

Environment and Health: Health Impact Assessment as a Planning Tool

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Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a planning tool, based on a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Its aim is supporting decision makers in selecting the best policy and planning decisions, in order to maximize health and minimize health inequalities. HIA is promoted by the World Health Organization in the planning / policymaking stage, in order to include health promoting environment, in its broad sense, as an integral part of decision making. This process has been gradually introduced as a standard procedure in many countries.

HIA combines disciplines such as ecology, environmental sciences, epidemiology, risk assessment, economy, sociology and anthropology. In addition, it emphasizes public participation throughout the process, and the importance of local knowledge and environmental, economic, cultural and social components for public health. HIA can help in resolving conflicts and increasing awareness to public health among the public, stakeholders and decision makers.

The Israeli HIA forum has been active since 2007, promoting HIA as a tool for decision making in Israel. It includes professionals from diverse fields, such as environment, health, urban planning and law. The Forum works to increase knowledge, awareness and practice of HIA among decision makers, and to promote HIA legislation and implementation. The law in Israel requires HIA for plans expected to impact the environment significantly (since 1981, modified 2003). HIA does not include a formal requirement to assess impact on human health. Since the introduction of HIA law, health impacts were assessed rarely, based on local awareness of specific committees. The Israeli HIA forum examined the world experience, and the possibilities to make HIA a legal requirement in Israel.

HIA methodology is an important tool suitable for planning healthy environment in Israel, but its implementation requires consideration of the unique characteristics of the society and environment in Israel, and creation of cooperation among a variety of sectors, such as health, environment and planning.