

# IDEALISM VERSUS PRAGMATISM IN DESIGNING A CUSTOMISED SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK IN FLANDERS, BELGIUM

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## Abstract

Sustainability assessment is a comparatively recent instrument fostering governance for sustainable development. As an *ex ante* evaluation process, it aims to improve the quality of decision-making and to facilitate a much-needed transition towards sustainability.

In Flanders, the institutionalisation of sustainable development has entered public debate. A range of evolutions such as the adoption of regulatory impact analysis, the 2006 regional strategy for sustainable development and the introduction of sustainability assessment systems both at European and at federal Belgian level, have boosted interest in the development of a customised Flemish sustainability assessment framework. The *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* is taking on that challenge. After having developed an ideal-typical assessment process based on the international state of the art, on a detailed review of scientific literature and on expert interviews, the next phase of the project consists of a targeted stakeholder consultation.

In the process of designing a sustainability assessment framework, one encounters seemingly unavoidable conflicts between the need for a pragmatic and user-friendly approach that can easily be fitted into existing institutional arrangements; and the aspirational interpretation of sustainability assessment as a powerful process aiming at restructuring the policy cycle towards sustainable development. This presentation will list recommendations and reflections, based on the Flemish case-study and international experiences.

Keywords: sustainability assessment, Flanders, policy-making, policy recommendations

## INTRODUCTION

The current global environmental challenges demand new and innovative instruments and processes to progress towards a more sustainable society. While actions in favour of sustainability may range from shifting individual consumption patterns and implementing new business models to a re-organisation of the economic system, governance instruments for sustainable development are widely regarded as key factors of success in fostering sustainability.

Sustainability assessment can be such a powerful governance instrument. We define it here as '*an ex ante evaluation of a policy proposal, aiming at the integration of sustainability principles at all levels of decision-making by adapting or replacing the initial policy proposal in order to make the policy response coherent with aspirational sustainability principles agreed upon by a range of stakeholders*'.

Sustainability assessment allows decision-makers to make fully informed decisions, without jeopardising the freedom of political decision-making (Dupasquier, 2008; Gibson, 2005).

In order to design a user-friendly and effective sustainability assessment framework suited for a specific jurisdiction, a systematic analysis of the functions of sustainability assessment in the policy process is needed.

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In Flanders - Belgium's northern region - the institutionalisation of sustainable development has recently entered public debate. The adoption of regulatory impact analysis by the regional government in 2007 and the introduction of sustainability assessment systems both at European and at federal Belgian level, have boosted interest in the development of a customised Flemish sustainability assessment framework. The 2006 Flemish Regional Strategy for Sustainable Development explicitly calls to *'examine the possibility to carry out an analysis of the economic, social, environmental and administrative impacts of policy measures, in Flanders and on a global scale'* (Flemish Government, 2006).

On behalf of the Office of the Flemish Minister-President, the Policy Research Centre for Sustainable Development (of which the Human Ecology Department of the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* is a member) is taking on the challenge to develop a customised sustainability assessment framework to respond to key research questions on the subject:

- What are the main advantages of the introduction of sustainability assessment (SA) in Flanders?
- What do Flemish stakeholders expect from this new policy-supporting process?
- What are the main institutional barriers and opportunities facing sustainability assessment in Flanders?
- What should be the main steps of a sustainability assessment exercise?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research project builds on:

1. an overview of the state of the art in sustainability assessment through an extended review of the scientific literature;
2. explorative interviews of sustainability assessment experts;
3. a consultation of Flemish sustainability stakeholders, which included a survey and a series of in-depth interviews;

to develop a sustainability assessment guidance for Flanders.

The project is currently (May 2009) in this guidance development phase. The guidance will subsequently be tested on two case studies, and will subsequently be adapted to the needs of its users.

The scientific quality of the research is guaranteed through the project's steering committee, composed of experienced practitioners in the field of assessment and/or sustainable development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Key principles of sustainability assessment**

The design of the sustainability assessment guidance for Flanders is based on a number of key principles that came out of the literature review, the explorative expert interviews and the stakeholder survey. These principles are listed below, and subsequently discussed:

1. To provide the conditions to allow (social) learning effects to happen;
2. To produce both direct, proximate impact as indirect, substantive impact on the policy-making process;
3. To guarantee the input of verifiable scientific knowledge in the policy-making process;
4. To provide a forum where stakeholders can voice their opinion and confront their views;
5. To deal explicitly with the inherent uncertainty and subjectivity of governance for sustainability;
6. To provide a framework that is sufficiently adaptable to be linked with existing institutional arrangements and to respond to the expectations of all its users (policy-makers and other stakeholders alike);

7. To contribute to the societal transition towards sustainability.

The compilation of these principles synthesises the views of a wide range of international and Belgian assessment scholars and practitioners, and therefore form a sound base on which to build sustainability assessment guidance for a jurisdiction that has no experience with this kind of policy-supporting exercises.

Holder (2004) mentions the importance of learning effects but makes a distinction between the informational and the cultural function of an assessment. Owens (2004), Hertin *et al.* (2007) and Sinclair (2007) all consider the learning effects as being more important than the mere information-providing function of sustainability assessment. Mog (2004) even links these learning effects with the intrinsic features of sustainability as a non-absolute, dynamic concept subject to shifting interpretations.

The ultimate aim of sustainability assessment is to have a lasting impact on the policy-making process. The direct, proximate impact can be defined by answering questions such as: did the assessment lead to a reformulation of the policy problem at hand? Did the assessment lead to the formulation of a range of realistic policy options that were all thoroughly analysed? Did the assessment provide additional information that directly influenced the final decision? Did the assessment's recommendations lead to tangible modifications of the policy proposal? etc... But next to these questions shedding light on an assessment's direct impact, the 'substantive impact' places the exercise in a broader context by analysing the assessment's impact on the policy-making culture as a whole, instead of focussing on one specific case. The substantive impact acknowledges attitude changes and subtle long-term shifts in policy-making, rather than the -sometimes limited- impact of an assessment exercise on a specific proposal.

One can observe signs of Saviotti's (2007) ideal of an increasingly 'evidence-based society' in Flanders. This can be illustrated by the high-quality Environmental Reports (MIRA, 2009) and by the 'Policy Research Centres', which aim to scientifically support policy development in each of the thirteen policy domains for which the Flemish Region is competent. This evolution, together with the strong -but yet insufficiently coordinated- work on regional indicator sets, holds out the prospect of satisfying scientific input in future sustainability assessments.

As the current scientific paradigm is no longer strictly based on 'objectivity', but also includes normative elements, it is important to guarantee the input of a wide variety of stakeholders in an assessment process (Luks & Siebenhüner, 2007). Involving various stakeholder categories guarantees the acknowledgement of various opinions and interpretations and will ideally lead to better solutions for complex problems. Alternative framings of sustainability challenges are a central element of 'sustainability governance'.

Although specifically performed to reduce uncertainty about future impacts, sustainability assessment should acknowledge the inevitable uncertainties surrounding impact prediction and assessment, for instance by providing confidence intervals or by clearly explaining why certain mitigating actions are recommended. As Aarts & Van Woerkum (2002) rightly state: '*social developments are the unplanned result of planned actions of mutually dependent actors*'. Failing to recognize uncertainties might lead to a sense of artificial reassurance of decision-makers, thereby jeopardizing the precautionary principle.

Furthermore, a user-friendly sustainability assessment framework should be sufficiently adaptable to integrate existing institutional arrangements, as well as to be used in conjunction with other policy-supporting instruments such as Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA). Indeed, RIA has been introduced in Flanders in 2006, but keeps struggling with 'growing pains'. Let's also keep in mind that various actor categories can have diverging expectations about the function and implementation of sustainability assessment (Paredis *et al.*, 2006).

Finally, sustainability assessment should assist policy-makers in taking societal aspects into account that go far beyond their usual day-to-day practice. These include aspects relevant for other policy sectors (Jacob *et al.*, 2008), but also aspects relevant for society as a whole. Sustainability assessment should pave the way for society's transition towards sustainability, as stated by Rotmans' team (2006).

## 2. Recommendations to introduce sustainability assessment in the Flemish institutional landscape

The consultation of the future users of sustainability assessment in Flanders (civil servants, members of regional ministerial offices, civil society organisations, academics, consultants) will allow us to translate the abovementioned seven principles into practical guidance for sustainability assessment in a Flemish context. However, existing institutional arrangements will determine the way sustainability assessment is conceptualised and implemented. Following the ideas of Nykvist & Nilsson (2009), we analysed the key institutional barriers and opportunities influencing the introduction and the adoption of sustainability assessment in Flanders. In order to transfer the ideal-typical principles set out in section 1 to the reality of Flemish policy-making, we need to have a clear view of the present institutional landscape.

For the purpose of analysis, the institutional arrangements that will underpin the introduction of sustainability assessment in Flanders can be grouped into three main categories:

- the policy-making culture in Flanders;
- the institutional sustainable development policy framework;
- the Regulatory Impact Analysis practice;

The Flemish policy-making culture is characterized by institutionalised consultation mechanisms between government and civil society, and by a somewhat fuzzy relationship between administrations and more ‘political’ ministerial cabinets. This leads to unclear boundaries between policy preparation and actual decision-making, but also fosters collaborative governance.

The regional sustainable development policy is still in its infancy, but the existence of the Flemish Strategy for Sustainable Development, as well as the Regional Law (Decree) on Sustainable Development proves that sustainable development is considered to be a relevant policy issue. Finally, the existence of a Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA) framework can be viewed both as an opportunity and as a threat. Its stepwise and systematic approach to policy-making is a plus, while its (initial) narrow focus on administrative burdens and on business impacts does not foster a holistic interpretation of sustainability.

In order to ease the introduction of sustainability assessment in this institutional landscape, we issue a number of recommendations for the Flemish Government:

- There is a need to strengthen capacity-building efforts in sector ministries and in all administrations, as the knowledge of the opportunities of *ex ante* impact assessment for sustainable development are still not widely known.
- The inter-service coordination needs to be strengthened both at strategic and at operational level to ensure efficient and effective information exchange to feed the sustainability assessment procedure.
- The regular evaluation of the RIA schema needs to be used to open up the debate in order to transform the existing RIA into a wide impact assessment framework as used by the European Commission (EC, 2009).
- Increased coordination between the Sustainable Development Cell and the Regulatory Management Cell will ease the reform of the RIA to a fully-fledged impact assessment procedure.
- Sustainability Assessment should ultimately have a central position in the policy-making process, which needs to be gradually reformed to follow a Green Paper and White Paper approach. The Flemish Government is committed to introduce these approaches, but should strengthen the adoption of regulatory agenda’s to allow the timely planning of policy decisions and their *ex ante* assessments.
- By acting pro-actively, the Flemish Region can be an early adapter of the international trends towards increasingly holistic *ex ante* impact assessment procedures. This will save resources

when international pressures (e.g. coming from the European Union) rise in the future, and will also accelerate the transition towards sustainable policy-making.

## CONCLUSION

Introducing sustainability assessment in Flanders is a challenging endeavour. The Flemish Government's commitment to sustainable development is reflected through a range of institutional arrangements which together with the prevalent policy-making culture, offer a number of opportunities. On the other hand, institutional barriers hamper the introduction of sustainability assessment. The most important finding of our research so far is probably related to the realisation that the main window of opportunity to introduce sustainability assessment is not to be found within the existing sustainable development policy, but in the Regulatory Impact Analysis framework.

Ideal-typical principles and reasoned argumentation are key elements that will convince policy-makers to adopt *ex ante* impact assessment for sustainable development, but using existing arrangements may prove as important to actually introduce new ideas that will trigger a change in the policy makers' attitude. The systematic RIA process is an interesting starting point to introduce a strong impact assessment framework, as is shown by the example of the European Commission's Impact Assessment Guidelines.

Reforming the existing Flemish regulatory impact assessment scheme, together with an improved coordination between ministries and administrations are both important conditions for a successful introduction of sustainability thinking in *ex ante* assessments. If implemented properly, a (sustainability) impact assessment scheme will also be a powerful response to the critics emphasising the lack of maturity of the regional sustainable development policy. We believe that the introduction of (sustainability) impact assessment is a learning process on its own, and hope that this research project will bring on some new ideas and concepts to further feed the societal debate on the subject. The sustainability assessment guidance (now in progress) will have to reflect the ambitious goals of an ideal-typical assessment and will need to be embedded in existing institutional arrangements if it is to contribute to a more sustainable society.

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