

Citizen Participation in Health Impact Assessment: An Overview of the Risks and Obstacles

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One of the mandates of the National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCCHPP) is to inform Canadian public health practitioners about effective strategies for promoting the adoption of healthy public policies. Health Impact Assessment (HIA) currently represents one of the most structured practices available to public health actors. It is applied to policies developed by sectors other than that of health that can significantly affect health determinants. This fact sheet focuses on one of the methodological aspects of implementing health impact assessments, namely the role that can be assigned to citizen participation.

Definitions

HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) can be defined as a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population (European Centre for Health Policy, 1999).

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation refers to all of the means that are used to involve, whether actively or passively, citizens or their representatives in an HIA process.

Risks/Obstacles to Citizen Participation

The founding documents of HIA, and in particular the Gothenburg Consensus paper (European Centre for Health Policy, 1999), identify citizen participation as one of the cornerstones of HIA. In fact, some practitioners and researchers maintain that an HIA remains incomplete without the effective and concrete participation of the community (Dannenberg, Bhatia et al., 2006, p.266).

However, participatory practices in HIA are still limited in scope and number (Gagnon, St-Pierre et al., 2010). In addition, even the idea of citizen participation in HIA seems poorly articulated and is sometimes called into question (Mahoney, Potter et al., 2007; Wright, Parry et al., 2005). Basing our discussion on a review of the literature on HIA¹ carried out using predetermined terms,² we will explore, in this fact sheet, five categories of factors that can explain the significant gap between the participatory rhetoric attached to HIA, and actual practices. It should be noted that these factors can be simultaneously viewed as risks or obstacles. In fact, strong advocates for citizen participation see them as obstacles that can and must be overcome. Others see them more as real risks that serve to explain these actors' mitigated interest in, perhaps even their opposition to, citizen participation in HIA.

1) ORGANIZATIONAL RISKS/OBSTACLES

Public organizations that are called on to conduct HIAs (e.g.: public health branches, regional health authorities, or municipalities) have limited human and financial resources with which to support citizen participation strategies (Kearney, 2004). In addition, establishing participatory processes can prove incompatible with decision making timeframes, which are often very short

¹ Four databases indexing scientific journals covering public health and the social sciences were consulted for our literature review: PubMed, OvidSP, EBSCO Host and CSA Illumina. Searches were carried out using predetermined terms and were aimed at identifying all of the relevant publications published before July 2009, in both French and in English. Initial searches led to the identification of 443 potentially relevant articles. The title and abstract of each article were analyzed to determine their relevance and duplications were eliminated. All articles examining citizen participation in other sectors were eliminated (e.g.: environmental impact assessment). The relevant articles were then analyzed in greater depth, along with their references, so as to identify other publications of interest. Our final inventory included 51 articles focused on citizen participation in HIA.

² Searches carried out using PubMed and OvidSP used the following terms and boolean operators: "health impact assessment" AND "consumer participation". The searches carried out in EBSCO Host and CSA Illumina used the following terms and boolean operators: (Public OR Communit* OR Citizen* Or Stakeholder*) AND (Participat* OR Consult* OR Involv* OR Engag*).



(Wright et al., 2005; Mahoney, et al., 2007). Thus, tension continues to exist between the time and resources available to meet decision makers' demands with respect to HIA, and the time and resources required to establish a citizen participation strategy.

2) COMMUNITY RISKS/OBSTACLES

Some HIA practitioners appear to doubt the desire of citizens to invest time and energy in an HIA process; citizens already being quite busy fulfilling their own daily obligations (Parry & Wright, 2003, p.388). Moreover, some excluded or marginalized groups might be difficult to mobilize (Wright et al, 2005, p.61). It is also possible that citizens' mistrust of governmental institutions makes the participatory methods used in HIA appear untrustworthy to them (Kearney, 2004, p.227).

The Five Risks/Obstacles to Citizen Participation

1. Organizational
2. Community
3. Political
4. Theoretical
5. Methodological

3) POLITICAL RISKS/OBSTACLES

Decision makers can also themselves be mistrustful, and may associate certain risks with citizen participation in HIA. Unlike some authors who see the participatory approach as consensual and cooperative (Lester & Temple, 2006, p.916), others, like Kearney (2004, p.227), point out that it can spark controversy within a community or reignite a latent conflict, which will impede the decision-making process. Some government authorities also fear that citizens could mount systematic opposition toward any large-scale project and that the decision-making process could thus be held hostage (Kearney, 2004, p.225). Still according to Kearney (2004), decision makers are generally risk-averse. They could be hesitant to commit to a participatory process that risks undermining their ability to implement projects, programs or policies.

4) THEORETICAL RISKS/OBSTACLES

Some authors contend that the idea of citizen participation is poorly articulated in the founding documents of HIA; these documents evoke the notion without, however, making explicit what is

meant (Mahoney et al., 2007). Thus, it seems that the meaning of "citizen participation" remains rather ambiguous, as does the way to integrate it into the science of HIA. Some even argue that the theoretical foundations of HIA have not yet reached a level of maturity that allows for the risk-free involvement of citizens (Cole, Shimkhada et al., 2005, p.385).

5) METHODOLOGICAL RISKS/OBSTACLES

The literature on HIA offers few clear answers to the questions that concern practitioners: Which citizens should be involved? At which point in the HIA process should they be involved? What should be their level of involvement in (or degree of influence on) the HIA process? The absence of a proven method thus seems to feed a certain amount of scepticism toward citizen participation. Some view it as an intangible practice and an unattainable goal (Elliott & Williams, 2008, p.1112).

Conclusion

The rhetoric of participatory HIA is confronted with several significant risks and obstacles. These reflect, in large part, the fact that citizen participation in HIA is an emerging practice. This novelty gives rise to concerns and uncertainty about the effects citizen participation might have on HIA and on the decision making process. However, it seems important to place these risks and obstacles in perspective, by examining the considerable arguments in favour of involving citizens in an HIA process, which we have documented in another fact sheet. One must also consider the fact that citizen participation can rely on a variety of means to help mitigate some of the risks and obstacles identified above, regardless of the goals one has in undertaking the HIA. Thus, a final fact sheet in this series documents the practical dimensions of implementing a participatory approach.

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