

Debates on International Agencies: Critiques of the IMF

**THE NEED TO INCLUDE HEALTH IMPACT
ASSESSMENT AT THE INTERNATIONAL
MONETARY FUND**

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The lending and technical support provided by the International Monetary Fund affect the determinants of health and healthy equity. Most health determinants lie outside the control of the health sector, and thus non-health-sector policies have profound positive and negative effects on population health. Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is an instrument for identifying the effect of policies, plans, programs, and projects on population health and health equity. It is a feasible, cost-effective, and transparent process that has been adopted by several financial institutions, including members of the World Bank Group. Adopting HIA would assist the IMF in ensuring that the potential health consequences of its policies are identified and addressed.

Social and economic policies have a determining impact on whether a child can grow and develop to its full potential and live a flourishing life, or whether its life will be blighted.

—WHO, Final Report of Commission on
Social Determinants of Health (1)

The lending and technical support provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crucially affect the determinants of health and health equity. These determinants of health include poverty, debt, natural disaster, armed conflict, inequality, health sector spending, financial stability, and food security. Most health determinants lie outside the control of the health sector, and thus non-health-sector policies can have profound positive and negative effects on population health.

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Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is an instrument for identifying the effect of policies, plans, programs, and projects on population health and health equity. More specifically, HIA is “a combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a policy, plan, programme or project on both the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage those effects” (2). It is a feasible, cost-effective, and transparent process (3, 4). Many public institutions currently advocate HIA in order to protect and promote health; these include the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which is part of the World Bank Group (5), and the World Health Organization (WHO) (1). The European Commission requires integrated assessment that includes consideration of health in its policies (6, 7).

By adopting HIA, the IMF would ensure that its efforts to provide protection from financial harm would include the identification and mitigation of potential health consequences. Adopting HIA, however, presents challenges: IMF staff would require training to judge the quality of completed reports, HIA practitioners are scarce, and the relationships between IMF interventions and future health consequences cannot always be quantified. As with all impact assessments, the results of each analysis are likely to be contested.

Notwithstanding these challenges, other financial institutions have made HIA an integral part of their business practice. For example, the safeguard policies and standards of the IFC contain a requirement for HIA to be performed for large projects (2). The IFC has since issued good practice guidance for HIA (8). The standards have been accepted by most of the leading lending banks that are parties to the Equator Principles (9). There are also country policies (10) and sector-specific guidelines (11). These provide experience that the IMF could draw upon.

Over time, the HIAs would ensure that public health is represented in economic planning, and an accumulating public health evidence base would contribute toward improved policymaking and governance. As countries represented on the IMF board are moving themselves toward adoption of “health in all policies,” it is reasonable to ask the IMF to do likewise.

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