

SMARTENING IA THROUGH FOLLOW-UP: 50 YEARS OF LEARNING

Updating the best practice principles for IA follow-up

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IAIA21 Smartening Impact Assessment in Challenging Times
Virtual event; 18-21 May 2021

Abstract

Follow-up is essential for learning and determining the outcomes of impact assessment. This paper presents newly revised best practice principles for IA follow-up for consideration by the IAIA community.

1. Introduction

Follow-up is a fundamental component of best practice impact assessment (IAIA & IEA, 1999). We formally define IA follow-up in the next section, but for now we simply note that it is central to learning about IA performance for smartening up practice. Publications about follow-up commenced approximately 10 years after IA practice began. A summary of early literature on the topic is provided in Morrison-Saunders and Arts (2004), while more recent literature is reviewed in Pinto et al (2019) and Morrison-Saunders et al (2021). From 2000 to 2005 we hosted a series of workshops at successive IAIA annual conferences exploring practices in IA follow-up internationally. This culminated in publication of the existing Principles for best practice IA follow-up by IAIA (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007).

Following a request from IAIA to revise and update the existing Principles document, we hosted workshops at the IAIA18 and IAIA19 conferences for this purpose. We ended the latter workshop with a resolution to draft up revised IA follow-up best practice principles for discussion at the next conference. A full account of the revision process, including a detailed literature review, in which each section of the existing Principles document was systematically and critically reviewed is provided in Morrison-Saunders et al. (2021).

The purpose of this paper is to present the proposed revised IA follow-up best practice principles (Section 2) along with some brief explanatory notes (Section 3). Our focus is specific to ‘micro-scale’ follow-up (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p1) associated with the implementation of individual projects or plans. We invite feedback on the revised principles; our intention being to subsequently formalise a revised best practice principles document for publication by IAIA as well as guidance material for applying the principles in practice (something suggested to us in previous conference workshops).

To contextualise the principles presented in the next section, we were guided by the following criteria:

- Keep framing text to a minimum, so that individual IA follow-up principles are the central focus.
- Only have one core idea per IA follow-up principle.
- Ensure that each core idea is fundamental to IA follow-up.
- Only express a core idea once (i.e. avoid overlap between principles).

- Avoid overlap with the existing IAIA and IEA (1999) Principles of EIA Best Practice, unless it can be justified.

This approach leads to a much more succinct format relative to the existing Principles document. These are presented in the next section and comprise a new and simple definition of IA follow-up, a new objective of IA follow-up, and 15 individual principles.

2. Proposed principles for best practice IA follow-up

Definition of impact assessment follow-up

Impact assessment follow-up can be defined as:

- *Understanding the outcomes of development projects or plans subject to impact assessment.*

Objective of impact assessment follow-up

- To learn about the performance of impact assessment projects in order to inform ongoing project management and future related impact assessment applications.

Impact assessment follow-up principles

Impact assessment follow-up should:

1. State the objective of each impact assessment follow-up activity and the overall program.
2. Be tailored to context.
3. Commence early in the impact assessment process (e.g. during screening and scoping stages).
4. Be carried out throughout the project/plan life-cycle.
5. Be transparent.
6. Be accessible to all impact assessment stakeholders.
7. Provide clear accountability for impact assessment follow-up responsibilities.
8. Provide clear, pre-defined and well-justified performance criteria.
9. Specify enforcement provisions.
10. Promote continuous learning from experience to improve future practice.
11. Facilitate adaptive environmental management.
12. Be flexible according to emerging needs.
13. Inform and be informed by follow-up for other relevant activities at different levels of decision-making (tiering).
14. Consider cumulative effects.
15. Consider the overall effects of the project/plan.

3. Explanatory notes

In this section, we provide some brief explanatory notes about the proposed new principles for best practice IA follow-up. More detailed explanation and justification can be found in Morrison-Saunders et al (2021).

3.1 Definition of IA follow-up

The existing Principles document describe follow-up as “essential for determining the outcomes of EIA” (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p1). The revised definition upholds this sentiment.

3.2 Objective of IA follow-up

A new objective builds upon the revised definition of IA follow-up emphasising the learning and management purposes of carrying out follow-up. What is needed to accomplish this objective includes:

monitoring – collection of activity and environmental data relevant to project performance determination;

evaluation – of monitoring data in light of performance standards, predictions or expectations;

management – making decisions and taking appropriate actions in response to issues arising from monitoring and evaluation activities;

engagement and communication – with stakeholders on all aspects of IA follow-up (i.e. from design of follow-up programs during the early stages of IA through to implementation once project construction and operations commence); and

governance – processes and arrangements enabling implementation of the IA follow-up activities.

The first four of these points formed the basis for the original definition of IA follow-up in the existing Principles document (Morrison-Saunders, 2007, p1), while the governance element was an addition made by Pinto et al (2019) in their systematic critique of the existing Principles.

3.3 IA follow-up principles

Here, we briefly address each principle in turn. In doing so, we use groupings of the principles in terms of a similar focus or function.

Principle 1 [*state the objective of each IA follow-up activity and the overall program*] is self-explanatory. It captures the sentiment of being “objectives-led and goal oriented” in the existing Principles (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p3).

Principle 2 [*be tailored to context*] acknowledges that individual applications of IA follow-up will vary according to the specific contextual factors at play (e.g. project type or locality; significance of impacts or issues arising; or institutional setting). It accords with the notion of being “fit-for-purpose” in the existing Principles (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p3).

Principle 3 [*commence early in the IA process (e.g. during screening and scoping stages)*] and **Principle 4** [*be carried out throughout the project/plan life-cycle*] form a pair focusing on the timing when IA follow-up takes place. Both aspects regarding commencing preparation for IA follow-up and continuing with follow-up undertakings for the full life-cycle of development activities are also in the existing Principles (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p3).

Principle 5 [*be transparent*] and **Principle 6** [*be accessible to all IA stakeholders*] form a pair related to communication with stakeholders and the rights of citizens to know how projects/plans are being managed and the performance arising. Transparency is included in the existing Principles (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p2), but here we have also singled out ease of access to IA follow-up information, as it has been a frequent point of discontent and poor practice in the past (Morrison-Saunders et al, 2021). This is an instance where the IA follow-up principles do overlap with "Basic Principles" for EIA more generally (IAIA & IEA, 1999, p3).

Principle 7 [*provide clear accountability for IA follow-up responsibilities*], **Principle 8** [*provide clear, pre-defined and well-justified performance criteria*] and **Principle 9** [*specify enforcement provisions*] form a group of principles focused on the quality of IA follow-up activity. Rather than attempt to document the roles of different stakeholders in IA follow-up, as is the case in the existing Principles – e.g. the section of text on "who does follow-up" (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p2) and individual Principles directed toward the "proponent of change", "regulators" and "the community" (p3) – we consider it sufficient for Principle 7 to simply ensure that there is clear accountability for whoever is involved in IA follow-up, rather than seek to itemise actions for each stakeholder group. This is consistent with the IAIA & IEA (1999) principles for EIA. The inclusion of performance criteria (Principle 8) matches an existing Principle (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p3). Specifying enforcement provisions for IA follow-up (Principle 9) is a new addition here; it arose from workshop participants and recent literature as explained in Morrison-Saunders et al (2021).

The next four principles, being:

- **Principle 10** [*promote continuous learning from experience to improve future practice*];
- **Principle 11** [*facilitate adaptive environmental management*];
- **Principle 12** [*be flexible according to emerging needs*]; and
- **Principle 13** [*inform and be informed by follow-up for other relevant activities at different levels of decision-making (tiering)*]

form a group directed to the outcomes of IA follow-up. Learning (Principle 10) is central to IA follow-up as indicated in the objective of follow-up outlined previously, and appears in several places within the existing Principles. Adaptive environmental management (Principle 11) is a long-standing practice associated with IA follow-up, also appearing in several places within the existing Principles. It refers to the natural resource management approach as originally proposed in Holling (1978). The notion of adjusting or altering IA follow-up programs themselves (Principle 12) in response to emerging needs was mentioned in supporting text in the existing Principles document pertaining to "operationalizing EIA follow-up" (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p4). Here, we have included it in a principle, and in doing so, we have avoided also using the term 'adapt' to describe it, so as to keep this principle distinct from the preceding one. The application of learning from follow-up of one IA activity to another, including the notion of tiering between project and plan or other strategic levels of IA (Principle 13) is only obliquely mentioned in the text of the existing Principles document in terms of "learning from experience to improve EIA processes in the future" (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p1 – also simply as "learning from experience" in two of the existing Principles, p3). As noted and reviewed in Morrison-Saunders et al (2021), it is mentioned frequently in the IA follow-up literature; thus, we considered it appropriate to include in a principle.

Finally, **Principle 14** [*consider cumulative effects*] and **Principle 15** [*consider the overall effects of the project/plan*] are a pair that focus on the breadth or scope of impacts that are addressed in IA follow-up programs. Cumulative effects (Principle 14) are specifically addressed in the existing

Principles (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p2), meaning that follow-up activity should account for the impact on a particular component of the environment affected by other development activities in the local or regional setting as the project or plan under evaluation. As explained further in Morrison-Saunders et al (2021), the notion of considering the overall effects of a development (Principle 15) refers to how each of the individual effects or impacts of a development interact with each other to inform a holistic perspective of the project or plan outcomes. We have chosen this more concrete focus for the new principle instead of the expression "dealing with... sustainability issues" used in the existing Principles document (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2007, p2).

4. Next steps

We have formulated and presented this suite of revised IA follow-up principles to fulfil the commitment we made at the IAIA19 conference and specifically to seek inputs/reactions to them. The longer account of the revision of the existing Principles document in Morrison-Saunders et al (2021) similarly invites response from readers.

We will collate and closely consider the feedback we receive with the intention of formulating a final set of revised principles document for IAIA. It is also our intention to produce an accompanying guidance document if deemed appropriate.

As stated in the Introduction, the focus of this paper has been exclusive to micro-scale follow-up for individual development activities. Looking further into the future, there is the possibility of establishing principles specific to macro scale (system or jurisdiction level) applications of IA follow-up. We welcome any feedback from readers in this regard.

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