

When to perform an HIA

Clarification of the key elements that characterize HIA facilitates reflection on which approach to choose from among several possibilities for promoting the adoption of healthy policies or projects. Table 2 describes situations commonly encountered by public health practitioners, discusses the relevance of HIA for each of them, and points to the most suitable similar practices, if applicable.

Table 2 The relevance of HIA for some commonly-encountered situations in public health

Situations	Is HIA relevant?	Comments/alternative processes & tools
I wish to determine whether our immunization practices are effective and whether they effectively reach all our clientele, including marginalized persons.	No. What is called for is a retrospective evaluation of a health program.	For the evaluation of a public health program, refer to this annotated inventory of program evaluation tools and resources: http://www.phred-redsp.on.ca/Docs/Annotated%20Inventory%20of%20Evaluation%20Tools%20and%20Resources_PHRED_Oct%202009.pdf For a health equity impact assessment, refer to: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/fr/pro/programs/hea/tool.aspx Inventory of tools focused on equity: http://www.ncchpp.ca/docs/Equity_Tools_NCCDH-NCCHPP.pdf
Our local public health branch has received a request from the municipality for an analysis of the impacts on respiratory health of its compost plant.	Yes. However, to fulfill the principles of HIA, the analysis must go beyond considering the impacts on respiratory health to take into account other determinants that can be affected by the plant, including, for example, the positive and negative impacts on employment.	An environmental impact assessment (EIA) may also be requested. It would then be preferable to combine the two processes, making sure to go beyond examining the biophysical impacts that are usually considered in EIAs to assess human health impacts.
I wish to know to what extent my planned program for promoting physical activity will achieve the desired health objectives.	No. What is called for is a study of the relevance of a public health program (to address health goals).	An evidence-based program planning tool can be useful here. Refer to: http://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/servicesandtools/ohpp/pages/default.aspx Refer also to the process for constructing a logic model to assist in examining the assumptions of efficiency: http://www.ncchpp.ca/172/publications.ccnpps?id_article=898
Faced with a road safety problem, we are seeking the most effective measures for addressing it.	No. This situation calls instead for a search for best practices.	The Health Evidence site may be useful here for finding measures that have been proven effective: http://www.healthevidence.org/ Additionally, the NCCHPP's method for analyzing public policies can be used to produce more in-depth analyses of a few select options, so that the most appropriate one for the given context can be identified: http://www.ncchpp.ca/172/publications.ccnpps?id_article=827
A community group would like us to assess the health impacts of a shale gas extraction project.	Yes, within or in parallel with an environmental impact assessment.	However, one must be careful to examine all the potential impacts, including those on job creation, and not to just support the community group's position.
A municipality has asked us to participate in an intersectoral committee to help identify needs related to the creation of social housing.	No. What is called for is a needs assessment.	Several tools are available to assist in performing such analyses. See for example: http://www.hqontario.ca/portals/0/Documents/qi/qi-rq-needs-assessment-0901-en.pdf
I wish to demonstrate the importance of a regulation controlling the marketing of sugary foods to children.	No. The preferred approach here would be evidence-based advocacy (promotion of a new policy).	The framework for producing scientific advice on health referenced by the NCCMT could be useful here. See: http://www.nccmt.ca/registry/view/eng/195.html As well as the NCCHPP's framework: http://www.ncchpp.ca/docs/Guide_framework_analyzing_policies_En.pdf

Situations	Is HIA relevant?	Comments/alternative processes & tools
A local community group wants to set up a working group to gather public concerns about a policy proposal on social development and to provide alternatives.	Yes. This is a community-led model of HIA.	The contribution of the public health unit will be to provide advice on the process for it to be as rigorous as possible, according to the HIA principles, and to provide the relevant evidence.
In the course of my work I am asked to produce notices of compliance for environmental impact assessments.	No. This type of intervention, along with notices of admissibility, is not consistent with the holistic approach of HIA.	However, this situation may offer an opportunity for broadening the public health lens to include all determinants.
My organization is concerned about the negative health impacts of the new alcohol policy and wishes to produce an opinion report.	No. This situation calls more specifically for a risk analysis, which is part of HIA but does not cover all of its parameters.	In this case, methods for synthesizing targeted scientific knowledge would be the most appropriate.
I'm doing scientific research to assess the health impacts of an existing policy.	No. Although it involves the evaluative study of impacts, HIA is not designed to be an academic research method.	The term HIA is often used in this situation, which is understandable since it does, in fact, involve carrying out an impact assessment. However, generally speaking, a research study does not include all of the constituent elements of HIA.
My organization is producing an advisory report on the health impacts of air pollution.	No. The aim here is to link a specific determinant to the population's health.	However, this type of information is very useful to HIAs that must examine the determinant 'air quality' and formulate well-founded recommendations.

Conclusion

Several work methods can be used to influence a policy or project. While all those cited here seek to draw attention to evidence, and while some include a concern for health inequalities or for the participation of persons affected, they are not necessarily suitable for situations where HIA is the most useful method (decision to be made, sectoral policy or project); nor do they encompass all of the other characteristic elements of HIA: a holistic approach, following a systematic process, and considering both the negative and positive aspects of a project or policy, so as to anticipate its effects.

HIA is the product of the confluence of several current practices originating, in particular, from the field of health protection and promotion. Thus, it incorporates methods and approaches that have demonstrated their usefulness. It also draws on lessons learned in fields connected to public health, such as those of citizen participation, knowledge sharing and public policy analysis. Therefore, several of the tools and principles associated with the HIA process may well be useful to other public health processes aimed at influencing public policies so that they may become more conducive to health.

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