

Source: Kauppinen T (2002). Human Impact Assessment in Finland. Paper for the Human Impact Assessment -seminar. 25.1.2006. Kellokoski, Finland.

Human Impact Assessment (HulA) in Finland

In Finland, the advance assessment of environmental impacts has been statutory since 1994. The Act on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure (EIA) provides that any impacts on human health, living conditions and amenities need to be assessed.

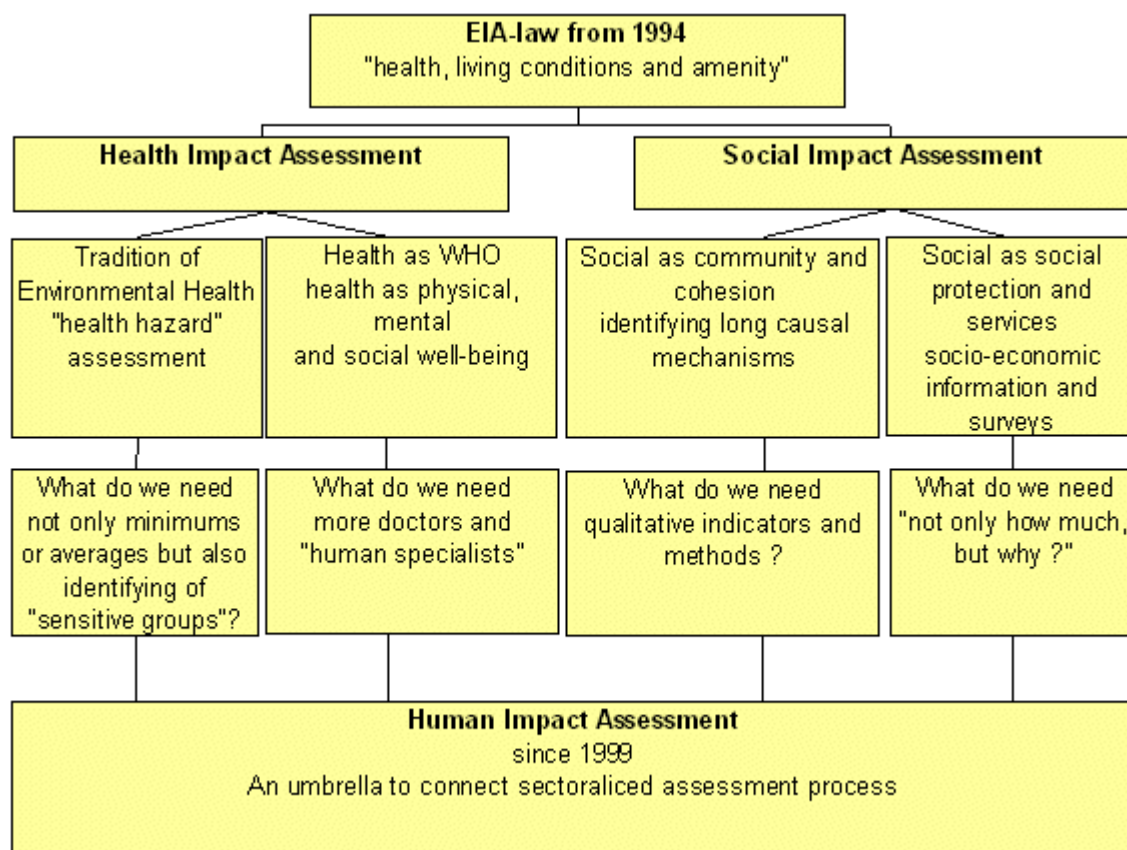


Figure 1. Human Impact Assessment as Health and Social Impact Assessment

Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

Environmental health has a long tradition in Finland. Before Health Impact Assessment, the Health Protection Act stipulated that it should be ensured that plans would not cause health hazards.

In practice, the concept of 'health hazard' corresponds to that of 'significant health impact' used in Environmental Impact Assessment. A health hazard refers to a disease or other health disturbance, or to the occurrence of a factor or condition that may reduce the health of the living environment of

an individual or a population. Minimum values and parameters have been set for factors that may cause health hazards, such as the quality of air, noise, household water, food, swimming water, soil, chemicals, and radiation. The exceeding of such values and parameters is then defined to constitute a health hazard.

Impact assessment has mostly been carried out by health inspectors and engineers, while doctors have participated to a lesser extent. In practical work, the main emphasis has been on the protection of environmental health (Environmental Health Impact Assessment (EHIA)). In most cases, perceived health hazards or a fear thereof have been regarded as social impacts.

In addition to environmental health, it has now become necessary to understand health more broadly. The World Health Organisation, for instance, broadly defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not only the absence of disease or infirmity". This definition, however, is more utopian and challenging than realistic. It states that health does not only mean the absence of disease or infirmity. The definition of health as a state of well-being in the broad sense of the word makes it necessary to view health problems as a tripartite entity consisting of the aspects of physical, mental and social well-being. The practical implications of this definition are now under discussion in Finland.

Social Impact Assessment (SIA)

Social impact traditionally means the effect that a decision, project or measure has on an individual, a community or society, and the resultant changes in people's well-being or in the distribution of well-being. The Finnish translation of the English word 'social impact' is 'sosiaalinen vaikutus', although the meaning of the Finnish word 'sosiaalinen' is much narrower than that of the word 'social' in the Anglo-American culture. As the Finnish word mainly refers to social protection and social services, impact assessment has been more limited and it has been difficult to draw the boundary between social and health impacts.

Assessments have mostly been performed by the methods of natural sciences. In practice, Social Impact Assessment has very often been made by quantitative methods. In many cases the assessment has merely consisted of a general statistical review. If the inhabitants have been interviewed, Gallup-type reporting of the results as mean values has been a common practice until recent years - for instance, different groups of people have not been considered separately.

Issues such as social indicators, willingness to pay, and costs and benefits have been on the agenda in Finland. Those engaged in impact assessment admit that everything cannot be measured. Another issue brought up for discussion is how qualitative factors such as 'happiness' or 'well-being' could be taken into account in the assessment.

Human Impact Assessment (HUIA)

In 1999 the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published a handbook on the assessment of social and health impacts. In this book the Ministry used the phrase 'Human Impact Assessment' to bring together the separate areas of social impact assessment and health impact assessment.

Human impacts may be related to health, living conditions, population, services or amenities. They should, however, be seen in a wider context and both direct and indirect impacts on well-being and on broadly-defined health should be taken into account in the assessment. Such impacts may also be seen to include the impacts of nature or the built environment on people. In this case, human impacts also include any impacts on community structure, landscape, townscape and cultural heritage.

What do we need in the future?

I hope that the different aspects of impact assessment will not develop in different directions, as has been the case in many other countries.

I also hope that we will be able to consider the human being as a whole, instead of looking at the stomach, the lungs, the mind or the living conditions separately.

Further, I hope that we will be able to utilise the knowledge and experience of all different fields to promote well-being and health.

Towards Human Impact Assessment

The development of the relationship between Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and Health Impact Assessment (HIA) in Finland can be described as being divided into three different phases.

In the first phase, SIA and HIA are separate from each other. SIA contains HIA, or HIA contains SIA. The two ways of impact assessment are thus competing as to which is the umbrella concept and which contains the other. This competition takes place between different professions and different resources.

In practice, HIA has been related to the protection of health in Finland, and therefore the social aspect of HIA has meant perceived ill health. In SIA, in turn, there have been hardly any practical examples of health impact assessment. As a matter of fact, neither of the approaches has contained the other approach, but the two ways of assessment have remained separate (Figure 2).

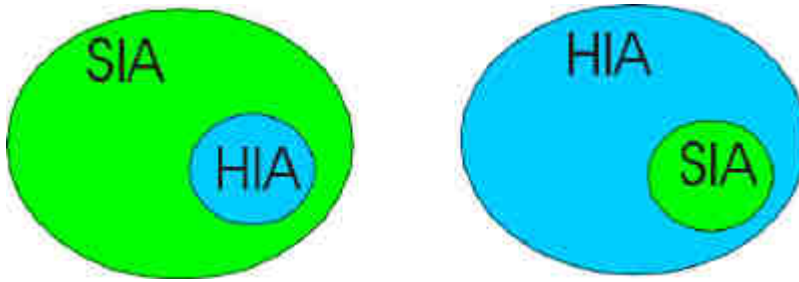


Figure 2. SIA and HIA separately.

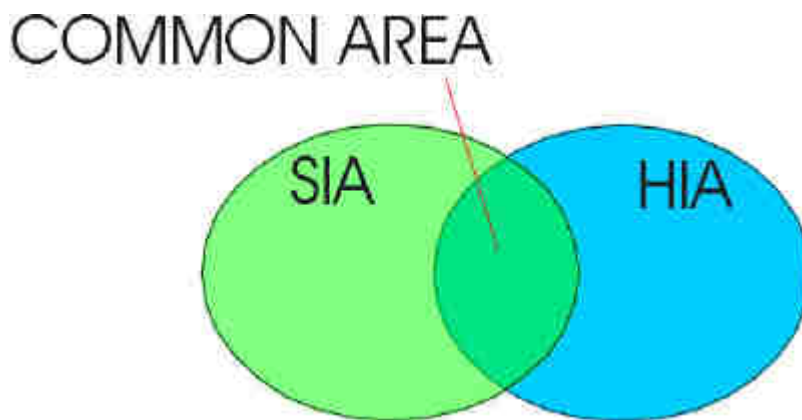


Figure 3. SIA and HIA have a common area.

In the second phase, SIA and HIA have approached each other (Figure 3). The different sectors of impact assessment overlap to some extent. A grey area, a no-man's-land, remains between them. The shared area may consist of perceived health or mental health. In addition to their own special areas, the different sectors of impact assessment also have areas of common interest.

This is how the relationship between SIA and HIA has been understood in Finland after the publication of the handbook "Environmental Impact Assessment. Health and Social Impacts on Human Beings" by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (1999).

The Ministry handbook considers that Health Impact Assessment covers health hazards as defined in the Health Protection Act. A health hazard refers to a disease or other health disturbance, or to the occurrence of a factor or condition that may reduce the health of the living environment of an individual or a population. Minimum values and parameters have been set for factors that may cause health hazards, such as the quality of air, noise, household water, food, swimming water, soil, chemicals, and radiation. The exceeding of such values and parameters is then defined to constitute a health hazard. Perceived health hazards and a fear of health hazards, in turn, are mostly seen as social impacts. The grey area is seen to be covered by Social Impact Assessment.

The third alternative may still be Utopian. In the figure, the social and health aspects have merged together at the opposite ends of the continuum. Seen in this way, all impacts on human beings have their social and health dimensions. An impact that poses a major threat to human health also has its social dimension. Furthermore, even changes in people's happiness have health impacts in the long run. Accordingly, the debate on which one of the two concepts is the umbrella term or has a broader scope of application will gradually lose its meaning. Figure 4.

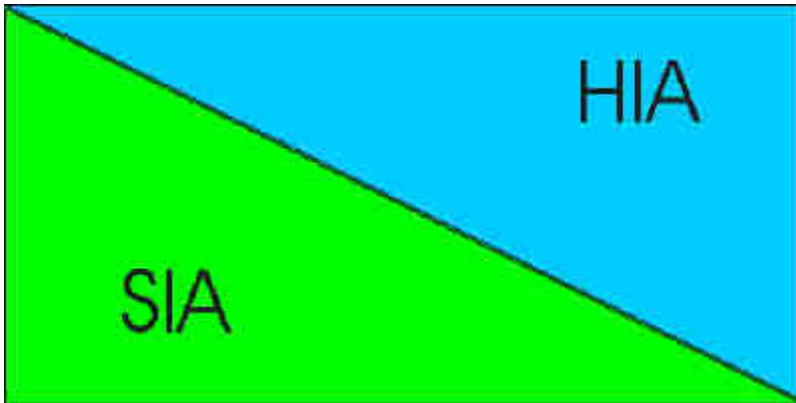


Figure 4. SIA and HIA together at the opposite ends of the continuum.

What is needed is a genuinely common new umbrella concept that combines the different approaches and professions. Concepts such as human impacts, welfare impacts or impacts on human beings have been suggested for the purpose. Assessment of impacts on human beings can function as a real umbrella concept. There is still a need for expertise from a variety of fields. Expertise is of vital importance in the identification and description of social processes and in the analysis of health-related matters.

However, the term that is used to refer to the assessment to be carried out no longer needs to limit the participation of different experts and the identification of impacts, or to decide which methods can be used in the assessment. If the social aspect of the impact is more prominent, the methods of SIA are used at the beginning of the assessment, while the HIA approach is applied if the health aspect is more evident - the other viewpoint need not be excluded.