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Perceived Health in Environmental Impact Assessment

Abstract

When decisions are made on projects, plans and programmes, their various impacts must also be assessed in this connection. The Finnish Act on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure (EIA) stipulates that, in addition to consequences for the natural and built-up environment, also impacts on human health, living conditions and amenity must be assessed. Investigations into the environmental impact assessments implemented show that impacts on people have not been taken into account as carefully as those on nature.

In terms of human impacts the study focused on perceived health impacts. Theme interviews and the problem-solving method were employed to find out how the authorities engaging in EIA define health, perceived health and perceived health impacts. In addition, the study examined the ways in which assessment of perceived health and perceived health impacts could be more efficiently taken into account in implementing environmental impact assessments.

Perceived health and perceived health impacts belong to a type of impact that does not have an established definition or place in the field of environmental impacts. In planning the physical environment, health is usually viewed from a scientific perspective, making it possible to classify hazards to human health and demonstrate them through microbes, chemicals or physiological changes in humans. However, other factors reflecting human health include e.g. satisfaction with the living environment, opinions, emotions and social relations.

The results of the study showed that distinguishing perceived health impacts -and health impacts in general- from social impacts was considered difficult and artificial. Health impacts, perceived health impacts and social impacts were regarded as different sides of the same phenomenon. Thus, the interviewees suggested that, instead of distinguishing between social and health impacts, the term human impacts should be used. This approach would direct attention to humans and human impacts in a comprehensive way along with natural and environmental impacts. In addition, the concept of environmental impact would become wider, including impacts on people in addition to natural and environmental impacts.

The interviewees regarded the inclusion of perceived health impacts in EIA as important. However, this inclusion was considered problematic, as perceived health impacts are not measurable or easy to define accurately. The interviewees understood the restrictions inherent in norms and checklists in isolated project assessment, but such guidelines and checklists were nevertheless deemed necessary.

The study incorporates proposals as to how the inclusion of health impacts could be developed in the assessment process, terminological development, co-operation, training and taking account of locality. In addition, the interviewees brought up expectations placed on municipalities, provincial

governments, experts and assessment authorities in order to develop assessment of perceived health impacts further.

Key words: living environment, human impact assessment, participation, social impact assessment, health impact assessment, co-operation