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# EVIDENCE BRIEF

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SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors towards a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Informing Best Practices in Environmental and Impact Assessments**.

## Unlocking the promise of “integrated” regional and strategic environmental assessments

### About the project

Regional and/or strategic environmental assessments (RSEAs) have been put forward as useful methodologies for overcoming the limitations of project-specific environmental impact assessment. RSEAs are an important part of Canada's new Impact Assessment Act (IAA). The act provides guidance on how to trigger RSEA and significantly expands the purview of impact assessors and proponents to assess a variety of land-use values across environmental, community (e.g., cultural, socio-economic) and health domains. To realize this integrative imperative, a picture of what integration looks like in the context of RSEA is required, as well as criteria to help decision-makers weigh tradeoffs between seemingly disparate, but interconnected, land-use values.

By reviewing evidence from OECD countries, this project investigated the degree to which diverse land-use values (e.g., environmental, community and health) are incorporated in RSEA protocols. It also identified practical ways in which decision-makers can make complex trade-offs in land-use decision-making processes.

A realist review methodology was deployed to understand the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of RSEA implementation, paying particular attention to methodological innovation that can help drive values integration and decision-making on what are often framed as “competing” values. Realist reviews examine why and in what contexts a policy or intervention works or does not.

### Key findings

A review of evidence published in peer-review journals from 2010-19, focused on OECD countries and RSEA implementation, found that:

- A considerable body of peer-review scholarship on RSEA protocols and processes has been published in the past 10 years. In the Canadian and OECD contexts, RSEA implementation is diverse and can be disconnected from formal governance systems that direct planning processes. The effectiveness of RSEA is strongly linked to its compliance with strategic goals. Practically, RSEAs are largely ad hoc and seem to have limited provisions for public engagement, which limits their effectiveness. Moreover, practitioner surveys indicate that for strategic environmental assessments to be truly strategic and

realize long-term benefits, it must address indirect impacts early in the design process and be adequately resourced.

- Despite growing calls for greater integration in environmental assessment, there are limited numbers of practice-based papers attempting to incorporate environmental, community and health components. This limits the ability to assess the application of component selection, measurement and evaluation in real-world settings. Most articles reviewed focused on conceptual contributions to RSEA with limited practical guidance on how to carry it out. Effective methods of simplifying complex data are needed to enable comparisons between diverse values to guide decision-making.



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The term “integrated/integrative” is used and defined inconsistently in impact assessment practice, particularly in the context of RSEAs. Some researchers use these terms to incorporate broad land-use values into a single assessment architecture; others describe it in relation to methodological tools, multiple environmental components, or for integrating

across assessment types or spatial scales. Socio-economic and health considerations are incorporated less systematically than environmental considerations, are largely inconsistent across assessments, and not clearly defined. Health-oriented values are the least readily integrated.

## Policy implications

- The broader strategic and spatial analysis of multiple land-use values can now be interpreted as necessary conditions under the new *Impact Assessment Act*. Findings demonstrate the myriad interpretations of integration, and suggest that integration should, at a minimum, include spatial and temporal scale, and multiple land use values. This requires involving multiple sectors, disciplines, approaches/methods and senses into the assessment.
- Despite considerable developments in social, economic and health impact assessments, the logics and methods underpinning these assessments have yet to be fully incorporated into RSEAs. In some cases, integrated impact assessment can be stymied by legalistic approaches that reduce “expert-based” planning in favour of collaborative approaches that leverage expertise from multiple jurisdictions, stakeholders or Indigenous rightsholders. RSEA has notable disciplinary blind spots and tends to be implemented using approaches similar to project-specific environmental impact assessment. The fact that RSEA is a product of environmental impact assessment as a field is not necessarily problematic. However, impact assessment practitioners have unique opportunities to draw from established methodological approaches for understanding the social and health impacts of specific policies, plans and programs, including social and health impact assessment approaches.
- The ad hoc nature of RSEA implementation lends itself to diverse research and analysis methodologies. This signals the need for capacity-strengthening efforts that promote understanding of the multiple meanings of integration in RSEA in order to clarify strategic intent, and to use clarity about strategic intent to effectively match goals to appropriate research methods.
- Increased focus on health and community (e.g., socio-economic, heritage, culture) values will necessarily draw increased research attention to the equity dimensions of who is affected by what plans, policies and programs. Many of the environmental impacts that affect local economies, cultures and health are not distributed equally among all members of society and may disproportionately affect those who already bear the brunt of past land uses.
- Further policy guidance on promoting equitable and sustainable transitions in the context of RSEAs are needed to drive just outcomes. But how to ensure fair, just and equitable outcomes in RSEA requires further investigation.
- RSEA also needs to be clearly explained, defined and operationally described (how it is done and what it accomplishes) to the public and business, as well as to regulators and other policy audiences.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION:

[▶ Read the full report](#)

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The Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC) is a federal body accountable to the minister of Environment and Climate Change. The IAAC delivers high-quality impact assessments that contribute to informed decision-making on major projects in support of sustainable development.

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