

Sustainability Impact Assessment

The notion of sustainability impact assessments as an analytical tool was presented by Muschett (2000) as a way to improve upon the deficiencies and limitations of traditional environmental impact assessments, lifecycle assessments and World Business Council on Sustainable Development approaches.¹ To varying degrees, these other approaches did not comprehensively include the full set of social, economic equity, environmental and natural resource issues associated with sustainability. At about the same time, the development and use of sustainability impact assessments (SIA) was being promulgated by the European Union to help incorporate sustainability concerns into trade policy and trade negotiations.

Since that time the use of SIA has become more widely accepted among the European Union countries but, regretfully, interest and applications have lagged in the U.S. Gerald Beyer, in a report issued by the European Sustainable Development Network, has defined sustainability impact assessments as a “systematic and iterative process for the assessment of the likely economic, social and environmental impacts of policies, plans, programmes and strategic projects, which is conducted during the preparation of them and where the stakeholders concerned participate pro-actively. The main aim is to improve the performance of the strategies by enhancing positive effects, mitigating negative ones and avoiding that negative impacts are transferred to future generations.”²

Although, as indicated above, there needs to be a comprehensive set of basic questions and impacts examined for the SIA to improve upon other methodologies, the emphases and level of details will vary somewhat dependent upon the particular application, as illustrated in the report by Gerald Beyer. General guidance for the preparation of SIA has been provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).³

¹ F. Douglas Muschett, “Sustainability impact assessments: a new comprehensive framework for raising the bar beyond existing environmental assessments,” *International Journal of Sustainable Development*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2000, pp. 257-275. (Found in the “Sustainability Papers and Publications” section of this website)

² Gerald Beyer, “*Sustainability Impact Assessments: Approaches and Applications in Europe*,” European Sustainable Development Network Quarterly Report, June 2007.

³ Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation, *Guidance on Sustainability Impact Assessment*, July 2010.