



Editorial - embedding the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in IAPA's remit

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EDITORIAL



Editorial - embedding the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in IAPA's remit

Working and researching on impact assessment (IA), you are likely to have come across, and possibly worked with, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; see United Nations 2020), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015. The 17 goals¹ along with 169 targets and over 232 indicators set a global agenda until 2030, following on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were adopted for the period 2000–2015. Whilst the MDGs' focus was on developing countries, the SDGs are global, applying to developed as well as developing countries.

At their launch, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the SDGs as 'a roadmap to ending global poverty, building a life of dignity for all and leaving no one behind.' Furthermore, he suggested that they were 'also a clarion call to work in partnership and intensify efforts to share prosperity, empower people's livelihoods, ensure peace and heal our planet for the benefit of this and future generations'.² In order to achieve this, SDGs cover a large number of issues, sectors, and challenges and are, as a consequence, highly complex.

Impact assessment requires objectives and targets for the evaluation of – both, positive and negative – impacts and the SDGs can be an important reference point for many of those. SDG targets for the most part are not quantitative (with a few exceptions, e.g. 'at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries'; see goal 8). In order to be of practical use in IA, they will therefore need to be adapted to the specific situation of application. A number of authors have written about the connections between IA and the SDGs in *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, including e.g. Morrison-Saunders et al. (2020), Green et al. (2020) and Hacking (2019). These and many other papers are exploring linkages between IA and the SDGs and often focus on how SDGs can be operationalised through IA. In this context, what makes the SDGs particularly valuable for IA in an international context is that they are formally adopted by 193 countries. Therefore, they provide a bonding kit for researchers and practitioners as well as authors and readers internationally and it is therefore not surprising that the International Association for Impact Assessment has released FASTIPS for the SDGs (No. 19).³

A Scopus⁴ search of the refereed published literature, using the terms 'Impact Assessment' AND 'Sustainable Development Goals' on 17 May 2020 resulted in 130 hits. Seven of these were from IAPA publications, the highest number reached by any one journal. 76 of the papers fell into the broad remit of environmental sciences, with 45 being associated with the social sciences (publications can fall into more than one category). With regards to a particular discipline being associated with the SDGs, medicine claimed the top spot with 29 hits, followed by engineering (19 hits) and energy (18 hits). With regards to different types of IA being represented in the 130 hits (either in the title, keywords or the abstract), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) appeared in 80 of them, Sustainability Assessment (SA) in 38, Health Impact Assessment (HIA) in 27, Social Impact Assessment (SIA) in 21 and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in 17.

Whilst an SA could – in theory at least – use all SDGs, in practice IAs normally aim at looking only at those issues that are relevant, i.e. those where significant effects are likely. An IA addressing all SDGs is likely to be perceived as confusing and possibly incomprehensible by those attempting to use it in (policy, plan, programme or project) decision making. However, IA is likely to focus only on certain aspects, 'depending on the specific problems they are facing' (Fischer 2014). In this context, it is important that it is the challenges and problems of a specific situation that (should) lead to the use of a particular IA instrument, e.g. environmental issues (EIA and SEA), health (HIA), social issues (SIA) and – occasionally – other issues, such as language (language impact assessment; see Welsh Government 2017), territorial cohesion (territorial impact assessment; see Fischer et al. 2015), gender issues (gender impact assessment; see Verloo and Roggeband 1996) and others.

SDGs are clearly of great relevance for IA. However, using them may not always be unproblematic. This is not surprising, though, considering the hugely diverse range of issues they cover. Also, nearly all countries globally adopted them, which undoubtedly meant compromise was necessary. In this context, what is of particular concern from an IA perspective is that goals are unprioritized. Subsequently, two issues are briefly discussed that show where challenges may arise when applying the SDGs in IA; the use of GDP (gross

domestic product) for measuring economic development in goal 8 and the approach taken to inequality by goal 10.

GDP is a monetary measure of goods and services produced in e.g. a country. GDP growth is associated with the expansion of output of goods and services. It is used throughout the world and GDP is seen as a 'key measure of the overall strength of the economy' (Bank of England 2020). For many, GDP per capita is an indicator of wealth. However, and importantly, on its own GDP is not a suitable measure of well-being. From a sustainable development point of view, a fundamental problem with GDP is that 'it measures income, but not equality, it measures growth, but not destruction, and it ignores values like social cohesion and the environment'.⁵ For example, natural disasters usually have negative impacts on those affected. However, they also have the potential, in particular in developed economies, to increase GDP. Whilst the inclusion of GDP in the SDGs is justified by an assumption that it is possible to decouple GDP growth from environmental degradation (in this context, see the work of the UN International Resources Panel⁶), many have expressed doubts whether this is possible. For example, Ward, et al. (2016) observed that 'growth in GDP ultimately cannot plausibly be decoupled from growth in material and energy use, demonstrating categorically that GDP growth cannot be sustained indefinitely.' There is therefore potential tension between GDP growth and many other SDGs, e.g. those that revolve around the protection of biodiversity and the sustainable use of resources. What is of importance here is that any IA which is using incompatible objectives may find it difficult to provide clear recommendations.

With regards to inequality, SDG 10 includes targets that apply to the bottom (i.e. poorest) 40% of a population ('by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average'). However, there is no mentioning of the rapid accumulation of wealth of those at the very top of the income scale. This is by and large a global phenomenon and currently, the richest 1% are said to own half of the world's total private wealth.⁷ Importantly, the World Inequality Report of 2018⁸ stated that between 1980 and 2016 the poorest 50% of humanity only captured 12 cents in every dollar of global income growth, whereas the top 1% captured 27 cents. In this context, the SDGs also don't mention the problem of tax evasion and avoidance as well as the detrimental effects of financial speculation.

This editorial is an invitation for IA practitioners and researchers to engage more extensively with the SDGs, not just on how they can be implemented through IA, but also associated challenges. In this context, IAPA would be pleased to accommodate relevant papers.

Subsequently, in this issue, seven papers and a book review are presented to you. Topics covered include economic, social, health, environmental and heritage impact assessments. Furthermore, management for sustainability and impact assessment teaching and training are explored. Authors are from Australia (Fiona Miller and Richard Howitt, both of Macquarie University; Angus Morrison-Saunders and Megan Jones, both of Edith Cowen University; Richard Parsons of the New South Wales Department of Planning, Industry and Environment; Galina Williams of CQ University; and Bryan Jenkins of the University of Adelaide), the Netherlands (Lara Mottee, Jos Arts, Patrick Patiwaal, Peter Groote and Frank Vanclay, all University of Groningen), Spain (Carlos Iglesias-Merchan and Elvira Dominguez-Ares of the Polytechnical University of Madrid) as well as for the book review (on 'Legal pathways to deep decarbonization in the United States'), the United States (Weston Fisher, US).

Enjoy reading!

Notes

1. (1) No poverty, (2) Zero hunger, (3) Good health and well-being, (4) Quality education, (5) Gender equality, (6) Clean water and sanitation, (7) affordable and clean energy, (8) Decent work and economic growth, (9) Industry, innovation and infrastructure, (10) reduced inequalities, (11) Sustainable cities and communities, (12) responsible consumption and production, (13) climate action, (14) life below water, (15) Life on land, (16) Peace, justice and strong institutions, (17) Partnerships for the goals.
2. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2015/09/summit-charts-new-era-of-sustainable-development-world-leaders-to-gavel-universal-agenda-to-transform-our-world-for-people-and-planet/>.
3. https://www.iaia.org/uploads/pdf/Fastips_19SDGs.pdf [accessed 17 June 2019].
4. the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature.
5. https://oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/1518/Is_GDP_a_satisfactory_measure_of_growth_.html.
6. <https://www.resourcepanel.org/about-us>.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/21/world-26-richest-people-own-as-much-as-poorest-50-per-cent-oxfam-report>.
8. <https://wir2018.wid.world/>.

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