

Critically evaluate the role and effectiveness of Environmental Impact Assessment in ensuring environmentally sound and sustainable development in the UK

The World Conservation Strategy (WCS) demonstrated in 1980 that development can only be sustained by the integration of development and conservation policies to conserve the resources on which that development depends on (Gilpin, 2000). In 1987, The Brundtland Commission, in its report to the Governing Council of UNEP (Our Common Future), defined sustainable development as: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987).

In recent times, this definition only forms the basic framework for the concept of sustainable development (Buytaert et al., 2011). The malleability of the concept of sustainable development is a major reason why it has been embraced internationally (O'Riordan, 1993), but paradoxically, that same reason is its greatest challenge. The malleable nature of the concept gives rise to significant conceptual difficulties in operationalizing the concept and evaluating the contribution of decision-aiding tools to sustainable development (Cashmore, 2004).

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is simply defined as "a systematic process to identify, predict and evaluate the environmental effects of proposed actions and projects" (Sadler and McCabe, 2002:103). It was originally intended to be an "action-forcing" device to bring about environmental reform in throughout the US federal bureaucracy (Caldwell, 1982 cited in Petts, 1999:251). It has now become a decision-aiding tool and has evolved greatly over the years (Sadler and McCabe, 2002).

In recent times, environmental Impact Assessment has become internationally recognized as a very important tool to help achieve sustainable development (Lawrence, 2003; Weaver, 2003; Andre et al., 2004). EIA practice is however hindered by certain limitations and structural weaknesses (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 1999). Also, according to Craik (2008: 78), 'despite the early and continuing identification of the importance of EIA for promoting sustainable development, the precise nature of this linkage has suffered from the conceptual ambiguity of