

Sustainability Assessment and RIA: a natural convergence?

Reflections from an academic perspective

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Overview

1. Setting the stage
2. What's in a name? IA - SA - RIA
3. Discourse
4. EU
5. Flemish Region of Belgium
6. Towards an integrated assessment for SD

Setting the stage

'Impact assessment is the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action' (IAIA, 2009)

- Various IA 'traditions'
- Reflecting particular policy objectives
- Sustainable development / Better regulation
- Complex decisions require structured knowledge
- Quid 'integrated assessment'?

What's in a name?

- IA = generic 'umbrella' term
- RIA, SA, EIA, SEA, HIA etc...
- Common goals:
 - Information provision to decision-makers;
 - Transparency (& participation)
 - Identification of alternatives to minimize negative impacts and/or to maximize positive impacts
- Process:
 - Stepwise
 - Systematic
 - Feedback loops

SA

- SA is a process that aims to integrate sustainability issues into decision-making by identifying sustainability impacts and by fostering sustainability objectives
- Formal (Devuyst, 2001) or broad (Pope, 2006) definition?
- Sustainability? Brundtland? Various interpretations - but beware of interpretational limits (Lele, 1991)
- Sustainability principles (Gibson, 2005) - also embodied in SD Strategies
- SD characterised by Change / Interdisciplinarity / Limitations and Thresholds / Normativity / Integration / Critique on conventional thinking / Precaution...

SA (cont'd)

- Beware of legitimizing trade offs
- Interdependencies / Complexity / Integration
- SD = value-laden → participation
- The objectives-led approach is a distinctive feature of SA

RIA

- RIA is a stepwise process to improve the quality of regulation
- Decision-support tool
- Asking & answering right questions in a structured framework
- Systematic analysis of potential impacts of public policy
- Communication tool
- Competitiveness ↑
- ↓ Administrative burden

Common SA-RIA objectives

- To identify and assess future impacts of planned or current actions
- To increase integration
- To enhance communication and transparency
- To provide decision-makers with information
- To structure the policy preparation process

Common SA-RIA approach

- Set of logical steps to be followed in policy preparation
- Decision-support tools
- Structuring information
- Instrumental, conceptual and political use of SA and RIA

Discourse

- Discourse is 'a way of seeing and talking about something'
- Discursive evolutions influence design and application of impact assessment tools
- Discourses reflect policy agendas
- Sustainable development
- Better regulation

Converging discourses at EU level

- Impact Assessment Guidelines 2001
- EU Sustainable Development Strategy & Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs
- IA presented as an instrument to ensure policy consistency and to foster both SD as Lisbon strategies
- IA practice had improved - promising instrument
- yet contradictory policy declarations persist..

Converging discourses at Flemish level

- Pact 2020
- Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy
- Integration apparent in discourse: '*a competitive and sustainable economy*'
- Flemish Government calls for complementarity between Lisbon and EU SDS
- Yet (still) insufficiently uses its own institutional architecture to foster synergies at sub-national level

Towards an integrated assessment?

- Structural similarities (objectives & process)
- Discursive evolutions at EU and sub-national level
- Characteristics of current Flemish RIA
- Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy
- Blurred boundaries between SA and RIA

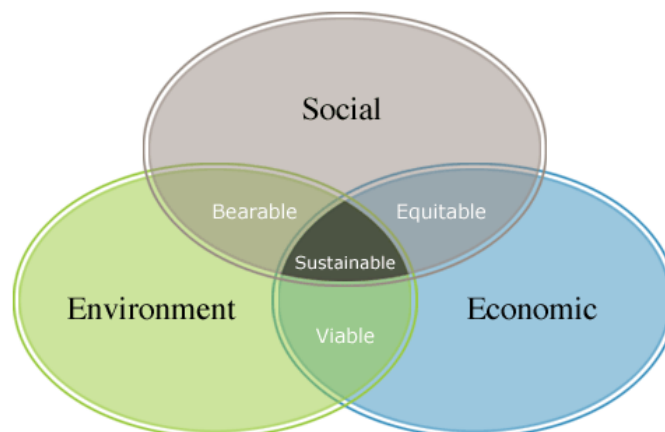
Towards an integrated assessment?

- Learning potential embodied in existing RIA framework
- Effectiveness and efficiency
- Political discourse
- Example of EC's Impact Assessment
- Window of opportunity : reforming Flemish RIA?

Conclusions

- IA interpretation and practice are dynamic
- Converging political discourses
- Influence IA theory and practice
- Perception of incompatibility between SA and RIA is fading
- Sustainable development as overarching yet manageable objective

Environmental sustainability is key



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