



## Are current effectiveness criteria fit for purpose? Using a controversial strategic assessment as a test case



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Strategic assessment  
Impact assessment effectiveness  
Browse LNG Precinct

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to test the broader utility of the sustainability assessment effectiveness framework of Bond et al. (2015) by applying it to a controversial strategic assessment case study. The effectiveness framework comprises six dimensions: procedural effectiveness, substantive effectiveness, transactive effectiveness, normative effectiveness, pluralism, and knowledge and learning. It was originally developed to evaluate sustainability assessment at a system-wide level and it has not been previously applied to a specific case study. The analysis was conducted through document review and the first-hand experience of two of the authors who were involved in the case study in different capacities. The case study selected was the strategic assessment of the proposed Browse Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Precinct in Western Australia, which was conducted over the period 2007–2015 under the strategic assessment provisions of both the Western Australian and Australian Commonwealth environmental legislation. The framework provided a useful structure within which this complex case study could be explored, its strengths and weaknesses brought to light, and the interactions between the dimensions highlighted. We also found opportunities for refinement of the framework. As a result of this analysis we propose to replace the final three dimensions of the framework with legitimacy, where a legitimate process is one which all stakeholders agree is fair and which delivers an acceptable outcome for all parties, though we acknowledge the need for further conceptualisation of this dimension. We also suggest that the concept of substantive effectiveness should be expanded to incorporate the unintended consequences of impact assessment. Our research thus makes both a useful addition to the literature already published on the Browse case study, as well as to the literature on impact assessment effectiveness.

### 1. Introduction

The question of whether or not impact assessment in its various forms is effective has been a topic of interest and research from the earliest days of impact assessment. It came sharply into focus with the release of the *International Study of the Effectiveness of Environmental Assessment* in 1996 (Sadler, 1996), in which three dimensions of effectiveness were distinguished (p39):

- Procedural: Does the (impact assessment)<sup>1</sup> process conform to established provisions and principles?
- Substantive: Does the (impact assessment) process achieve the objectives set e.g. support well-informed decision-making and result in

environmental protection?

- Transactive: Does the (impact assessment) process deliver these outcomes at least cost in the minimum time possible, i.e. is it effective and efficient?

While subsequent researchers seeking to clarify what makes impact assessment effective have largely retained these three dimensions, other dimensions have also been distinguished. For example, Baker and McLelland (2003) include ‘normative effectiveness’ in their framework for evaluating the effectiveness of an impact assessment process from the perspective of First Nations people, which they define as “the extent to which the policy [EA] achieves the normative goals”, where normative goals are “what the policy purports as an ideal with respect to

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<sup>1</sup> Sadler uses the term ‘environmental assessment’, abbreviated to EA but we prefer the more generic term ‘impact assessment’.

what it sets out to achieve” (p584–585). Authors including Retief (2007) and Runhaar and Driessen (2007) use the term ‘indirect effectiveness’ to emphasise that impact assessment can deliver substantive outcomes beyond those related to specific decisions as per Sadler (1996)’s conceptualisation. This theme is further developed by Bina et al. (2011) who prefer the term ‘incremental effectiveness’. These broader, more systemic outcomes reflect changes to the context within which impact assessment is conducted (Bina, 2008).

Bond et al. (2013a, 2013b) recently developed an effectiveness framework specifically for sustainability assessment, which they define broadly as any process that directs decision-making towards sustainability (Bond and Morrison-Saunders, 2011), a definition derived from Hacking and Guthrie (2008). Six dimensions of effectiveness comprise their framework: procedural, substantive, transactive, normative, knowledge and learning, and pluralism. The inclusion of pluralism invites explicit reflection on the reality that sustainability assessment (and impact assessment in general) will be judged against “diverse and even divergent reference points” (Bond et al., 2013a, 2013b, p117), while the inclusion of knowledge and learning serves as a reminder that impact assessment can (and arguably should) not only generate new knowledge but also facilitate learning at both the individual and societal levels. This framework was developed in order to “compare and evaluate the effectiveness of sustainability assessment practice in different jurisdictions” (ibid. p117), that is, for application in a ‘system-wide review’ to use Sadler (1996)’s terminology. It was subsequently applied in their book (Bond et al., 2013a, 2013b) to emerging practice of sustainability assessment in Canada, England, Western Australia and South Africa. The details of this framework were then slightly modified in Bond et al. (2015).

The aim of this paper is to test the broader utility of the Bond et al. (2015) effectiveness framework by applying it to a specific case study rather than a system in an example of what Sadler (1996) terms a ‘decision audit’. We are also interested in evaluating the utility of the framework in application to other forms of impact assessment apart from sustainability assessment, and so we choose a strategic assessment case study in this instance. We do this in order to determine the extent to which application of the framework illuminates the relative strengths and weaknesses of this case study, and hence the extent to which the framework can be considered a useful tool in the evaluation of impact assessment case studies in general. The evaluation aims to identify specific modifications that might make the framework more generally applicable to individual assessments rather than systems.

We commence in Section 2 by briefly introducing our selected case study and explaining the reasons for its selection, before outlining the methods for applying and testing the framework. We describe the effectiveness framework of Bond et al. (2015) in Section 3 and modify it to fit the specific context of a strategic assessment; and we provide details of the selected case study in Section 4. We then apply the framework to the case study in Section 5, discuss the outcomes in Section 6, and draw conclusions in Section 7.

## 2. Case study selection and embedded methods

The case study to which the framework is applied in this paper is the strategic assessment<sup>2</sup> of the proposed Browse Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Precinct in Western Australia, a process conducted over the period 2007–2015. While it is often argued that the goal of strategic assessment in particular should be to seek to contribute to sustainability (International Association for Impact Assessment, 2002; Wallington et al., 2007), making it a form of sustainability assessment according to the definition provided above, the concept of sustainability was not specifically invoked in this case. Thus the case study offers the

opportunity to explore the utility of the Bond et al. (2015) effectiveness framework to impact assessment more broadly.

This particular case study was selected because it was complex and highly controversial, implying that there were aspects of the process which were perceived by some to be ineffective. It has also been the subject of previous contributions to the academic literature that have critiqued it from different angles including through a social impact assessment lens (Beckwith, 2012); an Indigenous People’s perspective (O’Faircheallaigh, 2009); and an institutional and legal perspective, with a focus on the marine environment (Marsden, 2013). The depth of existing understanding and analysis of this case study was an important factor in its selection for two reasons:

1. The published critiques form an important part of our dataset, along with documentation associated with the assessment process and the reflections of two of the authors who were involved in the case study in different capacities over its duration, one as a Government employee and the other as a consultant to both Government and the private sector; and
2. It enables us to examine whether the effectiveness framework of Bond et al. (2015) sufficiently captures the full range of values and opinions that are brought to bear in a contentious context.

To test the value of the framework in Section 4 we draw on the three data sources identified above to apply it to the case study using our professional judgement, acknowledging that this process is inherently subjective. We also acknowledge the limitations of document review as our data collection method; further insights into the effectiveness of the case study could be obtained by interviewing stakeholders and interested parties. However, we believe that our approach is sufficient for our stated aim of testing the utility of the framework. Our analysis also provides further evaluation of and insights into a case study that has attracted international attention.

## 3. An effectiveness framework for strategic assessment

Each of the six dimensions of the Bond et al. (2015) effectiveness framework is discussed in turn below in the context of strategic assessment, with modified wording as indicated.

### 3.1. Procedural effectiveness

Procedural effectiveness refers to how an assessment process is undertaken, i.e. the steps that are followed. Procedural effectiveness is noted to be dominant in many effectiveness studies (for example Wood, 2003; Jones et al., 2005), as well as in the International Association for Impact Assessment’s (IAIA’s) *Strategic Environmental Assessment Performance Criteria* (International Association for Impact Assessment, 2002), which represent good practice guidance for strategic environmental assessment (Bina et al., 2011). In relation to procedural effectiveness Bond et al. (2015) ask: *Have appropriate processes been followed that reflect institutional and professional standards and procedures?*

While Sadler (1996) refers to conformance with ‘established provisions and principles’, Bond et al. (2015) highlight that what constitutes ‘professional standards and procedures’ is often highly dependent upon the political, legislative and institutional context, a point also made by Fischer (2002), Fischer and Gazzola (2006) and Van Doren et al. (2013). Nevertheless, there are some basic elements of accepted good practice in strategic environmental assessment, including whether the scoping is appropriate; whether alternatives are considered; whether integrated, fit-for-purpose information is generated at the appropriate time; and whether the process is participatory, transparent and accountable (International Association for Impact Assessment, 2002; Wood, 2003; Jones et al., 2005). This list can be used as the basis for the evaluation of a specific case study, whereas a system-wide evaluation might be more concerned with whether or not appropriate procedures

<sup>2</sup> We use the Australian terminology ‘strategic assessment’ throughout, rather than the more common international term ‘strategic environmental assessment’.

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