

## Health Equity Impact Assessment (HEIA) Evaluation: A Backgrounder

### What is Health Equity Impact Assessment (HEIA)?

HEIA is a decision support tool that helps users to identify and address any unintended health impacts that a plan, policy or program might have on vulnerable or marginalized groups within the general population. The aim is to maximize positive impacts and reduce negative impacts that could potentially widen health disparities between population groups – in short, to deliver the assessed initiative in a more equitable way.

The Ontario HEIA tool was developed by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care in collaboration with the province's Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) and Public Health Ontario. The HEIA tool is based on the Health Impact Assessment (HIA), a World Health Organization tool that has been adopted in a number of jurisdictions, including Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. HEIA incorporates international evidence as well as input gathered during regional pilots and conversations with health service providers.

### Why evaluate HEIA?

Evaluation is a systematic way of investigating the effectiveness of a program, intervention, or policy. An evaluation should be designed such that it is driven by questions that yield measurable, credible, and useful answers (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004). Evaluation must be realistic, that is, be useful to someone, be feasible to carry out, and be grounded enough to be carried out (largely) by people who would not normally see themselves as evaluators (Quigley & Taylor, 2004, pp. 546).

The purpose of evaluating the Health Equity Impact Assessment is to determine if and how the use of the HEIA tool informed the decision-making process; if it contributed to the reduction of avoidable health disparities between population groups; and if so, how well it did so.

**Note:** evaluating the HEIA is a separate and distinct activity from evaluating the program, policy or initiative that HEIA was used in.

Reasons why evaluating HEIA is important include:

- To build a body of knowledge to support organizations in implementing HEIA and improving HEIA processes (e.g. by showing what works well and what changes may be necessary to optimize the HEIA approach)
- To demonstrate the value of the HEIA tool by showing the contribution that HEIAs make to raising awareness of health equity issues and to developing more equitable policies, programs and initiatives – and ultimately, more equitable health outcomes
- To create accountability to stakeholders by tracking how recommendations were received and acted on (Taylor, Gowman & Quigley, 2003)

### How is HEIA evaluated?

Evaluation should be a core part of all HEIA activity. Evaluation should be built in at the onset of the planning stage of a HEIA. An evaluation plan should be in line with the stated objectives for completing the HEIA.

HEIA evaluation should include an evaluation of the HEIA process itself and of the HEIA's impact on decision-making and on program, policy or initiative design. The evaluation may start concurrently with the HEIA process itself, but can only be fully completed once the HEIA has been completed, when its recommendations have been implemented and its impact on the planning process and potentially on equity outcomes has become evident.

The proposed HEIA Evaluation Framework (see separate document) offers questions to guide HEIA evaluation, based on a review of the literature on evaluation of the closely related HIA. It is recommended that the suggested evaluation questions be asked of as many people as possible who were involved in conducting a HEIA to gather different perspectives.

### Process Evaluation

Process evaluation aims to determine whether the HEIA is administered as is intended. It appraises the activities that occur while a HEIA is being conducted, identifies who is involved and whether the separate components of the HEIA are working.

Process evaluation is especially important in building evidence for the effectiveness of HEIA by identifying *how* the HEIA works. It also gives direction on what, if any, changes need to be made in order to improve the HEIA process and maximize its effectiveness at increasing equity.

The process evaluation should reflect the five steps of the HEIA process: scoping, potential impacts, mitigation, monitoring and dissemination.

### Impact Evaluation\*

HEIA impact evaluation assesses 'the value and worth' of HEIA in terms of influencing decision-making and supporting equity-driven planning. It is an assessment of whether implementing the HEIA resulted in more equitable policy, program(s) or initiative(s) – i.e., whether the positive effects on equity were enhanced and the negative effects (that could potentially widen health disparities between population groups) were minimized.

### Long-term Outcome Evaluation\*

Long-term outcome evaluation assesses the ultimate impact that the use of the HEIA tool had on health equity and on reducing health disparities. However, a robust evaluation of the health and equity outcomes of using HEIA is often not feasible. Measuring the direct impact of a HEIA on health outcomes is complex and resource-intensive.

**\*Note:** Current program planning and evaluation models typically view "outcomes" as preceding "impact." However, the proposed evaluation framework is based on the international literature on HIA evaluation, which refers to "impact evaluation" of the HIA's *impact* on the decision-making process (i.e., short-term outcomes of HEIA) and "outcome evaluation" as the HIA's influence on health *outcomes* (i.e., long-term outcomes of HEIA).

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**For more information, see:** Evaluating Health Impact Assessment (HIA): A rapid review of the literature  
**Related document:** HEIA Evaluation Questions (A Draft Template)