

**Mainstreaming climate change:  
Towards effective and efficient Environmental Assessment**

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Despite recent political developments in the USA, in Europe and across much of the world, there is a fairly profound level of political commitment to addressing climate change. Countries such as Denmark and Sweden have committed themselves to energy futures based exclusively on renewable sources. And beyond the nation state, global cities and business leaders in Europe and beyond have made bold commitments to carbon neutral futures.

Yet against this backdrop, EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) and SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) have to-date offered more in theory than in practice in relation to the mainstreaming of climate change. Scholars who have examined how climate change issues have been addressed in EA (Environmental Assessment) have reported somewhat concerning trends in European countries. In relation to EIA, a recent study examined the consideration given to climate change in Spanish 'records of decisions', which are the formal statements on how an EIA has influenced decision-making. Of 1713 records of decision studied, only 14% mentioned climate change<sup>1</sup>, suggesting that climate change had not been a prominent concern in the EIAs. The situation may be better for SEA practices, partly because there is a widespread belief that it is more meaningful to address climate change at the so-called strategic levels of decision making. A study of 149 SEA reports produced in Denmark found that 57% of the reports addressed climate change to some extent, and the proportion covering climate change had increased over time<sup>2</sup>. Yet only 12% of these 149 reports included both climate change mitigation and adaptation concerns in a country which we tend to think about as being highly ambitious in relation to climate and sustainability issues.

I do not believe that it is methodological or technical challenges that are responsible for the apparent failure to institutionalise climate-inclusive EA. Rather, I believe that the tools and knowledge for climate-inclusive EA exist. What is lacking is the political commitment to making EIA and SEA truly effective. Limited success in institutionalising climate-inclusive EA practices is merely one indicator of this problem.

Certain political administrations have supported effective institutionalisation of EA and demonstrated that this decision aid can operate effectively. In Canada, Hong Kong, Western Australia, and the Netherlands, highly effective practices have developed at particular points in time. What has been significant in these contexts is that there has been political commitment to making EA salient, legitimate and credible. This has been approached through strong legislation, rigorous quality control, and robust enforcement. Insufficient emphasis has been given to these foundational components of effective and efficient EA in many instances. And as a consequence, EA practices have often lacked salience, legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of many stakeholders. We have also underestimated the capacity requirements needed to make EA truly effective and, as a consequence, too limited resources have been attributed to capacity building in many instances<sup>3</sup>. It is my belief, having worked on a number of climate mainstreaming programmes, that more wide-reaching and sustained programmes of capacity development are required in order to achieve the institutionalisation of climate-inclusive EA practices.

EA tools may also have something of an image problem. Some actors have argued that EA has been eclipsed by more recent policy innovations. Paraphrasing Harriet Bulkeley and colleagues<sup>4</sup>, they suggest that if governing urban sustainability used to be a matter of the development of urban plans and strategies, often informed by processes of environmental assessment, then currently favoured approaches are more interventionist, incremental and built on an understanding of sustainability as a phenomena that is emergent rather than pre-given.

A failure to institutionalise effective and efficient EA practices has contributed to this image problem. I am not convinced that EA is viewed as an important policy tool for addressing climate change, in a policy world of climate adaptation plans, carbon taxes, urban living labs and an emerging culture of governance by experimentation. The dissemination of good practice cases may help address this image problem, but what is more important is a concerted emphasis on making EA practices salient, legitimate and credible. This is the strategy that has underpinned the success of a certain global EA – the IPCC's (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) climate change assessment reports. I believe that effective and climate change-inclusive EA practices are most likely to develop under such circumstances. This will require renewed political commitment to EA, including the allocation of additional resources to develop the capacity for truly effective and efficient policy implementation.

## References

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