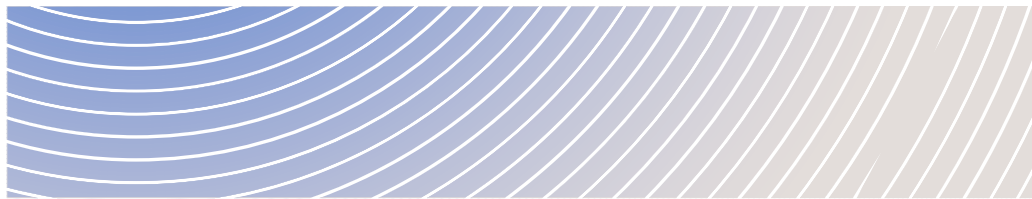


Workshop on strategic assessment under the *Impact Assessment Act*



PUBLIC DISSEMINATION DOCUMENT





Contents

Context and Purpose	1
What we heard	1
Application and Objectives of Strategic Assessment.....	1
Key Principles and Considerations for Conducting Strategic Assessment.....	2
Strategic Assessment and other Assessment Models.....	3
Final Remarks	3
Next Steps	4



Context and Purpose

On November 26, 2019, the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (the Agency) held a workshop on Strategic Assessment under the *Impact Assessment Act* (IAA). The workshop was funded through the Agency's research program administered by the Science Policy Division. The purpose of the workshop was to support the development of a strategic assessment policy that will describe the conduct of strategic assessments under the IAA. The objectives of the workshop were to identify:

- key principles, objectives and considerations to be captured in the strategic assessment policy;
- how best to link strategic assessment with project level impact assessments; and
- key criteria to help prioritize the policies, plans, programs or issues to be subject to strategic assessments.

The workshop solicited advice and guidance from experts in strategic assessment, including the following Canadian and international academics and practitioners:

- Ryan Barry – Nunavut Impact Review Board, Executive Director
- Bram Noble – University of Saskatchewan, Department of Geography and Planning
- Robert Gibson – University of Waterloo, Department of Environment and Resource Studies
- Maria Rosario Partidario – University of Lisboa, Department of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geo-resources
- Cole Atlin – next generation environmental assessment practitioner and researcher
- Peter Croal – recently departed from the Canadian International Development Agency, Manager, Environmental Integration Unit and Chair of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development SEA task team

This document provides an overview of the key themes and perspectives shared during the workshop. Experts emphasized the use of strategic assessments to address complex issues; the importance of developing transparent, flexible, independent and collaborative processes for the conduct of strategic assessment; and links between strategic assessment and other assessment models. These key themes are outlined below.

What we heard

Application and Objectives of Strategic Assessment

Experts framed strategic assessment as a tool to address complex problems, often leading to the development of policies, plans and programs. They discussed objectives of strategic assessment and its application, providing the following advice and insights:

- **Address complex problems:** Strategic assessment can apply to a spectrum of issues at different levels. Strategic assessments may be applied to issues directly related to impact assessment as well as larger issues or root causes of issues which, once addressed, can set direction or context for project-level impact assessment. Experts noted that strategic assessment should especially focus on larger, direction-setting issues. They describe the strategic dimension of the assessment as addressing challenges related to understanding and delivering a desirable future for Canada. Experts raised the opportunity for strategic assessment to address urgent concerns, strategic policy priorities (which will influence other decisions and actions) and emerging issues, and to deliver recommendations for credible and authoritative strategic policies, plans and programs.
- **Inform policies, plans and programs:** Strategic assessment is a tool to support forward-thinking decisions. It informs policies, plans or programs by assessing an issue, searching for alternative routes of action and recommending a preferred course of action to address an issue through options assessment or through other tools.
- **Act now:** Experts emphasized the importance of using this moment in time to equip and enable strategic assessments as a means to address “wicked problems” (i.e. complex problems without apparent solutions); in particular, by responding to the urgency of global ecological challenges, such as biodiversity loss and climate change.

Key Principles and Considerations for Conducting Strategic Assessment

Experts described the complex, variable contexts in which strategic assessments are applied (whether that be in relation to the actors involved, the nature of the topic or issue, political climate, etc.). Here are the key considerations proposed for conducting strategic assessment:

- **Independence and transparency:** Experts stressed the importance of independence and transparency to ensure credibility in conducting strategic assessments. They indicated that having independent committees lead strategic assessments would lend credibility, as would basing decisions on evidence, expertise and transparent reasons for decision.
- **Collaborative, interdepartmental work and processes:** Strategic assessments should be undertaken collaboratively with relevant jurisdictions, government departments, agencies and public organizations, to provide valuable insight and information.
- **Public engagement:** Public participation is crucial to the effective governance of strategic assessments. The outcomes of strategic assessment affect local communities, including Indigenous peoples and stakeholders, and are often dependent on support from these partners. It is important to provide a collaborative, coordinated and constructive process where stakeholders and partners are involved in discussions and assessment design that effectively consider communal and independent needs. Strategic assessment could also be used as a tool to collaborate with Indigenous peoples in the spirit of reconciliation.
- **Secondary data can be sufficient:** New data are not typically needed to support a strategic assessment. Beyond providing new data, strategic assessments should aim to influence decisions and action for important issues that are time-sensitive. Experts encouraged collaboration between the government and research centres, communities and stakeholders, as well as developing a shared accessible database to leverage existing data for strategic assessment.

- **Flexible, adaptive, innovative approach:** Experts advised that the Agency's strategic assessment policy should apply to a range of issues and contexts, potentially addressing issues for which there is no concrete or immediate solution. The policy should allow for flexible approaches to adjust for a range of actors, values, timing, processes, policies and delivery outputs created by changing circumstances. Strategic assessments should be revised in response to changing conditions and new information.
- **Application of sustainability and considerations set out in the IAA for designated projects:** The scope and broad objectives of the IAA should apply to deliberations and recommendations from strategic assessments as well as project assessments, especially given that strategic assessments are meant in part to provide credible, authoritative guidance for project assessments.

Strategic Assessment and other Assessment Models

Experts suggested that the strategic assessment policy should acknowledge the many models and assessment tools related to strategic assessment.

- **Clearly define the range of strategic assessment models that can be used under the IAA:** Strategic assessment exists in a broader international context. Strategic assessment must be defined under the IAA in a way that recognizes existing models. The implementation guidance should include clear common principles or criteria that all acceptable models must meet.
- **Clarify the relationship between the types of assessment, especially those included under the IAA:** There is confusion around the terminology and application of the range of assessment tools (strategic environmental assessment, strategic assessment, regional assessment, cumulative effects assessment). Policy and guidance should clarify the relationship between the types of assessment included under the IAA, the *Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan or Program Proposals*, and strategic assessment approaches used in other jurisdictions. There should be clear guidance on the application of these tools within the federal government.
- **Learn from existing models:** Strategic assessment under the IAA should maintain the elements proved successful under other models of strategic assessment. It should be applied as:
 - A convening platform to resolve emerging issues, disputes and conflicts;
 - A tool to “set an equal playing field”; and
 - As a way to address a legacy of public or other stakeholder concerns.

Final Remarks

Experts indicated that the IAA offers a renewed opportunity to apply strategic assessment as a tool, and they urged the Agency to be ambitious in its development of a strategic assessment policy to ensure strategic assessment can effectively address some of the pressing issues of our time. Drawing on their experience evaluating and applying strategic assessment, they also suggested starting with a practical issue for strategic assessment under the IAA, on which the Agency would demonstrate value and gain experience.



Next Steps

The Agency thanks the participants of the workshop on Strategic Assessment under the IAA. The Agency is applying the results of the workshop in developing a policy for strategic assessment.