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.

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 implications for IA theory and practice have been profound, as constructivist principles have underpinned the re-evaluation of many of its hitherto conventional premises, including its rationalist axioms. Furthermore, societies across the world have changed in numerous respects. One component of these changes that is particularly significant for IA theory and practice concerns the remaking of governance expectations.

It is within this context of marked change that a review and update of the international study of the effectiveness of IA (see Sadler, 1996) has been commissioned by the IAIA. This '15 years after' study will take in a broader range of theoretical and practical issues concerning the use of IA instruments than its predecessor and utilize a more eclectic approach, 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 commissioned 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 exploration 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 individually 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 importance of fostering ownership for the effective implementation of IA; Elling deconstructs the notion of effectiveness using an interpretation of rationality derived from critical theory; Jha-Thakur *et al.* address 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 politicized development contexts; and Therivel *et al.* empirically evaluate the use of an integrated or sustainability-centred IA model.

The topic of effectiveness is used in this special issue as a uniting theme to draw together deliberations that fundamentally concern how IA instruments can be purposefully employed. Elling contributes to this debate by advancing a sophisticated and thought-provoking philosophical critique of conventional conceptions of IA instruments, advocating '*deontological optimization*' as an alternative 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 contemporary 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 invariable, but are recognized to be personalistic and hence irreducibly plural (O'Faircheallagh, Stoeglehner *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 engagement 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 implementation 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 naive environmental ethics that have dominated discourses on IA.

A slightly different perspective is that IA procedures actually provide an opportunity to align stakeholders' 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 dimension of IA as a means of changing individual and organizational attitudes, leading to long-term improvements in decision-making (representing double-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 analysis 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 theory and practice (Owens *et al.*, 2004; Cashmore *et al.*, 2008). The articles in this special issue cumulatively 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.

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