

21 November 2011
English only

Economic Commission for Europe

Regional Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development

Geneva, 1 and 2 December 2011
Items 5 and 6 of the provisional agenda

Assessment of progress in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges

A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

Strategic Environmental Assessment as a tool for greening the economy

Note by the secretariat

Summary

1. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a tool for integrating environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes, and for evaluating interlinkages with economic and social considerations. It is an established, proven instrument that can be used to identify options for reconciling environmental protection and economic growth and for integrating considerations related to green economy into decision-making in all sectors and at all levels of government, as well as in international and donor organizations. The Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) is a legally binding but flexible instrument for integrating environmental, including health, concerns into decision-making. It sets out a systematic approach for SEA and it is open to all Member States of the United Nations.
2. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference) is likely to generate numerous recommendations on strategic interventions that advance environmental protection, economic growth and social inclusion. These strategic interventions may have different environmental and social impacts in different settings.
3. To ensure that these new strategic interventions, as well as other development plans, programmes and policies, are optimized in terms of their environmental and social impacts, the Regional Preparatory Meeting might wish to propose to the Rio+20 Conference to endorse the importance of SEA as an enabling tool, or even a prerequisite, for optimizing the impact of government policies, plans and programmes. Parties to the Protocol have already recognized SEA as a unique and important instrument for planning and policymaking related to greening the economy (ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/2, Declaration, para. 18).

I. Role of strategic environmental assessment in achieving green economy targets

4. Strategic environmental assessment is a set of “analytical and participatory approaches that aim to integrate environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes and evaluate the interlinkages with economic and social considerations”.¹ It provides for the integration of environmental considerations, along with health and socio-economic aspects, into decision-making at all levels and in all sectors. SEA provides a systematic approach as it comprises generic, but flexible, methodological steps to follow. SEA could be used as a key tool for greening the economy by providing a sound, established procedural framework for identifying ways or options by which policies, plans and programmes could contribute to both environmental protection and economic growth and by integrating green-economy targets into such policies, plans and programmes.

5. The role of government in promoting the transition towards a green economy is central, as all development programmes, sectoral strategies and land-use plans, from local to national, would have to be aligned with green economy targets. Knowing which strategy to follow is not a simple task, but can be made easier by applying a systematic instrument, such as SEA, for evaluating the impacts of different alternatives on green economy. SEA is designed to integrate environmental and other considerations into planning and policymaking at an early stage, when significant structural changes towards a green economy can still be made: if introduced early, SEA can enhance a policy, plan or programme by identifying alternatives, measures or options that can support both environment and economic goals (e.g., technologies that reduce pollution and increase competitiveness).

6. Moreover, SEA can be used systematically to integrate green-economy objectives and targets into all sectors, ranging from national energy policy to local land-use plans.

7. Given government’s central role and the importance of human well-being in the transition to green economy, the involvement of the public in this process is vital. Recognizing the importance of good governance, decision makers could invite citizens to participate in the decision-making process in order to enhance transparency and build public trust in the transition to green economy. Public participation is one of the cornerstones of SEA: SEA provides an established, commonly applied means of integrating the views of private citizens, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders into the development of policies, plans or programmes.

8. SEA can also facilitate and strengthen cooperation between different sectoral ministries and other authorities by providing a framework for bringing them together to assess the alignment of proposed policies, plans and programmes with green-economy objectives. Improved cooperation and coordination is relevant for ensuring a holistic approach to green economy, so that improvements in one sector are not offset by actions in another sector, and in defining areas where additional measures need to be taken. Given these factors, SEA provides a tool not only for integrating green-economy targets into decision-making, but also for identifying obstacles to achieving a green economy.

¹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Applying Strategic Environmental Assessment: Good Practice Guidance for Development Cooperation*, Development Assistance Committee Guidelines and Reference Series (2006), p. 17; available from <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/book/9789264026582-en>.

9. In the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness,² developed and developing countries agreed to elaborate and apply common approaches for SEA. SEA might therefore also provide an efficient channel for integrating green-economy objectives and targets into development cooperation programmes and activities.

10. SEA may also be used for focusing project-level environmental impact assessment. While many of the targets of green economy would best be integrated early in decision-making at the policy, plan or programme level, there would still remain a need to assess specific economic development activities at the project level. Environmental impact assessment is a proven means of assessing the alignment of planned activities with environmental policies when innovation and activities are developing bottom-up; it can thus complement SEA as a tool for greening the economy. Application of SEA may also help to highlight the specific considerations related to green economy that should be addressed in the environmental impact assessment of projects that are proposed within development policies, plans and programmes.

II. Benefits of applying strategic environmental assessment in the region of the Economic Commission for Europe

11. The period since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has witnessed a rapid development of SEA systems around the world. Establishment of national SEA systems was in many countries supported by international instruments, both legislation and guidance. Among these instruments, the ECE Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (Kyiv, 2003) to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo, 1991) stands out as a flexible international legal framework that is open for accession upon approval by all Member States of the United Nations. The Protocol's objectives include the integration of environmental, including health, concerns into measures and instruments designed to further sustainable development. Parties to the Protocol recognize it as a unique and important instrument for planning and policymaking related to greening the economy.³

12. The Protocol is a legally binding instrument that obliges its 23⁴ parties to incorporate SEA into their national legislation and procedures. It defines a well-tested, systematic series of procedural steps for efficiently integrating environmental considerations into the development of plans, programmes and, to the extent appropriate, policies and legislation. It contains extensive provisions on public participation for enhancing good governance, transparency and public trust in decision-making. In addition, it has a special focus on health issues and thus obliges its parties to consider this aspect of human well-being, which is also an integral part of green economy.

13. The Protocol also provides proven principles and provisions on SEA that can be replicated when drafting national legislation and developing practice in countries that are not parties to the Protocol. These, together with the experience of efficient application in the ECE region, could serve as inspiration for other countries wishing to use SEA as a tool for greening the economy.

² Made during the High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, 28 February–2 March 2005, Paris.

³ Declaration by the first session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/2).

⁴ As of October 2011, these were Albania, Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the European Union.

14. Member States of the European Union have indicated a number of benefits of SEA, such as greening decisions, strengthening cooperation between different authorities, increasing transparency in decision-making and improving compliance with the requirements of the specific environmental policy concerned.⁵ Moreover, application of the Protocol is a concrete step towards Millennium Development Goal 7, to “ensure environmental sustainability”, and its first target to “integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources”.

15. Based on the experiences of the ECE region, it can be concluded that SEA can be used as an enabling tool for integrating both sustainable-development and green-economy targets into decision-making, so improving compliance of policies, plans and programmes with these targets.

III. Steps to be taken within the region of the Economic Commission for Europe to move to a green economy

16. The exact concept of green economy will differ from one country to another due to the varying social, economic and environmental conditions. So, too, will the impacts on the environment and society of green-economy policies vary.

17. SEA processes can provide two important functions in this regard. First, they enable the integration of green-economy principles into development planning processes. Second, they allow the consideration of the environmental and social impacts of proposed interventions and they help to refine such interventions by ensuring that their benefits are maximized and their risks and adverse impacts are reduced and managed.

18. Considering that the SEA Protocol has already been ratified by many ECE countries, and that any Member State of the United Nations may accede to it upon approval, the Protocol provides an enabling condition for the transition to green economy in the region. Encouraging additional countries to join the Protocol, and promoting its efficient application, would thus contribute in turn to the transition to green economy in the region and beyond.

19. The effectiveness of SEA depends to a large extent on the institutional and professional capacities of the implementing authorities and organizations. Targeted activities would be needed for building capacity both generally in SEA methodology and specifically in integrating green economy targets into the assessment.

20. As political support and commitment are critical for the effective functioning of such a framework, the Regional Preparatory Meeting might wish to consider proposing recognition in the Rio+20 Conference outcomes of the importance of SEA as an enabling tool for integrating green-economy targets into government policies, plans and programmes. Such recognition might take the form of a statement such as: “Strategic environmental assessment should be undertaken for development plans, programmes and policies to evaluate their alignment with green economy and sustainable development policies, and to optimize their impacts on society and the environment.”

⁵ Report from the European Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the application and effectiveness of the Directive on Strategic Environmental Assessment (Directive 2001/42/EC) (COM/2009/0469 final).