

# INTEGRATING SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT INTO PLANNING PRACTICE

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This spring three students from the urban governance program in Tallinn University defended their master theses. Two papers out of those dealt with the paradigm of social impact assessment – a field that has so far gained little attention in Estonian spatial planning. Epp Vahtramäe studied, based on the example of the Telliskivi Creative Cluster, the sociocultural effects of regeneration of former industrial areas and the attitude of the inhabitants in general towards this kind of spatial change. Mart Uusjärv analysed the social impact assessment approach in the planning of Maakri area by assessing the changes and social impacts that have occurred after building the high-rises.

Social impacts are understood as effects, resulting from certain developments, that are sensed by an individual, a family unit or a community, on a material or non-material level. For example, effects on people's health, social well-being, security, accessibility of public services, cultural values, community relations, participation traditions. Assessing Social Impact combines analysing social outcomes of planned changes, monitoring and management. This is a process that gives the decision makers information about the potential outcomes of planned developments already in the planning phase.

Both authors came to the understanding that social impact has so far been modestly dealt with in spatial planning and found that, in order to make sustainable planning decisions, integrating a social impact assessment into local planning practice should be considered. For example mapping the local community's profile could be considered in order to get an overview of the inhabitants who will be influenced and evaluate the changes occurring in the community's structure and following impacts. Another possibility would be to implement a participatory approach by consulting people who will eventually be influenced already in the early stages. This would enable to reach all the inhabitants, not only those who take part in public displays of plans and help to define potential site specific impacts.

One of the closest examples of practising social impact assessment can be found from Finland, the town of Jyväskylä, where the first steps in assessing social impact were made already in the middle of the 1990s. In the beginning of the 2000s they began integrating the principles of the social impact assessment into the planning process. For example they carried out thematic analyses in order to define the impacts of planned developments on services, demographic profile and safety in the area, using participatory principles by organising separate meetings with different social groups in the area (i.e. pensioners).

It is important that in local planning practice, next to the physical level, more attention is given to the social level so that the developers and planners would realise the necessity of evaluating social impacts. In any case, implementing principles of social impact assessment in Estonian spatial planning, invites discussion and poses a challenge in the form of compiling guiding materials and training experts.

Hopefully these master theses will give an impulse for further discussions and developments in the field.

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