The effectiveness of human impact assessment in the Finnish Healthy Cities Network

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Healthy cities;
Effectiveness

Summary Objectives: To develop a framework for analysing the effectiveness of prospective assessment and to apply the framework to human impact assessments (HulA) carried out in the Finnish Healthy Cities Network.

Methods: The framework was formed by synthesizing and developing the themes that emerged from the published literature on effectiveness. The research material consists of interviews with people who participated in the assessment process in the municipalities (19 interviews). The research material also included assessment documents, proceedings of working meetings, municipal policy documents, background material and project reports produced in the municipalities studied. The research datasets were examined by content analysis.

Results: HulA increased the decision-makers' awareness of effects and functioned as a tool for empowerment. The latter was apparent, for instance, in the social welfare and healthcare sector, finding a role for itself in decisively co-ordinating interdisciplinary work and actively seeking to alleviate identified negative effects. The assessment process also opened up the planning process, committed various actors to the decision, helped select the right alternative and promoted social learning.

Conclusions: From the viewpoint of preparation and decision-making, the effectiveness of a HulA increases when assessment becomes a recurring process and an integral part of an organization's activities. Integration of an assessment into permanent structures or activities, such as drawing up programmes or preparing strategies, helps the results of the assessment to be seen more clearly. From the viewpoint of decision-making, it is also important to strengthen the decision-makers' expertise in prospective assessment. When the effectiveness of HulA is looked at in a new way (i.e. from the viewpoint of goal achievement, decision-making or learning), a more comprehensive interpretation can be given.

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Introduction

The effectiveness of environmental impact assessment (EIA) has been a subject of research for some time,¹⁻⁷ but little information is available on the effectiveness of health impact assessment (HIA).⁸ The World Health Organization (WHO) has launched a 3-year project to analyse the effectiveness of HIA.⁹

In this paper, we examine a variety of ways of analysing the effectiveness of prospective assessment (ex ante), propose a framework for such analyses, and apply the framework to human impact assessments (HulA) carried out in six cities of the Finnish Healthy Cities Network.

HulA is a process for anticipating the effect of a programme, a project or a decision on human health and welfare. Because of its anticipatory nature, prospective assessment can be used as a tool for planning and decision-making. In this paper, the terms 'human impact assessment', 'prospective assessment' and 'assessment' are used synonymously.

In Finland, the term 'HulA' is used as an upper concept for HIA as well as social impact assessment (SIA).¹⁰ When HIA has been applied as part of EIA, health has been understood narrowly as risks and environmental health. The health determinants that fall outside the narrow interpretation of health have been incorporated in SIA.¹¹ In other words, the focus of HIA and SIA on public health and its determinants has been limited in Finland: HIA as part of EIA has dealt with environmental health issues, whereas SIA has been concerned with issues linked to people's living conditions and amenity. In the absence of a broad interpretation of health, HulA has, in turn, aimed to cover HIA and SIA, and to increase the visibility of public health determinants.

HulA in the Healthy Cities Network

The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) started a 5-year project (2003–2007) to encourage the execution and development of HIA locally. The aim is to integrate assessment into municipal decision-making processes.

Among the project partners are six municipalities and sub-regions in the Finnish Healthy Cities Network, which engaged in developing methods of prospective assessment to apply to planning or decision-making during 2003. Each of them set up a working group that was responsible for preparing a

programme and implementing an HulA. The municipalities were given methodological support for the assessment processes by the authors of this paper. HulA processes in the municipalities are described below.

Eastern Häme municipalities

Emergency duty arrangements

Six municipalities created joint regional solutions for social and healthcare functions. In this project, HulA focused on the effect of emergency duty arrangements at healthcare centres from the point of view of customers, personnel and municipalities. The assessment was used to identify the effect of the emergency duty arrangements and to examine measures to strengthen or mitigate their effect.

City of Jyväskylä

Ensuring social integrity through land-use planning

The aim of the project was to develop the content and methodology of the SIA. In addition, the project focused on finding appropriate tools and methods for describing social integrity by developing ways of monitoring the living environment.

City of Kajaani

Implementation of a welfare strategy

A working group on the promotion of welfare and health analysed the effect of alternative service-production models on the welfare of the city's inhabitants (children, elderly people, the working-age population). HulA was applied to the development of both the city's own work and the creation of a model for the regional administration in Kainuu.

City of Kerava

Development of the work of the employment unit

With the help of alternative models, the staff of the employment unit described the effects of the changes in the resources and practices of the unit. Impact assessment took place from the viewpoint of clients, their families, the employment unit, the city, environment and society. The assessment provided support for the unit's budget estimate, and was also used by the unit for analysing and clarifying its own policies and practices.

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