**Exploring the Use of ‘Argument’ in Impact Assessment**

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Senior representatives of a government agency with a mandate for doing impact assessments requested assistance to improve their process for assessing impact ‘significance’. This study asked: would organized use of ‘argument’ help?

Analyzed features of 33 determinations of significance from 11 separate project reports. Result: Yes. The structure of their arguments was weak and several identifiable steps could improve them.

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What are arguments and their major features? A simple argument is a set of reasons (also called premises or grounds) that lead to a conclusion, targeted to a particular audience. More complex arguments, called cases, assemble many individual sub-arguments to reach an overall result. Assessments are complex arguments: they are cases.

There are three different kinds of cases (fact, judgment and policy cases) with different requirements for the nature of their premises, and how the premises are used to support conclusions.

The process of argument can also be called organized reasoning.

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The agency’s arguments usually missed important elements of desirable strong arguments. These omissions did not necessarily make the conclusions incorrect. But the arguments were often much weaker than they might have been, since there was ample data available that had not been made clear. Better prepared arguments (more organized reasoning) would be more correct, take less time to prepare, would result in more compelling ‘stories’ and the agency’s procedures would be more transparent, than they are now.

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Recommendations

1 Better define key terms.

2 Present sub-conclusions and supporting premises for different impact contexts and characteristics.

3 More comprehensively: Develop a better process for significance determination, including the above steps, that addresses context and explains the reasons and weightings for the fact, judgment and policy considerations.

4 Implement improved argument gradually. Use checklists of steps at first. Add more advanced features later.

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