

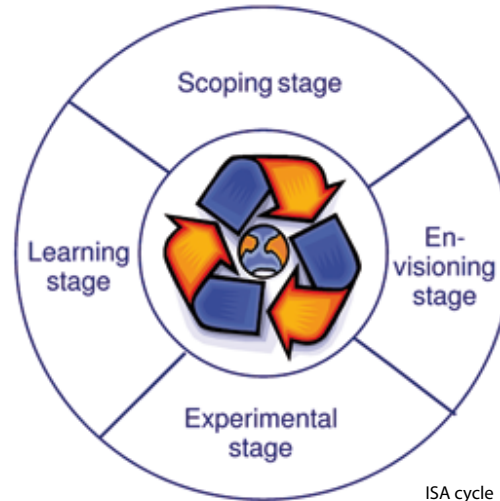
What is an ISA?

Sustainability assessment is fundamentally a 'sustainability defining and applying' process¹. The concept of sustainable development is contested, both scientifically and socially, so by definition it is subjective and ambiguous. Nevertheless it makes sense to operationalise it, but with the acceptance that universal implementation is not possible. Sustainability is context-bound and needs to be interpreted and implemented by a range of stakeholders within that specific context.

Currently, most practical applications of sustainability assessment fulfil a pragmatic role in screening already tabled sectoral policy proposals that have no sustainability orientation per se (see pages 7 - 8). While the demand for screening will continue, the MATISSE project has shown that there is also a need for strategic level analyses, where the objective is to help develop long-term, cross-sectoral policies expressly designed to contribute to sustainable development.

Integrated Sustainability Assessment (ISA)

ISA is intended as a pro-active, strategic and potentially transformative process to give an explicit sustainability orientation to policy making and other undertakings that are expressly intended to address persistent complex problems of unsustainable development and take up opportunities for achieving more sustainable development.



The objectives of an ISA are to develop a shared interpretation among stakeholders of the different perspectives on and dimensions of sustainability for a particular social-ecological system (scoping), transform these into a shared vision of a sustainable future (envisioning), and explore various solution directions for a transition towards sustainability through a range of innovative experiments (experimenting), as a basis for learning about key relationships and ways of reframing problems and solutions (learning/evaluating). The formal definition of ISA reflects these means and ends:

'ISA is a cyclical, participatory process of scoping, envisioning, experimenting, and learning through which a shared interpretation of sustainability for a specific context is developed

and applied in an integrated manner in order to explore solutions to persistent problems of unsustainable development.'

The essential design requirements for ISA stem directly from its intended role as a transformative process for exploring and supporting reframing and reorientation. ISA represents a new mode of knowledge production that offers a forum for:

- defining 'socially- and ecologically-robust' targets and thresholds;
- integrating these as elements of operational, context-specific sustainability interpretations; and
- exploring alternative pathways of transition.

ISA brings together an integrated systems analysis and a participatory process involving a selection of relevant stakeholders and actors. The integration of stakeholders selected to represent different perspectives and interests is a basic requirement of ISA in order to develop a rich and robust interpretation of sustainability for a specific context. ISA is based on the principles of addressing intergenerational equity, the integration of the economic, ecological and socio-cultural domains and the interaction of scales.

In order to deal with the multidimensional complexity of sustainable development, ISA is designed as a cyclical, participatory process of four stages:

Scoping stage

This stage of the ISA-process involves a thorough definition of the persistent problem in question. This requires an integrated systems analysis. A stakeholder analysis is needed as well in order to explore the current and potential actor and stakeholder configurations. It is important to address the unsustainability 'problematique' from multiple perspectives. The extent to which a shared problem perception among stakeholders is already available or can be generated should be explored.

Envisioning stage

This stage involves the development of a vision of a sustainable future for the system of interest. This requires a transformation of the unsustainability problem into a sustainability challenge. The



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sustainability vision is not meant to be a blueprint with a high predictive value, but rather an evolutionary vision with evolving long-term targets, and multiple pathways to reach them. The process of envisioning is therefore at least as important as the vision itself. The potentially mobilizing capacity that the envisioning process contains for the stakeholders involved is of great importance.

Experimenting stage

This stage uses ISA-tools and methods to test the sustainability visions and policy proposals in terms of consistency, adequacy, robustness and feasibility. In particular, transition pathways (scenarios) from drivers to sustainability goals are analysed. Trade-offs are explored, but no formal cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses are attempted, because this is irrelevant on the long time-scale of a transition period (25-50 years), during which benefits especially cannot be estimated adequately.

Learning, evaluating and monitoring stage

In this stage, learning experiences and lessons during the ISA-process are made explicit. Learning provides input for the next ISA-cycle through a possible reframing of the shared problem perception, an adjustment of the sustainability vision and related pathways, and reformulation of the experiments to be conducted. Monitoring the different stages of the ISA-process is vitally important generally, but especially for the reframing process, in terms of how the perception

of stakeholders involved might have changed and to which extent the visions, pathways and experiments are adjusted.

The iterative nature of an ISA allows for a continuous learning process, in which participants adjust the scope, visions, pathways and tools, if necessary, each time that the process is repeated. For the strategic purposes of ISA, these adjustments play an important role. This means, however, that a full ISA process takes a long time to complete.

¹ Varey, W. (2004). Integrated Approaches to Sustainability Assessment: An Alignment of Ends and Means. Available at: www.emrgnc.com.au

Further Reading

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Weaver, P.M., Rotmans, J., Turnpenny, J., Haxeltine A. and Jordan A. (2007). Methods and Tools for Integrated Sustainability Assessment, Chapter 9, In: George C. and Kirkpatrick C. (eds.) *Impact Assessment for a New Europe and Beyond*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK.

Weaver P.M. and Rotmans J. (2006). Integrated Sustainability Assessment: what is it, why do it, and how?, *Int. Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 1, No.4, pp.284-303.

Weaver, P.M., Haxeltine, A., van de Kerkhof, M. and Täbara, J.D. (2006). Mainstreaming action on climate change through participatory appraisal, *Int. Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp.238-259.