

Health Impact Assessment: a useful tool for decision makers

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Health Impact Assessment is defined as 'the combination of procedures, methods and tools through which it is possible to evaluate a policy, a program or a development plan concerning possible effects on public health and their distribution in the general population'.

In a constructive debate this definition points out some interesting observations:

- health is not the result of health policies alone, but it is often defined by the attention given to it in other contexts;
- health is however the result of policies and it therefore must deserve the attention of Decision Makers;
- health must not be taken into consideration without taking into account an evaluation of its distribution and its determinants within a population. Particular attention must therefore be paid into inequalities;
- following the Council of the European Union recent conclusions on Health in All Policies we have to consider that everyday environments such as day-care centers, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and the commute between them have significant effects on health and that health, in turn, has an effect on the economy by enabling active and productive participation in working life.

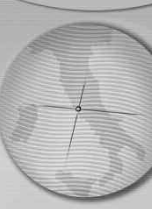
In the past 20 years huge progress has been achieved in the epidemiological contest to define risks. Nowadays, it is known that a low cultural level lowers the capacity to respond to prevention, that elevated pollution levels do represent a health risk, and that the scarce social relationships that elderly people have in our society have strong consequences on their health and their quality of life.

The real challenge is that of finding the source of the causes, making sure not to abandon the epidemiological and social studies which provide up-to-date data about a situation which is continuously evolving. The pollution levels depend on those policies related to traffic and industrialization, the low cultural level depends on education (schools and mass media), but also on economics and equality policies. The social relations of an elderly person depend on the chances that his family is given to host him, and on the ability of the society to make itself useful.

As the literature reports, only few of these examples are strictly related to health. Nevertheless the health system can play a major role by contributing to defining the policies. This can be achieved by being constantly present and by being reminded systematically in which manner every policy has both acute and chronic effects on health. In addition to this, the Health System might offer stimuli and standardized technologies to enable a proper evaluation of the impact that these policies may have on health.

Health is involved almost in all fields and it is of fundamental importance to carry out a precise evaluation of the impact that the diverse Policies (environmental, transports, urbanization, tourism, alimentary, social and economic policies, etc...) have on it.

These are some of the reasons why health impact has become one of the main concerns on the agenda of numerous European Presidencies in recent times. An example is that of Finland, which in 2006 has introduced the "impact evaluation" as a priority tool to determine the definition of the E.U. Directives.



Nevertheless, the process of globalization and the need for international integration, which come out in diverse political, social and economic contexts, do impose a thorough examination of the effectiveness of the parameters of evaluation and of those condition which might favor the application of the latter.

It is true to say that HIA is holistic, non-specific, democratic and transparent procedures, which expresses its efficiency at its best in cultural contexts and organized institutions, even though it is not bound to standardized methods and protocols.

HIA has to be able to involve all stakeholders, which is not an easy task as the latter express very different opinions and exert diverse influences. It also has to guarantee equity and influence decisions and therefore represents a virtual and virtuous bridge which connects scientific knowledge and the effects that the latter has in the Health field as it affects political decisions.

The Health Impact Assessment is coherent and the natural application of our public and universalistic model of the Health System but, moreover, for its capability to impact on sustainability, it represents a strategic key element for health systems reform.

Health System sustainability is, actually, not only determined by a good resources rationalization, based on efficacy and appropriateness criteria, but also by the ability of coordinating and influencing the other policies.

I am thus very happy that HIA has been considered by the Italian Journal Public Health as a topic deserving a dedicated issue. I believe in fact that such a debate expresses its potential at its best both in the scientific and political context.