METHODFINDER

Practitioner's Guide:

Choosing Between Alternative Plans: An Assessment Approach

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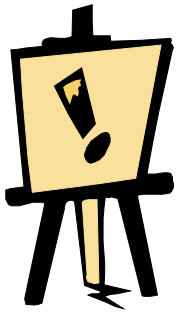
Brief Description



In order to be able to choose between alternative planning proposals a degree of objectivity would be desirable. However, it is not always possible to develop a purely objective selection system, there is always a certain degree of subjectivity involved.

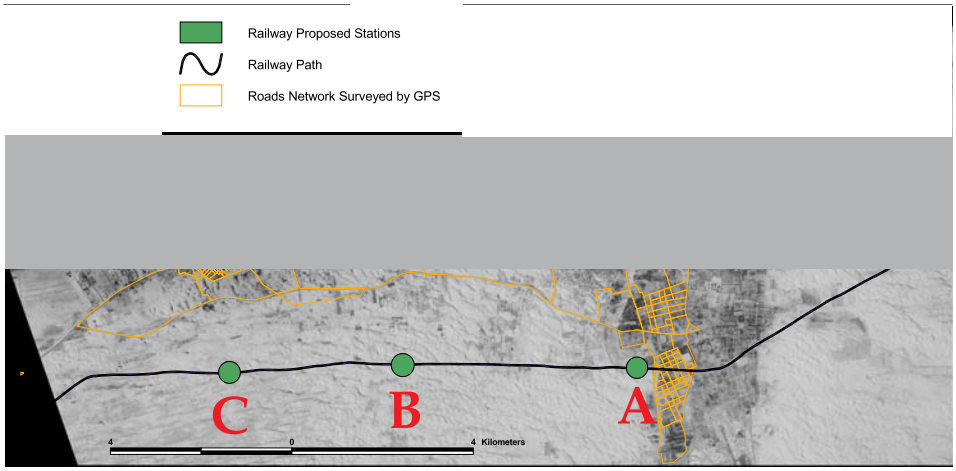
A mixture between objectivity and subjectivity provides a pragmatic approach and there are several reasons for this:

I. Objective mechanisms have a place because they can be used to fairly eliminate a large number of different planning choices. From the small pool of choices remaining a more subjective evaluation can be undertaken.

II. Objective criteria better enable a resolution of justice/perceived justice between the planning alternatives that are finally selected. The planner can explain to the politicians why certain planning choices were not selected (e.g. the second plan did not meet criteria x).

III. With a purely subjective system it is difficult to explain to people why a plan was rejected/accepted.

Map 1: Three possible sites for a railway station



Expert group selection amongst three possible locations for a railway station using economic, ecological and envrironmental criteria.

Location A

Location B

Location C

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Proposed Main Users

Private and public sector regional, urban or sectoral planners.

Purpose of the Method

Objective criteria can be in the form of multiple hurdles (i.e. each criteria must be met before the individual can proceed to the next step in the process) or additive. Each criteria provides a score which is added up across the range of criteria to produce a final rating. Criteria considered more important than others may provide additional points to form a weighted linear sum. Each of these systems has its own advantages and disadvantages and these issues must be considered before selecting a system.

The value of subjectivity in the process is made clear when one considers the huge number of variables that may be input into the selection model. It is not always possible to insert every variable into the calculations due to the numbers involved, a lack of awareness of the variable and/or difficulties inherent in measuring certain variables.

Economic and financial assessments are also complex and expensive to implement. Therefore a series of subjective selection criteria can be used to generate a certain degree of objectivity.

The method being described here bridges the gap between objectivity and subjectivity. In addition to using a series of subjective criteria, the example also makes extensive use of Geographical information system (GIS) to present the alternatives on different maps.

Choosing Between Alternative Plans: An Assessment Approach

Advantages

It combines both subjective and objective approaches. It is easy to use, can be adapted to most local settings. It is a transparent approach for selecting alternatives. It is not as complicated or expensive to implement compared to other economic selection criteria (i.e. cost-benefit, value analysis) and therefore lends itself to easy application.

Limitations

The thought that one can actually create an *objective* selection system is flawed. All systems are inherently subjective, the human factor will see to that. In other words subjectivity is involved in the development of objective mechanisms. Criteria may be selected and made measurable. However, the process of deciding which criteria (or variables) to measure is a subjective process. Conclusion: You cannot have a purely objective selection process even if you wanted to therefore the choice is between a purely subjective system and a mix of subjective evaluation and measurable criteria.

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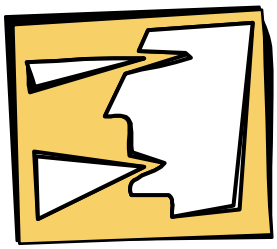
Principles and General Procedures



A seven step procedure needs to be applied:

1. Define the criteria that will be used to assess the planning alternatives (i.e. economic or environmental criteria).
2. Cluster the criteria into logical groups
3. Develop a method of quantifying the assessment, preferably along a scale (e.g. scale from 1-9 with 9 being the highest score and 1 being the lowest or best/worst).
4. Subject the results of the assessment using the criteria to a public or expert hearing. The public / expert hearing involves planners, experts and general public. During the public hearing the criteria are re-examined and the results of the application discussed and reviewed.
5. Summarize the final result of the assessment at the end of the public expert hearing.
6. Agree upon a weighting between the different groups and then apply the weighting.
7. Rank the alternatives and then present these to the decision makers (the alternative that gained the highest score being at the top of the list).

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