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Ex-ante sustainability appraisal of national-level policies: A comparative study of assessment practice in seven countries

It has long been acknowledged that to promote sustainable development effectively, environmental concerns should be integrated into decision-making procedures on a wide range of issues. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s to analyse the ecological implications of projects like roads and industrial developments. Through the emergence of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), this approach was applied to the higher strategic level of plans and programmes in areas such as land use, transport, waste, energy and water management. Only more recently, however, have similar procedures been widely used to in the design of national and international policy initiatives outside the area of infrastructure planning, for example new regulations, taxes and international treaties.

This paper reviews the procedures for sustainability appraisal of generic policies through seven qualitative case studies: the United States, the European Union, Britain, Canada, Australia, Italy, and the Netherlands. Drawing on existing evaluations as well as interviews with government officials involved in the assessment, the case studies provides a comparative analysis of institutional frameworks, appraisal processes, scope of analysis, and methodologies as well as an evaluation of their effect on policy output. The paper identifies two dominant models of sustainability assessment: single-issue environmental appraisal procedures applied to selected initiatives and the inclusion of sustainability concerns into traditional regulatory impact assessment covering a wide range of policies. The research shows that while the environmental dimension of policy appraisal has been strengthened in recent years, some of the procedures have been poorly implemented, and environmental concerns still play a small role in policy appraisal. Exploring the barriers to ex ante sustainability appraisal, the paper concludes by discussing the hypothesis put forward by Dalal-Clayton and Sadler (2004: 179) that the critical constraints for national level policy appraisal are not technical or methodological, but political, institutional and procedural.