

RPS GLOBAL HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT BRIEFING



INTRODUCTION

This briefing highlights the benefits of using **Health Impact Assessment (HIA)** to inform the decisions that shape society.

Projects, programs, plans, policies, strategies, or even legislation are often devised with objectives centred around economic growth and infrastructure development.

Such initiatives may inadvertently exacerbate lifestyle-related diseases and widen the gap between the healthiest and least healthy people. The critical understanding of public health implications is often missing.

DEFINITION

HIA is a process which systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a project, program, plan, policy, or strategy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population.

HIA generates evidence for appropriate actions to avoid or mitigate health risks and promote health opportunities. HIA guides the establishment of a framework for monitoring and evaluating changes in health as part of performance management and sustainable development¹.



HIA

Is used to improve population health through more informed decision-making

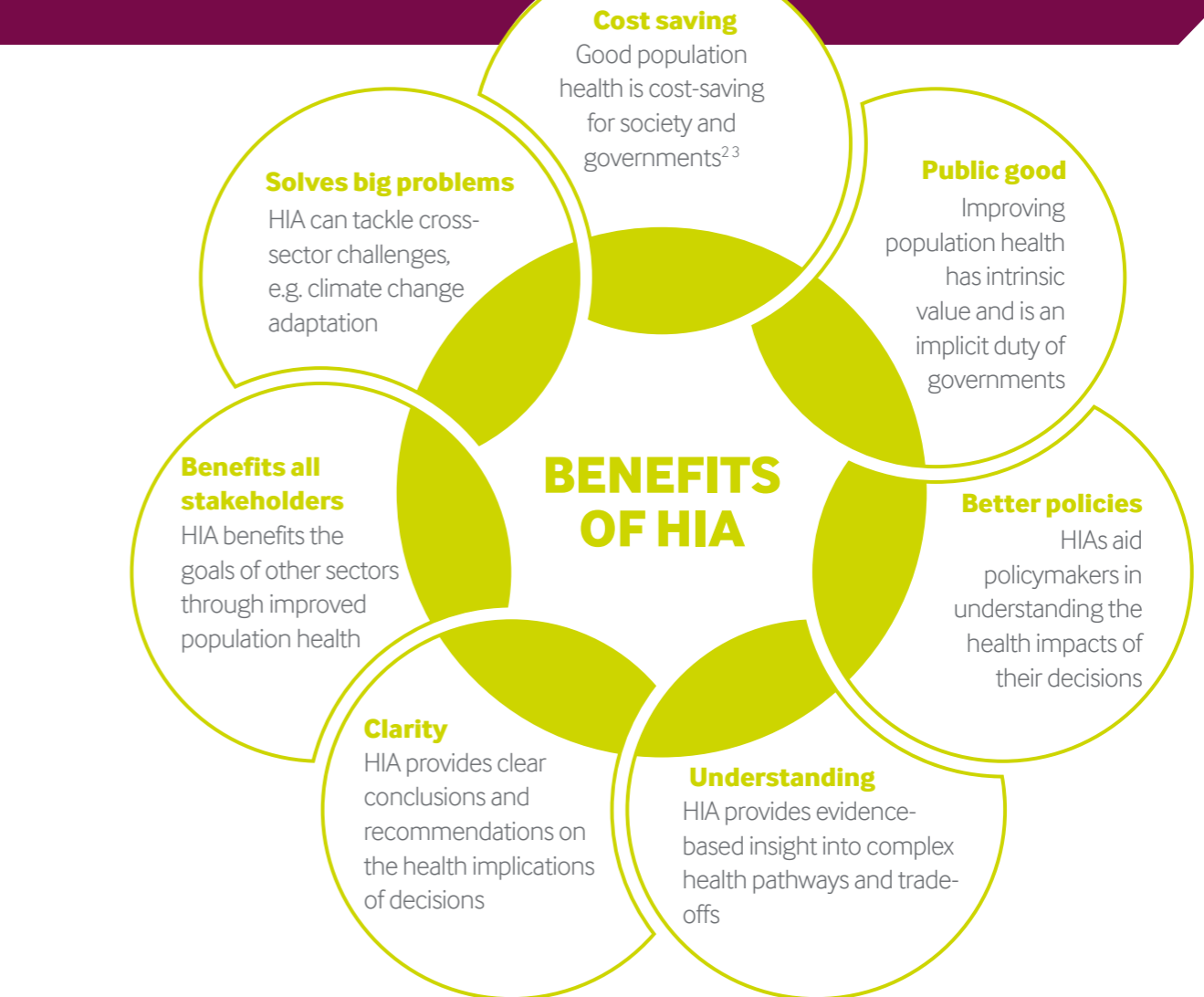
Can be applied to decisions about new legislation, strategies, policies, plans or projects

Adds value and reduces risk. HIA has a clear methodology but can be used flexibly in many contexts

May be undertaken as a standalone report or can be integrated within other assessments

Triggers include financial lending criteria, legal obligations, policy requirements and voluntary practice

We have a leading team of experts to deliver HIAs globally



Comprehensive approach to health HIA considers a broad range of influences on population health

Ethical use of evidence
HIA is transparent and rigorous in the sources of evidence it uses

CORE PRINCIPLES

The following principles guide HIA¹

Sustainability
HIA is part of delivering sustainable development

Equity and equality
HIA identifies if some people would be more affected, and if that is fair

Participation
HIA centres around those affected by a decision

HIA considers the ways health is affected, including if there are health inequalities i.e. the decision causes differences between the health of groups within a population.

Different groups may include young people, older people, people on low incomes, people with existing poor health, people who experience social disadvantage, or people more affected because of where they live or work.

Practical activities in undertaking the HIA

- Reviewing evidence, including population health indicators, scientific literature and health priorities
- Understanding the behavioural patterns, lifestyle choices and cultural practices within a community
- Assessing how the change would affect peoples' health, directly and indirectly
- Reviewing the implications for healthcare services, including changes in demand on hospitals and clinics
- Considering if there may be unintended consequences of a decision, including in other sectors
- Recommending measures to mitigate any adverse health effects and enhance beneficial health effects

APPLYING HIA

HIA uses 'determinants of health' to describe the main ways that population health is influenced by a decision. The following are illustrative⁴:



Healthy lifestyles

such as opportunities to exercise and eat healthily



Safe and cohesive communities

such as access to good quality housing and transport



Socio-economic conditions

such as job opportunities and training availability



Environmental conditions

including air, water and soil quality, and noise exposures



Health and social care services

covering medical, occupational and other care services

OPTION SELECTION

When a big decision is being made, such as a new government policy, a municipal area plan, or a particular infrastructure development project, there are typically a small number of options to choose between.

A strategic HIA can help the decision-maker by identifying which alternative is better for:

- Narrowing health inequalities
- Promoting healthy lifestyles
- Promoting safe and cohesive communities
- Enhancing socio-economic conditions to enable people to thrive
- Enhancing environmental conditions
- Improving access to good-quality health and social care

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In doing so the HIA considers the overall 'health objective' relevant to the decision, for example:

The health objective is to improve the physical, mental and social wellbeing of current and future populations (including vulnerable groups and those who would be most affected by implementation of the proposal).

Particular regard is to be paid to health inequalities, healthy lifestyles, safe and cohesive communities, socio-economic conditions (including education and employment), environmental conditions and health and social care services⁴.

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Benefits of conducting HIA at different levels

There are three main types of HIA: strategic HIA, checklist HIA and comprehensive HIA.

Benefits of Strategic HIA

Strategic level decisions (e.g. of a new policy, plan, programme or piece of legislation) deal with principles and the overarching strategy of change. Strategic HIA fine-tunes such major decisions in favour of public health. The HIA is evidence-based and tailored to the specific context but can also be the least resource intensive and most influential form of HIA. A strategic HIA is a key opportunity for the early identification of unintended adverse effects to a population's health. A strategic HIA also enables beneficial health considerations to be integrated early, setting a trajectory of long-term societal good health. Strategic HIA is fundamental to reducing the barriers in society that prevent people making healthier choices. The process applies a public health lens.

Benefits of a Checklist HIA

A checklist approach to HIA is a structured and systematic tool to evaluate if certain population health issues are covered by a decision. A checklist approach is 'rapid', meaning it can be conducted within short timeframes and often using existing data. Such HIAs are valuable for swift health considerations, offering immediate action if gaps are identified. The tool can proportionately promote public health. Checklists are however not exhaustive and may offer limited opportunity to identify population health risks and opportunities that are specific to a particular context. This type of HIA is often undertaken for small or medium-sized projects.

Benefits of a Comprehensive HIA

A comprehensive HIA provides an in-depth analysis of the likely population health effects of a decision. The HIA draws on evidence sources to focus on the most relevant population issues. The HIAs may also generate new evidence, for example through stakeholder engagement or new analysis. This approach offers a detailed understanding of the key health impacts resulting from a decision. The HIA makes recommendations to improve the decision, including to avoid significant unintended adverse effects to vulnerable population groups. This type of HIA is often undertaken for large projects or detailed plans.

CONCLUSION

HIA is a core instrument in today's decision-making, improving population health, an outcome which is cost saving for society and governments.

HIA is a tool for any sector and is applicable to decisions about projects, programs, plans, policies, strategies, or even legislation.

The briefing distinguishes between the benefits of strategic, checklist and comprehensive approaches to HIA, each offering unique advantages. Strategic HIA fine-tunes major decisions in favour of public health. Checklist approaches provide swift insights for urgent decision-making. While comprehensive HIAs provide an in-depth investigation into health effects, providing valuable recommendations.

The rigour and adaptability of HIA empowers decision-makers and provides the understanding of potential health impacts, intended or unintended.

As we navigate complex challenges and pursue sustainable development, regularly using HIA is instrumental in healthier, more inclusive and equitable communities globally.

RPS has a leading team of HIA experts to deliver HIA at all scales and all jurisdictions. To enquire further, contact ryngan.pyper@rpsgroup.com

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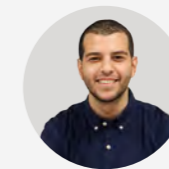
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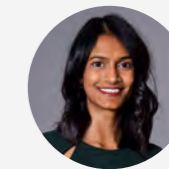
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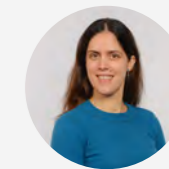
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⁴Pyper, R., Cave, B., Purdy, J., & McAvoy, H. (2021). Institute of Public Health (IPH) guidance: Standalone Health Impact Assessment and health in environmental assessment.

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