The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SPICe
The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Scottish Parliament Sustainable Development Impact Assessment Tool

Inneal Measadh Buaidh Leasachadh Seasmhach aig Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Version 2.3, updated 2022

Introduction

The sustainable development impact assessment (SDIA) tool provided in this document should help users assess how decision-making will affect the sustainability of a society's development.

The SDIA tool is **discursive**. This means that it is not designed to be used by one person alone, but by a group of people, working together to unpack and gain a deeper understanding of the matter under consideration.

The SDIA tool was originally developed to assess the impact of draft legislation and public policy, which are forms of decision-making about how a society will do something. However, through its use in the Scottish Parliament and elsewhere, it has been found to be of use in evaluating a range of types of decisions, e.g. what to include in a tender specification to ensure that a procurement exercise will support and not undermine sustainable development.

This version (2) is the product of some years of testing, use, and refinement. In keeping with the Scottish Parliament's founding principle of accessibility, openness and participation, it is freely available to use.

For use within the Scottish Parliament, please download version 3 instead, which places extra emphasis on climate change, equalities, participation and human rights. The Parliament has made political and statutory commitments to mainstream these across scrutiny, in addition to sustainable development.

Please use this tool in conjunction with its accompanying explanatory notes.

For more information, please email spice@parliament.scot.

What is sustainable development?

In this case, 'development' refers to the way in which societies evolve and progress, and 'sustainable' is something which can continue in the long term. So 'sustainable development' is about a method of societal development which can continue in the long term. Sustainable development was born out of the realisation that some human activity undermines our ability to meet our own needs.

For example, our increasing use of petroleum-fuelled transport increases the ease and convenience with which we can travel and access goods and services from around the world. But, burning fossil fuels in the engines of motor vehicles creates exhaust fumes, which contain air quality pollutants. Several of these pollutants are harmful to human health. In 2005, the World Health Organization found 'that transport-related air pollution affects a number of health outcomes, including mortality, nonallergic respiratory morbidity, allergic illness and symptoms (such as asthma), cardiovascular morbidity, cancer, pregnancy, birth outcomes and male fertility.'[1]

While the environment can cope and recover from the removal of a certain amount of natural resources or disposal of wastes into it, there is a limit to this ability. When ecological systems break down, the benefits that humans derive from them, such as fresh water provision, can be reduced.

Sustainable development (SD) was formally defined by the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development as *'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'*[2] It means that the way in which societies evolve and change should improve the capability of all people to meet their needs. Also, this should not be done by reducing the capability of subsequent generations or those who live outwith Scotland to meet their needs.

[1] **Krzyzanowski, M. et al (eds.) 2005:** *Health Effects of Transport-Related Air Pollution,* WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.
[2] **Brundtland, G.H. et al 1987:** *Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development.

What is sustainable development? continued...

In short SD is about trying to develop fair and just societies that can thrive in the very long term. In order for this to be possible, there are two essential conditions:

1. We cannot damage the environmental systems that make human and all other life possible and bearable.
2. Our economic, political and cultural systems cannot favour some people while harming others.

These conditions form the basis of the UK shared framework for sustainable development (figure 1), along with three supporting conditions:

1. An economy that doesn't damage the environment, and benefits all people.
2. Public policy that is based on sound evidence.
3. Governance systems that are open, democratic and participatory.

The SDIA tool is based on this framework.

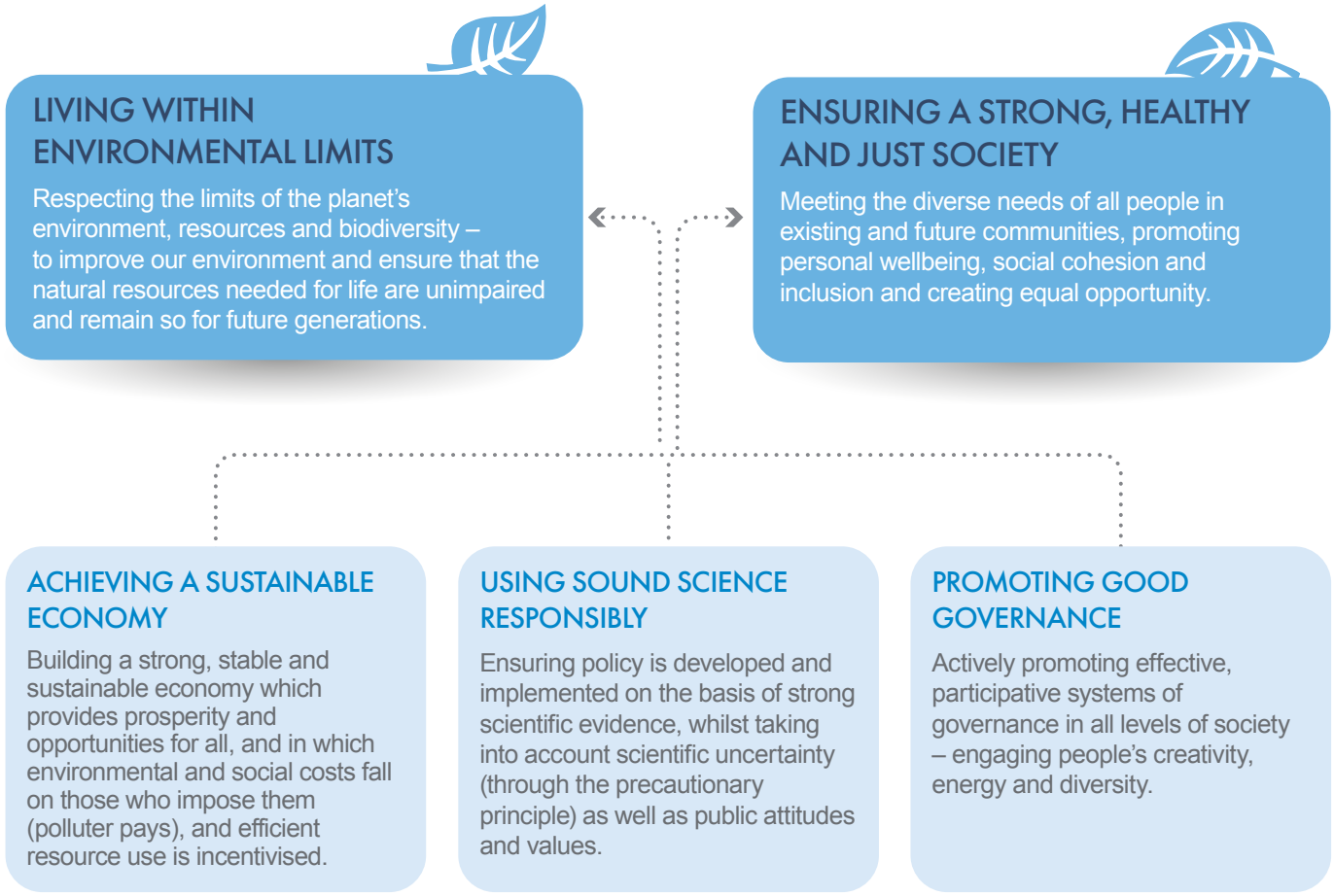

Figure 1: UK shared framework for sustainable development.

How to use the tool

The tool aims to help you to consider whether an issue – legislation, policy, activity, etc. – meets the two essential conditions detailed in the top half of the framework.

It includes a table for each essential and supporting condition. Theoretically, the first row of each of the two essential conditions tables could constitute a complete SD impact assessment (SDIA). However, SD requires holistic, systemic thinking, and in practice, it is often difficult to do this without some questions to prompt you.

You may therefore find that some of the answers to the questions are repetitions. In such cases, there is no need to write your analysis out all over again. **The tool should help you think, rather than be an exercise in form-filling, and you should use it as such**. If there are no new insights to add in a particular row, you could simply include a brief reference to the section of the table where the relevant information is, or leave it blank. You might even find that some rows are not relevant to the legislation or policy you are working on.

Sustainability thinking

Because all areas of public policy can contribute to, or detract from, sustainable development, impact assessment can be complicated. According to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, *'A skilled sustainable development practitioner needs to be a complex-systems expert... acknowledging the complexity of issues and looking to make a specific diagnosis of each specific case.'*[3]

However, pretty much anyone can learn to use sustainability thinking – most of us already do to some extent. Although it is strongly recommended that you get some technical support from a sustainable development expert, learning to think in a new way is mainly about getting stuck in and learning through experience.

Please contact spice@parliament.scot for more information.

Below are some guidelines for sustainability thinking:

Work as a group: Group discussion is a really powerful way of understanding an issue. Articulating your thoughts and listening to other people's should help to make the issue clearer, and give you confidence in your analysis. It can also be a more efficient use of time.

For example, working through the sustainability impacts of a piece of legislation or policy at your team meeting is likely to be quicker and more effective than struggling with it on your own.

Think about the big picture: This is the most important aspect of sustainability thinking. To understand whether legislation or policy can lead us towards a society that has high wellbeing, is fair, and can remain so in the very long term, we have to think about:

- **Other policy areas:** how your issue relates to others. For example, at first glance, you might not think housing policy / legislation has anything to do with climate change, but in fact, how houses are built and maintained, and how settlements are laid out makes a big difference to how much energy is used to power them. Sustainable development requires joined-up policy.
- **Time and space:** how your policy / legislation will affect people or the environment beyond its immediate scope, e.g. elsewhere in the world, or in the future.

[3] **Sachs, J.:** *The Age of Sustainable Development,* Columbia University.

Sustainability thinking continued...

- **Systems:** trying to understand how things work. A system is a collection of items that interact, leading to certain results. For example, the governance system in Scotland includes the Parliament, the Government, the judiciary, the public sector, civil society organisations, pressure groups, etc. The way in which all these interact determines the decisions and processes of governance. You can think of most things in terms of the system it is part of – the transport system, environmental systems, the welfare system, etc. Usually, for development to become sustainable, systemic solutions are required – that is policy or legislation that tries to address the root causes of a problem, rather than treating the symptoms.
- **Perverse outcomes:** sustainable solutions have minimal unwanted consequences on the same or other systems. For example, during the scrutiny of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, several witnesses argued that the proposed provision to make it easier for landlords to provide less secure accommodation to tenants with a history of antisocial behaviour, and to evict them more easily, would not address the root causes of the problem – rather it would simply shift the problem to another location.

There is no right answer – but there are lots of good solutions: The unsustainability of our development is what is known as a 'wicked problem.' It's complex and involves lots of different systems. There is no consensus about how to tackle it, and no simple, obvious or established solutions. That said, most policy areas could make a huge contribution, especially if they are joined-up, systemic, long term, try to avoid any unwanted consequences, and aim to meet peoples' needs.

When to use the tool

The tool is designed to support decision-making, which includes the scrutiny and passage of legislation. In relation to bills, you can use the tool at more or less any point from policy development to the writing of a policy memorandum. The same applies if you're looking at a corporate decision, or a committee inquiry.

However, you may find that there is an optimal point for it use in relation to your work – some examples are given below.

In general, as with most impact assessment, the most effective way to use it as early as possible in the decision process, so that the policy is as well thought-through as possible, and negative consequences are avoided or mitigated from the outset. Using this tool later on, such as once a policy has already been decided will be less effective, as some participants may not be willing to make changes, or it may not be possible to do so.

Guidance
Explanatory notes are available in a separate document, which can be used alongside the tool. They aim to clarify some technical terms and concepts used in the tool.

Expert support
It is strongly recommended that at least for the first few uses of the tool, users seek the support of a sustainable development expert. For example, in the Scottish Parliament, SDIAs are often carried out through a workshop facilitated by such an expert.

For more information, or to request support if you are member of Scottish Parliamentary Service, please email spice@parliament.scot

The word 'policy' is used in the tool to mean any decision process, including legislation, policy, strategy, topic of inquiry, or even a single decision, such as what a procurement tender should require.

The SDIA tool – 1. Living within environmental limits

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
1A Local environment Will the policy lead to any positive / negative changes in anyone's local environment? Will it affect anyone's access to green / blue space or local amenities? Will there be any impacts on the built environment? Would any changes affect the way people live, work, travel or interact? Has the mitigation of any negative impacts been considered, or the unfair distribution of any positive impacts?		
1B Use of materials or energy Will this policy lead to an increase / decrease in the level of materials or energy used by people, either in Scotland or abroad? Is there anything that can be done to minimise this? Could the policy lead to the increase / decrease in the quantity or hazardousness of any solid, liquid or gaseous waste?		

The SDIA tool – 1. Living within environmental limits

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
1C Ecosystem services Is the policy likely to enhance or protect the environment's ability to provide people with benefits? Could this policy threaten or reduce any of the benefits that the environment provides for people and if so how? Is there anything that could be done to minimise or mitigate any negative impacts?		
1 D Planetary boundaries Will the policy contribute to increased impact on any planetary systems that maintain the stable conditions on earth? • These include • biodiversity • biochemical cycles such as the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles • land use • climate • ocean acidity • freshwater use • the ozone layer • human-made substances entering the environment • particles and droplets in the atmosphere.		

The SDIA tool – 2. Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
2A Human needs and wellbeing Will this policy help to improve people's capability to meet their fundamental human needs? Will it help particular groups only? Consider whether it will reduce anyone's capability to meet their needs. If so, how? What might be needed to mitigate this? Are some needs prioritised over others? Will the policy help to improve anyone's wellbeing? Could it adversely affect anyone's wellbeing		
2B Equity Will this policy be fair? Will it address or prevent any injustices, unfairness or inequality? Could it affect any group adversely, now or in the future? Will it favour any particular group or confer any unfair advantages on it? Could the bill have any impacts on people outside Scotland? Could it impact future generations?		

The SDIA tool – 2. Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
2C Social capital – the relationships and networks that people can draw on, and the trust, reciprocity and mutual support they represent. Will this policy help to improve the connections between people, e.g. goodwill, friendship, trust, support, networks, etc. Could it strengthen communities, or have any adverse effects on them? Could the bill have any impacts on cultural diversity or heritage?		

The SDIA tool – 3. Achieving a sustainable economy

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
3A Livelihoods Will the policy have any positive / negative effect on anyone's livelihood and its decency and security? Has the mitigation of any negative impacts been considered?		
3B Resilience Could the policy affect the ability of any household, community or country to withstand shocks and stresses? Could there be any impact on people's abilities to adapt to environmental change, e.g. climate warming?		

The SDIA tool – 3. Achieving a sustainable economy

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
3C Society Could the policy have any effect on inequality, including how wealth, income, or both are distributed across society? Are there likely to be any financial or other costs to society?		
3D Environment Consider whether the policy will lead to any economic activity that cannot be sustained in the long term. Are environmental costs properly factored in to decision-making?		

The SDIA tool – 4. Promoting good governance

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
4A Participation in decision-making Could the policy have any impacts on anyone's ability to have their views heard and listened to, or otherwise engage in decision-making? Could the policy have any impact on the availability of data, or on transparency and accountability?		
4B Institutions Could the policy affect the way in which institutions make decisions? Could it improve or diminish institutions ability to gather and use evidence to support their decisions? Could it create any inconsistencies in public policy?		

The SDIA tool – 4. Promoting good governance

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
4C Economy Could the policy have any impact of the governance of the economy? Will any vested economic interests be served by it?		
4D Environment Could the policy have any impacts on whether public bodies contribute to environmental harm or improvement? Could the policy affect the way in which natural resources or ecosystem services are governed?		

The SDIA tool – 5. Using sound science responsibly

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
5A Evidence for the bill/policy Has enough evidence been gathered to support the policy? Is there any evidence that suggests that the policy aims or provisions need to be revised, for example if there are likely to be any unintended consequences or if any of the provisions could fail to achieve the policy aims? If so, how can the bill be improved?		
5B Improving knowledge and understanding Could the policy improve our knowledge and understanding? Could it have any negative impacts on the way information is gathered or shared?		

The SDIA tool – 5. Using sound science responsibly

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
5C Monitoring impacts Does the policy include any ways to measure or review its impacts? If so, will this include any participatory elements?		