

Editorial – On the key importance of impact assessment when implementing pledges of COP26

Dear readers,

Welcome to the sixth and final issue of IAPA in 2021.

In November, 40,000 registered participants (and many more non-registered demonstrators) gathered in Glasgow (Scotland) for the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP26. Somewhat surprisingly (but maybe not unexpectedly), the largest delegation was the fossil fuel industry which had more delegates than the eight nations most affected by climate change over the past two decades combined (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-59199484>).

Regardless of this fact – which undoubtedly will raise some scepticism towards the conference amongst readers – the resulting ‘Glasgow Climate Pact’ (The Pact) is the first international agreement in which the Climate Change Conference parties are pledging to reduce the use of fossil fuels in order to limit the increase in average global temperature to 1.5C overall – the latest IPCC report had concluded that warming has already reached 1.1C (<https://www.carbonbrief.org/in-depth-qa-the-ipccs-sixth-assessment-report-on-climate-science>)¹. In this context, the promise to phase down unabated coal use (the wording here was watered down somewhat ‘at the last Minute’) is of key importance. Other pledges include working collectively to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030, reducing methane emissions and setting targets for zero carbon cars. Unfortunately, there was no discussion on reducing the overall growth rates of motor vehicles, meaning that many associated environmental, health and other problems (due to e.g. increased congestion, the need to build more – environmentally damaging – infrastructures and the negative impacts associated with mining of materials necessary for batteries and their disposal) will persist.

Parties also committed themselves to doubling climate adaptation financing. In this context, developed countries noted with ‘deep regret’ that an earlier promised delivery of US \$100bn a year in climate finance to developing countries had not ‘yet’ been met. Finally, the Pact includes a request to countries to present more ambitious climate pledges in 2022.

With regards to ensuring that ambitions translate into reality, the pledges made need to find their way into strategies, policies, plans, programmes, projects and produce climate positive outcomes. In this context, the role of impact assessment (IA) instruments is more important than ever, in particular as the parties indicated a commitment to transparency. As a consequence, if we don’t see any strengthening of IA instruments – in particular with regards to them not merely functioning as tools for securing licenses for development that are bolted onto other processes too late in order to be able to make a real difference – the seriousness of the parties on their commitment to deliver on the promises will be in doubt. In this context, a particular emphasis should be put on defining non-negotiable (climate) targets in strategy, policy, plan, programme and project making that can then be assessed in IA (Morrison-Saunders and Fischer, 2006). Furthermore, and connected with the establishment of non-negotiable targets, a substantive focus should be added to the (mostly) procedural requirements of more or less all current IA instruments globally (Fischer and González, 2021).

¹ There are predictions that even if all commitments of the Pact are fully implemented, an increase in the average global temperature of 1.8C can be expected (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/04/cop26-pledges-could-limit-warming-to-18c-says-energy-agency-boss>)

This issue of IAPA consists of five full papers and three book reviews. These represent authors from nine countries, including China, the US, New Zealand, Denmark, The Netherlands, Malaysia, the UK Canada and Brazil.

In the first paper, Qunying Xiao (Xi'an Technological University, China), Huijun Liu (Xi'an Jiaotong University, China) and Marcus W. Feldman (Stanford University, The US) ask whether change of natural capital is essential for assessing relocation policies. In this context, the authors reflect on a case from Baihe county in western China. Next, Nicholas Taylor (Nick Taylor and Associates, New Zealand), Michael Mackay (Lincoln Research Centre, New Zealand) and Harvey C. Perkins (University of Auckland, New Zealand) explore social impact assessment with regards to a (realist) evaluation. In the third paper, Emilia Ravn Boess, Ivar Lyhne, Juanita Gallego Davila, Emilie Jantzen, Ulf Kjellerup & Lone Kørnøv (the first three and the last being from the Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment, and the other two from COWI, Denmark) reflect on 'Using Sustainable Development Goals to develop EIA scoping practices: The case of Denmark'. Next, Ana Maria Esteves (Community Insights Group, The Netherlands) introduces a 'people-centred approach to assessing livelihoods impacts'. Finally, Jamal Hisham Hashim, Soo Chen Kwan, Jamilah Mahmood, Zairul Ain Zulkafli, Wan Yusmanisan Wan Yusof & Mohd Firdaus Siau Abdullah (the second author is from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, with all others being from the Ministry of Health Malaysia) provide the story of 'developing a qualitative environmental health risk matrix and assessment tool for Malaysia'.

The three book reviews are presented to you by Sam Hayes (PLACED, the UK) who writes on Angus Morrison-Saunders and Jenny Pope's 'Teaching Environmental Impact Assessment' (Edward Elgar), Peter R Mulvihill (York University, Canada) who reflects on 'The next generation of impact assessment: a critical review of the Canadian impact assessment act' (edited by Meinhard Doelle and John Sinclair); and Luis E Sanchez (Sao Paulo University, Brazil) who explores the 'Handbook on Strategic Environmental Assessment' (edited by Thomas B. Fischer and Ainhoa González and published by Edward Elgar).

Enjoy reading!

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References

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Morrison-Saunders, A. & Fischer, T. B. 2006. What is wrong with EIA and SEA anyway? - A Sceptic's Perspective on Sustainability Assessment, *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management* 8(1): 19-39.