



Policy Brief 3: The Case study

This SustainabilityA-Test policy brief presents a case study on biofuels, summarising activities carried out and resulting outcomes.

The project SustainabilityA-Test to scientifically underpin the use of assessment tools

The purpose of SustainabilityA-Test is to scientifically underpin the use of tools in integrated assessments for sustainable development. These tools comprise all kinds of tools used to carry out assessments (evaluations). Examples are not only model tools, and cost-benefit analysis and participatory tools, but also tools that frame integrated assessments (so-called assessment frameworks), such as the European Commission's impact assessment procedure.

Objectives and function of the case study

The objective of the case study was to further deepen the tool analysis. The basic idea of the case study was to apply the assessment tools to the same policy case. This facilitated a hands-on experience with the tools and also allowed the tools to be compared in terms of their resource needs and capacity to address issues relevant to sustainable development. The application also helped to discover how the tools operate, to identify more pros and cons of the tools and tool combinations.

The biofuel policy case

The increasing government support given to biofuels and the expansion of energy crop production has led to a broad range of possible sustainable development impacts, making the 'biofuel case' an interesting case study subject. The starting points for the case study assumed two policy decisions:

- Biofuel Directive (BD)
- Energy Crop Premium (ECP)

Both of these provided sufficient scope for sketching a wide variety of assessment approaches that could be supported by a broad spectrum of tools. The case study analysed which tools were used in the development of both policy decisions and dealt with combinations of tools and approaches for hypothetical integrated assessments of the two policy decisions.

Design and practical implementation

The case study was implemented according to the following steps:

Steps 0 and 1:

Describing the existing EU level assessments made in the course of BD development and adoption formed step 0. This became the preparatory work for Step 1, a critical review by the tool experts of these assessments. The tool teams described here how 'their' tool type could have contributed to the assessments in terms of additional assessment questions and the coverage of sustainable development impacts.

Step 2:

The review of national level assessments (in the context of the BD and ECP) extended the preceding steps and aimed at facilitating a more complete overview of actual assessment practice. A major objective was to ensure that all relevant tools have been covered within the SustainabilityA-Test project. National teams consisting of the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Spain, Sweden, Italy, Latvia and Germany were composed for this step.

Step 3:

The practical work of the case study started with this step, in which the tool experts were asked to elaborate their own application for their own tool using 'illustrative' data (readily available data and guessed data to fill the gaps). The tool teams assessed the possible contribution of BD and ECP according to the priorities of the EU SDS with respect to the expected effects on land use and agriculture. The teams described their tool application, the underlying assumptions and the scope of the analysis. Possible linkages with other tool types and a critical self-evaluation of the assessments were provided.

Step 4:

This step consisted of planning a full-fledged assessment satisfying the needs of a more comprehensive sustainability assessment. It was carried out by three different assessment teams comprising tool experts from all tool types. Particular emphasis was put on effective coverage of relevant sustainable development aspects and on the creation of efficient linkages between tools. The assessment plans, prepared by the three consortia, were presented to a review panel of six external experts (representatives of the European Commission and additional researchers) for evaluation.

Lessons learned from the case study

Broad experiences were gained from the case study, besides the experiences gained by the tool teams on the capacity of 'their' tools. These learning experiences are structured under the following main topics:

- Coverage (of sustainable development impacts)
- Combinations (of tools)
- Communication.

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Coverage

Taking the multi-dimensionality of impacts into account

The assessment plans made in step 4 revealed that the selection of sustainable development impacts strongly influences the outcome of the assessment. Consequently, each plan proposed this selection to be enhanced by involving stakeholders by means of participatory tools. Doing so would make the selection of sustainable development aspects to be part of the integrated assessment process.

Dealing with diversity and limited data availability

Regional case studies (e.g. a community or province) can be used to address the more detailed interrelationships on the one hand and spatial diversity on the other. A critical question is, if and, how regional level results of context-specific sustainable development impacts can be translated into conclusions relevant for the analysis at an aggregated level (e.g. EU level).

Taking into account relevant time frames

It is important to plan assessments in such a way that relevant assessment outcomes can be taken up at the right time in the policy process. Therefore the time frame available for the assessment has to be taken into account. Using an assessment framework with a longer term perspective that draws attention to longer term structural changes often requires more time than is normally available for a conventional policy process-related assessment in practice.

Combinations

Combining qualitative and quantitative analyses

A complex problem can, in the main, be better addressed by a *combination* of tools than by using single tools. However, it is still a challenging task to couple different tools that are usually separately applied. It might be better to use fewer tools and to combine them in efficient ways. Their use and linkages need to be made as transparent as possible.

An important question is how to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in such a way that they complement each other. Additional aspects that play a role in combining tools are differences in time frames and in spatial scales of their application. A comprehensive assessment framework could be of use here. It could help bring different temporal and spatial scales together, along with qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Communication

Finding the right level and timing of stakeholder involvement

Participation took place in the development of the biofuel directive and also formed a prominent part of the assessment plans developed in the case study. This does not mean that stakeholder participation is sensible in all cases. Specific aims, modes of involvement and timing have to be carefully conceived. Important questions to ask here are: why involve stakeholders and how? Where precisely is stakeholder participation meaningful? How can we ensure representativeness?

Communicating assessment outcomes in understandable ways

It appeared to be a challenging task to have scientists from different disciplines working and communicating together. Also, the communication between these multi-disciplinary teams and policy-makers appeared to be as challenging. Any assessment takes place on the 'border' between research and practice, and thus functions as a bridge between them. As the communication of research results to users could be problematic, for example with regard to terminology used, careful attention should be given to how to present and communicate the results. Clear and comprehensive information about tools could enlighten the communication between scientists themselves and between scientists and policy-makers.

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