



Strategic Environmental Assessments

What are Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) and why are they needed?

SEAs are high-level decision-making tools used to promote sustainable development. They ensure that one a group of development activities does not undermine others.

Strategic Environmental Assessment was formally recommended as a critical tool for countries wishing to develop the hydrocarbon sector by the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions. This was because oil and gas had been found in many countries and oil development in one country can seriously impact other countries. Many fishers in West Africa are already affected by the damage caused by more than 6,000 oil spills to the Niger Delta mangroves – once one of the most important fish breeding grounds in the region.

SEAs help decision-makers broaden high-level planning from single-sectoral approaches (e.g. individually assessing oil and gas, mining, fisheries, tourism, etc.) to a broader, holistic and participatory approach across multiple sectors – for example identifying how offshore oil and gas development, coastal tourism, agriculture and fisheries together impact upon each other and marine ecosystems. SEAs look particularly at combined/cumulative impacts on people and the environment.

An SEA is undertaken much earlier than a project-level environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA). It provides for intersectoral and extensive public participation in decision-making and sets the standards for the ESIA's which follow.

SEAs can also ensure that the development of the oil or mining sector is aligned with the principles in national strategies for poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Benefits of SEA

Strategic Environmental Assessments complement and facilitate subsequent project-level ESIA's. They are undertaken by governments to assist in participatory decision-making and are best coordinated by an inter-ministerial committee. They can also be undertaken at a district or provincial level if several extractive activities are envisaged in the same region.

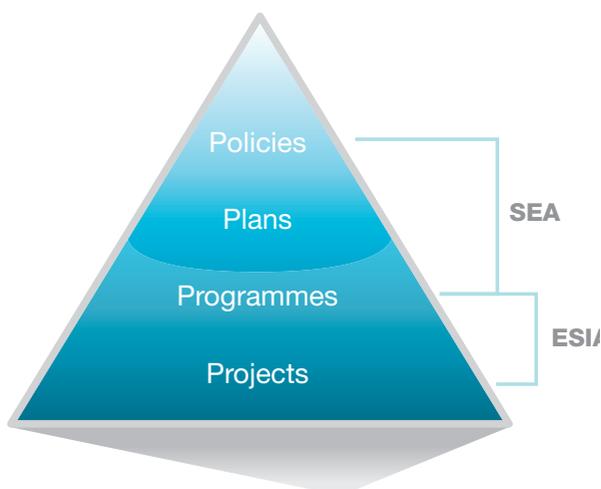
SEA identifies the main groups of governmental, civil society and private sector stakeholders and provides a platform for dialogue and learning to find their common interests. For example, in WAMER hundreds of thousands of artisanal fishers, as well as commercial fishing companies and an expanding tourism market, all depend upon maintaining the health of their marine and coastal resources. It also helps forge consensus on the most relevant issues – for example protecting key fishing and fish breeding zones and key habitats like mangroves and sea grass beds.

Definition of SEA

1. The Strategic Environmental Assessment is a flexible process: proactive, participative, and systematic.

The SEA focuses on three main classes of work:

- a) **Policies, legislation** and other rules governing actions;
- b) **Plans and strategies**, including regional, watershed and sectoral plans (e.g. new or revised national water, mining or hydrocarbon codes, a new poverty reduction strategy, etc.); and
- c) **Programmes**, or sets of coordinated projects, rather than specific individual projects themselves, partly because specific projects are identified at the conclusion of the SEA. If a number of projects – for example oil and gas or mining – are proposed for a region, the SEA tackles the region as a whole, gaining lessons learned from similar projects already in the region, such as cumulative impacts.



2. An SEA should be scheduled as early as possible – the sooner the better – preferably as soon as the decision is taken to draft a policy, plan or programme, and well before individual projects have been identified in order to ensure the participation of different ministries and civil society stakeholders.
3. The SEA is designed to identify, predict, report, prevent, compensate or otherwise mitigate the economic, social, health and environmental implications of the policy, plan or programme being assessed. It enhances the benefits of the policy, plan or programme, and is particularly effective in preventing expensive and damaging errors.
4. The SEA is a decision-making tool designed to promote better projects, postpone questionable projects, and help cancel the worst projects in a programme or sector. It also helps decision-makers to select among alternatives. Effective SEAs rank alternatives in a sector in one or more orders of quality (for example, more rather than less sustainable; lower negative social impacts rather than higher).
5. The SEA is totally transparent and fully participatory, as mandated by the UN Aarhus Convention. Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is the goal.
6. The SEA complements conventional EIA of individual projects. A project-level EIA takes a proposed project and assesses the environmental implications. EIAs that follow SEAs will be faster and cost less because only better projects will have been taken up.

Many SEAs have been carried out with good examples in Ghana (Guide to Strategic Environmental Assessment www.cea.lk/pdf/SEAGuideline.pdf), Mauritania, Sierra Leone, the UK, Norway and Canada.

Differences between an SEA and an ESIA

ESIA	SEA
Is reactive to a specific development proposal.	Can be proactive in a way that informs development proposals and can address geographic regions or technical sectors
Focuses on project-specific impacts.	Enables the creation of a framework against which impacts and benefits can be measured.
Has a well-defined beginning and end, and informs a particular development decision.	Can ensure that the right information is available to inform multiple decisions over a period of time.
Assess the direct positive and negative impacts of a single proposed activity.	Enables cumulative impacts to be assessed and identifies implications and issues for sustainable development.
Focuses on the mitigation of impacts.	Enables a focus on achieving and maintaining a chosen level of environmental quality.
Emphasises the reporting of impacts in a document for decision-making purposes.	Is seen more as a “process” than a “product”. A written report and a mechanism for continued collaboration are produced.

Recommendations

SEA

- is sustainable development tool;
- helps maximize the benefits and beneficiaries of development activities;
- ensures coherence and coordination between all related and overlapping activities related to a sector or region;
- is based on transparency, stakeholder participation and dialogue;
- ensures that stakeholders are part of overall decision-making;
- provides a mechanism for conflict avoidance and resolution.

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