

Impact assessment: a tool for healthy urban planning

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Health impact assessments (HIA) are based on an approach initiated by the Gothenburg consensus paper in 1999, which defines them as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools

by which a policy, programme or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population” [1]. This definition has been supplemented by the International Association for Impact Assessment, which specifies that “the HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage these effects”. It follows a structured six-step process (selection, scoping, impact assessment, recommendations and communication of results, monitoring of the implementation of recommendations, and evaluation of HIA results on the decision), which uses a range of data sources and analytical methods, relying on contributions from a wide range of actors.

HIA comes from two currents of influence: environmental health and health promotion, and elements from these two major fields of public health are included in its methodological deployment. It is particularly influenced by health promotion insofar as it applies a holistic model of health, which stresses the importance of the social determinants of health and adheres to ethical principles, such as equity and social justice, democracy and citizen participation, principles that distinguish HIAs from other forms of impact assessment [2].

Qualified as a prospective, inter-sectoral and participatory approach to evaluation, HIA intervenes in a decision-making process as far upstream as possible, its purpose being to predict the health consequences of projects (in the short-, medium- and long-term) and to recommend appropriate measures for minimizing negative effects and maximizing positive effects before the project is carried out. It can take different forms depending on the elements of context, the challenges of the project and the resources available (human, financial, time); HIAs are applicable to different sectors such as transport, industry, natural resources and urban development.

HIA is a distinct form of prospective impact assessment, specifically focused on human health, that emerged during the 1990s. It has gradually spread and diversified across the world with practitioners from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and other European countries pioneering the methodology, which is still evolving today [4]. A review of international historical developments in HIA, published by Harris-Roxas *et al.* in 2012, shows that the HIA approach has matured, diversified and spread to a growing number of countries around the world, with applications in the public and private sectors. It is now adopted in many countries, regulated or not, with the aim of better integrating health into all policies. In this sense, HIA is a means of implementing healthy urban planning, which more specifically targets the integration of health into development and urban planning policies. In France, the practice of HIAs has gradually developed since early 2010. About 60 different HIAs have been

registered to date, relating mainly to urban development projects and, to a lesser extent, social and transport policies [5; 6].

One of the limits of HIA lies in evaluating the effectiveness of the approach, in particular the real impacts on health compared to the projected impacts. Researchers and practitioners in the field have therefore developed HIA evaluation models and work on the subject is continuing. ■

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