Where and When are HIAs Necessary?

HIAs represent a valuable method that can apply the concept of health to a wide range of decisions. The idea of applying a framework to ensure that all policies, plans, and decisions will benefit human health is appealing. The logical question then is, when and where can this revolutionary approach be applied? Should it not be employed in every possible instance? After all, what could be more important than human health?

Geography

Like any decision-making tool, an HIA is not constrained by geography. Where an HIA can or should be conducted is as simple as wherever policymakers, legislators, governments, or other entities are engaged in a decision-making process that has the potential to impact the surrounding population.

Timing

An additional consideration, assuming an HIA is desirable, is at which point during the decision-making process the HIA should be initiated. According to Andrew Dannenberg, who is a part of the CDC Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services and one of HIA’s leading researchers, the intent of an HIA is to inform decision-makers on possible health-related outcomes of a proposal, suggesting a sooner-than-later approach. Simply put, there is often little reason to conduct an HIA after a decision has been reached, or so late in the process that any resultant conclusions cannot be fully debated, presented to the public, stakeholders, and decision-makers.

Scale

In deciding whether or not to conduct an HIA, it is important to determine whether the project, plan, or policy in question is of the appropriate scale. Are there likely health-related outcomes? Are those outcomes already so obvious that an analysis would be redundant? Finally, and most importantly, is there even a decision to be made? Several resources, including Healthy People 2020, training guides developed by UCLA, and practicing consultants, all outline a comprehensive screening process that can be used to determine if an HIA is appropriate to a given situation. The screening process is further detailed later in this document.

HIAs will likely be much more useful and accurate if it is applied to a more specific proposal. For example, imagine a city council is debating whether to increase the availability of public
transit. When is the correct time within the proposal to begin the analysis? Certainly increased mobility could benefit the population’s health by increasing access to resources such as healthy foods, parks, and trails. Perhaps the analysis should not be initiated until there is a specific proposal to enhance a particular transit route. With more known quantities, an analysis would be simplified. Just by drawing circles on a map, decision-makers could determine what segments of the population would be given increased access, and to what destinations. In this scenario, the council could not know if that specific proposal was potentially the most beneficial, until options were fully developed.

Each HIA is unique. In the situation presented, maybe the city council could use an intermediate approach (see Figure 4 on page 8); begin a public-involvement process early on, clearly stating the importance of health in the process, and begin to involve interested parties with the requisite interest and expertise. Perhaps the transit agency could present a range of alternatives or proposals for enhancing one of a handful of routes, and the HIA process could be used to identify and tweak the most beneficial project.

In any event, regardless of at what point a formal analysis begins, it is clear that having a consensus in place that values health outcomes will help community leaders create healthier communities. Beyond that, the HIA process is as much art as science and relies upon thoughtful and timely implementation.