

Social Impact Assessment in Regional Land Use Planning

Social Impact Assessment in Regional Land Use Planning – Best practices from Finland

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APPENDIX

Preface

The research programme, '*Internationalisation of regional development policies – Needs and demands in the Nordic countries*' was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers in the spring of 2005.

The aim of this programme is to undertake research on key issues, where it has been identified that new knowledge is needed, and where such knowledge could be seen to benefit the development and implementation of regional development policy in the Nordic countries.

The basis for the research programme is its Nordic character. Research should lead to new knowledge both for the academic world and for the world of policy and practice. Projects should add 'Nordic value', i.e. they should produce knowledge of relevance for several regions and countries across *Norden*. The research should moreover be comparative and collaborative across at least three Nordic countries or self-governed areas.

Three themes of high priority for the research programme have been identified; '*regional governance*', '*innovation and regional growth*', and '*demography and labour migration*'.

In addition to these priorities two additional crosscutting themes were also defined; '*the enlargement of the EU and the challenges for Nordic regional development policies*' and the broad topic of '*the three dimensions of sustainable regional development*'; i.e. social, economic and environmental sustainability.

The research programme has been launched in two rounds. In the first round during the spring of 2005 it was decided to fund five projects. These will be reported during the spring and summer of 2007. In the second round during the spring of 2007 it has been decided that a further five projects will be funded. These will be reported in 2009. All project reports are published in this publication series dedicated to this programme. At the end of the programme, a synthesising report will also be produced where the most important findings are discussed.

Nordregio wishes to thank the Nordic Senior Official Committee for Regional Policy and the Nordic Council of Ministers for providing this unique opportunity to develop new research-based knowledge and for encouraging cooperation and the exchange of ideas between Nordic researchers.

Nordregio would furthermore like to thank all of the involved research teams and the programme's Steering Committee for their continuing contributions to the Nordic discourse on regional development.

Ole Damsgaard
Director

Margareta Dahlström
Coordinator of the research programme

Authors' Preface

Regional plans are used to guide the use of land for different purposes, e.g. recreation and transport or urban activities. The regional plan acts as a guideline for municipal-level plans and other detailed planning of land use. On the other hand, regional land use plans are fundamental tools of regional development strategies and policies.

Today, an integrated approach to the key themes of sustainable development is central to the regional development strategies as well as to land use plans. A particular issue in relation to regional policy integration concerns the range of different strategies being produced with different prime areas of concern and by different agencies in the regions. The sustainability of regional development is intended to encompass environmental, economic and social issues but inevitably all have different emphases.

There is a concern that social sustainability might be neglected in regional planning, often being under-represented relative to the powerful regional lobby interests present in the case of economic development and environmental protection. The general social criteria which are being discussed in regional planning concern, for example, provision of affordable and good quality housing and living environments, access to jobs and facilities, increase of social inclusion and reduction of disparities, improvements in health and education, reduction of crime / increase of community safety, and encouragement of participation in planning.

According to many recent studies, the social dimension of impact assessment has been poorly developed in land use planning, and especially in regional planning (Kohl & Sairinen 2004; Sairinen 2004; Päivänen et al 2005). This is a clear shortcoming, as social sustainability issues have become increasingly important challenges in regional development.

There is a real need for strengthening the content of social dimension of sustainability in regional development and planning. This means that there is a need for developing concrete ways in which sustainability is operationalized, measured and carried out in regional policies. Social impact assessment in regional planning offers one very concrete tool. In this report, the experiences of using the SIA in regional planning in Finland are analysed. The aim is to describe and analyse the best practices.

The environmental and social impact assessment procedures (EIA and SIA) are one of the main policy tools and methods, which have been developed in order to satisfy the legitimacy qualifications concerning the environmental and social questions of land use planning.

The impact assessment of land use plans has developed in some countries through EIA project. For example in Finland, the requirements of making impact assessment in urban and regional physical planning was taken into planning legislation already in 1994 simultaneously with the formation of the EIA legislation. The same requirements were taken into the new Finnish Land Use and Building Act in 1999. According to the Act, the potential environmental impacts of a plan, including implications for the community economy, and social, cultural and other effects, should be appropriately investigated. The impact assessment should be conducted in all planning levels separately (detail plan, general plan, regional plan). The studies and assessments carried out in connection with regional plans are normally more general in nature than in the general or detail plan level.

Nowadays, the development of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) highlights the need for developing impact assessment in land use planning around Europe. The Member States of the European Union had to implement Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) by July 2004.

Spatial planning was one of the main issues to be addressed by the SEA Directive (Stoeglehner & Wegerer 2006). In the EU member states, this discussion is still in its infancy. Until now there have been relatively few experiences on what the impact assessment includes in physical land use planning and what it requires from the planning process. The Finnish experiences are therefore quite interesting in this respect.

Another more specific question concerns the role of different thematic assessments such as social impact assessment. According to the SEA Directive, human-ecological aspects and population should be considered in the assessments. This means that the effects of a plan or programme on a group of persons, as well as their social interaction, their extent and their spatial allocation are addressed (Stoeglehner & Wegerer 2006). In this respect, the experiences from Finland concerning social aspects in land use planning are also very interesting.

The results of this study are useful alike for the regional planners, experts of impact assessment and decision-makers in all Nordic countries. The project provides needed information about the poorly developed dimension of sustainability – the social one. The results of the project present an overview of the best practices in Finland, practices which might be applicable and relevant also in other Nordic countries.

The research project was carried out during 2005-2007 at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) of the Helsinki University of Technology. Research Director, Doc.Soc.Sc. Rauno Sairinen was the leader of the project. MA Soc.sci. Timo Heikkinen was the main researcher.

In addition, a Nordic reference group was formed for the project. The purpose of the group was to get for the project the best knowledge available concerning impact assessment in land use planning from various Nordic countries. The members of the reference group were: Holmfridur Bjarnadottir, Nordregio, Sweden; Bo Elling, EIA Centre, Roskilde University, Denmark; June Lindahl, Boverket, Karlskrona, Sweden; Tuija Hilding-Rydevik, Nordregio, Sweden.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research task and Nordic context

The purpose of the research project is to analyse and compare the contents, methods and working practices of social impact assessment (SIA) in regional land use planning in Finland. In Finland, there has recently been new developments in this area, whereas other Nordic countries do not have so much empirical cases.

The research task is divided into the following subquestions:

- a) What are the contents and methods of social impact assessment in regional land use planning?
- b) How is social impact assessment integrated into the regional planning process and decision-making?
- c) How can plan-making benefit from social impact assessment? Does social impact assessment alter the planning processes and the contents of regional plan-making? If so, what does this mean?

In other Nordic countries the role of regional land use planning is somewhat different from Finnish model.

Norway

Closest to the Finnish case is Norway, where the County Municipalities are required to prepare regional plans (fylkesplan). These are strategic plans which co-ordinate governmental, regional and local physical, economic, social and cultural activities. For example, the county master plan lays down guidelines for the use of land and natural resources in the county with respect to matters which will have major impacts beyond the boundaries of a municipality, or which the individual municipality is unable to solve within its own area. The county plan is not, however, automatically legally binding on the municipalities. For this reason both county authorities, the County Municipality and the County Governor, are mandated to raise objections against plan proposals under municipal authority. The purpose is to ensure that the Municipal Council will not validly adopt the municipal plan before it is harmonized according to the requirements of these two county authorities (Rosnes 2005; Hilding-Rydevik et al. 2005).

Norway got its EIA system in 1990, and the system has undergone minor changes during its fifteen-year lifetime. In 2005 it was changed radically, when EIA thinking and processes were integrated in land use planning processes in municipalities and counties (Strand 2006). The primary purpose behind the changes was to follow up the directive of strategic environmental impact assessment.

Sweden

In Sweden the possibility to prepare regional land use plans has existed since the 1947 Building Act. Regional planning has, however, only been continuous in the Stockholm area, where regional plans are made by the Regional Traffic and Region Planning Office of the County of Stockholm. Otherwise land use within the community is decided by the local authorities. Regional boards have, however, a controlling role with respect to national interests, intercommunity planning, health and security aspects, and the so-called environmental quality norms. The railroad agency, for instance, makes its own plans, which must be accepted by regional governmental authorities (Lindahl 2006; Hilding-Rydevik et al. 2005).

Regional development programming is not legally regulated, and for this reason there are no legal grounds for including regional development programmes under the SEA demands of EU legislation. However, according to the Planning and Building Act, there should be a wide

range of impact assessments on local land use planning. The only legally stipulated impact assessments are, however, EIAs and SEAs. Local authorities are responsible for conducting EIAs and SEAs, and normally their EASs should be accepted by regional development authorities or environmental courts (Lindahl 2006; Hilding-Rydevik et al. 2005).

Denmark

In Denmark, major changes are taking place both in the regions and in the regional planning system. A reform of local government structure in Denmark entered into force on 1 January 2007. The 271 municipalities will be amalgamated and reduced to 98 municipalities. The 12 regional planning authorities (mostly county councils) are being abolished and replaced by five new administrative regions with regional councils elected by the population.

The regional councils will be responsible for preparing regional spatial development plans for the administrative regions. Based on a comprehensive assessment, a regional spatial development plan will provide an overall spatial strategy for the future spatial development of the cities and towns, rural districts and small-town regions in the administrative region, as well as for nature and the environment, business, tourism, employment, education and culture. The regional spatial development plan is thus a completely new strategic planning instrument which will express what the regional council considers important for promoting economic growth and sustainable development in the administrative region. Economic planning in the regional spatial development plan will be based on regional economic development strategies prepared by the regional forums on economic growth.

The regional spatial development plan will be a joint project between the municipal councils, business, the regional council and the other actors in the administrative region. The municipal councils will therefore explain how the municipal plan relates to the regional spatial development plan.

Compared with earlier regional plans, the regional spatial development plan will focus more on an overall spatial strategy for regional development, and will be much more active and future-oriented.

The new regions are thus obliged to prepare a regional development plan which will not include a land use plan. The municipalities will take over the majority of the county tasks in physical planning, including environmental approval and inspection. The municipal councils will be responsible for ensuring that land use is regulated in accordance with the overall national interests, for example. The reform of local government structure will strengthen the State's potential to monitor local development and to understand local needs. The Ministry of the Environment is establishing seven new regional environmental centres dispersed throughout Denmark which will ensure that the municipal councils take responsibility for overall national and societal interests in preparing their municipal plans.

The documents used in this report do not describe the role of impact assessments (including SEA, EIA and SIA) in detail. It can be presumed, however, that at least SEA must be conducted in the context of regional spatial development plan, and EIA in local plans (Danish Forest and Nature Agency, Ministry of the Environment 2007; Indenrigs – og Sundhedsministeriet 2007; The Danish Planning Institute 2006).

1.2 The Regional land use planning system in Finland

In Finland, planning for a region covers a strategic regional plan (also known as regional scheme), a regional plan (regional land use plan) and a regional development programme (see Figure 1 below). The strategic regional plan is the fundamental document in regional planning. The regional scheme indicates the regional development goals and outlines the strategic choices and visions. Its timeframe covers from 20 to 30 years. The regional development programme

includes regional development strategies and planned activities, and its timeframe is 3 to 5 years, with an annual implementation plan. The regional plan sets out the principles of land use and community structure, and designates areas as necessary for regional development. Areas are designated as reserved only to the extent and accuracy required by national or regional land use goals or by harmonizing the use of land in more than one municipality. The timeframe is from 10 to 20 years, and the plans are revised when necessary (Land Use and Building Act 1999).

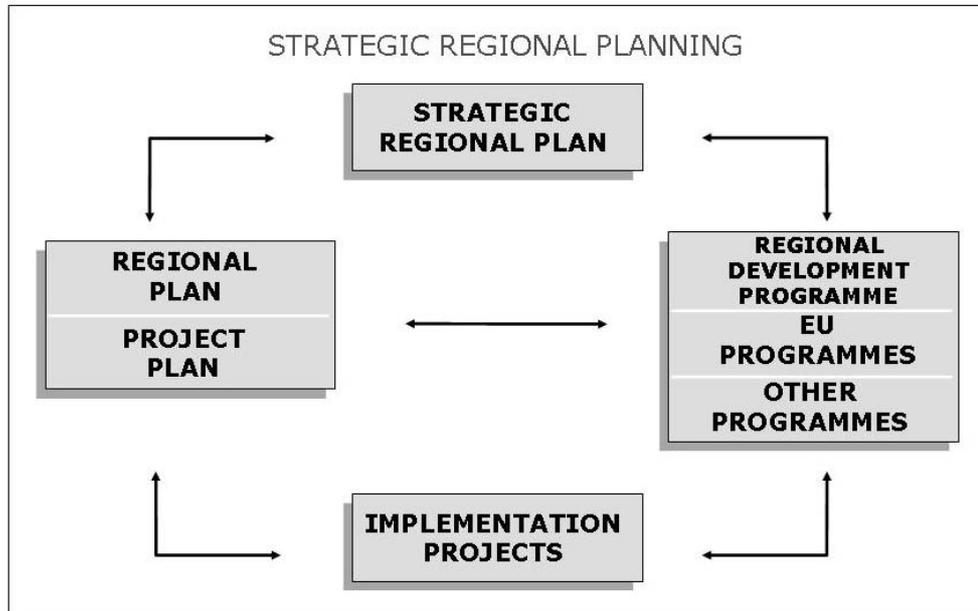


Figure 1: Strategic regional planning

The strategic regional plan and the land use plan reconcile the interests of central government with the interests of regional and local government. They also try to harmonise the land use objectives with the aims of economic life, environmental control and sustainable development.

The regional land use plan therefore:

- Is an overall plan for community structure and land use in the region or some part of it.
- Aims to create preconditions for a good living environment and to contribute to ecologically; economically, socially and culturally sustainable development.
- Communicate national land use guidelines to the lower levels of planning (master plans and detailed plans) and acts as a guideline for these plans.
- Does not contain details of the land use: these belong to the master and detailed plans.
- Is clearly a structural plan.

Regional plans are created in a context of laws, various programmes and goals. The contextual “map” of regional land use planning can be described as the following model:



Figure 2: Contextual map of Finnish regional land use planning

The basis of the regional plan is the Land Use and Building Act. According to the law (Land Use and Building Act 1999), the objective in land use planning is to promote the following through interactive planning and sufficient assessment of impact:

- 1) A safe, healthy, pleasant, socially functional living and working environment which provides for the needs of various population groups, such as children, the elderly and the handicapped.
- 2) Economical community structure and land use.
- 3) Protection of the beauty of the built environment and of cultural values.
- 4) Biological diversity and other natural values.
- 5) Environmental protection and prevention of environmental hazards.
- 6) Provident use of natural resources.
- 7) Functionality of communities and good building.
- 8) Economical community building.
- 9) Favorable business conditions.
- 10) Availability of services.
- 11) An appropriate traffic system and, especially, public transport and non-motorized traffic.

The rationale for conducting impact assessments is thus grounded in law. The law requires that the plans be founded on sufficient studies and reports. When a plan is drawn up, the environmental impact of implementing the plan, including socio-economic, social, cultural and other impacts, must be assessed to the necessary extent. Such an assessment must cover the entire area where the plan may be expected to have material impact. The demand for impacts assessments is further specified in the Land Use and Building Decree: the significant direct and indirect impacts of the plan implementation on the following matters must be assessed:

- 1) People's living conditions and environment.
- 2) Soil and bedrock, water, air and climate.
- 3) Plants and animals, biodiversity and natural resources.
- 4) Regional and community structure, community and energy economy and traffic.
- 5) Townscape, landscape, cultural heritage and the built environment.

The actual planning work – including the arrangements for impact assessments – is done by the Office of the Regional Council.¹ The plan draft is approved by the Board of the Regional Council and the plan proposal by the Assembly of the Regional Council. The final plan is ratified by the Ministry of the Environment. The phased planning process can be described as follows:

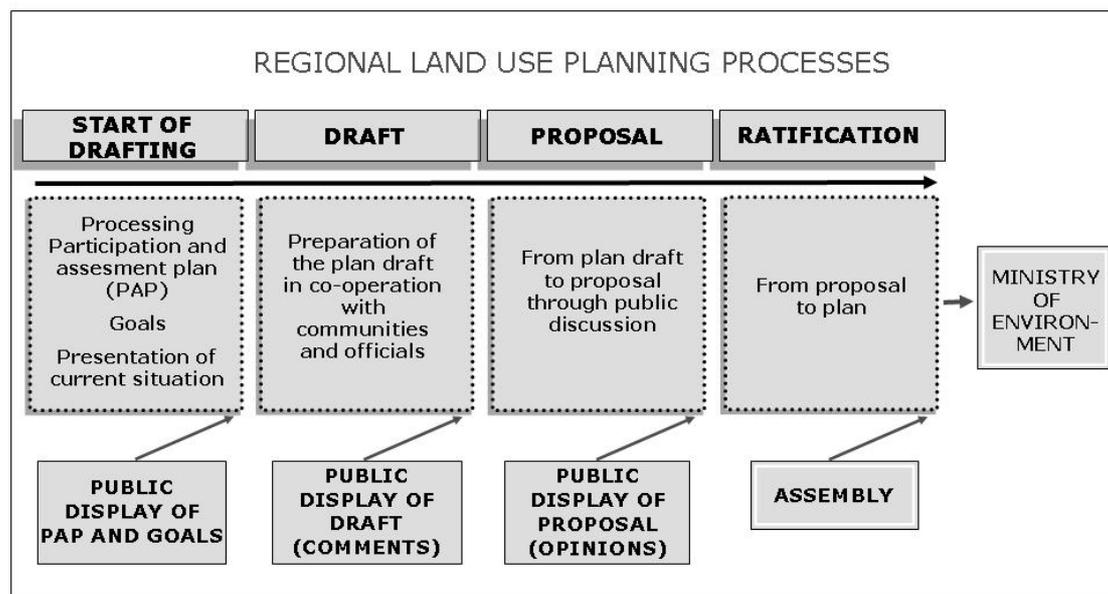


Figure 3: Regional land use planning process

1.3 Methodology

The study began with a survey of the planning situation in the regions and the role of SIA in regional land use plans. This was done by e-mail, literature and website review, and was validated as well as complemented by non-structured interviews with key experts on social impact assessment and regional planning in Finland.

¹ In Finland, the municipalities and the State are responsible for regional development. The Regional Councils (19 + Åland, the autonomous region with special status) act as regional development authorities responsible for the management of functions related to regional development and regional planning. Regional Councils (maakuntaliitto, landskapsförbunden) are joint municipal boards of which the municipalities are the members. There are other voluntary co-operation bodies, but overall inter-municipal co-operation takes place, by law, within the 20 regional councils. Municipal politicians, elected on a four-year basis, are represented in the regional boards of these bodies and therefore there is, to date, no directly elected regional level in Finland, except in the case of the Kainuu region, where a regional experiment is on-going. The highest decision-making body of the Regional Council is the Assembly, which normally convenes twice a year. The executive and administrative body of the Regional Council is the Board. The Boards convene at least once a month. The Office of the Regional Council assists the Board in its administrative tasks. The Office is headed by a Regional Manager, who acts as referendary at the meetings of the Board and is the head of other staff. The total number of staff in Regional Councils is about 600.

Our examination showed that there was a great variation among regions regarding the phase of planning. Some regions had their plans already ratified by the Ministry of the Environment whereas others were just starting to draft the plan. It also turned out that in some regions land use planning was done with *phased regional land use plans*: a larger region (or content) is divided into smaller areas (topic areas) which are planned and ratified as separate entities. This meant that the number of regional land use plans was up to 25.

More importantly, the examination showed that the social impact assessment was in most cases conducted by the Office of the Regional Council – the actual planner – itself. In addition, the planning documents gave hardly any information on the social impact assessment process. The documents showed the results of the assessments, but no description of the methodology used to produce these results. It was therefore decided to focus only on cases where external social impact assessment was conducted by consultants, and, perhaps for this reason, where a separate social impact assessment report was produced. This kind of process had occurred in three regions – in Etelä-Pohjanmaa, Päijät-Häme and Uusimaa.



Image 1: Locations of the regions under study

After selection of the cases, the plan descriptions and social impact assessment reports were read, and the consultants and relevant planners working in the Office of the Regional Councils were interviewed. Altogether, six theme interviews were conducted. The analysis of the plan descriptions and interviews was done by using the frame described below. The results of the analysis are presented in chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this report.

Frame of analysis

Goals (of the land use plan/goals of the SIA)

- Is SIA (or socio-cultural viewpoints) mentioned in participation and assessment plan?
- By whom is SIA carried out and to what purposes?
- What goals are set for SIA (or socio-cultural viewpoints)?

Method: text analysis

Process (the role of SIA in the planning-process)

- How is SIA connected to planning process and other kinds of impact assessments?
- Is there specific SIA or is it integrated to other assessments?
- Is SIA conducted by planners themselves or by consultants?
- Has SIA impacted on the plan?
- Is SIA linked to participation?

Method: text analysis and interviews

Content (what is SIA in regional planning?)

- Overall image on SIA/on what SIA consists of?
- Description of the cases
- Description of the methods
- Are there substantial links to other dimensions of impact assessment?
- Relationship between social and cultural impacts?

Method: text analysis and interviews

2. Social impact assessment

2.1 Need for impact assessment in planning

What is the impact of planning? How does planning matter? Questions concerning the impacts, effects and consequences of planning have become more and more relevant in urban politics and in the politics of planning

The issue of the impact of planning is many-sided. According to Rydin, there are at least three different ways of understanding the matter as a whole (see Rydin 1998). The traditional question in the debate has been to what extent have the policy goals of planning been achieved? How and in what way have the plans been implemented? Later, there have been questions presented about the effectiveness of planning as a set of procedures. Or rather, the potential weaknesses in planning as a process have been outlined. Most recently, the third view of impacts has come to the fore: What are the outcomes of planning in terms of environmental or social change and protection of nature and people's health and welfare? Much of this analysis highlights the inadequacies in the planning process in various parts of the system and the extent to which outcomes fall short of ambitions in many cases (Rydin 1998).

The environmental and social impact assessment procedures (EIA and SIA) and participatory planning practices are among the main policy tools and methods, which have

been developed in order to satisfy the legitimacy qualifications concerning the environmental and social issue of planning. Impact assessment is a process whose ultimate objective is to provide decision makers with an indication of the likely consequences of their actions (Wathern 1988). The outcome of this process is usually a formal document, usually called an environmental impact statement (EIS). Very often the impact assessment procedure includes the use of alternative plans and citizen participation methods.

In the thirty years since its inception in the United States, EIA has become a widely accepted tool in environmental management (Wathern 1988). EIA has been adopted in many countries with varying degrees of enthusiasm; this is why it has also been defined in various ways depending on the national context in which it is applied.

Impact assessment, in principle, can be applied to individual projects (a highway, a power plant, a harbour) as well as to broader plans, programmes and policies. In practice, however, EIA and SIA have most often been applied at the project level. This failure has been one of long-standing criticism of impact assessment systems, as it tends to preclude the discussion of generic issues and any serious consideration of alternative approaches.

During the 1990s, the imperatives of sustainable development have stimulated attention to considering the environmental and social impacts of policies, plans and programmes in a number of countries. This kind of assessment has been called “strategic environmental assessment” (SEA). In this context, impact assessment of urban land use plans have become relevant. Here, the Finnish experiences of using environmental and social impact assessment in urban planning have represented pioneering work in the world.

2.2 What is social impact assessment (SIA)?

Planners and decision makers increasingly accept that social impacts need to be considered along with environmental impacts because (Barrow 2002):

- They are often closely interrelated.
- It is a wise response to the growing demand for “social responsibility”.
- It can improve environmental management and the quest for sustainable development.

Environmental managers as well as spatial planners seeking to understand and manage natural resources and changes of living environments need to be aware of social capital, social institutions, property rights, people’s capabilities, needs, fears and aspirations. SIA can furnish this information.

SIA can be defined as a systematic effort to identify and analyse the social impacts of a proposed project, programme or plan on social groups within a community or on an entire community. Social impacts of land use plans refer to various factors such as local services and living environments, gentrification or segregation, conditions of transportation and recreation etc.

Social impact assessment has no single, universally accepted definition. However, its content and subject matter consist of distinguishable components that consistently appear when the SIA process is implemented. According to the International Association for Impact Assessment, “*social impact assessment (SIA) includes the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions*” (IAIA 2003).

Based on the writings of several SIA practitioners and researchers, we can identify the following features characteristic to the SIA process (Dietz 1987; Burdge 1998).

- SIA has a similar function as environmental impact assessment (EIA).
- It is performed in advance during the planning phase in order to offer a better knowledge base for the decision-making processes.

- It is a tool for developing alternatives and determining the full range of consequences for each alternative.
- It is a tool for developing mitigation, adaptation or compensation measures for harmful social impacts.

There is no general social theory through which we could identify and find strict causal explanations for case-specific impacts. Often, social impacts have contextual features and they represent complex social relations or dynamics. On the other hand, the term social impact refers to the effects resulting from social or biophysical processes of change (the need for day-care or new schools, increased poverty, neighbourhood satisfaction, changes in life-styles).

The methodology of social impact assessment must favour a pluralistic approach, which can use both quantitative and qualitative analysis (see Kohl & Sairinen 2004).

2.3 Content of SIA in regional planning

The substantial content of social impacts is a question that needs more careful attention. The impacts of land use plans are more complex and perhaps also more difficult to assess than the impacts of one individual building project (so-called project IA):

- 1) The land use plan contains lots of different kinds of changes and aspirations concerning regional and community development. Thus, the impact assessment of a land use plan comes very close to a general analysis of regional and community development.
- 2) Only some of the impacts can be considered to be determined by plans. In standard impact assessment legislation, even indirect impacts (mediated by culture, such as changing lifestyles) should be assessed, but if they are not causally determined, an assessment of this kind cannot really be made. This happens when the context where individual and group decisions are made is formed by both plans and other societal changes. The crucial question is where the borderline between the impacts of the plan and those of other changes runs?
- 3) The nature of impacts varies with the type and size of the land use plan (detail plan, general plan, regional plan), as well as with the nature of the region in which the project is located.

When defining the content of social impacts, we need to develop typologies of various possible impacts. This task is in close relation to the phase of identifying the impacts in the planning process.

In impact assessment literature, there are lots of “checklists” of possible impact categories. These categories serve also as indicators of social impacts that may be applied in the various stages of the impact assessment and planning process.

In social impact assessment, one of the most famous lists has been drawn up by Rabel Burdge (1990). He arranged the SIA variables (26) under the headings of population impacts, community/institutional arrangements, conflicts between local residents and newcomers, individual and family level impacts, and community infrastructure needs. Sairinen and Kohl (2004) have developed Burdge’s list further for the Finnish context by using five main impact categories: socio-demographic changes, functional conditions, characteristics of the area, impacts to the welfare and lifestyle, opinions and disagreements of people and the community. These categories contain 23 different variables.

Which impact categories or variables would be usable for regional land use plans? A starting point for this is to look at which impact categories are relevant on each planning level. Checklists should be formulated in co-operation between professionals and local policy actors.

In Finland, Päivänen *et al* (2005) have devised a new typology for identifying the social impacts of land use plans. The social impacts of land use plans can be analysed using three

basic dimensions. Social impacts can be further analysed using the variables presented under the subheadings.

Dimension	Social variables to be assessed
<i>Social characteristics</i>	Distribution of welfare Differentiation Identity and image Sense of community
<i>Functionality</i>	Mobility Services Recreation Jobs
<i>Experiential dimension</i>	Perception of nature and cultural environment Aesthetics Safety Restorative dimension

Table 1: The dimensions and variables of Social Impact Assessment

The studies and assessments carried out in connection with regional plans are normally more general in nature than those on the level of general or detail plans. In the regional plan level, social impacts concern regionally relevant issues, which can have effects, for example, on the structural networks and regionally focused activities. The following is an illustrative list of possible social impact categories on the regional level:

Social characteristics

- Identification of vulnerable groups
- Socio-demographic changes and their consequences
- Welfare of growth areas vs. regional equity
- Division of labour between different areas and its consequences
- Differentiation of regional identities

Functionality

- Networks of public transportation
- Balance of regional service structures
- Accessibility of different areas according to various population groups
- Networks and accessibility of recreation areas

Experiential dimension

- Siting of hazardous or polluting activities
- Regional significance of landscape and nature values for local people.

3. Description of the cases

In this chapter, an overview of the regions under study is given. After this we will take a closer look at the planning process and the different kinds of assessments done during the process. Then we will focus on social impact assessments, their organisation and methodology, and examine how the results of the SIAs were presented in the plan descriptions. In the final section of the chapter we will compare the social impact assessments and highlights their characteristic features.

3.1 Uusimaa

The region of Uusimaa is situated in southern Finland, and its main center is the nation's capital, Helsinki. The region has a land area of 6365.6 km² and it is home to 1,359,150 inhabitants, which is more than a quarter of the country's total population. Population density is 200.2/km². The regions consist of the Helsinki metropolitan area (cities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen), smaller towns and villages, countryside and archipelago. The region covers 24 municipalities and three sub-regions (seutukunta, ekonomiska region).

The Helsinki metropolitan area is one of the fastest growing urban areas in Europe. The population of the Uusimaa Region is currently growing by about 15,000 people annually, and the proportion of young adults, i.e. under the age of 40, is particularly high. As much as 7.6% of inhabitants speak Swedish as their mother language, whereas in the whole country the percentage is 5.5. The people in the region are well educated: 32.7% have a degree in higher education; the figure for the entire country is 25.0%. The most prominent businesses in the region include wholesale trade, finance and insurance services, and information-intensive business services. Most of the people in the region are employed in the service sector (80.4%). The region accounts for nearly one-third of Finland's national product, and its GNP is significantly higher in comparison to the country as a whole.

The assessment report is rather limited (28 pages). It focuses on the plan as a whole, not on any specific locality. The assessment refers often to academic literature, which is used to highlight the contextual changes taking place in the region. The assessment examines the following themes:

Social impacts of the plan

- Population change and regional diversification
- Vitality of sparsely populated areas
- Adequacy and versatility of housing
- Employment and economy
- Recreation

Cultural impacts of the plan

- Cultures of growing cities and their surroundings
- Situation of minorities
- Cultural heritage
- Accessibility to cultural services

Health impacts of the plan

- Experienced health
- Psycho-physical health
- Impacts of traffic projects on health and living conditions
- Other environmental hazards
- Social health
- Lifestyles and illnesses

In the plan description, the results of all assessments are presented in several places. In the chapter “Impacts of Uusimaa Regional Plan”, two groups of impacts are listed: “Cumulative Impacts” and “Common Impacts”. The latter includes the description of plan impacts on specific impact dimensions:

- Land use
- Transportation and community management
- Nature and environment
- Economy, business and industry
- Inhabitants, living conditions and communities.

The results of social impact assessment are presented mainly in the last paragraph of this chapter. The results are taken from the SIA report and they also show the possible negative impacts of the plan. For example:

- Densification can be experienced negatively if natural areas diminish.
- Segregation might arise if the quality of planning is not good enough.
- Villages become more lively, which strengthens the countryside and thereby the region as a whole.
- Migration might weaken local identities both in the growing Uusimaa Region and in regions with negative migration.
- Growing traffic brings negative health effects (physical and mental) and noise.
- Successful densification strengthens functionality and (public) transportation networks.
- Living environments might change dramatically (experienced quality of living environment).

The the chapter “Cumulative Impacts” deals with the impacts of the plan on regional development issues. Here the impacts are formulated as arguments or statements. The rhetorical style of the topics express the aim to convince the reader of the capability of the plans to attain development goals and bring about general benefits. The topics include:

- “Plan strengthens existing community centres”
- “Land use in traditional villages becomes more dense and efficient”
- “Impacts on community economy are significant”

More importantly, however, the impacts of the plan are also described in the chapter “Content of the Plan”, where the descriptions of plan notations are given, and each notation is followed by the relevant planning regulation. In most cases, justifications for the regulation and intended guiding effects are also presented. The impacts on the following themes are (usually) assessed and presented in separate paragraphs:

- Land use
- Transportation and community management
- Nature and environment
- Economy and business
- People, living conditions and communities

For example, the plan notation below refers to “Important area, road or focus point considering the landscape protection or cultural environment:”



Image 3: A plan notation

The plan notation is followed by the description, planning regulation, justification and intended guiding effects. An appendix includes maps which show the locations of these areas, roads or points:

- Cultural environments according to national inventories
- Cultural environments according to inventories done by Uusimaa regional council
- Targets protected under the Building Protection Act.

3.2 Etelä-Pohjanmaa

Etelä-Pohjanmaa is situated in the Province of Western Finland. The region is made up of 26 municipalities, of which eight are towns and the rest are municipalities. The land area is 13,457.5 km² and the population is 194,105. The regional centre is Seinäjoki, with more than 36,000 inhabitants. 57.2% of the work force works in services, 28.6% in manufacturing and 11.7% in primary production. The region is known for its entrepreneurship, fertile countryside and diversified cultural supply. The region consists of 26 municipalities and six sub-regions (seutukunta, ekonomiska region).

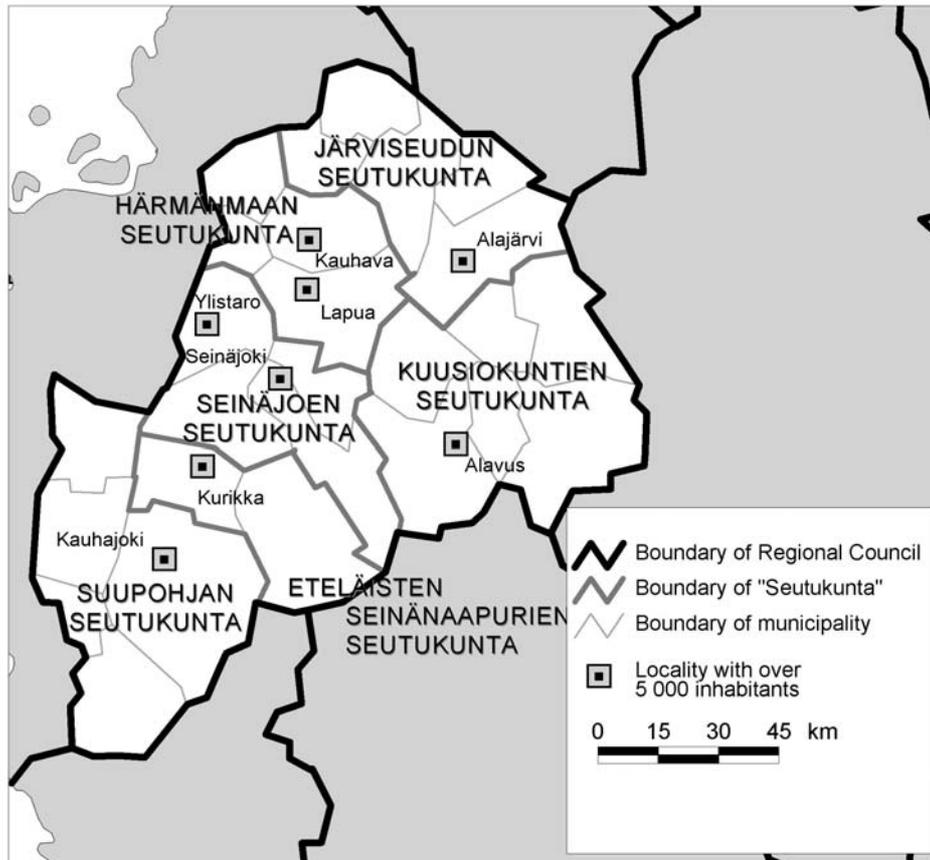


Image 4: The Etelä-Pohjanmaa region

The planning process in Etelä-Pohjanmaa began in 2000, and the plan was ratified by the Ministry of the Environment on 23 May 2005. The impact assessments comprised environmental impact assessments conducted by the Council office and assessment of economic and social impacts of the plan conducted by external consultants.

The original idea in the Council Office was to give the assessment to the local polytechnic, but this idea failed due to organizational difficulties at the school. Therefore, a routine competitive bidding was organized, and the winner was the Pöyry Environment Oy Consultancy Company. The expert responsible in the company was a geographer who had some earlier experience in social impact assessment in land use planning, but not at the level of regional planning.

The data of the assessment was gathered from:

- 1) Draft maps, a draft of the plan description and other impact assessments produced during the preparation of the regional plan.
- 2) A seminar, where 21 “regional communities” (consisting of two or more communities) were represented.
- 3) Comments and feedback on the draft of the assessment report by representatives of the regional communities and the special “sustainable development-group” created to assess the impact of the regional plan.

The assessment report is rather limited (36 pages) and it is divided into two sections: the social impacts (14 pages) and the economic impacts of the plan. The assessment contains hardly any references to scientific or other “contextualizing” literature. Maybe this is the reason

why contextual changes and developments taking place in the region are not presented in the report.

The assessment focuses on five sub-regions. In each sub-region, the assessment points out the issues brought out by the planning process. These include, for example:

- New roads (impacts of bypass road building on the location of services and the vitality of the town of Seinäjoki)
- Traffic (both as an ecological problem and a problem of access (railroad and functioning traffic system), also for private cars)
- Regional waste treatment plant (positive and negative impacts/conflict of public and private interest)
- Changes in population and demography (How are these recognized in the plan?)
- Tourists attractions (How the plan supports these?)
- Sod-production (the conflict between economic, ecologic and social impacts)

The distribution of wellbeing is given special attention in the report. The assessment focuses on peripheral areas in the region (villages and other low density areas), and the interaction between towns and countryside. The assessment also presents threats to the development of the region. Here it comments on the optimism of the plan and shows its limits: the plan alone is not able to enhance the competitiveness of the region, for example.

In the plan description, the results of the social impact assessment – and all other impact assessments – are presented in their own chapter entitled “Impact of the Regional Plan”. Here the description of the Etelä-Pohjanmaa regional plan differs significantly from the Uusimaa regional plan. In the case of Uusimaa, the impacts were presented in the chapter “Impacts”, but also in “Content” and, what is even more remarkable, in the context of each and every plan notation (impacts of plan notations). In the Etelä-Pohjanmaa plan description, the chapter “Impact of the Regional Plan” is rather general, presenting a non-classified mixture of cumulative impacts and different types of impact dimensions. The cumulative impacts describe how the plan helps to reach various regional development goals (such as the economic competitiveness of the region and consolidation of physical structure), while impact dimensions refer to the impacts of the plan on the local cultural environment, landscape, economy and social life. The results of the external social impact assessment are more or less invisible in the report. The assessment has received just a small role as a companion to economic impact assessment in the very end of the chapter.

3.3. Päijät-Häme

The region is located 100 km north of Helsinki, and it shares a border with the Uusimaa Region. Päijät-Häme consist of 12 municipalities and two sub-regions (seutukunta, ekonomiska region). The land area of the region is 5,133 km², and one-fifth of the region's surface area is covered by lakes. The third largest lake in Finland, Lake Päijänne, dominates the region. Apart from its significance for fishing, tourism and leisure activities in Päijät-Häme, it is also an important drinking water reservoir for the whole of Southern Finland. In the end of 2005, there were 198,970 inhabitants in Päijät-Häme. One-half of them are living in the vicinity of the City of Lahti, which is the center of the region. Some 80% of all inhabitants live in the greater City of Lahti (comprising the municipalities of Asikkala, Hollola, Lahti, Nastola ja Orimattila). The population has been rising steadily since the turn of the millennium. Most of the people are employed in the service sector (63%), although industry also plays a significant role (33%). Agriculture employs 4% of the work force.

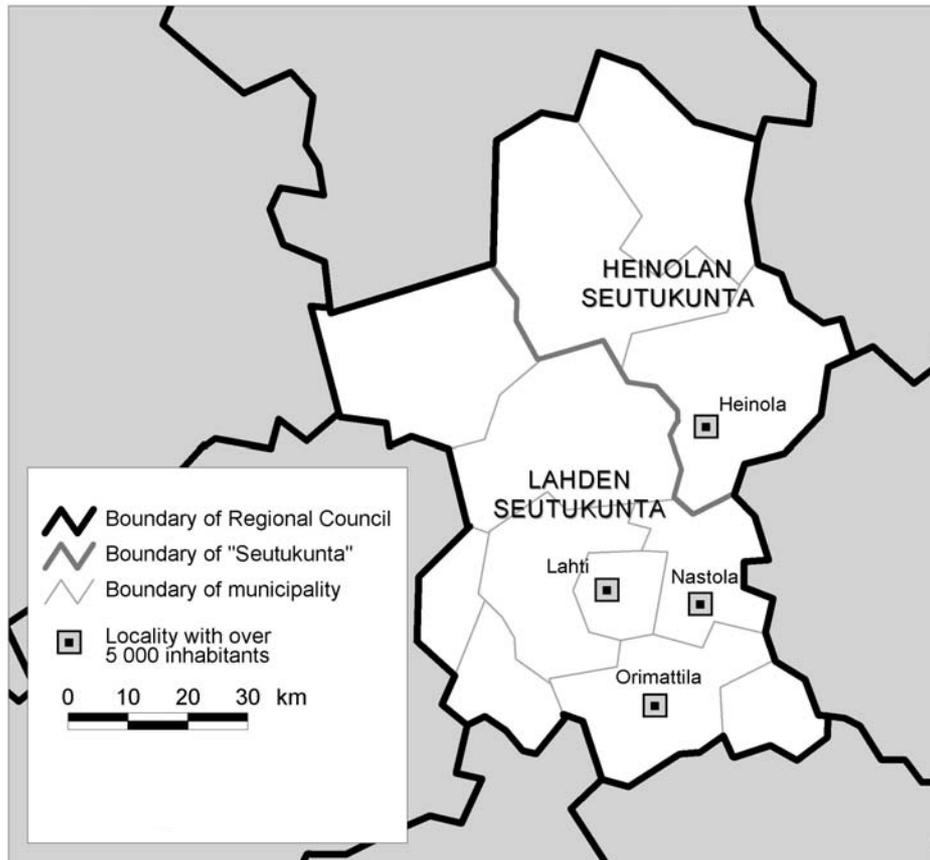


Image 4: The Päijät-Häme Region

The planning process began in 2001, and the plan is currently awaiting ratification by the Ministry of the Environment. The impact assessments comprised an environmental impact assessment conducted by the Council office and a social impact assessment conducted by external consultants.

In Päijät-Häme, a consultant was found through personal contacts. The expert of social issues in the Council had met the consultant in a seminar, where she was giving a presentation on social impact assessment. She had extensive experience in gender issues, the elderly, social justice and social impact assessment. She did not have experience in land use planning, but this was not considered as a disadvantage. Both the consultant and the Council saw co-operation as a chance to develop knowledge and skills on social impact assessment in land use planning. Although the Council organized competitive bidding, the Helsinki University of Technology/Centre of Lahti was nevertheless selected as the consultant.

The assessment used versatile data, such as:

- Literature produced in the planning process (ie. draft texts and maps, comments and objections on plan drafts, specific briefings on road number 12).
- Assessment material gathered from a specific theme group on social and health matters.
- Discussions with the expert group producing the plan.
- Scientific literature on the social impacts of the plans.
- Social impact assessments conducted at other levels of planning.
- Statistics.

The extensive assessment (98 pages) focuses especially on “sensitive groups”. These groups comprise the elderly, the handicapped (+ ill + disabled), and children. The themes used in the assessment of the plan and five localities are:

Balanced and equal living environment

- Including clearways in buildings and living environments; accessibility, mobility, local identity and communality, participation and action possibilities, image of the region.

Changes in population and regional segregation

- Improvement in living space, needs and possibilities for densification of urban structure, social structure of housing areas and possibilities for more versatile population structure, vitality of sparsely populated areas, adequacy and versatility of housing.

Employment and unemployment

- Impacts on economic structure, preconditions of companies and distances to work.

Improving the mental health

- Cultural heritage and recreation.
- Second homes and seasonal inhabitants.

Safety and health

- Experienced psycho-physical and social health, lifestyles and illnesses, health impacts of traffic projects and traffic safety, other environmental hazards (noise, quality of air, air pollution), economic safety.

Impacts on gender

- Ageing, links to local communities, public transportation, sports and leisure, shopping and services.

The assessment contains a lot of references to other scientific studies and literature. The consultant has presented important themes such as gender issues, which are almost entirely neglected in planning documents.

In the plan description, the results of the impact assessments are reported in two chapters: “Content” and “Assessment of Cumulative Impacts”. The chapter “Content” is divided into the following topics: densely populated areas, countryside, transportation, recreation and protection. The results of the impact assessments are usually, but not often, presented in the context of these classes and plan notations (as well as “realisation, timing and follow-up”) at a rather general level, not as specific as in the case of the Uusimaa regional plan. The influence of external SIA is most visible in the chapter “Assessment of Cumulative Impacts”, which focuses on the impacts of the plan on regional development issues such as housing, growth areas, rural development, recreation, etc., but also on the goals set by law (impacts on national land use goals, impacts on Natura areas etc.).

3.4 Comparison of the social impact assessments

There are both differences and similarities in the SIAs produced by consultants external to the regional planning process. Firstly, the assessments are different in their “ethos”. The assessment in Päijät-Häme is a fairly comprehensive academic work with its list references and contextualisation. Reading the assessment, it becomes evident that the assessor works for a university department, not for a consultancy company. Differences between the two traditions are, at least in these cases, clearly visible. The work in Päijät-Häme not only follows the text of the plan, but presents new ideas and perspectives on the development of the region. The assessment in Uusimaa is also an academic, sociological and contextual study. It too presents new ideas, but it is rather limited – or economic – in comparison to the assessment in Päijät-

Häme. The assessment in Etelä-Pohjanmaa is clearly a work done by a consultancy company. The work is closely knit to the economic impact assessment and maybe for this reason it exploits vocabulary familiar to discourses highlighting the importance of economic competitiveness. In comparison to the two other assessments, the emphasis is significant.

The cases also vary in terms of their emphasis on different social impact categories mentioned earlier in chapter 2 of this report.

Categories	Etelä-Pohjanmaa	Päijät-Häme	Uusimaa
Identification of vulnerable groups	-	+++	++
Socio-demographic changes and their consequences	+	++	+
Welfare of growth areas vs. regional equity	++	++	+
Division of labour between different areas and its consequences	++	++	++
Differentiation of regional identities	-	+	++
Networks of public transportation	+	++	-
Balance of regional service structures	++	+++	-
Accessibility of different areas according to var. population groups	-	++	+
Networks and accessibility of recreation areas	+	+++	++
Siting of hazardous or polluting activities	+++	++	+
Regional significance of landscape and nature values for local people	-	++	+

Table 2: Three SIAs and their emphasis on social impact categories

Analysis of three SIAs showed the importance of the research setting and methodology: What is the scope, frame and focus? Decisions concerning these significantly influence the nature and quality of the assessment. Our examination revealed that the assessments represented three different kinds of approaches to social impact assessment.²

The assessment of the Etelä-Pohjanmaa regional land use plan takes geographically defined areas – subregions – as its starting point. It therefore represents what we call a “geographical approach” to social impact assessment. The SIA explores the impacts of the plan on the level of sub-regions. It begins with an analysis of physical changes brought about by the plan, and continues with an analysis of social changes caused by the changes in the environment. The advantage of this approach is the strong linkage between the plan and its (environmental) impacts, especially in the case of specific projects envisaged for the sub-regions. The approach has, however, significant weaknesses. Firstly, when focusing on sub-regions, and exploring the most important projects and planning targets there, the assessment fails to show the impacts of the plan in all corners of the region: interpretation of the impacts of the plan on the whole region is somewhat lacking. Secondly, when highlighting physical changes brought about by the plan, the assessment becomes weak in terms of social reality:

² For more about the approaches, see chapter 5 of this report.

only those social phenomena which are directly caused by physical change in these specific areas are mentioned. For this reason, the perspective on social life becomes rather narrow.

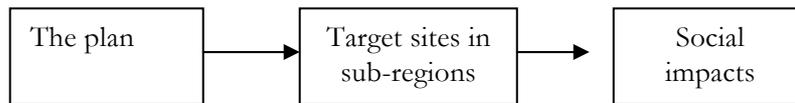


Figure 4: *The geographical approach to social impact assessment*

By contrast, the assessment of Uusimaa takes the social sphere as its starting point. For this reason we have called it a “sociological approach” to social impact assessment. The assessment is powerful in its analysis of the impacts of the plan on a very general level. Many features of social life – such as global trends and issues addressed in urban studies, for example – are discussed. The assessment is therefore able to present ideas and perspectives new to planners, thereby “adding something” to the planning process. The Uusimaa assessment is an almost total opposite to the assessment of Etelä-Pohjanmaa, and its strengths as well as weaknesses are almost completely reversed. The linkage between the plan and its social impacts is relatively weak, and the assessment is consequently hardly able to show what social impacts the plan's realisation would actually bring. Readers of the assessment will gain perspectives on the region's “place in the world” and on the significant challenges that planning must take into consideration, but they will not gain much knowledge on the specific impacts of the plan on people's lives in specific areas, such as villages.

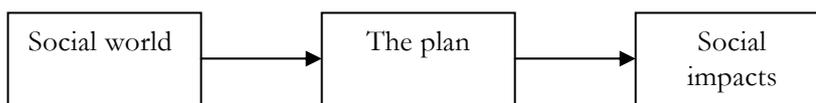


Figure 5: *The sociological approach to social impact assessment*

The assessment of Päijät-Häme exploits both the sociological and the geographical perspective. It starts with social themes and highlights the perspective of various population groups (the elderly, women, children etc.). From social issues, the assessment continues to analyse the plan in general, and proceeds then to take a closer look at selected target sites and areas. The assessment succeeds in linking physical changes with social phenomena, and shows the impacts of the plan on both the general and the specific level. Problems with this kind of ambitious research are mainly economic: Are there enough resources (personnel, time and money) to conduct such grandiose assessments? It is also quite possible that extensive reports are not widely read among planners and political decision makers.

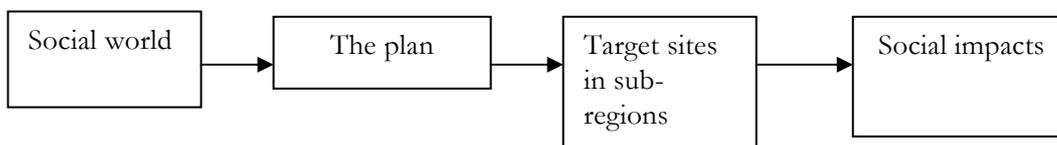


Figure 6: *The mixed approach to social impact assessment*

3.5 Conclusion

Social impact assessment in regional land use planning was a new issue for both the consultants and the Regional Councils. The assessments were the first ones conducted in Finland, and they were seen as a possibility to develop the social impact assessment procedure and adjust it in to the regional level.

The study shows that there is no one way to do SIA, but many. All three approaches have both their advantages and disadvantages, which can be shown as follows:

	The plan in general	Target sites/ changes in physical environment	Social phenomena/social groups
Etelä-Pohjanmaa “geographical approach”	-	+	-
Uusimaa “sociological approach”	+	-	+
Päijät-Häme “mixed approach”	+	+	+

Table 3: Three approaches to SIA in regional planning

The assessments are based on different methodological approaches, and the assessors' experience, education as well as the literature used play a significant role. The assessors have had the opportunity to “use” their own personality, experiences and values in addition to empirically gathered data. This has enriched the assessments and helped them to be sensitive to the social, political and cultural situation in the region.

The effort the assessors have put into their work is so remarkable that it is a pity that the assessment has acquired a significant role in plan description only in Uusimaa. The results of the SIA in Uusimaa were presented as detailed and in connection to each plan notation. The method of presentation in Päijät-Häme was quite similar, but the results of the SIA were mixed with the results of environmental impact assessment – and not always to the benefit of the SIA. In Etelä-Pohjanmaa, the results of the SIA were poorly presented. The chapter showing economic and social impacts of the plan focused mainly on the economic impacts, and the social impacts were not mentioned at all in plan notations.

4. SIA in the regional planning process

The Finnish Ministry of Environment has emphasised that impact assessments should be integrated to planning processes (see the guidebook Tallskog *et al* 2006). Impact assessments have been understood to be part of the devising of land use plans. In this chapter we will take a look at how this has happened in practice. The chapter is based on interviews and it focuses on the role and effects of SIA in the planning process.

4.1 SIA in participation and assessment plans

As mentioned earlier, according to the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (1999), the potential environmental impacts of a plan, including implications for the community economy, and social, cultural and other effects, should be appropriately investigated. The impact assessment is programmed in the participation and assessment plan (PAP) drafted in connection with the initiation of the plan. It lays out what impacts are going to be assessed and in what manner, as well as the boundaries of the area under investigation and the timetable for the job. In the participation and assessment plan, efforts are also made to take a stand on what the key impacts are as regards this specific plan which will be subjected to in-depth examination.

For our cases, the participation and assessment plan was a novelty. The PAP in Etelä-Pohjanmaa was made in 2000, in Uusimaa in 2001, and in Päijät-Häme in 2003. There were difficulties to define what PAPs should contain at the level of the regional plan: Who would be the stakeholders to participate? Who would and should represent people of the region? How would assessments be funded? The PAP – or the social impact assessment – had not yet become a “routine” task in the planning process, and for this reason the PAP documents are very general. For example, the PAPs of the Päijät-Häme regional plan approved by the Board of Regional Council (10 February 2003) do not mention social impact assessment in particular. According to Laitinen, SIA was not mentioned in the PAP because it was difficult to be specific at this early stage of the planning process. The social dimension was, however, implicitly included in the PAP:

Laitinen: The planning process takes years and it is difficult to go in to details in PAPs. We have to keep in mind that we work according to yearly budgets. The regional scheme had, however, already emphasised the role of people as actors and inhabitants in the region. The scheme guided the making of PAPs and for this reason people are in focus in the PAPs.

4.2 Decision to invite external experts

In the later phases of planning, a decision to make specific social impact assessment was made. As mentioned earlier, the assessments are usually conducted by the planning offices themselves. In these cases, however, it was decided to invite an external consultant for the job. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, an external expert was hired because there was local demand to highlight the social dimension:

Ristaniemi: I am personally interested in all kinds of impact assessments and in my opinion social impact assessment is an integral part of impact assessment of the plan. But there were representatives of the Board of Regional Council who also considered SIA as necessary. [...] There might be a cultural explanation for this interest. Etelä-Pohjanmaa is known as “the promised land of associations”. Social activity in general is highly respected and people take interest in society and politics. Maybe this explains why it was so easy to get SIA accepted there.

Secondly, it was felt that the social dimension of the plan needed special attention. Other impact assessments focus on the environment, economy etc. and tend to neglect social aspects. In order to create a “balanced” plan, a specific SIA had to be conducted:

Rekola: We had an economic impact assessment and several other kinds of assessments already. We felt that these assessments had to be counterbalanced with social impact assessment.

The third reason to use an external assessor was the planners’ need for external expertise. The planners were not familiar with social impact assessment, and they wanted to learn more about the social dimension in regional planning. The aim was to learn about the social dimension and to develop social impact assessment in land use planning in general:

Rekola: Social impact assessment was – and still is – a new thing. It was – and still is – not clear what it is all about.

Laitinen: We wanted to learn and develop this dimension. [...] And now when we had the opportunity to work with an expert, we used it. [...] We would have had an expert in another department [not in land use planning] but she was too busy and we were not able to work with her.

Finally, the external expert was seen as necessary because s/he could secure the objectivity of the plan 3. The planners felt that they were so deeply involved with the planning process that their perspective was becoming too subjective. The “outsider” would secure not only the objectivity of the plan, but of the assessment as well. If the assessment is done by the office itself, there is a clear danger of biased interpretations:

Rekola: [Having] an outsider was good, because it is possible that I was too close to the subject already.

Laitinen: It is good to have an external assessor because in assessments, objectivity is important. We [the planners] are not necessarily disqualified to do it but we are, nonetheless, interested parties.

4.3 Timing of SIA in the planning process

In our cases, all social impact assessments were conducted between the public display of the draft plan and the approval of the plan proposal. The consultants perceived this as problematic. On the one hand, the time was right for assessment, because the plan draft could be used as material in the assessment. On the other hand, it was felt that the moment in time was too late for assessment to have an effect on planning. It was therefore suggested that the assessments should be done during the preparation of the plan draft:

Ruotsalainen: A drafting phase is good, but a preparation phase would have been even better. I would have been able to analyse more alternatives. Of course the planners have analysed them, but if we want the assessment to really affect the plan, there should be a comparison between the alternatives, too. We should be able assess the impacts of different alternatives.

Päivänen: The assessments are done as cross-sections and too often *ex post facto* [afterwards]. They should be linked to the preparation of the plan, and the assessors should have the possibility to participate in meetings. The planning mechanism is sluggish and for this reason only one alternative is usually produced. There should be more interaction between the consultant and the planners – there should be more discussion on that one option at least.

Päivänen: In the drafting phase, it would be still possible to valuate which things are primary and which are secondary. In my opinion, the work is not well done if one makes a cross-section when the draft is ready – often only because the deadline is close.

The plan draft is problematic for assessment for other reasons as well. The draft does not necessarily contain all the information about the plan:

Päivänen: There was one non-optional draft plan. It contained most of the land use, but the locations of large retail business centres were not defined yet.

Also, delays in the planning process might cause problems. In Päijät-Häme it was hoped that the assessment would have a clear connection to the plan proposal. This was, however, impossible due to a delay in proposal's publication. The consultant had only the draft plan to go by.

³ Objectivity is one of the key ideals of planners as the study of Puustinen (2006) on Finnish planning profession has shown.

Timing was problematic not only for consultants, but also for the Councils. According to Rekola, it is often expected that the assessments would be available when planners and politicians make their decisions. This is hardly ever the case with strict schedules and sudden political decisions:

Rekola: The schedules are strict and the politicians make political decisions. These decisions have to be included in both the plan and the assessment – and that takes time. That is one reason why planning and assessment are difficult to do at the same time. It happens often that decisions are made first and assessment follows.

The assessments can be conducted only when there is enough data available. The assessment takes time and when the results are ready, “the train has passed the station”, as Rekola put it. In other words, the assessment is published too late and has no effect on planning or political decision making.

4.4 Response and influence

The final assessment reports were read by key planners and assessment steering boards at the Offices of Regional Councils. The consultants we interviewed did not know whether reports were read by other groups. However, the assessments were submitted as paper copies to political representatives in the Boards and Assemblies of Regional Councils. The assessments were also published on the Internet. The consultants got positive feedback from planners:

Päivänen: The response by planners was, as far as I remember, rather positive. They did not demand any kind of retouching or practise censorship. But we talked a lot about which issues are really matters of planning and which are not. I learned a lot from these discussions.

Melkas: The response by planners was positive. They had got value for money. [...] The person I worked with most had a completely different background from mine. She told me that the work gave her new points of view on different things.

Päivänen’s opinion was that the work had at least one practical outcome, promoting so-called “silent areas” in the Uusimaa region:

Due to our work the idea of silent areas – opportunities for recreation in an auditorily pleasant environment – is now acknowledged in Uusimaa. We started to promote the idea to the Council, because this issue has to be taken further at the regional level. Communities do not yet see its advantages. [...] It felt like a victory for us, because in the beginning the idea was opposed.

The planners had mixed opinions on SIA’s effect on their work. Laitinen was convinced that SIA was influential on a personal level:

It gave us – and I think my colleagues would agree – a new perspective on planning. [...] This was our first regional plan, so we were not doing routine work in a negative sense. Work as regional planner, however, brings us to see things from above. We might overlook things that eventually can be the most important ones for people.

She felt, however, that SIA did not have major influence on the actual plan. It had an impact on some details, but did not lead into total reworking of the plan. The other planners’s opinions are similar. According to Ristaniemi, assessment encouraged the marking of public transport in some community centres on the map, but otherwise it did not have much of an

impact. Also Rekola stated that assessment did not have a direct impact on the plan. However, the assessment became influential when planners had to meet politicians, as it gave support for the planners. In the case of waste management, for example, the assessments reflected public feedback (comments by inhabitants and other stake-holders) and this helped planners to describe the problem to decision makers:

Assessment showed that waste management [...] is not only environmental, but also social, and therefore political, issue. It is essential that we be able to convince politicians that experienced nuisance is real. And if another decision is not an option, then we have to just state the fact and bear the [political] consequences. We cannot simply exclude peoples' worries.

The consultants did not get any comments from politicians or any other groups. This lack of response of a larger audience was felt to be negative:

Melkas: I have not heard any comments from politicians or civil servants. Actually, it was very motivating when you called and wanted to interview me, because I had the feeling that the entire work is forgotten in the Council. I simply do not know what the situation there is. I have good memories of the project, but when I was starting we talked about printing the report. There was also talk about me giving a presentation for the Assembly of the Regional Council about the results of the assessment. This did not, however, happen. From time to time I have been wondering about the real response and benefit of the assessment.

Päivänen: Who else [but planners] read it? I do not know. The circulation was done by Internet, and I guess it was never printed. [...] The response of a larger audience remains a mystery to me.

According to planners, politicians did not pay much attention to the assessments. For example in Uusimaa:

Rekola: We did not get direct feedback on the assessment. But I think there have been readers among political groups, because the title "impacts on people" is rather tempting. But nobody has expressed disagreement or anything. The comments we got on the draft plan contained the same issues, but no references to the assessment.

There are many possible reasons for the politicians' reactions. First, the assessments have to draw clear conclusions in order to raise political interest: "politicians wish to get clear plusses and minuses and if it's just a paper, they do not read it". Secondly, the assessments gain interest among politicians if they are useful in political debate. Parties seek support for their arguments: "The only reference to assessment was made in a debate over the path of the highway". The third reason is political conventions: "It is easier for a single politician to follow decisions made by his or her group decision if s/he has not seen the assessment". According to Laitinen, the lack of response indicates a political culture which is not ready to accept assessments as essential elements in decision making:

The impact assessment as a whole is not interesting for politicians or larger audiences. [...] The ideology of impact assessment carries the idea that decision makers are aware of the impacts of their decisions, but this is not happening yet. [...] Luckily, however, there are some politicians who want see behind the scenes and read assessment material. In the assembly, for example, you could hear comments which showed that the speaker had read our material carefully.

The success of assessment is, thus, largely dependent on the attitudes among politicians. There still remains a lot to be done about this as shown by the following quote. The interviewee is talking about feedback the text of the draft plan got in the Board:

The comments were just word trimming. We were asked to show a positive attitude, even though in many cases the development in the region was negative.

4.5 Ideas for development

The interviewees were asked what they would do differently if they had to conduct a SIA on regional land use planning now. According to Ruotsalainen, the situation would be rather different. The assessments discussed in this paper were all pioneering efforts, and now assessors would have more knowledge and experience to conduct the assessment. The knowledge is partly provided by research and development projects funded by the Ministry of Environment and STAKES. There are now more guide books and checking lists available – “not just concept and ideology”. The SIA developed significantly during the past five years in Finland.

The consultants emphasised the importance of publishing the results. There should be organised tours where the results are presented to decision makers and other audiences in communities. The main problem, however, is the timing of assessment in the planning process. It was emphasised that assessments should be integrated better to the planning process. It was suggested that assessments should be “parallel and continuous” instead of “cross-sections”. According to Ristaniemi, for example, a parallel assessment process is more useful to planners than a cross-section focusing on just one phase of the process. In Ristaniemi’s interpretation, the assessment is given an extremely significant role. It guides the whole planning process, and cross-section analysis is not able to do this:

For us, the main thing is not [the details] in the assessment report, that a motorway or some other thing can have this or that impact. The interesting thing is the effect of the presence of that [detail] in the report on the content of the plan, map and description; in what direction it steers the process. A cross-section at some point of the process is not good at all.

Also Rekola supported the idea of continuous and parallel external assessment as an addition to “internal” assessments made by planners as a part of their routine work. He pointed out that long-time contracts might be challenging, but these have already been used in environmental impact assessment. Long-term contracts might fit into EU’s competition legislation, and they might also make the planning process more solid:

Rekola: If a consultant was chosen in competitive bidding at the beginning of the process, it would then be justified to hire the same consultant to do further work. We would not need to have another competitive bidding.

4.6 The future of SIA

The interviewees were asked their opinion on the future role of SIA in land use planning. The answers show that despite the difficulties, both the consultants and the planners consider SIA a necessary and important part of the planning process. SIA can enhance the quality of the plan, because it provides better knowledge for planners on social dimension, especially when it is used in tandem with participation:

Ristaniemi: The planner is simply unable to see and know everything. Not even if all plan makers – graduate engineers and architects – from all communities were

to sit around the table. [...] It is important that other perspectives and interests are represented. [...] Our own perspective is limited. It's just the way it is. There is not much we can do about it.

Melkas: If it [SIA] is able to get somebody to see the world from the perspective of the elderly or children – then it's marvellous!

SIA and participation helps planners inform inhabitants and others concerned about the aims and goals of the plan. According to Ristaniemi, SIA and participation make plans more acceptable among people if they are involved in the planning process from the beginning:

It is not necessary that people commit themselves to the outcome of the process. It is more important that people see the planning process and are able to influence it. Thereby their understanding deepens and their response is softer. SIA and participation have a positive impact on the process.

Other planners pointed out, however, that there is a lot of criticism towards the assessments among planners. Some planners think that they are already doing assessment as part of their routine work. Moreover, it has often been complained that there are too many assessments to be conducted in planning processes nowadays:

Laitinen: The number of different kinds of concepts in impact assessments is already tremendous. It is sad to say, but people are getting tired with this.

Rekola: The more we have to do these, the more superficial they get. The criticism that we are assessing just for the sake of assessing is to some extent true. There should be some limit set by the planning level. [...] But it is also worrying if planners start to think that assessment is not “real work”. If they start to think that assessing is an unpleasant obligation and only weakens the quality of planning.

It is therefore essential that the assessments be better integrated into planning processes: the assessment should have a positive impact on plans. It is also extremely important that politicians utilise assessments in decision making. Otherwise planners might get frustrated:

The need to make an assessment is written in law, and assessment has already become some kind of “perpetual-motion machine”. This is also a bit worrying for the future: What is enough? And if politicians do not take these into consideration, what is the sense of it, then?

4.7 Conclusion

The participation and assessment plans did not include specified details on social impact assessments mainly because of organisational and financial reasons. The social dimension was, however, implicitly present in the PAP. The assessment was assigned to external consultants for several reasons: local demand to highlight the social dimension of the plan, the balance of the plan (economic and environmental issues were acknowledged already), the lack of expertise on social issues in the planning office, and the objectivity of the plan.

The timing of assessment is the major problem and main future target of development. There was a broad agreement that cross-section assessments done in one phase of the planning process – between the public display of the plan draft and the approval of the plan proposal – should be replaced by continuous assessment, parallel with the planning process. This would enhance the usability of the assessments both in planning offices and in political decision making. The interviews showed that it is essential that the results of the assessments

truly can be exploited in these contexts. Otherwise there is a danger of frustration among the planners who have to follow the rules set by the law. The future of SIA – and all assessments – depends on this.

5. Contents of SIA

In this chapter, based on the interviews, we will focus on the contents of the assessments and ask how “the social” was understood and found in the cases under study. We start with questions deriving from the law, namely the definition of “sufficiency” of the assessment and “significant” impacts (Ympäristöministeriö 2006). From there we continue with a discussion on methods and the concept of “the social”. The chapter ends with some remarks on the assessment of the goals of the plan.

5.1 Scoping and sufficiency of the assessment

According to the Land Use and Building Act, the socio-economic, social, cultural and other impacts of a plan must be assessed to the necessary extent. In other words, the assessments must be sufficient and they should be able to indicate significant impacts of the plan. The interviews showed that both the concepts of “sufficiency” and “significance” are rather difficult in regional land use planning practice. Problems arise already in the scoping of the assessment.

The scope set by Councils in calls for bids are usually very general. According to the planners we interviewed, the reason for this is the generality of the regional land use plan itself. This leads to a situation where the scoping has to be done by the consultants making the bid:

Päivänen: In the call for bids there was some sort of list of interests. I rewrote it completely. [...] They wanted to explore impacts on well-being, demography and so on. I made a new structure for it and included other aspects such as experienced noise, etc.

Heikkinen: So you basically had to scope it yourself?

Päivänen: This is quite common. And when they compare quality and price, quality includes the capability to give structure for the issue.

Ruotsalainen: We did the scoping ourselves. Three sections. The first on recognising general guidelines for regional land use and development – what the regional plan means in this region? The second was a deeper assessment at sub-regional level, and the reporting.

Melkas: The scope set by the Council was not much more than a timetable. I thought it would take 39 days, but it took much longer. It was a new and interesting theme, and perhaps that was why I wanted to do as good a job as possible. The social circles are so small that if you are not doing a good job, everybody will soon know it. I have seen other social impact assessments since then and maybe mine was a bit too extensive.

The Councils were willing to give the scoping to the bidding consultants. If the scope and frame of the study looked promising, the consultant was hired and the frame was fine tuned in the first project meetings. These meetings were important because this is where the scope and

frame for assessment were finally decided in co-operation with the consultant and the Council. For example, in Päijät-Häme “We talked a lot about the scoping in the beginning. We tried to set the scope together with the consultant, and it was a real challenge in given the timetable” (Laitinen).

Scoping is not necessarily an easy task, because the consultant and the client might have different opinions about the focus, for example. Rekola (and Veltheim) pointed out that the Councils hire consultants for specific purposes: consultants should give answers to specific questions asked by the planners, not ask new questions:

Veltheim: We were looking for an opinion from this assessment on the outcomes of the plan – where the plan decision would lead us? Therefore the phrasing of the question had to be a bit leading. The consultant did good work. However, the planning process was also assessed – and that was not what we had ordered. [...] The social impacts of the *plan* were confused with the social impacts of the *planning process*, and we had to use a bit too much energy on solving this.

5.2 Sufficiency and significance

From the interviews, it emerged that there is no clear understanding of what should be included in social impact assessment in regional land use planning in order to meet the criteria of sufficiency. In calls for bids, for example, sufficiency was not mentioned. There are, however, several methods which can be used in order to meet the demands. It is possible, for example, to use different kinds of experts:

Päivänen: It is rather usual that the client does not have a clear idea about the frame. In this case, however, social, health and cultural impacts were mentioned. We translated them to one concept – impacts on people [*IVA* in Finnish]. In order to make a sufficient assessment, we used top-level law experts for whom this was a new thing, too.

Ruotsalainen: There was a steering board focusing on sustainable development which consisted of representatives of Finland’s environmental administration and sub-regions. From the Council of Etelä-Pohjanmaa, there were representatives from the social and health sector. The steering board guided and ascertained that the impacts were sufficiently explored. As far as I know, they were satisfied with our work.

According to Ristaniemi, sufficiency could be attained by on-going monitoring from beginning to end. The assessment should be conducted simultaneously with the planning, which would help the assessment to meet the sufficiency requirement. According to Rekola, however, it is extremely difficult for planners to decide when assessment is sufficient. Sufficiency depends on the context: what is sufficient from one perspective is not necessarily so from another:

We have no wisdom on sufficiency. It is the Supreme Administrative Court who is able to make the final decision. But maybe the assessment is sufficient when politicians can make decisions based on it. Sufficiency can, however, mean different things in different phases of the process.

Sufficiency is closely connected to significance. A good assessment should at the very least be able to recognise the most important impacts of the plan. According to the interviewees, it is nevertheless quite difficult to say objectively what particular impacts are the most significant. Here, again, perspective is crucial:

Melkas: It was really difficult to point out what impacts are the most significant ones. Writing the conclusion for this report was extremely hard. The problem is that if you write strict conclusions, then the multi-perspective approach promoted in this work will disappear. But I should have worked more with this issue – significant impacts. The theme group I worked with also felt that the significance of the impacts was difficult to judge. Among the handicapped, for example, the significance of an impact can be totally different depending on the nature of their handicap.

Ruotsalainen: It can be estimated whether the change is positive or negative. A change can, however, be either negative or positive depending on the area. In our project, we tried to recognise significant changes on the level of sub-regions, because on the level of the entire region, the task is quite impossible.

According to Päivänen, significance of the impacts is “a social construction” which is enriched by the input from data and created in discussions between the consultant and the client. This argument on the subjective character of significance was supported by others, too. The significance is constructed, although the planner does have the final word about it:

Päivänen: In practice, the consultant or researcher judges that some things are significant – and then the client can say “we think that this is not that significant because...”. It is in this discussion that the significance crystallises; “aha, in this sense a good location, in that sense a one-dimensional place”.

Ristaniemi: Significance of impacts? It is the planner’s own interpretation. We did not use any kind of ranking or other method to find it out.

Laitinen: Significance is a rather subjective question. What is significant to one is insignificant to someone else. But our interaction with the consultant made it possible to explore the significance more deeply. Without these discussions, the outcome would have been more limited. We discussed things and pointed out the significant phenomena. As a result, some of these significant issues were written down in the guidelines and even in the planning regulation.

5.3 The data and methods

The data used in assessments was largely provided by the planning offices. The consultants could use material produced in the preparation of the draft plan. These included, for example, the regional scheme and programme which provided guidelines for the regional land use plan, other kinds of impact assessments, and solicited opinions and comments on the draft plan given by different stakeholders, authorities and inhabitants. The GIS (geographic information system) was not yet used, because it was only later that GIS was established as a basic tool for assessments.

According to the consultants, opinions and comments on the draft plan and other impact assessments were most useful material. They helped them to understand the social reality of the region, which in most cases was not familiar to the consultants beforehand. According to Päivänen, “vigilant citizens” also asked good evaluative questions concerning ecologically sustainable development, for example. Environmental impact assessments on specific projects – such as highways – helped recognise how the plan might affect the physical environment. An understanding of physical change is essential for social impact assessment. As Ruotsalainen described it:

When we were outlining principles, guidelines and goals of land use development, the other impact assessments helped us to perceive actual changes that the plan would cause. Our aim was therefore to interpret what these changes meant in the

social world, what it meant for people, for business as well as for the competitiveness of the region.

There was not, however, systematic interaction between different types of impact assessments. The assessments were conducted as separate, individual projects, and the assessors could use the results if they were available.

In addition to using data provided by the planning offices, the consultants also gathered data themselves. The principal method was discussion with planners, expert groups and steering boards. For example, in Etelä-Pohjanmaa, a one-day seminar for stakeholders was organised. In Päijät-Häme, an expert group of social and health care specialists was formed to aid the assessment. This group was accompanied by the working group of planners and a group specialising in EU programme assessment. Meetings with planners and experts are essential for the consultant's knowledge production. As Päivänen described it: "It is ridiculous to come from outside and then have to use all the time to correct misunderstandings". In his opinion, the assessors should nevertheless have an opportunity to meet planners from communities as well:

In the case of a regional plan, it would be necessary to discuss with general plan makers at the communal level, with those whose work is most affected by the regional plan. What is their opinion about the development of the region? Are there conflicts or is everything OK? In other words, is this regional plan necessary?

5.4 Finding "the social"

Social impact assessment in regional planning was considered a challenging task, the main reason being the generality of the plan at this level:

Laitinen: In the regional plan, area reservations are very general and, compared to detailed and town plans, they contain a lot more land use categories. This makes impact assessment really difficult. [...] At the detailed plan level, for example, it is a lot easier.

Päivänen: For us, the whole process was a learning process. We learned that regional plans are really general and the aim is not, for example, to mark all recreational routes but only the most used ones.

In order to find the social impacts of the plan, different strategies were used. The first research strategy has already been described in chapter 3, where we called it the "geographical approach". This was used in the assessment of the Etelä-Pohjanmaa regional plan, where the starting point was environmental impact assessment and the recognition of physical changes that the plan will bring about:

Ruotsalainen: First we analysed [from the planning documents] what are the goals of the plan. Then we analysed changes: What are the changes taking place in the physical environment? In this we used the methodology developed in environmental impact assessment during the past 10 years. This includes quantification and yields hard scientific facts, so to say. At the level of the regional plan, it might be more difficult to estimate changes in social environment [than at the level of detailed and town planning]. By social environment we refer to phenomena which have something to do with everyday life: population structure, services, transportation. It is, however, difficult to analyse how the regional plan impacts directly on people's lives. But if we study environmental impacts, we can perceive the most important projects and their locations. If we know, for

example, railroads and highways, we can then proceed to analyse what this means to population structures, for example.

Also, Rekola from Uusimaa supported this kind of approach. According to him:

[...] some impacts are primary and some are secondary. Primary impacts are changes in the physical environment or clear changes in people's lives. These act as sources of secondary impacts which can be extremely concatenated. Social impacts are secondary impacts and they include economy, safety, employment, transportation, services and perhaps also land prices and housing costs. The social impact is a sum of things.

By contrast, the assessments of Uusimaa ("sociological approach") and Päijät-Häme ("mixed approach") had social and even global phenomena, social issues, different population groups or social aims and goals of the plan as their starting points.

Päivänen: I am interested in seeing how the plan takes the challenges raised by world change. It is not just the present that interests me. Where are we going, what is happening?

Melkas: This focus on different groups of people [...] is natural to me. It is almost automatic. [...] From the beginning there was an idea to write down issues which touched other levels of planning, too, not only the regional planning level.

Päivänen: We exploited traditional conceptualisations used in planning: housing, transportation, services, business and industry and working places. These were the targets of planning documents and it is these that the planning seeks to affect.

The main difference in these approaches is in their perspective. The "geographical approach" is more loyal to planning and limited to analysing closely what changes the realisation of the plan might cause. The "sociological" and "mixed" approaches are more liberal and their perspective is broader. The aim is not only to analyse changes brought about by the plan, but to give rise to broader discussion on relevant social issues. The assessment in Päijät-Häme, for example, focused on certain population groups and discussed the plan from this perspective. In the assessment of Uusimaa, several issues brought up by urban studies were discussed in the context of regional planning.

The planning level and the generality of the plan, however, caused problems to all approaches. This problem is closely connected to the notion of social impact. "The social" in planning has traditionally referred to phenomena which are explored using quantitative and statistical data (population changes etc.). Assessments using this type of data produce, of course, quantitative and statistical knowledge.

The concept of the social can, however, also refer to people's experiences. It can refer to people's experiences about the quality of the living environment, for example. Here assessments using quantitative data face problems. As Ruotsalainen described it: "Impacts to people's health can be counted using health parameters. But experienced impacts are difficult to convert to numbers." Here the level of planning is once again important, too. At the community level, it is relatively easy to interview inhabitants, but at the regional level the situation is different:

Ruotsalainen: The methodology of social impact assessment is developed in the context of specific planning projects. In these, the social scientist interviews people: "What does it feel like and how does it affect your every day life? Have any gender issues come up?" At the regional level, one can not really do that.

Interaction with inhabitants is impossible. [...] It is difficult to present the inhabitant's perspective on this planning level. [...]

The planning level is considered to be the reason why qualitative studies – such as interviews with inhabitants – are not conducted. The consultants have, instead, based their assessments on their own experiences, identification, literature, and discussions with planners and experts:

Melkas: If you take the other perspective – let's say the perspective of a child living in a village, for example – it helps you to make the assessment. [...] I tried to immerse myself in the world of the people living and working in that area. But I also imagined the world of people who just pass through the area, bus drivers and entrepreneurs. [...] I cannot understand how one can do SIA if one does not try to take the positions of people, try to see things from their perspective. [In SIA] you can exploit a large variety of literature, your own working experience, and your own personality as well.

Päivänen: When assessing the quality of the living environment brought about by the plan [...] one has to use literature. [...] This is nothing but qualitative discussion. One has to try to make out links between quantitative data – population changes or changes in housing – and qualitative phenomena.

5.5 Social and other impacts

Another problem is that social impacts are closely related to other kinds of impacts. Because the impacts of the plan might cause “chain reactions”, it is difficult to analyse the social impacts alone. Very often this problem is solved by conducting different assessments on environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts. In the case of Etelä-Pohjanmaa, for example, the consultancy company conducted both economic and social impact assessments and reported them in different sections of the assessment report. Another strategy is to broaden the scope of social impact assessment to cover a large variety of impacts. In the case of Päijät-Häme, different impacts were deliberately merged together:

Melkas: At first I had a classification into social, health, and cultural impacts. But I abandoned it, because it started to limit my thinking and prevent me from seeing important issues. These things are so closely connected. Think about noise, for example. The impacts can be health or economic impacts at first. Then it changes to a social impact and then to an economic impact again.

In the case of Uusimaa, the cultural impacts of the plan were studied in two different assessments, one focusing on cultural heritage and landscape, the other on social impacts. The latter defined culture in terms of subcultures and lifestyles:

An assessment emphasising historical issues was about to start when we came in. [...] Therefore we had to employ a different definition of culture in our work. We wrote about the subcultures and cultures of immigrants in this region. We tried to look at people's culture, but I am not sure how successful we were. [...] In general, my opinion is that in the future we need to acknowledge that all of us are not white, middle-class people with families who want to live in single-family houses. These “others” are people who want to live in high-rise buildings. We need to find these people, and not be scared of them. This does not imply any decay, housing preferences and environmental preferences are simply differentiating.

Veltheim from the Uusimaa Regional Council agreed that the reason to bring the cultural aspect into social impact assessment might have been the rising number of immigrants in the region. In Uusimaa, and in the urban policy of the Helsinki metropolitan region in particular, multiculturalism is becoming an important issue. According to Rekola, the cultural aspect might also derive from the second task (development) of the Regional Council. The Swedish-speaking minority is large and is recognised in various development plans and programmes:

Rekola: In the regional scheme and programme, multiculturalism, immigration and migration within the region are emphasised as important features. This was reflected in our plan, too.

Veltheim: Länsi-Uusimaa is bilingual and the culture of the Swedish-speaking minority is seen as an important resource.

Rekola: On the map, of course, there is no specific mark for it. But there are certain development possibilities, and through this it is important and closely connected to social impacts.

In Etelä-Pohjanmaa, the cultural aspect was also acknowledged in the planning process, even though it was not included in the social impact assessment. According to Ristaniemi, the cultural aspect is clearly visible in the landscape and social – as well as economic – life of Etelä-Pohjanmaa:

“Pohjanmaalainen” (regional) identity was an important starting point for the whole process. In practice it can be seen in people’s valuations of the landscape – field scenery (“lakeudet”), village roads and their heritage, classic building style (“kaksivooninkisuus”) etc. – but also in social life. Village committees are very active in Finland and are powerful stakeholders. Entrepreneurial activity has always been very strong in these villages, and it is, in a way, an important cultural tradition. Some villages are highly specialised in furniture production, for example. Cultural landscapes are a significant mental resource for people. In the regional plan, we emphasised the need to secure these landscapes by active agriculture. We had to recognise these features as development principles which will guide lower levels of planning.

Ruotsalainen: The aim of the regional plan is to secure the landscape and heritage. In my opinion, the “cultural landscape” mark in the plan has a cultural impact. It shows which areas are reserved for agriculture, and signals that this sort of activity can and should continue. Landscape is part of regional identity, and for this reason it is important that agriculture be supported in the region. Just think about eastern Finland where agriculture has reduced. If planning can play any role in this, it has a great cultural impact. The aim of the plan is to create potentials to this.

5.6 Assessment of the goals

The social impact assessment should include assessment of the realisation of the social goals: Is the plan able to meet its own goals? This turned out to be a difficult task at the regional planning level. The regional plan is general, and can be described as an “enabling” rather than a “determinant” plan:

Laitinen: When setting the goals, one has to keep in mind that we are making a sort of “maximum plan”. In other words, we try to anticipate different kinds of things, optimise the maximum level and control it. We don’t even think that all our plans would come true. Their realisation depends so much on local communities and retail business, for example. Realisation is not a fixed process.

Rekola: At the regional planning level, the goals as well as the impacts are very general. Putting together these two is not easy at all. Of course goals and impacts can be broken down into smaller pieces, but one has to keep the planning level in mind. [...] We did the assessment of the goals at the end of the entire planning process, when everything had to be wrapped up. But we were not able to go deep with it and consequently the assessment was merely declaratory.

Due to the generality of the plan, the goals of the plan are on a general level too. This can lead to a situation where the goals are not taken very seriously:

Ristaniemi: To be honest, I must say that, often, a lot of time is spent on setting the goals and then they are just forgotten. [...] Moreover, the goals are often contradictory in the details. There was no systematic exploration of them and they got blurred. It is therefore difficult to answer the question on goals and impacts now.

Melkas: I read the goals at first and then I did not pay much attention to them. I returned to them later to make some citations in my report. I don't mean to be arrogant, but I took them as verbiage. They are goals, yes, but do they satisfy [their criteria]? That's another story.

5.7 Conclusion

According to the law, the socio-economic, social, cultural and other impacts of the plan must be assessed to the necessary extent. In other words, the assessments have to be sufficient. As emerged from the interviews, however, there is no clear understanding among consultants and planners on what social impact assessment should contain in order to meet the criteria of sufficiency. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that sufficiency can mean different things at different stages of the process. It is therefore not surprising that sufficiency of the assessments is one of the most important sources of complaints about the plan – and that it is the Supreme Administrative Court who has the final word on planning decisions.

The assessments should also be able to recognise the most significant impacts of the plan. As the interviews showed, this is difficult, too. The planning ideology emphasises the objectivity of the plan – and of the planner – and this is one of the main reasons consultants are used in impact assessment. An external expert is able to make objective judgements and it is therefore expected that his or her work contributes to making better plans. The significance of an impact is, however, largely dependent on the perspective. At the level of the regional plan, it is quite difficult to point out objective social-scientific facts concerning the impacts of the plan on people's lives. This highlights the importance of perspectives: from whose perspective is the impact considered significant? The interviews showed that the significance of an impact is a social construction, and that there is a certain element of power present: the planner – or politician – has the power to tell which impacts are the most significant ones.

The assessor's perspective is also important. The assessments analysed in our study represent different (geographical, sociological and mixed) approaches to social impact assessment. All of them used the same kind of data and data gathering methods, but the way they used and interpreted the data varied significantly. The concept of the social proved to be somewhat problematic in this context. On the one hand, the concept refers to “classic” quantitative data used in planning practices: population changes, age structures, socio-economic factors, etc. Changes caused by the plan in these matters are relatively easy to assess. But the concept also refers to subjective experiences and perceptions as well as changes in them caused by the plan, and these are very difficult to estimate at the level of the regional plan. In addition, the notion of social impacts does not refer to social phenomena only. Depending on the perspective, social impacts can just as well be economic, environmental,

cultural or relating to health. The impacts tend to lead to chain reactions, too. The environmental impacts can lead to economic impacts, which in turn can cause social impacts.

6. Conclusion: results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyse and compare the contents, methods and working practices of social impact assessment in regional land use planning in Finland. In Finland, there have recently been new developments in this area, whereas other Nordic countries do not have empirical cases.

When assessing the results, it has to be remembered that these were the first SIAs made of regional plans. They are therefore a kind of first trial and pioneering work in this sense. The practices are developing all the time. All the cases presented different styles of doing the job. This originality is not a weakness, but rather a potential strength. We will now present the key findings of our research.

6.1 Openness of the planning process: availability of information on the results of SIA

In most of the regions in Finland, SIA was conducted by the planners themselves (the Offices of the Regional Councils) as a part of the “routine” of planning. The SIA process was often aided by special working groups where, for example, expertise on social matters was represented. The results of the SIAs were often presented as descriptive lists in the plan descriptions. These lists are not the best tool to present the results of the assessments. A specific assessment report would serve public interests and help political decision makers better. From a report, it would be easier to assess which impacts are the most significant ones and for whom.

6.2 Variation among the SIAs: three approaches to SIA in regional land use planning

The three SIAs analysed were all conducted by “external” consultants whose reports were published, for example, on the Internet. This gave us an opportunity to place both the planning and the assessment process under scrutiny. We discovered that the assessments were not carried out according to strict rules laid down in guide books, which in turn allowed room for creativity and personal input by planners and consultants alike. The organisational conventions, interests and material, and human resources play a considerable role in shaping the assessment process, and the final assessment report is an outcome of interaction between planners and consultants. For this reason, there is no single way to conduct SIA in (regional) land use planning but many. In our study, all assessment reports varied significantly in terms of their comprehensiveness, viewpoints and emphasis. We therefore categorised them to represent three different approaches to SIA in regional land use planning:

Geographical approach: In the case of the Etelä-Pohjanmaa regional plan, the SIA explored the impacts of the plan at the sub-regional level. It began with an analysis of the physical changes brought about by the plan, and continued with the analysis of the social changes caused by the changes in the environment. The advantage of this approach was the strong linkage between the plan and its (environmental) impacts, especially in the case of specific projects to be implemented in the sub-regions. The approach had, however, significant weaknesses. Firstly, when focusing on sub-regions, and exploring the most important projects and planning targets there, the assessment failed to show the impacts of the plan in all corners of the region: interpretation of the impacts of the plan on the region as a whole was missing. Secondly, when highlighting the physical changes brought about by the plan, the assessment became weak in terms of social reality: only those social phenomena which were directly caused by physical changes in these specific areas were mentioned. As a result, the perspective on social life became narrow in comparison to the two other assessments.

Sociological approach: The assessment of Uusimaa took the social sphere as its starting point. The assessment was powerful in its analysis the impacts of the plan at a very general level. Many aspects of the social – global trends and issues highlighted by urban studies, for example – were discussed. As a result, the assessment was able to present new ideas and perspectives to planners and, therefore, added something to the planning process. The assessment was an almost total opposite to the assessment of Etelä-Pohjanmaa, and both its strengths and weaknesses were almost completely reversed. The linkage between the plan and its social impacts was relatively weak, and the assessment was consequently hardly able to show what social impacts the implementation of the plan would actually bring. Readers of the assessment will gain perspectives on the region's "place in the world" and on the significant challenges planning must take in considerations, but they not gain much knowledge on the specific impacts of the plan on people's lives in specific areas, such as villages.

Mixed approach: The assessment of Päijät-Häme exploited both sociological and geographical perspectives. It started with social themes and highlighted the perspective of various population groups (the elderly, women, children, etc.). From social issues, the assessment continued to analyse the plan in general and then proceeded to take a closer look at selected target sites and areas. The assessment successfully linked physical changes with social phenomena, and showed the impacts of the plan at both the general and the specific level. Problems with this kind of ambitious research are mainly economic: Are there enough resources (personnel, time and money) to conduct such grandiose assessments? It is also quite possible that extensive reports are not widely read among the planners and political decision makers.

6.3 Utility of the assessment

A SIA conducted by external consultants is able to make the social impacts more visible for planners. This might improve the social acceptance (and quality in this sense) of the plan, which, in turn, would speed up the planning process (less complaints). It must be emphasised that the social dimension is not necessarily recognised very well by regional planners, who usually do not have education in social sciences. The SIA process can clarify the social dimension and help planners recognise the social impacts of the plan. This also means recognition of different population groups (women, children, the elderly, cultural minorities, etc.). This process of understanding the social dimension is important especially in regional planning, because the links between the physical and the social reality are traditionally not as evident in regional planning as they are at the municipal planning level.

6.4 Timing of the assessment

The phase of the planning process in which the impact assessment is conducted is crucial. The SIA is often conducted so late that it cannot really influence the plan. We therefore suggest

that SIA should not be just an analysis of one phase or moment in the planning process (usually just after the publication of the draft plan), but rather a parallel process alongside the continuing planning process. Such “on-going assessment” would help planners and decision makers to avoid, or at least recognise, the negative impacts of the plan. This kind of assessment might also lead to more accurate results, real impacts of the plan.

6.5 Assessment method and interaction with stakeholders

Special attention should be paid to the methods used for data gathering in SIA. Currently, data is usually collected from textual material produced by planners and stakeholders (complaints and solicited, public comments) in the planning process. In some cases, the consultant is helped by special expert groups, but this is not a routine procedure. In the cases studied here, the consultants met only a steering group consisting of a few key planners from the planning office, who provided information, but also commented on and received the report. It would be necessary, however, that the consultant has the possibility (time-resources) to meet stakeholders, too, not just primary clients. Inhabitants, various experts on the social sphere, entrepreneurs, landowners, etc., possess wide and concrete knowledge about the social reality which would help the consultant to draw more accurate conclusions concerning the social impacts of the plan. The use of regional and local statistical data also needs to be developed. The current practices seem to be very *ad hoc*.

6.6 Publication of the results and possibilities for political discussion

It should be ensured that published SIA reports reach a wider audience, not just a few planners representing the client. These planners have, of course, power to influence the final plan, but a SIA should also be able to generate discussion and even political debate on the social impacts of the plan among the decision makers, stakeholders and inhabitants. This is possible only if the reports are circulated, seminars or meetings focusing on social impacts are organised, and the press (or other media) is contacted.

As the case studies above show, there is a lot of variation in the contents and methods of SIA in regional land use planning. SIA is not yet fully integrated into the Finnish regional planning process, nor to the decision-making process, but our research has produced some ideas about how the situation could be improved. The study shows that plan making can truly benefit from SIA, and maybe even more importantly, that SIA can help make plans which improve the social sustainability and the quality of the living environment in the regions.

6.7 The relevance of SIA in regional planning

In all Nordic countries, impact assessments in regional planning and policy have become topical areas of development because of strategic environmental impact assessment. Spatial planning was one of the main issues addressed by the SEA Directive of the EU. Until now there have been few experiences on what impact assessment includes in physical land use planning and what it requires from the planning process. The Finnish experiences can in this respect be quite interesting.

The Finnish cases provide examples of different ways of preparing the actual assessment report (theoretical and methodological approaches, reporting practices, etc). But the cases also illustrate very well the possible content of the social dimension in regional planning. These substantial experiences provide good examples for all whose work involves the social

dimension in regional planning or policy making. The SIA process provides tools for the operationalisation of the issue of social sustainability.

The results of our study highlight the importance of methodological choices and the know-how of the SIA practitioners. The differences between SIA and EIA are clear. As Barrow (2002) has noted, SIA aims to be a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary process, usually involving a combination of objective and subjective assessment and ethical judgement. "*SIA is often treated as a subfield of EIA, but if EIA and SIA are laid out as a 'spectrum', then they are extremes, each clearly distinct in terms of approach, methodology and techniques, background of practitioners, and literature; however there is also a great deal of overlap. [...] It is best to accept that SIA relies a lot on the professional judgement of researchers, that qualitative measurements are useful, and that it is likely to be inaccurate.*"

SIA, like EIA, has tended to dwell on negative (unwanted) impacts, although it can also predict positive (beneficial) impacts. SIA should go beyond anticipating possible impacts to suggest development of alternatives to avoid, reduce or mitigate problems and maximise benefits. It can also be a means for public involvement and empowerment, and for improving the accountability of planners and administrators; a means to extract useful information from locals; and a way to solicit public opinion on proposals, alternatives, trade-offs, etc. (Barrow 2002)

According to this study, the weaknesses of the SIA practices in land use planning are obvious. There is insufficient standardisation of approach and the assessments are poorly funded compared to EIAs. In practice, the SIA is often given too little time to ensure adequate results. Frequently there is only one opportunity for assessment (yielding a spatially and temporally limited "snapshot" view). SIA deals with more complex and changeable factors than EIA, so it is likely to be less accurate, and possibly slower. Social scientists involved in SIA tend to be critical and discursive, rather than predictive and explanatory. Consequently, it is difficult to get a solid supportive theoretical framework for SIA.

The weaknesses of SIA may not be as serious as they appear initially. Burdge (1999) has argued that being sensitive to social impacts is perhaps more important than being able to precisely identify them. Barrow (2002, 191) concludes that "*a less-than detailed and accurate SIA may thus be useful*". The important role of SIA is to advise and inform planners, decision makers, and perhaps the public. "*It should show the likely risks and benefits, and the development options available; also, like EIA, it ought to flag potentially irreversible and dangerous impact.*"

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Appendix

The interviews

Helinä Melkas, researcher, Helsinki University of Technology, Center of Lahti, 8.8.2006

Jani Päivänen, WSP LT-Consultants, 24.8.2006

Arto Ruotsalainen, Pöyry Environment Oy, 17.8.2006

Riitta Laitinen, Environment Manager, The Regional Council of Päijät-Häme, 23.8.2006

Lasse Rekola, Environmental Planner (and Olavi Veltheim, Chief of Regional Planning) The Regional Council of Uusimaa, 25.8.2006

Olli Ristaniemi, Planning Manager, Regional Council of Keski-Suomi (worked earlier in The Regional Council of Etelä-Pohjanmaa), 28.8.2006