

## Step 1. Screening the proposal

Not all proposed policies should be subjected to a sustainability impact assessment. Whether an SIA is relevant will depend on the type of initiative and its content and how far reaching are its possible impacts and consequences. In fact, there may only be a small percentage of policies and programmes which should be assessed from this perspective (Box 2.1). Many policies may have a narrow focus or a limited range of predicted impacts, warranting alternative assessment procedures. Therefore, a preliminary screening or relevance test is needed to determine which proposals should be examined further. This can be based on different rules, criteria or thresholds to decide those policy proposals which have characteristics or foreseeable impacts which are sufficient to trigger an SIA.

The entire SIA process therefore begins with a description or definition of the initiative in question. In the preliminary stage<sup>1</sup> an initial assessment of possible impacts, a “relevance analysis”, is undertaken. This determines whether and to what extent an SIA is needed.

### Box 2.1. Use of SIAs: being selective

The European Commission (EC) requests impact assessments of relevant items on the Commission’s work programme, but exempts Green Papers (EC, 2005b). The Swiss approach screens Federal initiatives and programmes for conflicts between at least two sustainable development objectives (ARE, 2004). In the Federal Belgian sustainability impact assessment procedure, a “quick scan” screening phase identifies possible effects of a proposed measure on sustainable development and whether an in-depth SIA is required. Only major policy proposals for approval by the Federal Council of Ministers are screened for potentially significant economic, environmental and social impacts (Belgian Federal Administration for Sustainable Development, 2007).

Being clear about the main objectives of an initiative will also help identify the associated advantages and disadvantages. The relevance analysis should help to set the correct focus points in the study design, thereby omitting irrelevant factors at the earliest possible stage and providing greater precision in the choice of tools.

The screening process ensures the practicality and cost-effectiveness of the entire SIA process. This initial triage is essential to eliminate proposals which are only slightly relevant from a sustainability perspective and that do not warrant an assessment involving extensive staff, time and financial resources. On the other hand, overlooking proposals that imply potentially strong negative impacts for sustainable development could have undesirable consequences that could have been anticipated and avoided with a proper evaluation.

Screening proposals is not intended to be time-consuming. It should be based on readily-available information and be more qualitative than quantitative. It should involve a quick scan of the potential short-term or long-term conflicts between the sustainability dimensions, for example between economic growth and environmental protection. Generally, conflicts arise because improvements in one dimension may be linked to deterioration in another. When moderate but conflicting impacts are predicted for at least two sustainability dimensions of a policy proposal, it is a likely candidate for an SIA.

1. Some methods, such as those used in Switzerland, view this preliminary work as step 0 of the process.

Checklists or impact matrices are the most common methods for screening proposals. Policy proposals can be broken down into their main actions or components to be assessed against economic, environmental and social criteria. For example, relevance screening in the Swiss sustainability assessment process is based on 15 pre-set economic, environmental and social criteria (Box 2.2). An attempt is made to determine causal relationships between the proposal and effects on sustainability dimensions as exemplified by these criteria with relevance rated on a scale of 0 to 3. Whether the impact is positive or negative is not addressed at this stage. A qualitative determination is then made of whether a proposal is relevant to sustainability based on a moderate causal relationship for at least two sustainability dimensions and potential significant conflicts between at least two dimensions.

**Box 2.2. Relevance screening in Swiss sustainability assessments**

The relevance test in the Swiss sustainability assessment methodology is based on a criteria matrix which exposes potential impacts on the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, environmental and social. Fifteen pre-established Federal Council sustainability criteria (Figure 2.1) are evaluated individually and assigned a score of 0 to 3 points depending on the degree of relevance: no relevance (0), low relevance (1 point), medium relevance (2 points), and high relevance (3 points). Furthermore, there are eight additional criteria that are applicable to all policy measures (Table 2.1).

Figure 2.1. 15 pre-established Swiss Federal Council sustainability criteria

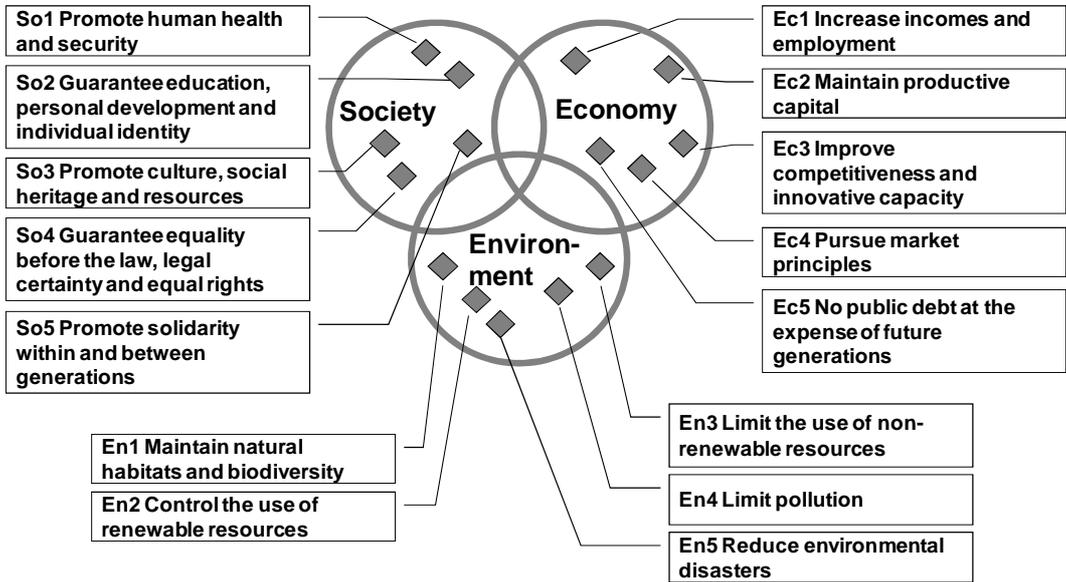


Table 2.1. **Eight additional Swiss Federal Council sustainability criteria**

1. Problem status	Will the initiative further exacerbate an already critical situation?
2. Trend	Will the initiative further strengthen an existing negative trend?
3. Irreversibility	Will the initiative result in negative impacts that are difficult or even impossible to reverse?
4. Burden on future generations	Will the negative impacts be felt only at a later point in time? Will this place a particularly heavy burden on future generations?
5. Risks/uncertainties	Is the initiative associated with major risks (very high potential damage/loss, even if the probability is low) and major uncertainties (insufficient knowledge of the dangers linked to impacts, or about future trends)?
6. Minimum requirements	Does the initiative result in a violation of minimum social, economic or environmental standards (e.g. thresholds or limits)?
7. Spatial impact perimeter	Will the negative impacts be felt across a wide area (spatial perimeter)?
8. Conflicts of interest	Do conflicts of interest exist between the various dimensions of sustainability, and with regard to the primary objectives of the initiative?

*Source:* ARE (2008), "Sustainability Assessment: Guidelines for Federal Agencies and Other Interested Parties", Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development, Berne.