



Benefits of a Strategic Environmental Assessment

UNDP, REC¹

This briefing paper introduces the role of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in development of policies, plans and programmes. It describes practical lessons learned with pilot SEA projects supported by the Sofia EIA Initiative in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This experience indicates numerous benefits that can be gained from application of SEA in transitional countries.

1] What is Strategic Environmental Assessment?

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed policy, plan or programme initiatives in order to ensure they are fully included and appropriately addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision-making on par with economic and social considerations².

SEA is a process for analysing and addressing the environmental and health effects of proposed policies, plans, and programmes or other strategic initiatives (e.g. legislation or regulations). It can be applied at all stages and tiers of decision-making and at the local, regional or national level. When carried out systematically, SEA helps decision-makers to achieve a number of important environmental objectives and sustainable development aims. These are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Aims of SEA

SEA helps decision makers

- to incorporate environmental and other sustainability objectives in the formulation of policies, plans and programmes,
- to gather and analyse the information necessary for sound decision-making, including input from relevant stakeholders,
- to evaluate likely significant environmental and health effects of strategic options and proposed actions,
- to set conditions for environmentally sound implementation of strategic decisions.

SEA responds to what the World Commission on Environment and Development called the chief institutional challenge in the 1990s, namely considering "the ecological dimensions of policy at the same time as economic and other dimensions." It addresses issues of environment and sustainable development at their source in decision-making, rather than treating them as symptoms or adverse effects much later at the stage of project design. By optimising policies, plans and programmes, SEA also promotes more sustainable development at the project level.

2] Principles of effective SEA

SEA is an ex-ante approach that is applied early in the formulation of proposals when major alternatives and options are still open and well before decisions are made. A number of guiding and procedural principles are gaining international acceptance and can be adapted to the context and circumstances of transitional countries.

In order to be effective, SEA needs to meet the purpose it is designed for and the goals of the proposal, integrating them with environmental and other sustainable development objectives (see Box 1). Principles of SEA application include:

- SEA should cover all proposed policies, plans and programmes likely to have significant environmental effects. It should have a scope proportionate to the importance of the issues, recognising the potential for addressing them at other tiers in the decision-making hierarchy.
- SEA should be undertaken by proponents of a policy, plan or programme. It should provide relevant information for formulation of proposals and for decision-making.

¹Produced by Jiri Dusik, Thomas Fischer and Barry Sadler with further input by Andrej Steiner and Nicholas Bonvoisin

²Sadler and Verheem, 1996

- SEA should be integrated into the policy, plan and programme making process at key procedural stages. It should start as early as possible as an objectives-led evaluation and provide input into all key stages of policy, plan or programme making. Figure 1 outlines the elements of process that can assist informed decision-making in support of sustainable development.
- SEA should evaluate the environmental effects of a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed initiative, recognising the scope of consideration will vary with the level of decision-making. It should identify the best practical environmental option, wherever possible and appropriate.
- SEA should focus on the right issues at the right stages of the policy, plan and programme making process. It should be carried out as a systematic, iterative approach, consistent with the logic and structure of the policy plan and programme making.
- SEA should facilitate early involvement of key stakeholders. It should apply appropriate, easy-to-use consultation techniques that are suitable for the target groups.
- SEA should use appropriate and cost-effective methods and techniques of analysis. It should gather information only in the amount and detail necessary for sound decision-making.

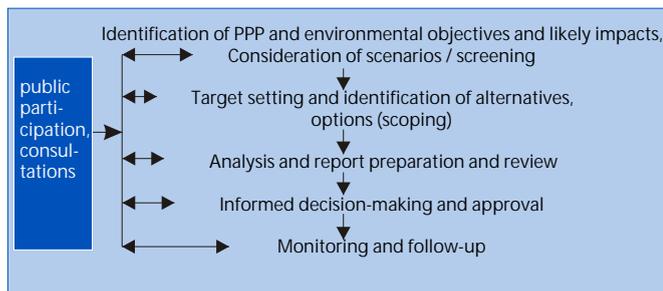
provided input into all key stages of the process. It focused on the following questions:

- Were the key existing environmental issues linked to economic development of the country identified and analysed?
- Were relevant environmental objectives for economic development of the country identified?
- Are objectives of the National Development Plan consistent with relevant environmental objectives?
- How do proposed measures in the plan relate to relevant environmental objectives? Are there any conflicts or synergies between measures and relevant environmental objectives?
- Is the proposed implementation system for the plan sufficiently clear to ensure selection of environmentally friendly projects? Are there sufficient arrangements for participation of environmental authorities in review of projects that will implement the plan?
- Does the National Development Plan include sufficient monitoring to gather information about its contribution to relevant environmental objectives?

The SEA was carried out by a team of seven experts who spent total of 120 workdays on the assessment. The SEA also facilitated stakeholder input into the review of:

- objectives of the National Development plan,
- general priorities and specific development measures suggested in the plan,
- arrangements for implementation and monitoring of the plan.

Figure 1: Opportunities for integrating of SEA into production of plans, programs and policies (PPP)³



SEA is not a complicated and theoretical tool. It was a flexible mechanism that gave us feed-back from environmental experts. It ran in parallel to the production of the Estonian Single Programming Document and provided operative and practical inputs. It helped us to improve quality of the document and increased awareness among NGOs of the entire planning process.

Ms. Kerli Lorvi, Ministry of Finance, Estonia

Box 2: SEA for Czech National Development Plan

The Czech Ministry of Regional Development undertook a SEA as part of the production process of the Czech National Development Plan in 2002. This plan is the main programming document for the future use of EU Structural Funds in the following areas:

- competitiveness of industry and business services,
- human resource development,
- regional development,
- rural development and multi-function agriculture,
- transport and environmental infrastructure.

The SEA was carried out in parallel to the planning process and

3] Benefits of SEA

SEA leads to better environmental protection and management and promotes sustainable development. It also strengthens the policy, plan and programme making process, thereby providing a number of immediate and longer-term benefits for development agencies, planning authorities and governments. The procedural benefits of SEA include efficiency of the planning processes and improved governance.

The UNDP/REC workshop on SEA of Regional Development Plans in Central and Central and Eastern Europe (December 2001, Slovenia) and recent studies⁴ indicate that SEA application results in a number of benefits. These are summarised in Box 3 and are further explained below.

Box 3: SEA benefits at a glance

SEA can help decision makers:

- to achieve environmentally sound and sustainable development,
- to strengthen policy, plan and programme making processes,
- to save time and money by avoiding costly mistakes,
- to improve good governance and build public trust and confidence in decision-making.

³Adapted from Fischer, 1999

⁴EC, 1996 or Fischer, 2002

SEA helps to achieve environmentally sound and sustainable development

SEA supports the consideration of environmental and social aspects on a par with economic aspects. Furthermore, the use of SEA enables reconciliation of different objectives pursued by various administrative levels and sectors.

SEA is a pro-active instrument addressing the causes of environmental problems rather than simply treating symptoms. It supports the early consideration of environmental and sustainable development objectives at the outset of policy, plan and programme formulation. SEA supports evaluation of the whole set of options and alternatives against these overall objectives and helps to design environmentally sustainable implementation plans for preferred strategic options.

Finally, by helping to protect the environment and natural resources, SEA does not merely deal with the well being of current populations, but also takes future generations into account.

The SEA for the first National Development Plan of Poland provided us with useful recommendations for improved consideration of environmental issues. The SEA has a wider applicability and can also be used in production of other documents. We will be able to use the lessons learned and methodology developed in the future.

*Mr. Piotr Zuber,
Ministry of Economy, Labour and Social Policy, Poland*

SEA strengthens policy, plan and programme making processes

SEA facilitates the identification and comparison of the likely significant environmental and health effects⁵ of the proposed policies, plans and programs. This helps planners and decision-makers to pro-actively consider both local environmental issues as well as global environmental problems (such as climate change, acidification, etc.).

SEA enables identification of those development options that achieve environment objectives. This helps to reconcile different goals and objectives and supports a gradual shift of decision-making towards genuine sustainable development.

SEA assists in the coordination between environmental authorities and proponents of policies, plans and programs. It streamlines decision-making systems by reducing the complexity of environmental issues at the different stages of planning hierarchies. Ultimately, SEA supports project-level decisions as these are based on previously optimised strategic decisions. Through monitoring, SEA leads to a better understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

SEA helped us to improve the quality of the Hungarian Regional Operational Program. Proponents of this program often did not take into account natural resources, which form the basis of any economic activity. The SEA team identified the main relevant environmental issues and helped us to consider this information throughout the entire planning process. SEA also facilitated our cooperation with the Ministry of Environment, other ministries and regional authorities during environmental optimising of the programme.

Ms. Ágnes Somfai, Prime Minister's Office, Hungary

SEA saves time and money

SEA helps to warn decision-makers at an early stage about unsustainable development options. Ultimately, this saves time and money as problematic options are disregarded at a point in time when only few resources have been spent on their development.

SEA enables planners to effectively gather and analyse input from relevant stakeholders within the policy, plan and programme making process. This ultimately makes decision-making more effective and less time consuming.

SEA helps to preserve a healthy environment. Sound application of SEA reduces the need for costly remediation of environmental problems that occur in implementing environmentally problematic strategic decisions. SEA thus provides economic, social and environmental benefits to current and future generations.

Thorough application of SEA will help us in avoiding large-scale health problems that occur when environmentally problematic strategic decisions are made.

Ms. Mojca Gruntar-Cinc, Ministry of Health, Slovenia

SEA improves good governance and public trust in policy, plan and programme making

SEA increases overall transparency of strategic decision-making. This helps planners and decision-makers to create public trust in the planning process.

SEA allows decision-makers to consider opinions of key stakeholders early in the planning process. This reduces the risk of deadlock during decision-making on individual projects such as locally-unwanted-land-use (LULU) and not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) situations.

Finally, properly undertaken and accountable SEA will enhance credibility of policies, plans and programmes and may mobilize support of key stakeholders for their implementation.

SEA was very useful experience in production of the Czech National Development Plan. It had benefits that went beyond its original purpose of ensuring full consideration of sustain-

⁵These include direct, indirect, cumulative, synergistic, induced, long term and delayed effects.

nable development during the planning process. SEA helped us to improve openness in the entire programming process and established a "bridge" between the planning team and the public. This turned out to be a very positive feature that we later very much appreciated.

*Mr. Tomas Nejd, Ministry of Regional Development
Czech Republic*

4] Cost of SEA

Many decision-makers overestimate possible costs of SEA. An EC study on the benefits of EIA⁶ indicates that introducing SEA to regional and local land use planning usually increased planning cost by 5-10%. This study also found examples of good SEAs that increased planning costs by less than 5%. These costs can be regarded as marginal compared with the overall costs of implementation of plans, programs and policies and with the costs that might be incurred by environmental damage.

SEA that is fully integrated into policy, plan and programme processes generally tends to be less costly and more efficient than separate "ex-post" SEA undertaken at the end of the planning cycle. The shared use of data produced at different stages of the planning hierarchy increases the efficiency of decision-making.

Most of the costs associated with SEA application occur during the initial development of methodologies when establishing the appropriate form of SEA. Subsequent SEAs tend to be less costly as they can build on previous experience and may require only standard analytical work and process management.

5] Is SEA relevant in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia?

While SEA is being introduced as a new concept to countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the philosophy behind it is not new in this region. Former socialist countries have a tradition of strong spatial planning requiring various environmental evaluations of proposed plans and programmes. Most of these countries have retained formalised plan and programme making processes and a high level of technical expertise. They therefore present a special opportunity for implementation of SEA (Dusik J., Sadler B. & N. Mikulic 2001).

Box 4: Development of SEA in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia

Two central European countries (Czech Republic and Slovakia) have formally required SEA application for governmental policies and plans since the mid 1990s. Other countries in the region (i.e. Bulgaria, Poland and Lithuania) focus their attention on the development of SEA systems for spatial plans. Since 2000, all EU

Accession countries have developed their national SEA systems in line with the requirements of EC Directive no. 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment.

Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (i.e. Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine) require State Environmental Expert Reviews of a broad range of strategic activities. These cover development plans, sectoral programmes and policies, legal standards, and mandatory rules with environmental implications and some systems even extend to draft legislation with environmental implications.

These existing assessment systems can be used as a basis for development of formalised SEA systems.

The development of national SEA systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia will be further promoted by the forthcoming UN/ECE Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment that has been negotiated under the auspices of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (the Espoo Convention). The Protocol will be opened for signature at the Kiev Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" in May 2003.

Implementation of this Protocol will require countries to consider the following issues:

- What are the most effective means for integration of SEA into the development of policies, plans and programmes?
- What are the most effective means for interaction between proponents, public authorities and the general public in the SEA process?
- What assistance should be provided to proponents of policies, plans and programmes to enable them to carry out SEA effectively?
- What national systems need to be developed and what legal instruments are required to incorporate relevant provisions of the Protocol?
- What capacity building is needed for public authorities, the public and NGOs to carry out effective SEAs?

Box 5: New UN/ECE Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment

The UN/ECE Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, once in force, will require its Parties to evaluate the environmental consequences of their official draft plans and programmes. It also addresses policies and legislation, though the application of SEA to these is not mandatory.

The Protocol provides for extensive public participation in government decision-making in numerous development sectors. The public will not only have the right to know about plans and programmes, but also the right to comment, have their comments taken into account, and be told of the final decision and why it was taken. In the case of plans and programmes likely to have significant transboundary effects, the public and public authorities in the affected Party will also have the right to be consulted. The participation of the public in SEA builds on the Espoo Convention and the Aarhus Convention.

Besides considering the typical environmental effects of plans and programmes, the Protocol places a special emphasis on the

⁶EC, 1996

consideration of human health, going beyond existing legislation in the region. This reflects the involvement of the World Health Organization in the negotiations as well as the political commitments made at the 1999 London Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

More generally, countries may wish to apply some of the following practical steps that support the development of national SEA systems:

- Review of consistency of existing systems for environmental evaluations in various planning, programming and policymaking processes (e.g. spatial planning, waste management programming, transport development planning, etc.) with the requirements of the UN/ECE SEA Protocol. Such reviews will identify the key obstacles and opportunities for introduction of SEA into domestic decision-making processes in each country.
- Promotional materials explain rationale for SEA in planning, programming and policy-making and enhance appreciation of SEA among planners and decision-makers.
- Pilot SEA projects test and develop SEA techniques on the basis of practical experience. They can establish precedents of good SEA practice and professional benchmarks for SEA.
- National policy dialogues facilitate consultation and exchange of perspectives among EA experts, planners and decision-makers. They may include conferences, multi-stakeholder workshops or other appropriate techniques (such as email discussion lists).
- Policy recommendations and practical guidance can explain the key elements of effective SEA practice to policy-makers and practitioners.
- SEA training helps to build elementary professional capacity for undertaking SEA among interested practitioners. Such training events may be especially

needed in early stages of SEA development in the country. For more information about available services for national SEA capacity building in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia please visit the following www sites:

REC Environmental Assessment site:

<http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/EnvironmentalAssessment>

UN/ECE Espoo Convention: <http://www.unece.org/env/eia>

EIA activities in EECCA countries by NGO Ecoline:

<http://www.ecoline.ru>

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