



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SPICe

The Information Centre  
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

# Scottish Parliament Sustainable Development Impact Assessment Tool

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## Inneal Measadh Buaidh Leasachadh Seasmhach aig Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Version 3.2, updated 2022

# Introduction to version 3

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

This version of the SDIA tool (version 3) has been created for Scottish Parliament users. Other organisations are recommended to use V.2.

## **1.1 What's new in this version?**

Version 3 has been developed for use in the Scottish Parliament. More emphasis has been placed on mainstreaming priorities - climate change, equalities, human rights and participation - so that all are considered together in a joined-up way. More information about the revisions of the tool are provided in the Appendix.

The accompanying Explanatory Notes for version 3 support use of the tool and should be read alongside this document.

## 2. 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.'<sup>1</sup>

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.*'<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Krzyzanowski, M. et al (eds.) 2005: *Health Effects of Transport-Related Air Pollution*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.

<sup>2</sup> Brundtland, G.H. et al 1987: *Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development.

## 2. What is sustainable development? continued...

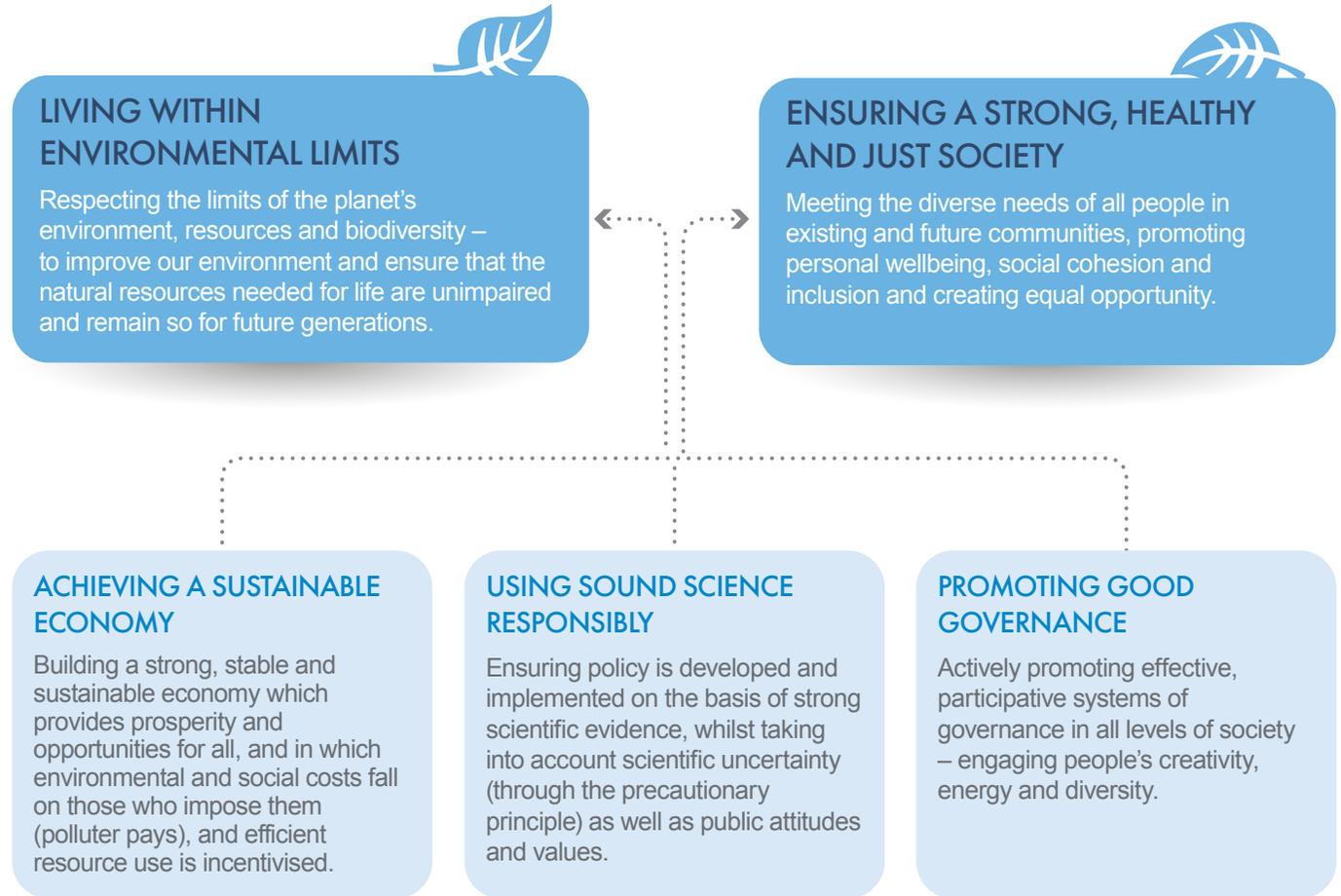
In short SD is about trying to develop fair and just societies that can thrive in the very long term. In order for this to be possible, there are two essential conditions:

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.

## 2. How to use this tool

This is a discursive tool, which means it is designed to be used in discussion with other people, in order to think through a particular topic. Several years of testing and refining the tool have shown that thinking together through discussion helps teams to unpack their topic. Because everyone brings different knowledge and experience to the discussion, participants can build on each other's ideas to arrive at a much more holistic and rounded view of the topic.

This tool is not a checklist, and will not provide the user with answers. In fact it may throw up questions, or highlight areas that need to be researched in more detail. For example, if there are likely to be impacts on the climate, you may need to look into how severe these might be. Thus the tool serves as a gateway impact assessment, allowing users to unpack multiple aspects of a policy, whether that is in the form of legislation, a corporate project, or any other decision process.

The tool aims to help you to consider what impacts decision-making – legislation, policy, activity, etc. – might have on the matters listed in the Introduction. Individually and together, the mainstreaming areas are 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 disrupt the planetary 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 fairly.
2. Public policy that is based on sound evidence.
3. Governance systems that are open, democratic and participatory.

Groups using the tool often find that it throws up something surprising that they had not previously considered. This is part of what we have been referring to as 'sustainable development thinking' (outlined on page 7).

The tool is based on the UK Shared Framework for Sustainable Development (Figure 1).

## 2. How to use this tool

### **The tool should help you think, rather than lead to an exercise in form-filling.**

While you can use the tool to keep a record of your thinking, by filling in the boxes, you should only do this if it will be useful. You will probably find that as you work through it, some of your responses will be repeated, or that some of the questions are not relevant to whatever you're looking at.

**This is a discursive tool**, which means that it requires users to deliberate and discuss the matter under consideration, in order to build on each other's ideas and bring different perspectives to bear on it. This will help users to unpack the matter in a more holistic way.

Following are some recommendations for getting the most of out of using the tool.

### **2.1 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 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. Everyone brings their unique combination of knowledge and experience to the table, so together you have a very powerful combination of lenses through which you can unpack your topic.

### **2.2 Request a facilitator**

There are a number of trained facilitators across the Parliament. It's strongly recommended that you ask one of them to support you in your first few impact assessments: a facilitator can guide you through the questions, provide some expert input if necessary, and, most importantly hold a safe space for your group. They (or a scribe) will also take notes for you. These will be returned to you to support your scrutiny or decision-making as required. **For more information please email [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)**

### **2.3 Explanatory notes**

Brief explanations of each mainstreaming area, and each criterion in the tool are available in the explanatory notes for this version of the tool.

# 3. Sustainable development thinking

Because all areas of public policy can contribute to, or detract from, sustainable development, and indeed human rights, equalities and climate change, 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.'<sup>1</sup>

Below are two important tips for SD thinking. Remember, a facilitator can be very helpful too.

## 3.1 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.

**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 how and what public policy decisions are made. 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 addresses the problem with the system in order to prevent unwanted outcomes, rather than dealing with the outcomes after they have occurred.

**Negative outcomes:** sustainable solutions have minimal undesirable consequences. In particular 'perverse consequences', which end up exacerbating the problem should be avoided.

An example of a solution likely to result in perverse consequences is the proposal, in the 2013 Housing (Scotland) Bill, to make it easier for landlords to evict tenants with a history of antisocial behaviour. While this might have alleviated the impact on one neighbourhood, as witnesses pointed out, it would not address the root causes of the problem – rather it would simply shift it to another area. This could cause distress for both the already-troubled individuals who were being evicted, as well as their new neighbours.

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<sup>1</sup> Sachs, J.: *The Age of Sustainable Development*, Columbia University Press, New York.

# 3. Sustainable development thinking

## 3.2 There is no one right answer

Societal inequality, human rights, inequality, climate change and unsustainable development are what are known as ‘wicked problems’. They’re complex and involve lots of different systems. There is no consensus about how to tackle them, and no simple, obvious or established solutions. That said, most policy areas could make a huge contribution, especially if they are joined-up, try to avoid any unwanted consequences, and focus on increasing wellbeing.

## 3.3 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 the 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 its 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 well thought-through, 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.

**Non-government bills:** Along with the proposer and/or their staff, you can use it to make an initial assessment of the policy proposal by filling in the ‘policy aims’ column. Here you should consider whether the policy aims will support sustainable development. At this stage, the tool could help the proposer to think about what the outcomes are likely to be, and whether this is what they want to see. At the end of the bill development process, you should have the information you need to complete the sustainable development section of the policy memorandum.

**Committee scrutiny:** You can use this tool at the approach stage, so that the scrutiny exercise itself is as holistic and impartial as possible. The best way to do this is through an impact assessment workshop which includes as many of the scrutiny support staff as possible, e.g. clerks, researchers, engagement staff, etc. This should ensure that you all have a thorough shared understanding of the bill, policy or organisation that will be scrutinised, and that your approach paper will cover the important issues, especially the root causes of any problems.

**Procurement** has found the tool to be useful for deciding on market research criteria and writing tender specifications.

## 4. Other impact assessments

You may find that the topic you are looking at has significant impacts on a particular mainstreaming area. In this case, you may wish to use one of the following tools, or contact the relevant expert:

**Equalities impact assessment:** <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/equality-impact-assessments>.

If you are supporting scrutiny within the Scottish Parliament, you may also find the Parliament's **equality impact assessment form** useful: [https://archive2021.parliament.scot/StaffAndManagementResources/EQIA/Form\\_2020\\_v2.0.docx](https://archive2021.parliament.scot/StaffAndManagementResources/EQIA/Form_2020_v2.0.docx)

To help with an Equality Impact Assessment, the Scottish Government's Equality Evidence Finder provides the latest data available on certain groups by policy area: <http://www.equalityevidence.scot/>

**Human rights self-assessment questionnaire:** [shrc\\_panel\\_self-assessment\\_tool\\_vfinal.pdf \(scottishhumanrights.com\)](#)

**Child Rights Impact Assessment:** [ENOC » Child Rights Impact Assessment](#)

To help with Human Rights Impact Assessment, you can use this guide to [Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals](#). It is a tool from the Danish Institute for Human Rights that allows you to search by SDG, human rights instrument, or simply a keyword search:

**Participation and engagement:** It is likely that the SDIA process will highlight who your committee might need to engage with in order to enrich its scrutiny exercise. For example, people who may be affected by legislation or policy will have insights from their lived experience. Alternatively, where the SDIA throws up questions which may be useful for you/your committee to look into further, you might need to engage those with relevant expertise.

You should consider carrying out **engagement planning** - guidance and support is available from the Participation and Communities Team ([pact@parliament.scot](mailto:pact@parliament.scot)).

## 5. The SDIA tool – 1. Living within environmental limits

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>1A Local environment</b></p> <p>Will the policy lead to any positive / negative changes in anyone's local environment? This might include local impacts of global problems such as climate change, or impacts of local pollution, such as air quality.</p> <p>Will the policy affect the ability of the non-human environment to thrive, e.g. would it cause climate impacts that might affect particular landscapes or species?</p> <p>Will it affect anyone's access to green / blue space or local amenities?</p> <p>Will there be any impacts on the built environment? Would any changes affect the way people live, work, travel or interact?</p>		
<p><b>1B Use of materials or energy</b></p> <p>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?</p> <p>Could the policy lead to the increase / decrease in the quantity or hazardousness of any solid, liquid or gaseous waste?</p>		

## 5. The SDIA tool – 1. Living within environmental limits

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>1C Ecosystem services</b></p> <p>Is the policy likely to enhance or protect the environment's ability to provide people with benefits? For example, a more stable climate could be beneficial to human health, food production, more regular weather, etc.</p> <p>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?</p>		
<p><b>1 D <a href="#">Planetary boundaries</a></b></p> <p>Will the policy contribute to increased impact on any planetary systems that maintain the stable conditions on earth?</p> <p>These include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• biodiversity</li> <li>• biochemical cycles such as the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles</li> <li>• land use</li> <li>• climate</li> <li>• ocean acidity</li> <li>• freshwater use</li> <li>• the ozone layer</li> <li>• human-made substances entering the environment</li> <li>• particles and droplets in the atmosphere.</li> </ul>		

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

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>2A Human rights and wellbeing</b></p> <p>Might any human rights might be affected by the policy? Has a human rights based approach been used in developing it? (This would mean that the policy seeks to prevent or eliminate unfair discrimination, and prioritises those are the most vulnerable, or face the greatest challenges to realising their human rights)</p> <p>Have the PANEL principles for human rights been applied?</p> <p><b>Participation</b> – have rights holders been able to participate in the development of this policy in a meaningful way?</p> <p><b>Accountability</b> – does the policy include any mechanism to assess its impact on human rights over time?</p> <p><b>Non-discrimination</b> – could the policy result in anyone facing unfair discrimination?</p> <p><b>Empowerment</b> – will people be able to understand and claim their human rights in relation to this policy?</p> <p><b>Legality</b> – will any human rights that might be affected by the policy be enforceable?</p> <p>Will the policy help to improve or adversely affect anyone’s wellbeing?</p>		

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

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>2B Equalities and equity</b></p> <p>Will this policy be fair?</p> <p>Will it address or prevent any injustices, unfairness or inequality? These might include climate, environmental or social justice.</p> <p>Could it affect any groups adversely, now or in the future due to age, disability, gender reassignment, race, belief, sex, sexual orientation, marital/partnership status, pregnancy/maternity or other characteristics? If so, have their needs, including access and participation, been taken into account?</p> <p>Will it favour any particular group or confer any unfair advantages on it?</p> <p>Could the policy have any impacts on people outside Scotland?</p> <p>Could it impact future generations?</p>		

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

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

## 5. The SDIA tool – 3. Achieving a sustainable economy

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

## 5. The SDIA tool – 3. Achieving a sustainable economy

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

## 5. The SDIA tool – 4. Promoting good governance

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>4A Participation</b></p> <p>Will the next stages of the development of the policy (e.g. scrutiny) you are assessing enable those who might be affected by it to have their views heard and listened to, or otherwise engage in the process? This might include adults and children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in different locations</li> <li>• with protected characteristics (listed at 5.2B)</li> <li>• who are seldom heard</li> </ul> <p>Are there likely to be any barriers to their participation? Will those who could be adversely affected have access to justice?</p>		
<p><b>4B Institutions</b></p> <p>Could the policy affect the way in which public institutions make decisions? Could the policy improve or diminish institutions' ability to gather and use evidence to support their decisions? Could it create any inconsistencies in public policy?</p>		

## 5. The SDIA tool – 4. Promoting good governance

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

## 5. The SDIA tool – 5. Using sound science responsibly

Theme	Policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
<p><b>5A Evidence for the policy</b></p> <p>Has enough evidence been gathered to support the policy? Are there any gaps in the evidence, e.g. science/knowledge, the opinions of those who might be affected, testing, etc.</p> <p>Is there any evidence which 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 could the policy be improved?</p> <p>Is there a need to reach out to anyone to understand their perspective or lived experience before the policy is finalised, or to complete this impact assessment?</p>		
<p><b>5B Monitoring and accountability</b></p> <p>Does the policy include any ways to measure or review its impacts, including on human rights, climate, equalities, participation, etc.?</p> <p>If so, will this include any participatory elements?</p> <p>Could the policy have any impact on the availability of data, or on transparency and accountability? Could it have any impacts on the way information is gathered or shared?</p>		

# Annexe: major revisions to the tool

**Climate change:** To ensure that climate change is considered as fully as possible, it has been highlighted in relation to several SD criteria, e.g. 5.1A and B, 5.2C, 5.5C.

**Human rights:** Questions from the Scottish Human Rights Commission's *Human Rights Based Approach Self-Assessment Tool* have been incorporated, including at 5.2A and B, and 5.5A and C. It is based on the PANEL principles of human rights, which are participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, legality.

**Equalities:** More explicit consideration of protected characteristics is now required (5.2B).

**Participation:** The emphasis on participation in general has been strongly increased due to the increased emphasis on human rights, and to reflect the Parliament's enhanced commitment to support participation in scrutiny. In addition, a question designed to ensure that users consider who they need to engage with has been added at 5.5B.

