« Social Impact Assessment » : an analysis of a decision-support tool to tackle poverty and social health inequality

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**Abstract**

Despite their significant potential and their increasingly frequent introduction at different policy levels, the role of impact assessment tools in the policy process remains questioned. The effectiveness of impact evaluation tools appears to be limited when applied in the context of policy issues such as poverty and social inequality. Even more than their complexity, it is the intrinsic controversial nature of these phenomena and the lack of consensus on how to tackle poverty and social inequality, that makes that knowledge resulting from an evaluation, will not always play a direct and instrumental role in the policy-making process.

In this PhD, we investigated how to adapt and improve the design and application of the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) tool, in order to better exploit its decision-support potential in the fight against poverty.

Based on a (theoretical and practical) analysis of the functioning of policy and decision-making processes and the mechanisms of policy change, our attention went to the various decision-support functions of SIA. We identified the function of _instrumental learning_ as the most consensual function, which is also expected by policy makers. In addition, we identified the function of _conceptual learning_ as potentially the most powerful function, which is often neglected and therefore under-exploited.

- Through the function of _instrumental learning_, SIA must provide precise information that can be used immediately in decision making. In this first perspective, the emphasis is on improving and optimizing a given policy proposal. The frame of reference of the policy measure is not called into question, and the focus is on the operational aspects. When identifying potentially negative effects of a policy measure on poverty, proposals for adaptation of the measure can be formulated to mitigate or compensate these effects. Positive effects can then be further strengthened and optimized.

- Through the function of _conceptual learning_, SIA must provide new ideas, perspectives and hypotheses that contribute to a broader understanding of poverty. This should increase insight into the potential effects of poverty policies. In this perspective, SIA must, in the longer term, contribute to ensure that public policy, in all policy areas, contributes to a global, effective, pertinent and sustainable poverty reduction policy.

Our proposal for the design of SIA is aimed at exploiting this double potential. We followed an iterative process in which we developed an initial proposal based on a literature study, on the one hand, and an analysis of a number of existing instruments for health and poverty impact evaluation in Ireland and Quebec (Canada), on the other hand. This proposal was then tested by means of its concrete application in contexts of ‘real-world policy-making’. We conducted two case studies in the Brussels context: a first one on a legislative proposal on integration programmes for immigrant newcomers, a second one on a proposal for a long-term care insurance. The observations made in the field, which were confronted with elements from the scientific literature, made it possible to adapt and refine our proposal.
The proposal for the design of SIA consists of four axes:

1. The alignment of SIA with the timing and limitations of the policy and decision-making process;

2. A clarification of the concepts of 'poverty' and 'impact on poverty' and an analytical scheme of 'determinants of poverty' to identify how and at what level a policy can have an impact on poverty;

3. A proposal for a methodological evaluation approach, inspired by the approach of realist evaluation. For this third axis we defined a series of questions for a SIA;

4. A proposal to integrate the knowledge and expertise of people in poverty into SIA.