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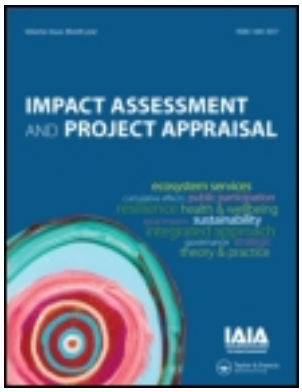

Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tiap20

International perspectives on the strengthening of impact assessment through integration and focus

Francois Retief[a], Alan Bond[ab], Jill A.E. Gunn[c], Jenny Pope[ade] & Angus Morrison-Saunders[adf]

[a] School of Geo and Spatial Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

[b] School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

[c] Department of Geography and Planning, School of Environment and Sustainability, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

[d] Integral Sustainability, South Fremantle, Australia

[e] Curtin University, Sustainability Policy Institute, Perth, Australia

[f] Environmental and Conservation Sciences, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Australia

Published online: 17 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Francois Retief, Alan Bond, Jill A.E. Gunn, Jenny Pope & Angus Morrison-Saunders (2014) International perspectives on the strengthening of impact assessment through integration and focus, Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal, 32:1, 27-30, DOI: 10.1080/14615517.2014.885638

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.885638

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Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal, 2014
Vol. 32, No. 1, 27–30, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.885638

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Francois Retief[a1], Alan Bond[a,b*], Jill A.E. Gunn[c2], Jenny Pope[a,d,e3] and Angus Morrison-Saunders[a,d,f4]

[a]*School of Geo and Spatial Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa;* [b]*School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK;* [c]*Department of Geography and Planning, School of Environment and Sustainability, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada;* [d]*Integral Sustainability, South Fremantle, Australia;* [e]*Curtin University, Sustainability Policy Institute, Perth, Australia;* [f]*Environmental and Conservation Sciences, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Australia*

(*Received 2 December 2013; accepted 16 January 2014*)

This paper consolidates international responses to the argument that there is a need to strengthen impact assessment (IA) through greater integration and focus. It is based on invited reflections by various international authors in the field of IA. The main conclusions are that power and context are important underlying reasons for the diversity of IA types; that in certain instances IA legislation works against achieving integration and focus; and that there is a pressing need to be able to measure and demonstrate added value and effectiveness in practice. The paper concludes by setting a research agenda reflecting the need to better understand why diversity exists in IA, what stakeholders expect from the process and how to improve practice based on greater understanding of what the various types of IA deliver.

Keywords: integration; focus; scoping; inter-disciplinarity; silo-based expertise; proliferation

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1. Introduction

These are challenging times for impact assessment (IA), given the global economic recession and increased pressure on regulatory systems to streamline decision-making, coupled with a proliferation of IA types and understandings. Against this backdrop, Morrison-Saunders et al. (2014) called for increased integration and focus for the purpose of strengthening IA, suggesting sustainability as a unifying goal. To test the arguments put forward in the paper, they invited the IA community to submit commentary papers in response. A total of eight response papers were subsequently published from 12 authors representing nine different countries and five continents. This paper serves as a riposte to the eight response papers received. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to critically reflect on and consolidate these international perspectives on strengthening IA, with particular regard to integration and the role of scoping in focusing IA activity. Our riposte does not defend a particular view but rather attempts to conceptualise the international perspectives distilled from the response papers with a view to providing a possible agenda for further debate on integration and focus towards strengthening IA.

At face value, the eight international perspectives papers present a mixed bag of messages and debates. For example, a number of responses characterize the problem (i.e. threat to IA) differently from Morrison-Saunders et al. (2014) as a lack of demonstrated value and effectiveness in IA (e.g. Fischer 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014; Vanclay 2014) rather than a lack of integration and focus. Cashmore and Morgan (2014) even question whether IA is under any particular threat at all, suggesting that the streamlining regulation trend should be approached calmly, and advocating that the IA community should celebrate its vibrancy and work towards better engagement and communication across IA types. Amidst the spectrum of views, we have structured our riposte discussion around what we consider to be emerging themes of debate. The three themes we have identified cover broad but related bases, progressing from theoretical views concerning power issues through to reflection on policy and legislation and on to more pragmatic views related to practice. It is tempting to conceptualise the relationships between these emerging themes, but such a representation might be premature at this early stage of thinking and therefore we present them separately.

Our first theme emerging from the international perspectives papers is the call to better understand and appreciate the semantics in the names of IA types, whether they reflect the exercise of power (Cashmore & Morgan 2014; Fischer 2014) or because the specific focus reflects a particular or unique application context that matters to users and decision-makers alike (Greig & Duinker 2014; Sanchez 2014; Vanclay 2014). By reflecting on the importance and origin of names, these authors explain the possible reasons and logic behind having diversity in IA typologies in the first place, providing a critical starting point for debate.

Our second theme emerges from those papers that respond to the argument made by Morrison-Saunders et al. (2014) that the lack of a common goal (of sustainable development) for IA has created unwelcome and inefficient diversity. Some of these papers point out that legislating IA has been a significant factor working against achieving integration and the potential to deal with the concept of sustainability within IA (Canter & Ross 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014; Sanchez 2014). Others argue that certain forms of IA have developed within corporate planning and management arenas rather than within the 'EIA/SEA [environmental impact assessment/strategic environmental assessment] fraternity' (Vanclay 2014)

*Corresponding author. Email: alan.bond@uea.ac.uk

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and thus have specific and focused goals. Arguments are made, echoing those emphasising the importance of semantics, that the focus of IA needs to meet the expectations of clients and decision-makers with different interpretations of the goals of the process (Geneletti 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014; Vanclay 2014).

Our third and final theme concerns integration and focus at the level of practice, an aspect addressed by the majority of response papers. The main message seems to be that practice desperately requires more progress towards achieving meaningful integration and focus in IA, both within and across different IA communities and types (Fischer 2014; Geneletti 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014). It is acknowledged, however, that the IA community is far from any sort of consensus on the way forward in either direction. We discuss these three themes of debate in more detail in the following sections, after which an agenda for future debate and research is put forward.

2. What is in a name?

A number of authors have either explicitly or implicitly highlighted the importance of names in order in to explain why a plethora of different types of IA (and consequently acronyms) are in use worldwide: in Morrison-Saunders et al. (2014) we identified and listed over 40, while Vanclay (2014) pointed to an even higher number recorded in earlier publications. We agree with Cashmore and Morgan (2014) and Fischer (2014) that it is particularly important to better understand why and how we have reached this level of complexity. One understanding is that different types of IA are expressions of power and provide boundaries and identity; thus Cashmore and Morgan (2014, p. 25) argue that names matter because

> The act of naming an IA tool serves to differentiate it and thereby create boundaries; it simultaneously creates an identity for the tool and it separates it from others. Thus, invoking a particular name can be used to emphasize a particular political issue (e.g. that social dimensions of policy decisions are sufficiently important to warrant delineation from environmental concerns) or to indicate that there is something innovative or otherwise different about a particular concept or system.

Therefore, in order to understand where names come from, it is necessary to understand the power dynamics underpinning the creation of each. For us, this is an illuminating insight because it also suggests that names (reflecting the silos of IA), and the reasons for having them are potentially far removed from the often-proclaimed and noble intention of improving practice and making better decisions. Rather, it is possibly at least as much about identity, boundaries, ownership, communication and ultimately power. This also supports the more pragmatic view that IA should not have an overly inward focus (Fischer 2014), but should instead focus on providing support to decision-makers (Canter & Ross 2014; Geneletti 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014) which, as Fischer (2014) argues, actually encompasses a large range of different communities of practice, each of which will have their own understanding of terms and names (Cashmore & Morgan 2014; Sanchez 2014; Vanclay 2014). Thus, reducing diversity might be difficult because of the role power plays, and may be counterproductive for effective communication to all stakeholders and decision-makers in what is an extremely varied decision-making landscape. The key argument here therefore is that silos are not developed in IA, but that they arise and exist in the context of diverse decision-making systems.

In light of this, we support the notion put forward by Fischer (2014) that complexity and identity is linked to context. Put simply, diversity in context leads to diversity in types of IA, and thus some level of diversity among IA types will always be present. For example, lesser known forms of IA such as language IA (LIA) is used where native languages are acutely threatened in countries such as Wales, while indigenous IA (IIA) is likely to be more important in Australia and other countries with a similar imperative to protect the rights of aboriginal people. We accept this observation but contend that it is again politics and/or power that have given rise to these different types and not the need to improve practice. The question is whether distinct forms of IA are needed, such as LIA and IIA in order to effectively deal with language and indigenous issues in IA? We return to this point later on through consideration of our third theme of integration.

3. The influence of IA legislation

The need to make IA requirements explicit in law and policy has been advocated since the early days of practice. Caldwell (1989, p. 12) proclaimed that 'EIA [*environmental impact assessment*] will be most effective where environmental values (1) are implicit and consensual in the national culture and (2) are explicit in public law and policy'. However, the role of policy and legislation and its (unintended) negative effect on achieving integration and focus were highlighted by a number of authors (e.g. Canter & Ross 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014; Sanchez 2014). In general terms, what has been argued by these authors is that IA as prescribed in legislation may have little in common with the stated goals of sustainable development and is likely to be more strictly defined, and therefore constraining, than a broad coverage of social, economic and environmental impacts. As Sanchez (2014, p. 14) states, 'A hurdle to integration can be legislation and the possibilities [fear] of litigation'. Along similar lines, Canter and Ross (2014, p. 21) state that 'An emerging concern is that IA legislation is specifying what is required and what can be done' and conclude that, '... the use of sustainability as a tool for doing impact assessment is intellectually attractive but may conflict with impact assessment legislation and so should be used only with care'.

Vanclay (2014) also points out that mandatory regulatory IA runs the risk of becoming supply-based and not demand-driven. This means that the application of IA is not driven by its perceived value, but rather to satisfy legal compliance expectations. The examples

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Vanclay (2014) provides in relation to non-statutory social IA being adopted by the business community because it makes sense and adds value is also argued for health IA by Cashmore and Morgan (2014). Thus, arguments for IA to better meet the expectations of the clients (Greig & Duinker 2014; Vanclay 2014) are not necessarily restricted to legal mandates, and these expectations may be much narrower in scope than sustainable development. Even where sustainable development is an agreed goal, Sanchez (2014) reminds us that this is a pluralistic concept that means different things to different stakeholders (even where a single definition is agreed).

If there is one problem statement upon which all authors of the international perspectives papers specifically agreed, it is that there is a need to be able to better demonstrate the effectiveness of IA (e.g. Fischer 2014; Greig & Duinker 2014; Vanclay 2014). This suggests that legislated forms of IA (often in the form of project-based EIA) – given they are often too narrowly defined to adequately reflect the sustainability goal of IA generally – may not be an appropriate focal point against which to assess IA effectiveness more broadly.

4. The demands of IA practice

The majority of response papers dealt explicitly with particular issues of practice but at the same time strongly endorsed the need for greater integration and focus. Geneletti (2014), for example, argues that the effective consideration of alternatives, which lies at the heart of IA, relies heavily on the integration of different perspectives and information. Canter and Ross (2014) simply state that good scoping and interdisciplinary teams are essential for effective IA but note that this is rarely done well. Greig and Duinker (2014) not only support the need for integration and focus in IA but go on to raise a plethora of additional issues that warrant equal attention such as impact prediction, significance determination and an approach based upon systems analysis. They furthermore plead for a move from a shallow adversarial process to a technically rigorous and collaborative one. The message seems to be that even after decades of doing IA and amidst the fetish with complicated new names and acronyms, IA practitioners still struggle in practice with getting the fundamental basics right – as Kim and Wolf (2014, p. 19) ask with reference to integration: '... what contents and formats do we have to integrate in the first place?'.

Vanclay (2014) argues that more collaboration is needed, not more integration. Here, we refer back to the first theme and the importance of semantics – the term 'integration' means different things to different people. If there is a common meaning that can be ascribed to the term, it reflects an agreed need for greater integration of perspectives – but the mechanism for doing this remains contested.

So, when IA practitioners get down to the level of practice and actually 'doing' IA (in ways that both add value and make sense), we suggest a need for integration and focus through better communication. We contend that in the practice of IA the integration of perspectives can be manipulated through politics and the abuse of power, confusing the already difficult task of communicating key significant issues simply and clearly to decision-makers. The emergence of complexity in IA as a response or adaptation to complex decision-making systems, as highlighted earlier, is understandable but the point remains that at the level of practice this complexity makes the task of distilling significance and communicating potential outcomes to decision-makers and the public much more difficult. We suggest that this is especially the case in instances where different IA practitioners (and other stakeholders in the process) speak about the same things using different language (or acronyms). What we synthesise from international perspectives paper authors who deal with such practical challenges is that IA practitioners are asking for integration and clarity in order for them to do their jobs, and do them well. This discussion points to a need for more carefully nuanced discourses related to IA effectiveness, such that practitioners can gain a clearer understanding of the extent to which certain perspectives are perhaps empowered or disempowered by their practice.

5. Agenda for taking the debate forward

This paper is a consolidation of international reflections on the argument for strengthening IA through increased integration and focus. The international perspective papers responding to our initial call for greater integration in IA presented a diverse set of explanations for the proliferation of IA types and also highlighted the challenges faced by the IA community in relation to integration and focus. From these, we can distil a number of broad questions for future research and debate:

- Understanding 'why'. Rather than criticising diversity, there is considerable scope to further explore the role of context, identity, boundaries, ownership, communication and ultimately power in producing diversity. A clearer understanding of the need for different types of IA (by practitioners, decision-makers and other stakeholders in the process) may help to counter arguments of inefficiency and advance agendas to improve IA effectiveness more rapidly, particularly in national or regional contexts.
- Understanding 'what'. The expectations of different stakeholders, and the meaning attributed to different words, have been shown to vary considerably and are therefore both a driver for different forms of IA and a basis for contestation. We suggest that much deeper understanding is needed about what stakeholders expect and understand in relation to the goals and practice of IA, which invites research based upon discourse analysis that can start to unpick the influence of power and politics and, potentially, point to ways of better integrating a broader set of perspectives. In part, this may be accomplished through revisiting and strengthening normative conceptualisations of the range of extant views on IA, ranging from IA as an applied science (focused on analytical science or

environmental design) to civic science (emphasizing information provision, participation, and/or environmental governance) (e.g. Cashmore 2004).

- Understanding 'how'. How can IA practitioners strengthen IA into the future? Attempts at streamlining IA (e.g. Bond et al. 2014) point to a very real need for change; we suggest that it is time for the IA community of practice to acknowledge that change is necessary, and in doing so to take a proactive stance and embrace this opportunity to continually improve. Decision contexts continually evolve and decision-support tools such as IA need to evolve at the same pace. Understanding 'why' and 'what', based on strong communication and ongoing dialogue within the IA community, will provide the starting point for change to 'how' IA might be carried out in the future.

There is undoubtedly considerable potential to learn from the communities of practice as defined more broadly by Fischer (2014) in order to develop appropriate research agendas to strengthen IA practice. We trust that the discussion initiated by Morrison-Saunders et al. (2014) and the subsequent international perspectives papers provide a good platform from which to engage further with the important debate on the strengthening of IA over the short and long term.

Notes

1. Email: francois.retief@nwu.ac.za
2. Email: jill.gunn@usask.ca
3. Email: jenny@integral-sustainability.net
4. Email: A.Morrison-Saunders@murdoch.edu.au

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