



## Conceptualising best practice in impact assessment



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### 1. Introduction

The practice of recognition, use and diffusion of “good practices” is extremely widespread and successful. Handbooks, catalogues, repertoires of good practices have been built for many domains, in both public and private sectors. No single policy field appears to have been untouched by the process: welfare policy, urban regeneration, spatial planning, local economic development, environmental policy, urban sustainability, community planning, regional planning, etc. (Vettoretto, 2009, p.1067)

As with all the areas listed in this quote, the world of impact assessment (IA) abounds with good/best practice guidance, produced by government bodies, professional associations, industry associations, national and international funding agencies, researchers, and others. Indeed, recent years have seen a steady stream of guidelines and frameworks for environmental and social assessment produced by international funding agencies and a number of UN bodies. These include the IFC Performance Standards on Environmental and Social Sustainability (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2012), the European Investment Bank Environmental and Social Handbook (European Investment Bank [EIB], 2013), the FAO Environmental and Social Management Guidelines (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2015) and the World Bank's new Environmental and Social Framework, released in 2016, to come into operation in 2018 (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development [IBRD], 2017). These policies, frameworks, and guidelines set out operational requirements with regard to development initiatives of different kinds, but also embed process and practice expectations for environmental and social impact assessment, often derived from “international best practice” (European Investment Bank [EIB], 2013, p.97), including statements of best practice such as those produced by the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) (Millennium Challenge Corporation [MCC], 2007).

The concept of best practice is, then, firmly established in impact assessment, at all levels, and the production of best practice resources is widely viewed as a constructive way to build capability among prospective and current practitioners (Moore, 2013; Cashmore et al., 2015). But the concept is not without its critics. It has been suggested, for example, that best practice can stifle creativity, innovation and critical thinking among practitioners; that it can embed values that may

not be relevant to prospective practitioners; and that it can be means for exerting undue control over practitioners (Bulkeley, 2006; Vettoretto, 2009; Moore, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013; Patel et al., 2015; Cashmore et al., 2015). Such criticisms demonstrate that the nature, production and use of best practice resources constitute a more complex process than is often realised, and at a time when there seems to be greater use of best practice thinking to help standardize international practices, both producers and users of best practice resources need to have a better understanding of that complexity, and especially of the possible pitfalls.

However, best practice is not just about seeking to codify the main rules of practice. The very activity of generating best practice resources serves an important role in developing professional identity and delimiting a community of practitioners (Bulkeley, 2006). Do these ideas apply to impact assessment, and if so, what does it suggest for the wider role of best practice in building an impact assessment profession?

The aim of this paper, then, is to provide a better understanding of the concept of best practice, as the basis for making better use of the process to further the development of impact assessment. The paper has two parts. First, the concept of best practice is examined to elucidate what it is, why and how it is produced, as the basis for identifying key issues and concerns that may be particularly relevant for impact assessment practitioners. Second, it takes a wider perspective in considering the role of best practice in characterising impact assessment as a field of practice and building a sense of professional identity. It also considers the link between best practice and learning within the community of practice, and the implications for the type of learning delivered, especially in short courses.

The paper does not attempt to identify what constitutes best practice impact assessment per se; this is covered in many other sources: in papers (see, for example, Joseph et al., 2015, and Macintosh, 2010), textbooks, guidance manuals, etc. Rather, it uses the literature on the concept of best practice to address the aims set out above. As there is little substantive literature on this topic in the impact assessment field, the paper draws on literature from other areas of applied practice, especially planning and development studies, but also social services, IT, and public administration, among others. For the purpose of this paper, “good” and “best” practice are treated as synonymous where the context supports that interpretation. There has also been some discussion in the wider literature about thinking more in terms of “better” practice (Bullough, 2012), “relevant” practice (Andrews, 2012), etc.,

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2017.06.009>

Received 15 February 2017; Received in revised form 28 June 2017; Accepted 28 June 2017

Available online 29 June 2017

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rather than “best” practice. These are pertinent questions but outside the immediate purpose of this paper.

## 2. Best practice as knowledge

In broad terms best practice refers to a set of ideas about how to carry out an activity to achieve an optimum outcome, as judged by criteria established by a respected authority, group, or individual, which can be disseminated to other existing or potential practitioners (Vettoretto, 2009; Andrews, 2012; Beza, 2016). At its core, then, is the production and transfer of knowledge.

In the field of knowledge management, it is usual to distinguish two forms of knowledge: tacit and explicit.

Tacit knowledge is subconsciously understood and applied, difficult to articulate, developed from direct experience and action, and usually shared through highly interactive conversation, storytelling, and shared experience. In contrast, explicit knowledge is more precisely and formally articulated, although removed from the original context of creation or use (e.g. an abstract mathematical formula derived from physical experiments or a training manual describing how to close a sale) (Zack, 1999, p. 46).

In applied disciplines, tacit knowledge enables practitioners to interact with the wider problem environment effectively in order to bring the more structured, substantive, explicit knowledge to bear on the problem itself. Explicit knowledge can be broken down into “know-what”, “know-how” and “know-why” (King, 2009). At the lowest level, know-what refers to the mechanistic knowledge, of how to respond in particular circumstances (e.g. recipe-book style instructions); the next step, know-how, involves a higher level of understanding to be able to select an appropriate response from a range of options when the problem setting is less structured. Know-why, the highest level of knowledge, refers to theory-based understanding of processes, causal factors, external influences, etc., that allows practitioners to develop novel solutions to more complex problems for which routine responses are not appropriate (King, 2009). In IA terms, know-what might be represented by a checklist of environmental components that practitioners would use to screen all proposed projects; know-how, on the other hand, might be a set of checklists to suit different environmental settings, and perhaps different categories of project, requiring a greater level of discretion by the practitioner. Know-why would be represented by a practitioner developing a new screening approach to suit a particular project for which other approaches are not suitable or relevant.

Best practice resources usually contain mainly explicit knowledge, and often towards the operational end of the spectrum: know-what and know-how (Fragidis and Tarabanis, 2006). Acquiring theory-based understanding (know-why) is normally associated with academic courses or extended training programmes, rather than best practice guidance. Tacit knowledge is not usually a significant component of best practice materials (Dani et al., 2006). This raises certain concerns over the transfer and use of best practice, but also suggests some opportunities for new types of best practice guidance; both are discussed later in the paper.

In the generic sense, practice itself varies from the more complex, diffuse processes associated with activities such as policy, plan and programme development, through to the more mechanical, operational forms associated with physical or administrative practices. Consequently, in capturing knowledge across that spectrum, best practice also varies in form and content, from exemplars and case studies, which are more typical of the policy and plan levels, through to more prescriptive, recipe-style approaches for operational activities.

For example, Moore (2013) in her discussion of the New Urbanism movement in planning, points to the use by planners promoting New Urbanism thinking of specific urban development projects in Toronto as exemplars of that thinking. Similarly, in the EU, agencies involved in the promotion of best practice urban regeneration programmes use

particular projects as exemplars for other countries and regions to learn from (Vettoretto, 2009). On the other hand, operational situations typically require practical guides which provide more descriptive, and prescriptive, information for practitioners to use. These tend to be found in situations where standardisation of practice is important, to improve the quality of a process and ensure more consistent outcomes (Manela and Moxley, 2002). But they also suit situations where new approaches to a task have to be transferred to other organisations and/or other localities.

Sánchez and Morrison-Saunders (2011) make a simple and logical distinction between procedural guidance and technical guidance in impact assessment, with procedural referring to the institutional rules and protocols governing IA practice, and technical to the actual impact assessment practice itself. However, cognitive psychologists refer to procedural knowledge—the knowledge about how to do something – contrasting with declarative knowledge, which refers essentially to factual information. To avoid confusion with that usage of the word “procedural”, guidance that addresses legal and administrative requirements will be referred to here as “institutional”. Also, as Sánchez and Morrison-Saunders (2011) do not include a category for exemplars or case studies, it seems logical to add a third category, narrative methods, to cover the various “storytelling” methods for transferring knowledge about processes. Hence, IA best practice information can be thought of as either *narrative*, *institutional* or *technical* in kind. All three will contain know-what and know-how knowledge, especially the institutional and technical types. But narrative methods can also be vehicles for transferring some level of tacit knowledge, which the other two types would not generally contain to any great extent.

## 3. The purpose of best practice

The reasons for producing and using best practice are many and varied, depending on context. Within many organisations, especially businesses, best practice may be about doing things better, to ensure survival and improve competitiveness. But it is also important as a way to learn from other organisations, including competitors in the business world, “in order to produce equally superior results, or to avoid the same mistakes” (Fragidis and Tarabanis, 2006, p. 371). Service-oriented organisations, from private sector service providers to public sector social and health agencies, use best practice to improve the provision of those services to their clients (Manela and Moxley, 2002).

For regulators and funding agencies, best practice is a means for promoting more consistent and better practices, and ensuring their information needs and statutory or administrative requirements are met (Williamson, 2001). At the same time it provides a template against which practitioners can judge their own practice.

NGOs that operate in applied areas may produce and disseminate best practice to further their particular aims, to standardize approaches to the field of interest of the NGO, to transfer learning, and generally to expand and upgrade practices deemed to be relevant and useful in particular ways. Lastly, academics and researchers critique and distil published evaluations and commentaries, to redefine thinking on best practice in a given field, producing new statements of best practice that may or may not influence the behaviour of other actors in the field.

All of the above are relevant (actually or potentially) to impact assessment as a field of activity. Large resource development companies, and larger environmental and social consultancies, that routinely engage in IA activities will have in-house best practice materials for staff and contractors to follow, perhaps as part of Standard Operating Procedures within Quality Management Systems. National planning and environmental agencies with regulatory functions relating to IA often produce guidelines on what they expect by way of form and content, timing and process, to help ensure practitioners provide the necessary information in a timely fashion, and to meet the other aims of the regulatory procedures. For example, the New Zealand Environmental Protection Authority produced an EIA guide in 2013, in

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