

Managing the information gap through Health Impact Assessment: Selection, learning and application

Abstract

How does Health Impact Assessment affect policy-makers' orientations and their decision-making behaviour, and how can its impact be improved? That is the central research question in a PhD research at the Institute of Health Policy and Management, EUR. Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is an ex ante evaluation of policies, programmes or projects with the aim to minimise damaging impacts and optimise beneficial impacts on health. The practical relevance of the opening question relates to the increasing expression of doubts about the impact and outcome of ex ante assessments. Especially policy-makers, confronted with an additional procedure, question their added value and doubt whether the cost outweighs the benefits of such assessments. The aims of this research are twofold. Firstly, to identify the conditions of a policy adjustment following HIA recommendations from exploratory case studies. Secondly, to design a tool that addresses these conditions in an optimal way by testing it in a game of responsive simulation.

This research relates to the NIG programme of Knowledge Society in two ways. On the one hand, HIA or any other impact assessment of policy is the result of government institutions failing to deal with their own unintended and undesired impacts in society, such as health risks. One of the causes of this failure is an information gap between the policy sector and the sector that experiences the impact. Ex ante evaluation, as a mode of governance, is to address and bridge this gap.

On the other hand, the opportunities and constraints that government institutions provide to such assessments are relevant. HIA, unlike EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment), has not been institutionalised into standard obligatory practice. Moreover, HIA has been organised in such a way that practitioners and users (decision-makers) belong to more or less separate policy networks. The information gap is an institutional gap. Furthermore, as it deals with merely one aspect from a policy or project, the information gap is also an orientation gap.

So how is HIA to produce information that addresses both orientations and institutions? We argue that the impact of HIA on policy directly depends on how the information gap is interpreted by both practitioners and users. We argue that the information gap consists of a mutual lack of information on the content and process of their business. Improving the impact of HIA on policy means improving the mutual understanding of orientations, contextual characteristics and dynamics.

In a broader perspective, HIA is a specific kind of policy oriented applied research, which opens the door to a body of literature on the relation between knowledge or research and policy. Three sources have been explored on its relevance to HIA: the

Knowledge Utilization studies from the 1960s onwards, the more recent Science & Technology studies and Knowledge Management literature, developed in the past decade.

Knowledge Utilization studies stress the importance of policy analysis, which is helpful in revealing the changes in substance and context during the policy process. A valuable finding is the implementation gap: the lack of *applying* policy ideas to problems. Policy analysis nevertheless provides a biased picture because it does not question nor analyse how the HIA has come about. An alternative research tradition, which does reflect on the assumptions underlying research, is that of the Science & Technology studies.

From the Science & Technology studies we have learned that research is subject to the same kind of complex behavioural mechanisms as policy. Thus, the boundaries between HIA, as a regulatory science, and policy may be redefined and reconstructed by consciously *selecting* both content and process elements of HIA. We either may consider HIA as a separate research that needs boundary work or we may consider the impact assessment as a boundary object itself, a means to redefine the boundaries of policy towards healthy decision-making. We choose to initially analyse HIA as a separate research that needs boundary work in order to be able to prescribe the conditions for HIA as a boundary object itself.

Finally, organizational learning and knowledge management provide a further specification of the relation between HIA and policy. It is said to be sticky, in need of organizational capacity to facilitate *learning* and mobilize tacit knowledge by team-building efforts.

As a result, we consider the impact of HIA on policies to consist of three main mechanisms: (variation and) selection; learning; and application. In the paper, the operationalised concepts will be applied to two exploratory case studies of Dutch HIA practice. The first is a qualitative HIA on the Dutch Housing Policy White Paper 'What people want, where people live' (2001). The second case is a quantitative HIA on a municipal reconstruction plan with a public-private exploitation. The discussion following the presentation will focus on the meaning of the case results for the research question, and the analytical framework.

Marleen Bekker MSc
PhD Candidate
Institute of Health Policy and Management
Room L4-54, Erasmus MC
P.O. Box 1738
3000 DR Rotterdam
The Netherlands
bekker@bmg.eur.nl