

A strategy board for impact assessment

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Abstract

After many years of experience, impact assessment is probably mature enough to start streamlining its approach, processes, and techniques for even more efficiency. Following refinements in the perception and communication of causality through ‘impact tracing’, a contribution to the higher ‘strategic’ level comes from a systems view of the action options on a ‘strategy board’.

1 Introduction

Within the field of impact assessment, environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) are related processes. Their common conception is marked in the end of the 1960s, induced by alarming levels of environmental pollution in certain parts of the world (Wathern, 1988; Canter, 1996; Glasson et al., 2011). Since their first national and federal implementations, with SEA lagging for about two decades, practice has been on the rise regarding the number of applications (projects for EIA and plans and programmes for SEA), professionals, and documents produced — ‘impact statements’ for EIA and ‘environmental reports’ for SEA (International Association for Impact Assessment, website).

While these increasing patterns may indicate a global concern for the quality of the environment we live in, there is a specific pattern of increase within the practice that raises some concern of exaggeration: the sheer volume of the impact statements and environmental reports (Perdicoúlis and Glasson, 2006, 2009). There must be many, varied, and valid motives that lead to greater volumes of information, but this raises questions such as: ‘bigger until when?’ or ‘could the essence be diluted in so much information?’ With over forty years of international experience, impact assessment practice must be at a mature enough stage to start trimming down to efficiency.

Recent refinements in the perception and communication of causality have been made through ‘impact tracing’ (Perdicoúlis, 2012a) regarding the cause-and-effect arguments of impact assessment. To complement this, a contribution to the higher ‘strategic’ level comes from a systems view of the action options on a ‘strategy board’.

2 Critical factors

Choices at a high level of aggregation, known as ‘strategic’, appear in both EIA and SEA. If the two processes are to be articulated, most of the strategic choices tend to appear in SEA. In this context, an influential method for strategic analysis and assessment comes from an SEA veteran, M.R. Partidário, and is known as ‘critical decision factors’, or CDF (Partidário, 2007).

The CDF method relieves SEA from the ‘traditional’ focus on the impacts, which characterises project EIA, to a ‘strategic’ level, examining options and possible pathways. The method helps focus the interest on a small number of ‘factors’ — less than ten — which are considered critical for decision-making. Despite these methodological innovations, though, the CDF method follows a traditional ‘list approach’ of working with the critical factors. Hence, CDF maintains the common ‘point thinking’ style found in standard works regarding indicators (Perdicoulis and Glasson, 2011) — Figure 1.

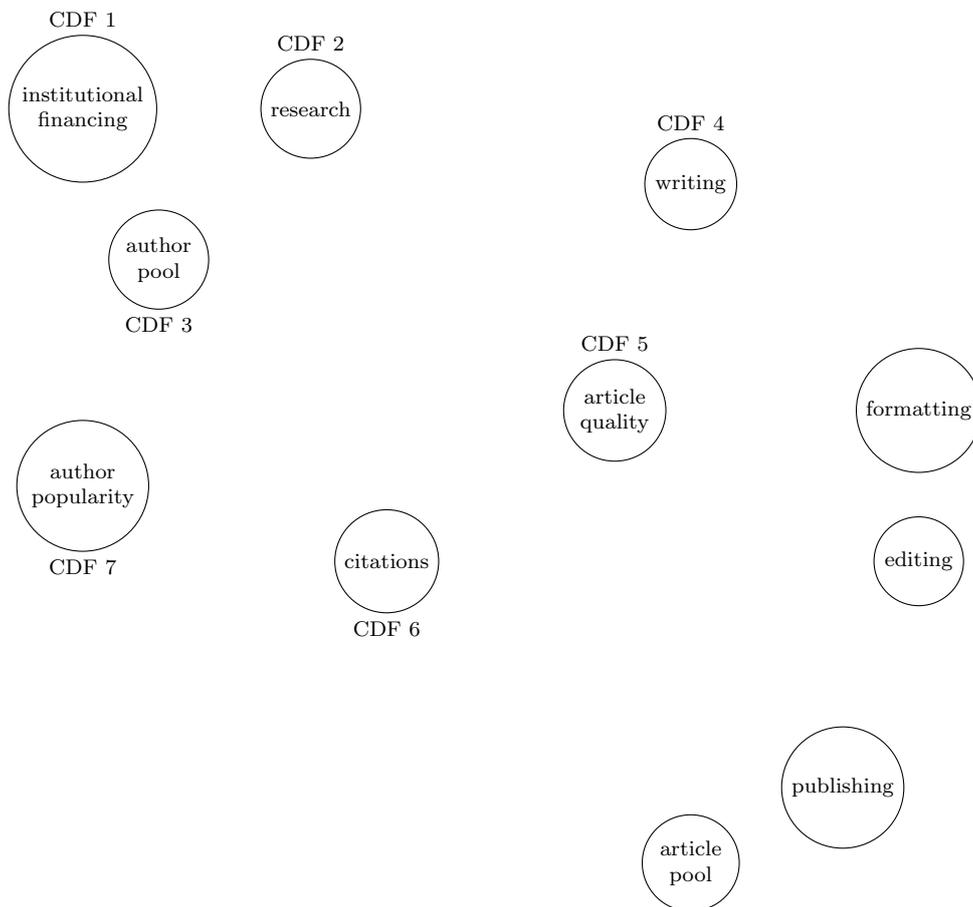


FIGURE 1 The critical decision factors of a publishing strategy are marked, but the underlying ‘point thinking’ excludes information necessary to understand the strategy, such as the relationships between these factors and the elements of the strategy — compare to Figure 2

3 Strategy board

In a parallel line of work, the ‘strategy board’ has been developed as a ‘practice package’ featuring a process protocol and selected techniques to establish the most important function of SEA: prepare for the choice through appropriate understanding. The strategy board gives a *visual form* to the perceived structure and function of the system of intervention as a reverse blueprint, or RBP (Perdicoulis, 2011a), with added markings of commitments and concerns. This marked RBP becomes the *board* upon which alternative action packages are placed and followed by (a) simulation — for instance, through ‘impact tracing’ (Perdicoulis, 2012a) — and/ or (b) strategy reformulation — for instance, through an ‘XYZ problem definition’ (Perdicoulis, 2011a). In an even more pro-active manner, the strategy board can be used to conceive strategy from the very beginning (Perdicoulis, 2012b) — Figure 2.

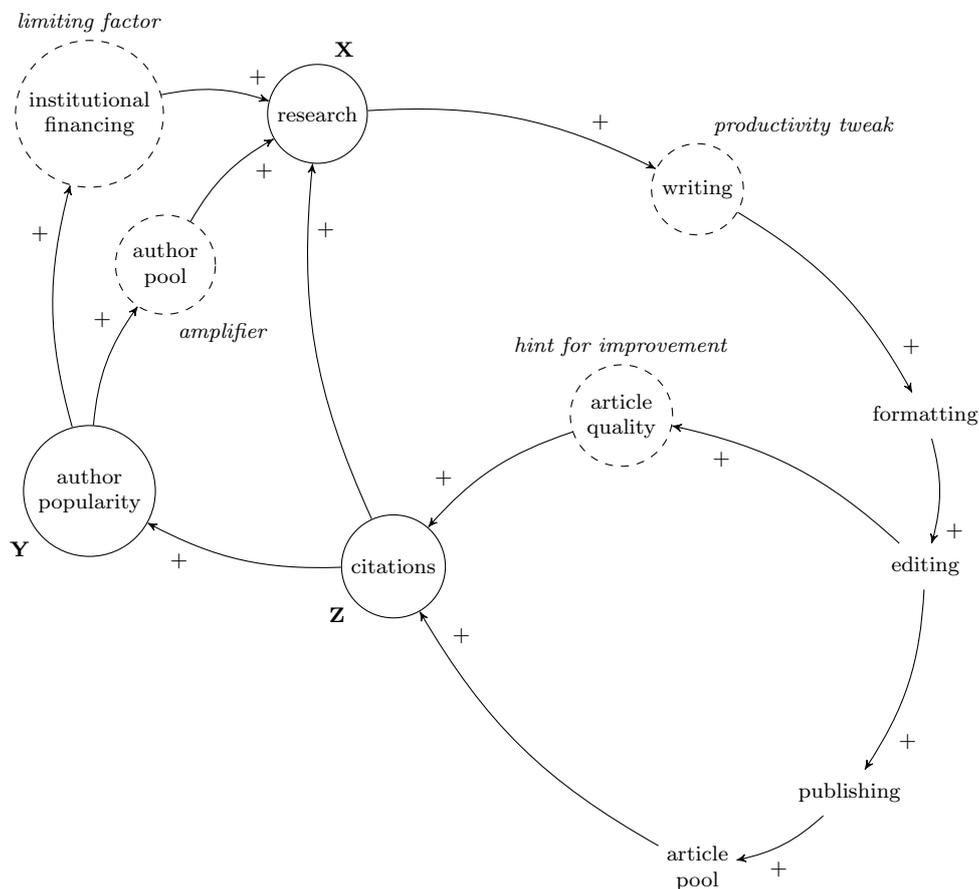


FIGURE 2 A strategy board is an appropriately marked system blueprint — source: Perdicoulis (2012b)

The strategy board of Figure 2 is a [section of interest extracted from a larger] system blueprint (Perdicoulis, 2012b), and accommodates two types of markings: (a) strategy markings, such as concerns and objectives (‘XYZ’ terms and solid circles), and (b) weaknesses and leverage points (italics and dashed circles), which are typical elements of a SWOT analysis — only this time presented in a graphical form.

A summary of the special advantages of a strategy board includes the following features: (a) promotes ‘systems thinking’ over ‘point thinking’ (Perdicoúlis, 2012c); (b) facilitates scoping, strategy, and value marking; (c) provides a medium for an easy and practical qualitative (or ‘manual’) simulation of the recently conceived strategy (Perdicoúlis, 2011a); (d) facilitates adjustments to all ideas, and an immediate ‘return to the drawing board’, as *it is* the drawing board of the strategy.

4 Discussion

When developing something from the ground up, such as an impact assessment process, it is quite easy to go overboard and make things complicated — that is, unnecessarily elaborate — including data and procedures. After a while of ‘living experience’ with the development, it is possible to trim it down to its essence, and streamline it to efficiency. Some familiarity is needed before getting to know how this ‘essence’ manifests itself in practice, and what the right balance is between ‘too much’ and ‘too little’ of specifications or features. Just a bit over four decades should be enough to proceed to the next level of efficiency.

Already established optimisation efforts such as the CDF method can be further enhanced, as is the case of the ‘strategy board’ that pushes the envelope from ‘point thinking’ to ‘systems thinking’. Such a transition requires an extra investment in each application, in the form of connecting the critical factors — probably after introducing other information that would allow realistic and meaningful connections. As with every investment, there is a learning curve, effort, and some delay before the first results become evident.

5 Conclusion

The strategy board is a practice-oriented methodological package, including a process protocol and selected techniques to establish the most important function of SEA: prepare for the choice through appropriate understanding. The package can be implemented on its own, or as an extension of already established methods such as the critical decision factors (CDF). The required investment in special diagramming returns facility and transparency in application, as well as better understanding and — perhaps most importantly — systems thinking as opposed to point thinking.

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