Introduction: The effectiveness of impact assessment instruments

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The global application of impact assessment instruments to achieve a variety of policy integration goals (e.g. the mainstreaming of environmental, gender or economic efficiency concerns) continues to proliferate. These instruments represent important components of contemporary political governance and hence are an important locus for applied research. This special issue of Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal critically examines ‘state-of-the-art’ knowledge and understanding of the effectiveness of impact assessment instruments. Six articles explore this subject from a variety of orientations (in terms of theoretical versus empirical emphasis, policy integration concerns, contributors’ beliefs and framing etc.). Individually and cumulatively, these articles make a powerful contribution to learning about the ‘thorny’ issue of effectiveness and its implications for the theory and practice of impact assessment.

Keywords: Impact assessment; policy integration; effectiveness; governance

The theme of effectiveness is writ large in the literature of impact assessment (IA). It encompasses a broad range of concerns, including some basic questions that have been asked repeatedly from the earliest years of process implementation. How well does IA practice measure up to key objectives and requirements enshrined in national law and principles of good practice, e.g. as advocated by the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA)? What is the impact of impact assessments, e.g. on decision-making or policy outcomes? Which conditions and factors bear on the success or shortfall of these instruments in different contexts?

Studies that formally or directly review and evaluate issues and aspects of effectiveness comprise a relatively specialized area of the literature on IA: one that is being paid increasing attention by both scholars and practitioners. It includes evaluations of effectiveness of processes, practice and performance at both macro (assessment systems) and micro (individual applications) levels, which draw on evolving frameworks, concepts and methods for their conduct. The subjectivity and relativity of such analyses are now emphasized; determinations of effectiveness are recognized as partial, circumstantial, open to argument and, in the case of outcomes, may not become apparent for some time, if at all (Sadler, 2004).

Moreover, IA has undergone a ‘sea change’ in recent years. Institutionally, particularly conspicuous has been the widespread introduction of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and regulatory impact assessment (RIA), the application of IA instruments to new policy arenas (e.g. international development and trade policy), the trend toward more integrated, sustainability-centred approaches, and their relationship to new modes of environmental governance.

Scientific thinking has also changed. Notably, the so-called ‘science wars’ of the 1990s have cemented an epistemological reorientation across large parts of
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the scientific community (Jasanoff, 2004). The im-
plications for IA theory and practice have been pro-
found, as constructivist principles have underpinned
the re-evaluation of many of its hitherto conven-
tional premises, including its rationalist axioms. Fur-
thermore, societies across the world have changed in
numerous respects. One component of these changes
that is particularly significant for IA theory and prac-
tice concerns the remaking of governance

expectations.

It is within this context of marked change that a re-
view and update of the international study of the ef-
ficacy of IA (see Sadler, 1996) has been com-
mmissioned by the IAIA. This ‘15 years after’ study
will take in a broader range of theoretical and prac-
tical issues concerning the use of IA instruments
than its predecessor and utilize a more eclectic ap-
proach, one which is more exploratory and critical,
broader based and less procedurally deterministic. A
series of discrete activities – including drawing on the
results of IAIA conferences, empirical studies of
national practices, surveys of practitioners and inputs
from IAIA working groups – have been commis-
sioned to feed into the process of analysis, reflection
and learning. Wherever possible, a consensus-based
process will be used to distil lessons and insights
from IAIA members and other constituencies.

This special issue is intended to provide important
input to the effectiveness study update, in addition to
comprising a special issue of standalone interest.
Our intention is to stimulate critical debate and ex-
ploration of the multifaceted problem of using IA
instruments to achieve various policy integration
goals. We have deliberately selected a diverse range
of contributions for publication, which both indi-
vidually and collectively do much to enlarge our
understanding of relevant issues. O’Faircheallagh
examines the use of IA to emancipate marginalized
communities; Stoeglehner et al. consider the impor-
tance of fostering ownership for the effective im-
plementation of IA; Elling deconstructs the notion
of effectiveness using an interpretation of rationality
derived from critical theory; Jha-Thakur et al. ad-
dress the need for assessment to foster learning in
order to continually improve decision-making; van
Buuren and Nooteboom employ case study analysis
to explore features of effective IA in highly politi-
cized development contexts; and Therivel et al. em-
pirically evaluate the use of an integrated or sustain-
bility-centred IA model.

The topic of effectiveness is used in this special
issue as a unifying theme to draw together delibera-
tions that fundamentally concern how IA instru-
ments can be purposefully employed. Elling con-
tributes to this debate by advancing a sophisti-
cated and thought-provoking philosophical critique
of conventional conceptions of IA instruments, ad-
voating ‘deontological optimization’ as an alter-
te to teleologically defined purposes and goals.
Thus for Elling, IA processes (and their evaluation,
for his critique of conventional interpretations of
effectiveness leads him to advocate the rejection of
this term as the basis for analyses) should focus on
the truthfulness and rightness of processes leading to
policy action. This reflects a theme evident in much
of the writing in this special issue, that a key con-
temporary challenge for IA theory and practice is
how it engages with acutely political, moral and
ethical concerns.

As a number of contributing authors emphasize,
the purposes of IA – whether deontologically or
teleologically defined – are no longer seen as invari-
able, but are recognized to be personalistic and
therefore irreducibly plural (O’Faircheallagh, Stoeg-
lehner et al., Therivel et al.). Indeed, actors’ goals
are often fluid, changing as mutual understanding
develops during the course of an IA process. How
then can we promote productive stakeholder en-
gagement with IA instruments when their purposes
may be viewed very differently? Part of the answer,
Stoeglehner et al. argue, is to foster ownership of IA
by stakeholders, and their analysis explores how im-
plementation theory can help us understand ways in
which this might be achieved in relation to those
actors primarily responsible for operationalizing IA
instruments. O’Faircheallagh takes this issue further
and examines how ownership of IA instruments
(specifically social IA) may provide a mechanism
for the emancipation of sectors of society that have
been systematically persecuted and deliberately
marginalized. His analysis of what effectiveness
might mean in such situations of truly divested
power provides an insightful counterbalance to the
often politically naïve environmental ethics that
have dominated discourses on IA.

A slightly different perspective is that IA proce-
dures actually provide an opportunity to align stake-
holders’ perspectives on issues of purposes, goals
and effectiveness, irrespective of their basis. Such a
use has the potential to reduce conflict in decision-
making and increase confidence in IA. In relation to
this, Jha-Thakur et al. address the learning dimen-
sion of IA as a means of changing individual and
organizational attitudes, leading to long-term im-
provements in decision-making (representing dou-
ble-loop learning), rather than short-term fixes
focused on individual projects or plans (single-loop
learning). Their analysis of current practices in three
EU countries tentatively indicates that single-loop
learning may be the norm at present. The case anal-
ysis of van Buuren and Nooteboom illustrates some
of the IA process characteristics necessary to foster
double-loop learning and alignment of perspectives.
Critical here, they suggest, are the linkages between
stakeholder engagement and knowledge production
processes. Although this might seem intuitive, the
relationships between participatory and analytical
components of IA are poorly conceived in both the-
tory and practice (Owens et al., 2004; Cashmore et
al., 2008). The articles in this special issue cumula-
tively provide strong directions for redressing this
limitation.
Therivel et al.’s salutary empirical observation of ‘little effect’ (Weiss, 1975) accompanying the implementation of the EU SEA Directive in English land use planning provides a sobering reminder of how great the discrepancy is between IA theory and practice. Lack of ownership (Stoeglehner et al.) and embeddedness (van Buuren and Nooteboom) may provide a partial explanation for their findings, for rarely has the introduction of IA instruments been accompanied by the level of capacity development necessary to prevent them from being manipulated to focus only on those elements with which the implementers are more familiar (see Stoeglehner et al.), and the English case is certainly no exception. Within such contexts, as one of the respondents to Therivel et al.’s questionnaire study candidly observes, ‘[w]e mostly carried out the SA [sustainability appraisal] to ensure there could be no legal challenge’. This emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the ‘big picture’ in effectiveness studies (i.e. not only procedures and practices, but also institutional capacity, norms and culture, etc); as the empirical analyses in this special issue show, it is patently illusionary, or worse, to expect IA instruments to produce radical transformations where their framing of policy issues is strongly curtailed by institutional factors. Nevertheless, perhaps theoreticians also need to reflect more critically on the assumptions underpinning IA, for it may be that theoretical simplifications are producing unrealistic expectations about precisely what can be achieved in practice through the use of IA.

The contributions to this special issue thus illustrate a fairly substantial change in thinking on the theory and practice of IA instruments since the first international effectiveness study was completed. It is interesting, and productive in terms of questioning our own opinions on what may seem to be immutable truths, to reflect on how much the context may change in another 15 years: will IA instruments still be used, and to what end? In the current scientific and ethical context, we suggest that the notion of effectiveness as some sort of absolute measure is untenable. Instead, the study of effectiveness is better conceptualized as a learning paradigm (Nutley et al., 2007). The point here is that we must not be afraid to address difficult, perhaps even uncomfortable, perspectives that conflict with our personal ideologies and interests and raise challenging new questions about effective policy integration. It is with this goal of searching and learning that the following articles are presented as contributions to the theory and practice of IA, and to the update on the international effectiveness study.

References