

# Social impact assessment in urban planning

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the content and importance of social impact assessment (SIA) in urban planning. SIA can be defined as a systematic effort to identify and analyse social impacts of a proposed project or plan on the individual, on social groups within a community, or on an entire community in advance of the decision making process. Social impacts of urban plans refer to various factors such as quality of housing, local services and living environment, gentrification or segregation, conditions of transportation etc. The article is focusing on the Finnish experiences. In Finland the new Land Use and Building Act, which came into force on 1.1.2000, brought impact assessment as an integral part of urban planning. The SIA experiences in Jyväskylä City offer an interesting case study.

*Keywords: social impact assessment, urban planning, land use plans, social sustainability.*

## 1 Need for impact assessment in planning

What is the impact of planning? How does the planning matter? The questions of the impacts, effects and consequences of planning activities have become more and more relevant in urban politics and in the politics of planning.

Yvonne Rydin has described well the main dilemma. “The goal of land use planning as a form of decision-making or administration is the effective management of environmental change and the control of urban development. The rhetoric stresses the strengths of planning, its power to control and manage. However, research, which begins from this standpoint, has consistently found land use planning to be a weak administrative system” [1]. Thus, the planning is not always doing what it says and clearly there are critical questions to ask about the impacts.



The question of the impact of planning is many-sided. According to Rydin, there are at least three different ways of understanding the whole matter. The traditional question in the debate has been in what extent the policy goals of planning have been achieved. How and in what way the plans have been implemented? Later, there has been presented questions about the effectiveness of planning as a set of procedures. Or rather, the potential weaknesses in planning as a process have been outlined. Most recently the third view of impact has taken attention: what are the outcomes of planning in terms of environmental or social change and protection of nature and people's health and welfare. Much of this analysis highlights the inadequacies in the planning process in various parts of the system and the extent to which outcomes fall short of ambitions in many cases.

The environmental and social impact assessment procedures (EIA and SIA) and participatory planning practices are one of the main policy tools and methods, which have been developed in order to satisfy the legitimacy qualifications concerning the environmental and social questions of planning. Impact assessment is a process having the ultimate objective of providing decision-makers with an indication of the likely consequences of their actions [2]. The outcome of this process is usually a formal document, usually called an environmental impact statement (EIS).

Impact assessment, in principle, can be applied to individual projects (a highway, a power plant, a harbour) as well as to broader plans, programmes and policies. In practice, however, EIA and SIA have most often been applied at the project level. This failure has been one of long-standing criticism of impact assessment systems, as it tends to preclude the discussion of generic issues and any serious consideration of alternative approaches. During the 1990s, the imperatives of sustainable development have stimulated attention to considering the environmental and social impacts of policies, plans and programmes in a number of countries. This kind of assessment has been called 'strategic impact assessment'. In this context, impact assessment of urban land-use plans has become very relevant.

## 2 What is social impact assessment (SIA)?

Social impact assessment has no single, universally accepted definition. However, its content and subject matter consist of distinguishable components that consistently appear when the SIA process is implemented. According to the International Association for Impact Assessment, "social impact assessment (SIA) includes the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions" [3]. Social impacts of urban plans refer to various factors such as quality of housing, local services and living environment, experienced health and security, people's ways of life, gentrification or segregation, conditions of transportation etc.

Based on the writings of several SIA practitioners and researchers we can



identify following features characteristic to the SIA process [4, 5].

- SIA is relative to environmental impact assessment (EIA).
- It is done in advance during the planning phase in order to offer better knowledge-base for the decision-making processes.
- It is a tool for developing alternatives and determining the full range of consequences for each alternative.
- It is a tool for developing mitigation, adaptation or compensation measures for the harmful social impacts.

There does not exist any general social theory through which we could identify and find very strict causal explanations about case-specific impacts [6]. Very often, the social impacts have contextual features and they represent complex social relations or dynamics. The nature of social change will vary with the type and size of a development project (or plan), as well as with the nature of the community in which the project is located. To study social change social scientists must switch from their traditional focus on structure in social organisations to a more dynamic assessment of the social impacts of planned change.

In addition, one of the key elements of SIA is that it provides methods for analysing social effects from the views of various population groups (social, age, ethnic etc.).

Thus, SIA must operate within the context of the different perspectives and value sets of the various actors. The methodology of social impact assessment favours a quite pluralistic approach, which can use both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

### **3 Need for social impact assessment in Finnish urban planning**

The purpose of the SIA in urban planning is to assess in advance the effects of the land-use plan to people's welfare and quality of life. From the end of 1990's, social dimensions of urban planning have become more topical issues in Finnish urban policy. There are several reasons for this, such as the changes in legislation, structural changes in urban development and the economic and social spatial differentiation. Also the debate on urban politics has created new fields for thinking the social sustainability of the cities. Social consistency of urban development has been seen as a precondition of the competitive ability of the city.

All above mentioned reasons have provided political support for developing social impact assessment in urban planning. Environmental impact assessment is quite new policy instrument in Finnish environmental policy system [7]. The EIA Act came into force in 1994. The Finnish EIA system included a comprehensive assessment procedure with wide participatory practices for the project level and also general aspirations towards social and strategic impact assessment.

There was made an amendment to the old Building Act already in 1994 about the requirements of impact assessment in land use planning. The problem was



that the planning practices did not take these requirements seriously. We had to wait for renewing the whole planning legislation to make the impact assessment more real in urban planning.

The new Land Use and Building Act, which came into force on 1.1.2000, brought many reforms. It introduced new roles of different administrative levels of planning, changed the quality criteria and verification procedures and added openness and communication requirements. One basic instrument for these purposes was impact assessment.

According to the Land Use and Building Act [8] there should be adequate investigation of a plan's potential environmental impacts, including implications for the community economy, social, cultural and other effects. Thus social impacts are mentioned separately in legislation.

After the new legislation, impact assessment practices have been developed gradually. The social dimension has also got more recognition. In some cities such as Jyväskylä, Vantaa, Järvenpää and Espoo the land use planning offices have started experimental projects on SIA in certain plans. The initiatives have become especially from the side of local politicians.

There does not exist yet any guidelines for this matter, but the first guidebook is under work. According to the Land Use and Building Act, when investigating the effects of a plan attention should be paid to the plan's task and purpose, previously conducted studies, as well as other factors affecting the need for investigation. There are no standards for drafting a report. The method and content depend on the local characteristics of the planning area as well as the nature and significance of the plan.

#### 4 Case of Jyväskylä City

In Finland, Jyväskylä city has been the most active developer of SIA for land use planning. The following analysis of the SIA-policy development is based on the studies made by Kati Närhi [9] and Jouni Mäkäraäinen [10].

In Jyväskylä, SIA projects in urban planning were initiated in 1995, when a group of social workers and students of social work evaluated a town plan for a new housing area called "Lutakko" near the city centre. According to Närhi, the idea of the City Planning Office was to create a housing area which would be a symbol of modern city life. Lutakko was even called as a "Manhattan" of Jyväskylä. The social workers had reason to expect that the area would not turn out the way it was originally planned.

Because there were no residents yet living in the area, social workers began to imagine and write fictional stories about future residents in the area in order to create some future visions about the quality of living environment. Although the stories were fictional, some important factors such as rent levels, access to the activities and services, importance of old buildings, noise and pollution came up. These points were presented to the landowner, the city planners and the constructors.

The voluntary SIA work continued after the time the first inhabitants moved into the area. In the summer 1996, social workers and students of social work



conducted three inquiries in which they asked residents about their views and experiences of living in the area. When looking back at the first assessment made by the social workers, it can be stated that they were quite right in their evaluations. The same kind of issues came up, but now they were the problems of the planning area: paths on the lakeshore, parks and green areas were decreased during the planning, the old buildings were demolished, the heavy traffic concerns the families with children, the idea of the community centre was not realised as planned and there were no services in the area at the moment.

All this information on social aspects were available from the beginning of the process but were barely used at all in the development of the residential area. Närhi argues that the short-term interests of economic profits were given priority over the long-term interests of a sustainable living environment.

The first experiences of applying SIA in Jyväskylä city were not a great success story. But, gradually the idea of using SIA was anyhow rooted into the city planning. The City Planning Office wanted to develop the ideas further. On the one hand, the new legislation required some kind of impact assessment system. On the other hand, the SIA suited well to the new image strategies of Jyväskylä. Jyväskylä had adopted “soft values” as an instrument to compete with other Finnish cities. The new strategies in Jyväskylä used the terms like “human wellness technology city”, “attractive little big city” and “city in the lap of nature”.

The general model of organising SIA as a part of city planning procedures was developed in January 2001. The model was published as a new guidebook for land-use planning process. In addition, Jyväskylä started a special SIA project for land-use planning in September 2001. The target was to develop an assessment model and to integrate SIA into planning process. The project was organised as a cooperation between the Office of Land-Use Planning and the Centre for Social and Health Services. The cooperation has been coordinated by a separate SIA-planner. The project was started by making the SIA in two detail plans in Kortepohja residential area. In addition, social monitoring was made concerning the nearly completed housing area of Kortesus.

In this work, Jyväskylä has had five main principles for organising SIA in urban planning [11]:

- SIA has to be natural part of the planning process and practices of social-and health enter.
- A special assessing form helps the assessment.
- There has to be basic data available on social conditions of the planning area.
- The wideness of the SIA and the need for scoping is defined separately in each plan.
- The possibilities and risks concerning the implementation of the plan have to be presented already during the preparations.



## 5 Integration of the SIA into planning process

Impact assessment generally takes place in a way that a planner her/himself assesses the impacts of the plans on the basis of studies conducted and visits to the locations concerned. A vital element in the assessment process is supplied by cooperation with other branches of administration and involved parties etc. If the person drafting the plan is a consultant, she/he is also generally responsible for assessing associated impacts. In particular areas of investigation demanding special expertise or in otherwise complicated assessment tasks a consultant is also frequently used.

Impact assessment is part of the design of the plan, a way of conducting work. Assessing impacts does not mean simply recognizing impacts but also taking impacts into account in the planning process. Figure 1 below illustrates the stages involved in the impact assessments and planning. Social impact assessment provides answers to questions: what will change, what will happen as a result, are there other options, what will be gained, what will be lost, who will benefit, who will suffer.

In Finland, the impact assessment is programmed in “*the participation and assessment plan*” drafted in connection with the initiation of the town plan. It lays out what impacts are going to be assessed and in what manner, as well as the boundaries of the area under investigation and the timetable for the job. In the participation and assessment plan efforts are also made to take a stand on what the key impacts are as regards this specific plan which will be subjected to in-depth examination.

One of the main principles behind both the EIA and the SIA is to connect different perspectives and professional options within the planning processes. The SIA studies in Jyväskylä during the 1990’s have examined what the potential role of social workers in conducting SIA could be, and have also looked at what kind of “new knowledge” or information social workers could bring to community planning. According to Närhi [12], social workers gain knowledge of “social” issues from their educational experiences and within their everyday work. Thus, social workers are constantly confronted with the consequences of rapid social change and “short-term planning” on the everyday lives of people.

Public involvement (or public participation) and social impact assessment are (and should be) clearly interactive in a planning process. The point is simply that public involvement is an important information-gathering tool for social impact assessment and also develops the value information that is essential to the overall assessment (and planning) process. Interviews, surveys, workshops, etc. are all frequently used as public involvement tools and can easily be used to study effects on local social structures.

Because SIA aims to predict and evaluate the impacts and outcomes of planned actions in the future and in various social conditions, the issue of the “right” interpretation or the “truth” has no clear content. There can exist competing “truths” or “views”. As such the SIA must always be understood within its local context [14]. The aim is to create an evaluation process that is



capable of recognising and appropriating the different available bodies of knowledge.

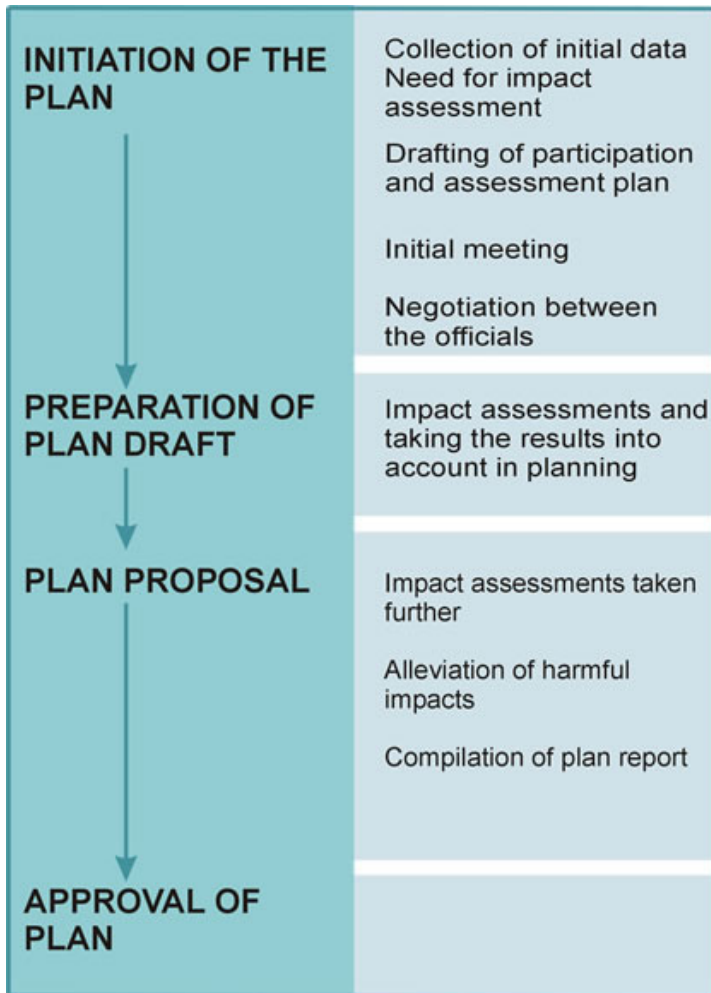


Figure 1: The integration of impact assessment into planning process [13].

## 6 Benefits of SIA for planning and community

There is clear need for developing social impact assessment in land use planning. This article has described some experiences from the Finnish practices. According to mentioned cases, the benefits of the SIA in planning can be seen in two levels. The planning organizations can benefit from the social impact assessment following:

- Systematic analysis of ‘participation data’.
- Better understanding on social conditions and impacts of the plan and the links between social and biophysical worlds.
- Better management of urban growth or decline.
- Tool for conflict management.
- Tool for developing the quality of environment.
- Improved understanding on the contents of social sustainability.

In addition, the SIA can be seen as a tool for community empowerment and social sustainability. SIA:

- builds on local knowledge and utilises participatory processes.
- raises consciousness and the level of understanding of the community and puts the residents in a better position to understand the broader implication of the proposed action.
- promotes community development and empowerment.
- develops social capital: social networks and trust.
- increases knowledge on the part of the project proponent and the impacted community.

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