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## UN Sustainable Development Goals in Environmental Assessment practice

*A Danish standard*

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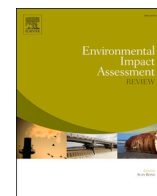
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## Collaboration through environmental assessment networks: Co-creating space and cultivating a joint learning mindset

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### ABSTRACT

The sustainability challenges tackled in environmental assessments (EA) call for transdisciplinary cooperation linking research and practice in a joint change agency. This article explores the researcher's agency through the development of an EA network that seeks to support collaboration between researchers and practitioners, mutual learning, and change with a view to sustainability. We are conducting a case study of 'The Environmental Assessment Day' (EA-Day), an annual Danish conference that has been held for 10 years and attracts representatives from public and private organisations relevant to EA. The article is centred around the questions: How and why has the EA-Day network developed, and with what value creation for individual participants and for the general Danish EA practice? A mixed-methods approach is utilised to garner insight into the role and effects of the transdisciplinary conference. The results show that EA-Day is characterised by many different organisations giving presentations and a strong network of participants. The results also reveal how EA-Day provides an important platform for mutual inspiration and the qualification of research and practice. The results are relevant for all actors interested in networks and conferences in the EA field, and especially those interested in how to promote collaboration between research and practice.

### 1. Introduction

There is increasing acknowledgement of the need for transdisciplinary knowledge and collaboration to solve grand challenges related to sustainable societal transition (e.g., Rau et al., 2018; MacFadden, 2019; Shrivastave et al., 2020). This need is also highlighted in the environmental assessment literature, including in relation to future governance needs (Sinclair and Diduck, 2017), as a major deficiency of current practice (Wiek and Binder, 2005), and as a means of overcoming the limitations of traditional models of knowledge production (Ortiz and Climent-Gil, 2020), with little or no connection between scholarship and practice.

Researcher–practitioner collaboration is seen as an element in transdisciplinary collaboration towards more sustainable practice (Bulven et al., 2021; Ortiz and Climent-Gil, 2020; Aaen et al., 2022). If research findings are not translated into practice, environmental assessment practitioners cannot benefit from the most recent scientific

knowledge when tackling challenges; and if knowledge and on-the-ground challenges are not transferred to research, researchers in the field of environmental assessment will risk producing decoupled knowledge that is not relevant to practice – neither now nor later. Research–practice collaboration and the role of science in EA is among other promoted by Cashmore (2004), Greig and Duinker (2011) who distinguish between science inside EA and outside EA (2011), and by Kørnøv et al. (2011) who introduces the notion of EA researchers as 'change agents'. It is also found in EA literature, that there are increasing expectations that researchers disseminate their research more broadly than to academic forums and contribute with societal impacts (Rau et al., 2018).

The literature describes a series of perspectives on researcher–practitioner collaboration. Collaboration relates to the discretionary power of actors (Zhang et al., 2018; Kørnøv et al., 2015), the spaces for action available in which actors engage in EA practices with different understandings, and how 'these understandings are important for

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actions' (Kågström and Richardson, 2015: 111). In this perspective, collaboration becomes a matter of supporting actors to utilise and perhaps change their spaces for action to promote more sustainable outcomes. Collaboration is related to trust, negotiations of and means for collaboration (e.g., Duxbury et al., 2021; Bulten et al., 2021), and it requires deliberate attention from both researchers and practitioners to evolve and thrive.

The literature also discusses the challenges and prerequisites of research–practice collaboration (e.g., Bulten et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2012). Research identifies 'collaboration culture' as a success factor for transdisciplinary collaboration aimed at sustainability transformations (Bergmann et al., 2021) and a lack of integration across knowledge types, organisational structures, and communicative styles as a key shortcoming (Lang et al., 2012). Different understandings of the roles played by other actors are also of importance. As Ma et al. (2018) show, expectations to research–practice collaboration vary across stakeholder groups, and practitioners consider researchers to have a more powerful role in EA than scholars themselves believe they have.

Despite a positive association between collaborative outreach and scholarly performance, the most hindering factors for researchers to engage in collaboration with societal actors are found to be a lack of incentives and lack of appreciation by the academic system (Kassab, 2019). However, the hindrance for collaboration by these contextual factors can be reduced through personal factors, such as an intrinsic motivation and a felt moral obligation to contribute to solving societal challenges. Openness to collaboration among researchers is central. To uncover this, Olmos-Penuela et al. (2015) have defined 'openness' as 'a willingness by researchers to make research more usable by external partners by responding to external influences in their own research practices' (p. 381). Their findings show that personal factors are determining the level of openness and that ongoing opportunities to engage across research and practice must be encouraged.

A key prerequisite for research–practice collaboration is to create opportunity and spaces for ongoing knowledge exchange that fosters learning, knowledge building, relationship building, etc. (Duxbury et al., 2021). Such spaces can take different forms, ranging from regular formalised collaboration to more informal ad hoc meetings; and from few partners involved to broader assemblies of actors. This paper focuses on a specific case of such space for research–practice collaboration: the Danish Environmental Assessment Day (EA-Day) hosted by The Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment (DCEA), which is an annual conference for actors involved in environmental assessments.

The research presented in this paper sets out to answer the following questions about the development of a national environmental assessment network and the meaning for practitioners and researchers and potentials of agency:

1. How has the national environmental assessment network developed as represented through the annual conference EA-Day?
2. What is the value creation and impact of EA-Day at the collective and individual levels?
3. What role does EA-Day play for collaboration across practice and research?

## 2. The environmental assessment day: Background and goals

The Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment (DCEA) was formally established in 2010 by a group of researchers at Aalborg University. It represented the continuation of previous research activities carried out by the 'Environmental Assessment & Governance' research group, which had been established in 2004. The DCEA was established with a more explicit mission to build a bridge between research and practice and to create a clearer entry to the research world. DCEA has continued the year-long research area, focusing on environmental assessment and governance, and establishing extensive collaboration and partnerships with the public, private, and civil society sectors.

The authors of this paper see their role as 'change agents' (Kørnøv et al., 2011; Kørnøv, 2020) and seek to contribute to the use of environmental assessment tools from the early stages in the process, from idea generation to implementation. DCEA aims to promote critical and better-quality environmental assessments and environmental governance, both in Denmark and internationally, and it engages in and initiates various types of formal and informal activities to achieve these goals. EA-Day is one in a range of collaborative activities (see Fig. 1).

In 2009, the year before the formalisation of DCEA, the Centre launched the first national conference: EA-Day, a one-day conference consisting of plenary presentations and discussions together with thematic parallel sessions and an informal network reception. The conference is hosted in both the west (Aalborg) and east (Copenhagen) of Denmark. In some years, EA-Day has been supplemented with short courses in environmental assessment, but these have been omitted from the study in hand.

EA-Day is organised as a not-for-profit event. The participation fee covers the costs of catering, planning, administration, and the presenter fees. Keeping costs at a minimum enables the participation of more actors. An important prerequisite for this to succeed is the dedication of the group's researchers. EA-Day is the day where practitioners and researchers meet to exchange information on new challenges and get the latest updates on legislation and tools within the environmental assessment field. The goals are to:

- enhance the effectiveness of EA practice and create a common arena to overcome some of the barriers for effective EA and develop innovative approaches to practical EA challenges
- support mutual learning and build capacity among all participants
- create a basis for further collaboration
- strengthen practical perspectives in research

EA-Day thus aims to foster a community of researchers and practitioners and helps to forge connections and to empower both researchers and practitioners working in the EA field. The conference is thereby also an important arena when it comes to developing and testing new research ideas.

## 3. Methods

The case study involved a mixed-methods design consisting of analysis of conference materials, including registration data and conference programmes, supplemented with an online survey sent to participants and focus group interviews.

### 3.1. Analysis of conference materials

The first part of the analysis is based on data from registration documents (with data about participant affiliations), participant lists, and conference programmes. It aims to answer the first question regarding the development of the network. The data cover the years 2009–2021, excluding 2010 and 2020. In 2010, EA-Day was an integrated part of a larger international climate change symposium, and both the form and purpose (e.g., contents, participants, and networking) differ too much from the other years to include it in the analysis. In 2020, the conference was cancelled due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

#### 3.1.1. Conference registration materials

When registering, participants provide the name of the organisation they are representing and register for either Copenhagen or Aalborg. Through the registration information and participant list, the historical development is analysed by mapping the number and distribution of participants across organisation types. We classify participants in the following seven organisational categories: national government, regional authority, municipality, consultant, developer, NGO, and university.

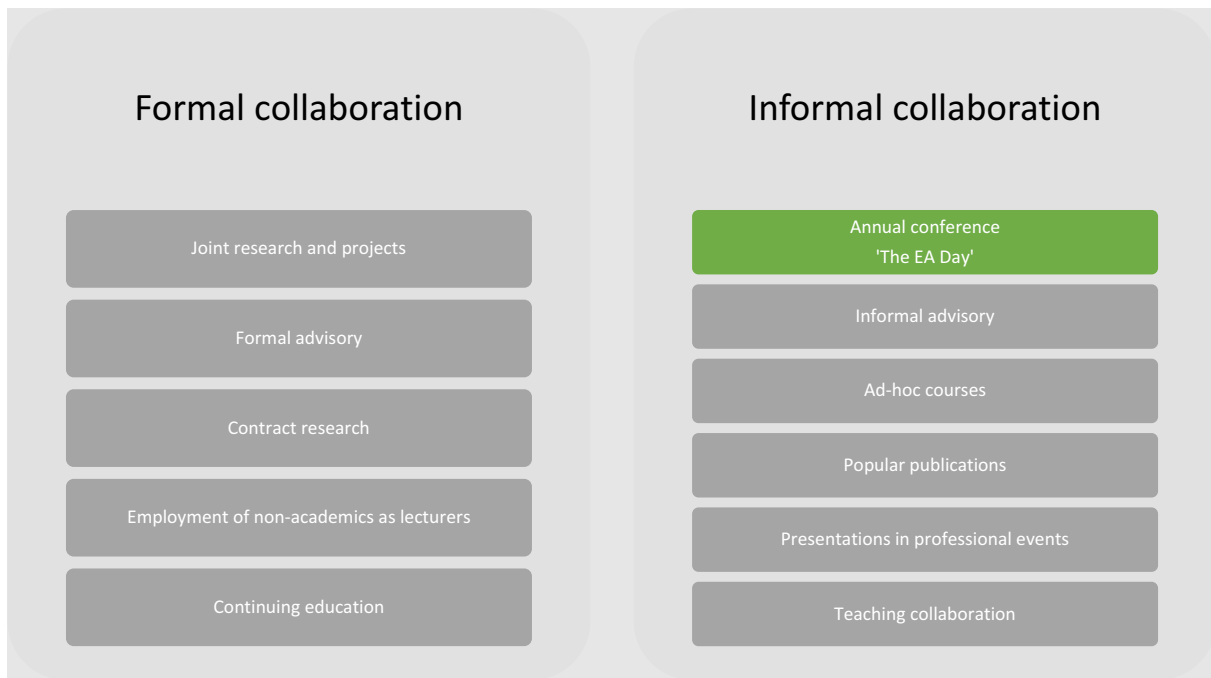


Fig. 1. Types of collaboration in which DCEA engages.

The data provides a basis for examining the development in the number of participants, reappearances of participants, as well as the distribution of participants between types of organisations over time; in other words, the content and spread of the network.

3.1.2. Conference programmes

EA-Day always has a specific programme with emphasis on different themes. Over time, a tradition has emerged whereby plenary sessions focus on news from the Ministry of Environment and news from research. In contrast, parallel thematic sessions have a greater diversity, and each year’s programme has unique session themes focussing on current and emerging issues. The programme is usually divided equally into approximately two hours of plenary sessions, three hours of parallel sessions, and three hours of networking (breaks, reception, etc.). The number of parallel sessions has been between four and six. The programmes from both Aalborg and Copenhagen for each year are included, the session themes are the same, but the division of presentations varies.

Data from the programmes provide a basis for mapping addressed themes over time and any peculiarities. In addition, the distribution of presentations between researchers and practitioners and any shared presentation is mapped to gain insight into contributions and collaboration.

3.2. Survey to participants

After the EA-Day in August 2021, DCEA issued a brief online survey to participants focusing on the motivation for and value of participating. The survey data constitute part of the empirical basis for answering the second question on the value creation and impact of EA-Day. The survey was initially sent by email to the participants at the conference in August 2021. The link to the survey was then shared on the DCEA LinkedIn profile, calling for previous participants to respond. In the survey it was stated that this data would be used for research.

The survey consisted of two background questions:

- Where have you participated in EA-Day? (Aalborg or Copenhagen).
- Where do you work? (national government, regional authority, municipality, consultant, developer, university, or NGO).

The other part of the survey consists of two questions:

- How many times have you participated in EA-Day? (once, twice, three times, four times, five times or more)
- To what degree do you agree with the following statements? (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, don’t know):
  - o I benefit greatly from participating in EA-Day.
  - o My participation in EA-Day has enabled me to better understand and carry out environmental assessment.
  - o Participating in EA-Day has inspired me to develop my (or my organisation’s) environmental assessment practice.
  - o My participation in EA-Day has expanded my network.
  - o EA-Day is a special forum because we meet across roles and interests.

The last part of the survey is a space to add additional comments. In Table 1, the number of respondents is shown. (See Table 1).

3.3. Focus group interviews

After the analysis of participant lists, programmes, and survey results, two focus group interviews were conducted online in February 2022. The purpose of the interviews was to create a basis for telling the EA-Day story and its meaning and impact for both research and practice, as seen from the practitioner perspective. The interview data thus constitute parts of the basis for answering the second question concerning value creation and the third question concerning the role of EA-Day for collaboration across practice and research. The focus group

Table 1  
Number of respondents who completed the surveys.

	Number of respondents who completed the survey	Number of respondents who partially completed the survey
Survey after EA-Day 2021	72	6
General survey on LinkedIn	6	3

interviews allowed the interviewees to interact with one-another and to deepen each other's perspectives (Bloor et al., 2001).

To stimulate discussion within the group, the interviews were organised in two rounds and with a logical sequence of open-ended questions. The two rounds and related questions were:

- Round I – Individual and collective value creation
  - o *What values has participation in EA-Day created for you?*
  - o *How do you see the broader and collective value creation?*
- Round II – The importance of a common arena
  - o *What role does EA-Day play in research–practice collaboration?*
  - o *What does this collaboration mean for researchers and practitioners?*

To get more in-depth answers, the participants were asked complementary questions during the interview (e.g., concerning the motivation for participation and view on the development over time).

The participants were selected according to the following criteria: Participants must (a) have experience related to undertaking EA in practice, (b) have participated more than 3 times in EA-Day, (c) represent different types of organisations, and (d) know each other. Because the focus group depends on the social interaction between the participants (Morgan, 1997), criteria (c) and (d) were chosen allowing for both heterogeneity and homogeneity. The participants are shown in Table 2.

Two researchers conducted the focus group and performed the roles as facilitator and co-facilitator. The facilitator guided the participants in a 'funnel-based interview' (Morgan, 1997), which started with broad, less structured questioning moving to specific and more structured questioning. The facilitator had moderate involvement: asking the overall questions, keeping the conversation on the subject, and avoiding sharing comments or personal experiences. The co-facilitator recorded the interview audio, complemented the facilitator with probing questions during the interview to clarify a participant's response, and managed the time.

The focus group interview was completed online via Microsoft Teams and recorded with the participants' informed consent, and consent to be quoted. They both lasted 1.5 h. The interviews were transcribed in full length, and the transcriptions were analysed in accordance with the focus of Question Two on individual versus collective value creation and Question Three on collaboration between practice and research. This included identification of relevant statements and categorisation in accordance with the questions.

The focus group interviews further fed into the discussion in section 5 connecting the findings from the focus group interviews with theories in narratives. Here, we approach the results from the interviews guided by theoretical reflections inspired by Wenger et al. (2011). They find that individual and collective narratives developed by members of networks on the history and purpose of same can inform about what value is/has been created (or not). They highlight how the narratives that

**Table 2**

The participants in the focus group interviews. The number of EA-Day participations is presented in brackets.

	Focus group I	Focus group II
National government	–	Special consultant (15) Ministry of Environment
Region	–	Chief consultant (5) The North Denmark Region
Municipality	Urban planner (7) Egedal Municipality	Land surveyor and EIA specialist (10) Aarhus Municipality
Consultant	Senior legal advisor (15) COWI	Senior project manager (9) NIRAS
Developer	EIA team leader (8) The Copenhagen Metro	–
NGO	Head of local affairs (8) The Danish Society for Nature Conservation	–

frame the contributions of networks to value creation are complex and include both personal and collective narratives. The personal narratives refer to *'the experience of participants'*. The collective narratives relate to *'the social networks and communities people are part of'* (Wenger et al., 2011: 18). They further point to the relevance of distinguishing between long-term and short-term perspectives in relation to the value creation. They exemplify this as they describe how new knowledge obtained in a network can be applied later and in other locations of engagement. Also, there can be short-term value on the individual level in a network if a member understands how to solve an immediate problem in their practice. Over time, however, the new solution applied may become a resource for members in the network or in the organisation they work in, when facing similar challenges. Value is then generated, both on the individual and collective levels, and it becomes both short term and long term.

#### 4. Results

The results of the analyses are presented in the following sections, which reflect the three questions mentioned in the introduction. The first section focusses on the characteristics and development of EA-Day over time, including participants, themes in focus, and presenters. The second section focuses on the value creation of the EA-Day, and the third section focuses on the role of the EA-Day in terms of research–practice collaboration.

##### 4.1. Characteristics of EA-day – and development over time

As stated in the second section, EA-Day was first held in 2009 and, except for 2010 and 2020, has continued yearly since, with 11 conferences over more than a decade. Over the years, the conference has had 1828 registrations in total over both the Aalborg and Copenhagen locations from a total of 862 different participants. This means that some participants have attended the conference more than once, and Table 3 thus shows how many times participants have attended.

The numbers in Table 3 show that most of the participants (521) have only participated once, leaving 341 participants who have participated more than once. The data (not depicted in Table 3) also shows that 56 participants have participated in one or more conferences in both Aalborg and Copenhagen.

As Fig. 2 shows, the number of participants started at 131 in 2009 and developed to more than 200 in 2019. The highest number of participants (239) thus far was in 2021. This may be an effect of the cancellation of many professional development activities the year before (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), meaning leftover funding to participate in e.g., conferences in 2021. However, 2019 also showed a significant increase compared to the previous years.

Fig. 2 also shows the distribution of participants for organisations. Throughout the period under investigation, most of the participants are either working in a municipality or a consultancy. The number of participants from the national government also increases noticeably over the years.

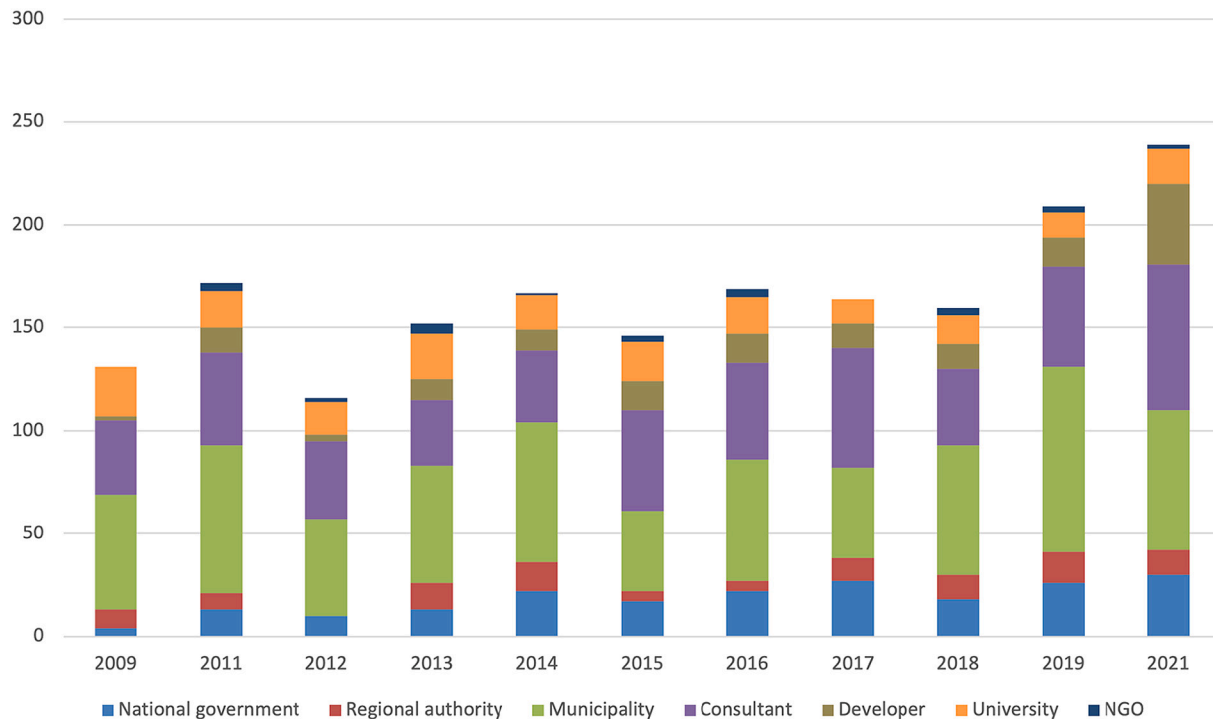
Table 4 below shows the types of organisations represented by the conference presenters.

Here, presenters from universities and consultants are the majority. The reason for the universities being so well represented is probably that they have an interest in (and an obligation to) communicate and share the knowledge they accumulate through research, together with an interest in obtaining research input. Looking to the consultants, they often see themselves as selling and competing on knowledge, meaning that they have both knowledge to share and an interest in showcasing it to potential clients. A fair number of presenters have also been from the national government. As seen in Fig. 3, the organisation types represented by EA-Day presenters vary considerably over the years. This can be viewed as a strength: that different actor types contribute depending on where new issues and developments are taking place.

**Table 3**

Number of participants who attended EA-Day X times. The numbers include both attendance in Aalborg and Copenhagen and all years.

Number of participations in EA-Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	15	19	21
Number of participants	521	144	63	44	33	15	13	10	6	5	1	1	3	2	1



**Fig. 2.** Total number of participants distributed on types of organisations. Note that 2010 and 2020 are missing, as explained in section 3.1.

**Table 4**

Distribution of presenters – organisation type and year.

Type of presenter/year	2009	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	Type of presenter total
National gov	2	4	2	5	6	4	5	9	6	2	8	51
Region	1	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Municipality	0	2	7	5	2	0	4	2	1	5	3	31
Consultant	4	9	7	3	6	10	6	11	8	12	15	87
Developer	0	1	2	2	4	0	0	3	2	1	1	16
University	7	16	4	9	8	8	12	5	10	5	8	85
NGO	0	2	1	2	1	2	2	0	3	3	1	17
Number of presenters total	14	37	23	28	27	24	29	30	30	28	36	292

Fig. 3 (below) shows the different themes that have been the focus of the EA-Day sessions over the years.

Most of the themes taken up on EA-Day have been different methodological issues and steps (e.g., scoping, monitoring). The sessions have also been on different types of environmental impacts (e.g., climate change, social impacts) and plans and projects that come under assessment (e.g., renewable energy projects, municipal spatial plans). A smaller number of sessions have had a purely interactive focus, some with a broad theme.

#### 4.2. Impact of EA-day

Based on the survey, Fig. 4 shows that almost 90% of EA-Day participants report having benefited greatly from their participation. The main benefit emphasised in the survey is the learning and inspiration gained from EA-Day, since around 70% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they have gained a better understanding and practice of EA or been inspired to develop their practice. In contrast, the survey

respondents appear to indicate that networking has not been a main benefit, as only 54% agree or strongly agree that their EA-Day participation has expanded their network. Conversely, 54% is a considerable share of the respondents, and almost 90% agree or strongly agree that ‘EA-Day is a special forum because we meet across roles and interests’.

The data from the focus group interviews supplement the survey data by unfolding the different types of values created through EA-Day. Table 5 provides an overview of the more specific values mentioned in the interviews. The table is structured using categories similar to the survey, but it also goes beyond the categories in the survey data and distinguishes between individual and collective value.

A few examples of the quotes behind the values in Table 5 will be given to help communicate the interviewees’ views on value creation. One interview provides an example of the role of EA-Day in helping individuals to create meaning: ‘I’ve felt excited at EA-Day – also about how I’ve met people who participate for the same reasons. During the presentations, both from universities and the ministry, I have felt that I worked with something important and meaningful’.



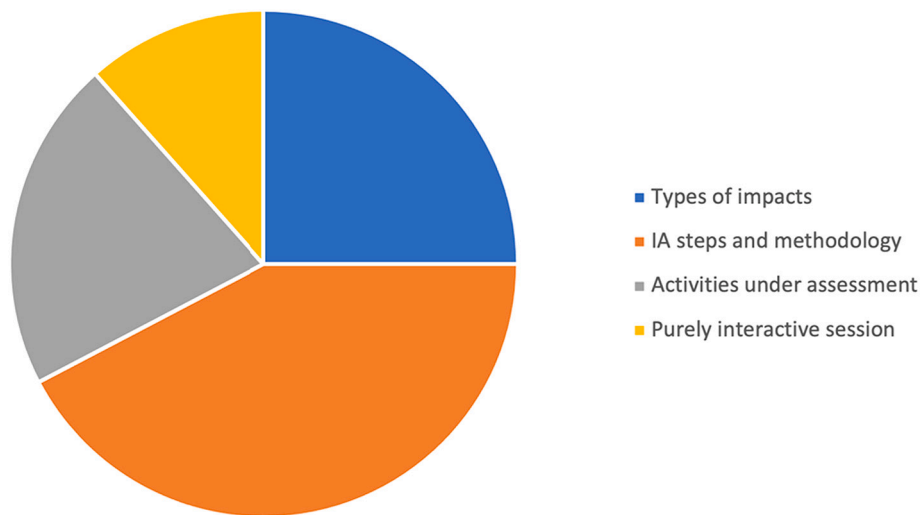


Fig. 3. Overview of EA-Day themes, 2009–2021.

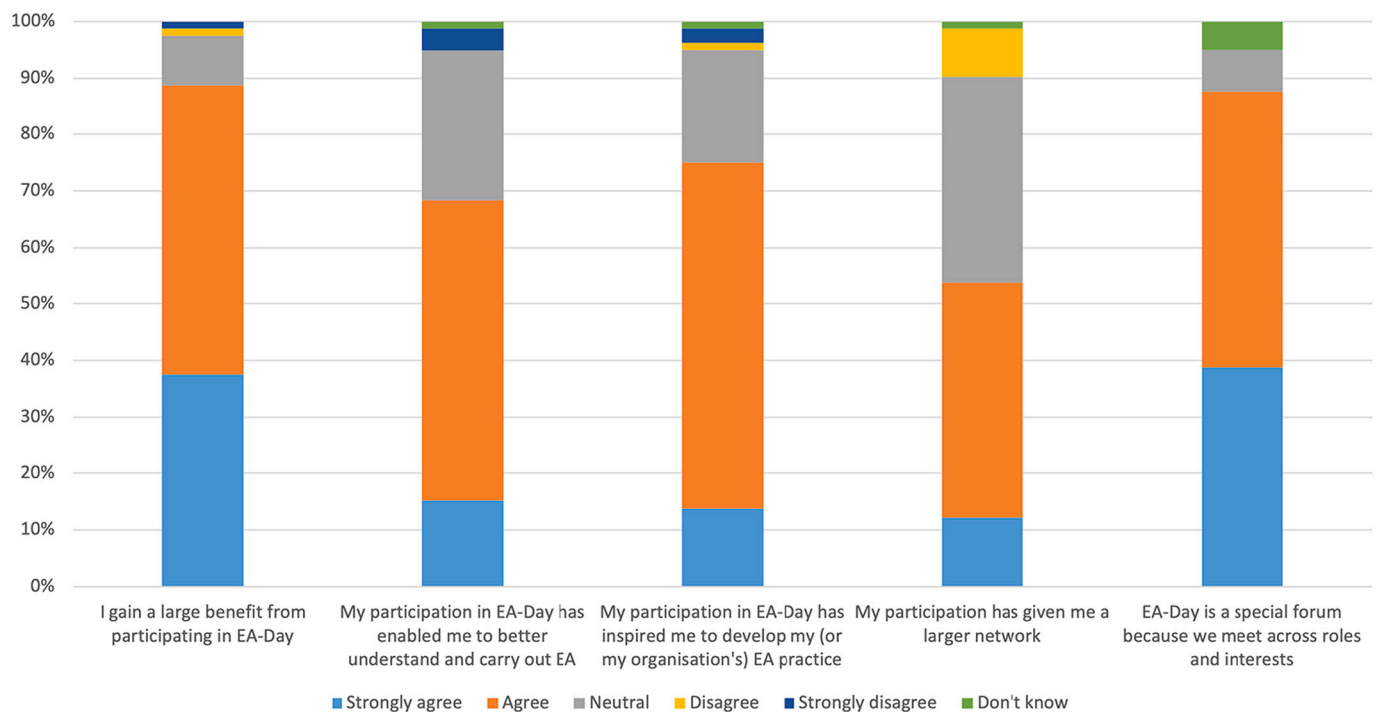


Fig. 4. Level of agreement among participants in the survey with statements concerning EA-Day.

Another interviewee gives an example of the common value of developing Danish EA practice: ‘We’ve been progressing over the years, and we’re now at a level where we’re ready to get inspiration from other countries. Earlier, we had a need to develop a common vocabulary and common understanding of what we were doing’. Another interviewee states, ‘It’s one of the major values created – that the level of practice is higher now than it had been without the EA-Days over these 10–11 years. [EA-Day] has contributed to strengthening the collective understanding’. The interviewees thus see a clear value contribution to the Danish practice from meeting annually across organisations.

Regarding the value of the EA network, which EA-Day contributes to maintain, an interviewee states, ‘A relatively strong generic network has been established around EA-Day in which you always know a few that you can ask about something if you are unsure or need help. This, I think, is a tremendous value of the annual meeting’. Another interviewee highlights

the specific role of the face-to-face EA-Day meetings: ‘If you take [EA-Day] out of the equation, I think we would have a hard time making [EA practice] work without the informal familiarity with each other from EA-Day’.

Finally, as an example of the communication between the ministry in charge of legislation and guidance and the participants in EA practice, an interviewee states, ‘I think it’s important to put a face on it [the legislation and guidance] – so that you can express it [your concerns and frustrations]. Otherwise, it gets to the minister in so many other ways. That people get a reason – I don’t think that can be overestimated’.

The interviewees point out the downsides of EA-Day, such as having too high a level for newcomers and a tendency to focus on legal aspects. They suggest reintroducing beginner courses to make it easier for them to follow discussions. The interviewees also mention the low cost of EA-Day as a key enabler of a broad participation of EA actors, especially for

**Table 5**  
Value creation mentioned in the focus group interviews.

Theme	Individual value creation	Collective value creation
Special forum	- Reducing the institutional problem of people being alone in their organisation in the work on EA.	- EA-Day plays – as the only forum across institutions and roles – a central role in establishing EA as a profession and developing the profession.
Better understanding and practice of EA	- Helping individuals to make meaning of the EA rules and work. - Helping individuals to keep updated on changes and making people aware of important changes. - Serving as a basis for checking own practice and templates.	- An increased understanding of rules and practice over the years. - An open exchange of experiences and advice that is mutually beneficial for participants.
Inspiration for developing practice	- Helping individuals to be updated on new developments in legislation, practice, and research. - A platform to start new agendas and requesting initiatives. - A platform for getting feedback on new initiatives.	- At platform for getting insight into state of practice, e.g., in terms of need to correct misunderstandings. - A platform for guiding practice, e.g., as a dissemination channel for the ministry and university and a more informal discussion of how to develop EA practice nationally.
Larger network	- Face-to-face contact eases dialogue between authorities and between authorities, developers, and consultants, which smooths out processes and makes asking for advice easier.	- Everyone knows someone to ask for advice or help. - The EA-Day network has contributed to sustaining people in the EA field.

newcomers to the EA field.

### 4.3. EA-day and practice–research collaboration

The participants in the focus group interviews point out a series of ways in which EA-Day contributes to the collaboration across practice and research. These ways are summarised in Table 6 by distinguishing between benefits for practice and research. Overall, EA-Day is seen as a platform for exchanges between research and practice.

A few examples of the quotes behind the values in Table 5 will be given to help communicate the interviewees' views on the role EA-Day has in terms of collaboration. One interviewee sees EA-Day as a platform for joint development: *'This field is widely learning by doing. There's no*

**Table 6**  
Roles of EA-Day in terms of research–practice collaboration, summarised as benefits for practice and research.

EA-Day to promote benefits for practice in terms of research	EA-Day to promote benefits for research in terms of practice
Researchers are facilitators of knowledge sharing among actors by organising EA-Day	EA-Day to provide inspiration for new research projects
EA-Day as an opportunity for practice to be inspired on future developments by research presentations	EA-Day as an opportunity for researchers to be updated on new developments in practice and legislation
EA-Day provides a platform for practice to get an external view on current quality of EA practice through research presentations	EA-Day to identify new areas for applications of research
EA-Day provides a platform for development, among others due to neutral overview provided by research	EA-Day to serve as a reality-check for research

*finished recipe for how to do [EA]. It's definitely a field where practice and research strongly need to go hand in hand to figure out what we can do to improve things'. Another interviewee highlights the neutral role of research in enlightening discussions at arenas like EA-Day: "It's easy to stand in a corner and say, 'Why don't you do like this?' or 'This isn't realistic in our daily work – and we don't have these resources'. Here, research can contribute to gathering data on what's done, how many do what, and how many see this as a problem".*

One interviewee highlights EA-Day as an arena to ensure that research is oriented towards reality: *'This might be the primary influence: That we as practitioners, or whatever we may be, provide ideas for what research could work with. [...] Sometimes [research] brings matters to a head by saying that we try to make research have both feet on the ground'. Another interviewee shares experiences from participating at EA-Day: 'As practitioner, I don't say that research isn't realistic or irrelevant for me. This tells me that you hit something relevant'.*

## 5. Discussion

The results from the analysis of the EA-Day value creation point to various values on both the individual and collective levels, but the focus group interview also tells us something about the characteristics of these values from a narrative perspective. In this discussion, we thus qualitatively explore values related to EA-Day based on narratives as presented by participants.

While narratives can be considered accounts of what has happened and is happening in a network, they cover the formative events that have shaped the development of a network, the activities in which members engage, their interactions and experiences, and the roles people play. Narratives also represent aspirations for a network; that is, what a person is trying to achieve when networking and what defines success. Whether explicit or not, such aspirational narratives can describe networks in terms of the value they are expected to produce. These narratives can constitute a story about what networking or communities should be, which evolves over time.

The narratives expressed by the participants during the focus group interviews centre around the perceived purpose and progression of EA-Day over the years. The narratives concerned both what they described as immediate values on both individual and collective levels, which refers to values related to finding solutions to challenges they were facing when participating in EA-Day (e.g., designing an appropriate screening list). The interviewees also mentioned what could be described 'potential values', referring to things they learned that they did not need to relate to challenges they were facing while attending EA-Day, but which could be relevant for them in relation to dealing with future EA issues. In other words: The knowledge added to their knowledge capital in the EA field, and their making sense of EA-related phenomena. Following the empirical and conceptual work by Kågström and Richardson (2015) on how frames influence practitioners' space for action, this result indicates a potential change of frames and thereby creation of new and/or expanded spaces for action, which ultimately might lead the practitioners to a greater exercise of their discretionary power for more effective EA (Zhang et al., 2018).

The participants explained how they experienced EA-Day as having contributed to creating an identity in the EA community and developing a language/vocabulary. By participating in EA-Day over the years, they developed an understanding of who the community members are and to whom they can reach out in relation to questions concerning EA practice. They obtained an idea of what they can learn from each other and what interacting can give them.

They further noted in relation to the development of the purpose and progression of EA-Day over the years how they found that the value changed for them; that EA-Day had adapted to the new needs and expectations of what it should provide. For example, they experienced a progression in themes, which they themselves found valuable, but as mentioned in relation to the downsides of EA in the section above, they



also explained how they had experienced that some of their colleagues, who were newcomers to EA-Day, had told them that they were feeling decoupled, as they had not been there before and were therefore not necessarily able to engage on the same level. In relation to this, they also found it important for future EA-Days to continue to cultivate a joint-learning mindset; that is, that courses should be offered in the days leading up to EA-Day to prepare those new to the field and the community, supporting their inclusion in the community. They also noted how their continuous engagement in EA-Day had made them aware of new knowledge gaps in the field ('unknown unknowns' becoming 'known unknowns'); for example, as related to foreign EA practise and experience, as also mentioned in the previous section. A crucial prerequisite for this knowledge building in practice is the researchers' personal and collective motivation in creating usable knowledge, and aligned with the findings of Olmos-Penuela and colleagues on the need for 'researcher openness' (Olmos-Penuela et al., 2015).

In this manner, they referred to values that can be identified as short-term values on the individual level, while they got help to understand how to solve or deal with an immediate problem in their practice. Over time, however, the new solution applied sometimes also became a resource for members in the network or in the organisation in which they work when facing similar challenges. An example of this was in relation to being informed of the results from grievance processes.

## 6. Conclusion

The investigation of the Danish EA-Day has shown, first, a strong community in the EA field in Denmark, in which researchers play a key role in organising EA-Day and presenting research results to actors involved in EA. What significance does the environmental assessment day then have for the collaboration between research and practice in Denmark? First, EA-Day is an arena for making practice and research meet to inspire and qualify each other's work. For practice, this means providing an overview of current practices, guiding new practices, and providing a neutral platform for discussions of how to develop the field. For research, this means inspiration for new research, updates on new developments, a reality-check on research, and identifying new areas for the application of research perspectives not previously related to EA. As the only recurring Danish forum for exchange across all the actors involved in EA in Denmark, EA-Day thus seems to have a considerable societal impact on practice and research. The type and nature of this societal impact would be relevant to explore in future research.

From an institutional perspective, EA-Day is a process of co-creating space for exchange and development among EA actors in Denmark: Several actors representing different consultancy companies, authorities at different levels, researchers, and the ministry in charge of EA legislation are all contributing to a co-created space with a mix of formal presentations and informal exchanges.

The results of the focus group interviews reflect how the current iteration of EA-Day is the result of a long-term development process. This development includes agreements on terms and a common understanding, as well as cultivating a mindset for joint learning among participants. This mindset is reflected in the many ways that interviewees perceive EA-Day as playing a role in the collaboration between research and practice; both practice and research are characterised by an openness and interest to be inspired and qualified by the other.

The research has shown that EA-Day has had a significant impact on the development of environmental assessment practices in Denmark. Since the research is explorative, further research is needed. In relation to exploiting this positive experience for other communities and networks, there is a need for a greater understanding of associated factors. The key contextual factor for creating EA-Day is the research group itself and the local, institution-wide norms and strategies regarding the value of collaboration. However, the understanding of the inherent motivation and openness of research initiatives to bring together non-academic

actors and researchers is not fully uncovered in the article. Given our research focused on the perceived value of attendees, we see clear relevance in exploring what factors motivate EA-researchers to facilitate and engage in knowledge-sharing networks like e.g., the Danish EA-Day. We also see a value in (despite the difficulty of) uncovering derivative effects for concrete collaborations across practice and research as well as for sustainability through improved environmental assessment practice.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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