ISA and Related Processes

Integrated Sustainability Assessment (ISA) shares some basic features of current forms of policy assessment, including Sustainability Impact Assessment, Regulatory Impact Assessment and the EU regime of Impact Assessment, referred to here as (S&R)IA. However, ISA and (S&R)IA are intended to perform different functions. (S&R)IA is, at least in principle, intended to apply and enforce the prevailing policy regime. By contrast, ISA is concerned with exploring alternative paradigms/regimes and improving the prospects for implementing promising elements of these. While (S&R)IA focuses on the shorter-term and very pragmatic concern of screening (mostly sectoral) policies and proposals, ISA is broader, strategic, explorative, forward-looking, longer-term and sustainability-oriented. While(S&R)IA is used (at best) instrumentally, ISA focuses on conceptual learning, reframing and transformative outcomes.

The premise of ISA requires a procedural and analytical approach that ensures that the assessment process takes its socio-political context into account. ISA is a cyclical, iterative, continuous process, whereas (S&R)IA is a sequential, linear process often performed once only at the end of policy development. ISA requires modulation between scales and levels within a single sustainability assessment process, while (S&R)IA is a nested set of assessment processes, whose coherence depends on having a single overarching policy paradigm as a common frame of reference developed at the highest policy levels and cascaded to lower levels. Whereas (S&R)IA is focused on predicting impacts, ISA is designed to understand the processes and relationships giving rise to development outcomes and to explore how these might be manipulated. The key analytical design differences between (S&R)IA and ISA are summarized in the table on the right.

In spite of these differences, ISA and (S&R)IA are positively correlated and should go hand-in-hand. Although there are potential benefits from screening sectoral policies of whatever orientation, the potential contribution to sustainable development that can be achieved through purely sectoral policies is likely to be intrinsically limited. Deeper integration of sustainability into policy-making will depend, firstly, upon establishing strategic directions for policy-making through ISA or ISA-like processes and, only secondly, on using an integrated regime of routine SIA at operational policy-making levels to facilitate implementation at different points and levels in the policy-making hierarchy.

The MATISSE project has carried out a context-specific analysis of how policy assessments (mainly IA and RIA) are being used in four jurisdictions: the EU, the UK, Germany and Sweden. The institutional capacities underpinning assessment in these jurisdictions were summarised. Often, policy assessments are limited in scope, focussing mainly on the economic aspects of policy rather than the social and environmental aspects of sustainability. Policy formulation activities are constrained, well before

Comparison of (S&R)IA and ISA: analytical features

Dimension	(S&R)IA	ISA
Paradigm	Regime applying	Transition oriented; regime exploring
Scope	Limited; economic aspects and compliance dominate; focus on impacts	Broad, multi-domain; focus on relationships
Goal	Goal(s) pre-set; optimisation on a single goal or a limited set of goals	Goal searching
Process/timing	Linear, one-time only, end of process	Cyclical, iterative, paralleling other processes
Stakeholders	Mainly regime players; takes account of structural power	Niche and regime players; takes account of emerging power
Trade-offs	Trade-offs inevitable (economic concerns dominate)	Search for synergies; trade-offs residual
Evidence/tools	Simple tools; single-scale of analysis; limited concern for causal chains	Tools and models able to represent cross-sectoral relationships; representation of structural change processes; multi-scale analysis; agent-based analysis; focus on causal chains


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the start of the formal decision-making process, for example by pre-existing political initiatives and policies, by administrative procedures, international and EU legal frameworks and policy commitments. There are, hence, political and institutional barriers to direct influence of assessment on policy outputs.

The question of institutional setting is therefore extremely relevant to the distinction between (S&R)IA and ISA. The prevailing governance institutions have developed over many decades as part of the dominant development paradigm and they reflect and support the concerns, thinking and approaches of that paradigm. Thus, prevailing governance institutions are organisationally and thematically divided according to sectors, political boundaries and levels in a governance hierarchy. This fits naturally with the current paradigm that has conceptualised development as a predominantly economic process. It has been argued that 'sustainability as an emergent proposition comes into conflict with existing governance structures'[1] and that policy assessment will be useful in furthering sustainable development only when it is fully integrated into the decision-making process[2 3]. However, progress on integrating sustainability into political institutions is only just beginning. A first step in this direction are efforts to achieve more 'joined-up' governance processes, by better coordination among still-sectoral policy-making domains to reduce conflicts between mandates. (S)IA provides an instrument to support this first step, whereas ISA could be instrumental for the more strategic step, which involves changing the policy regime so that this is deliberately targeted at sustainable development.

Given the nature of the persistent problems of unsustainable development, the resolution of these problems is likely to require broad structural changes (transitions), which depend on revision of the institutional setting in which they take place. It is one thing to assure that policies designed primarily to achieve sectoral objectives are not inconsistent with one another or with sustainable development ((S&R)IA), but it is something else entirely to develop strategies and policies designed from first principles actively to support a transition toward sustainable development (ISA).

In order to support sustainable development, future strategies and policies will most likely need to be designed with sustainability as a specific objective. These would have to be developed through systemic analyses of persistent problem causes with cross-sectoral approaches to problem solving. This is a role that ISA could play. Furthermore, through a participatory approach that engages stakeholders, experts and decision-makers in a social learning process, ISA can develop, simultaneously, strategies and action plans for a sustainability transition.

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Further Reading

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