



Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment Strategic Environmental Assessment

Views and Experiences (1) OECD-DAC inclusive

What is SEA for us?

We define Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as a family of approaches that aim to integrate environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes and evaluate their inter-linkages with economic and social considerations.

More concrete, SEA is a tool to:

1. structure the public and government debate in the preparation of policies, plans and programmes;
2. feed this debate through a robust assessment of the environmental and, where required, other consequences;
3. ensure that the results of the assessment and the debate are taken into account during decision making and implementation.

This means that public participation, transparency and good quality information are key principles. SEA is thus more than the preparation of a report; it is a tool to enhance good governance. Where needed, SEA also includes social and economic issues.

Whereas EIA aims at better projects, SEA aims at better strategies, ranging from legislation and country-wide development policies to more concrete sector and spatial plans. SEA is widely applied in different shapes and forms and, in countries as diverse as Canada, Nepal, Mozambique and Bolivia. This wide variation may create confusion and therefore inspired OECD-DAC to come up with a more harmonised SEA Guidance, supported by a large number of countries. The information in this key sheet is in line with the OECD-DAC Guidance.

SEA for Poverty Reduction

In 2002 Ghana published its Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy. When drawing up this strategy, little attention was given to environmental issues, such as the impacts of transport, agriculture and private sector developments on the environment. It was, therefore, decided to carry out an SEA to adjust the strategy where needed. SEA was applied at both national and district level, providing win-win options for the future update of the GPRS and recommendations on how to make over a 100 district development plans more sustainable. This experience has inspired other countries like Benin to apply a similar process.

What are the advantages of SEA?

The final objective of SEA is to contribute to sustainable development, poverty reduction and good governance. Advantages of SEA to decision makers are:

- Enhanced credibility of their decisions in the eyes of stakeholders, leading to swifter implementation;

- A better understanding of the cumulative impact of a series of smaller projects, thus preventing costly and unnecessary mistakes;
- Better insight in the trade-offs between environmental, economic and social issues, enhancing the chance of finding win-win options;
- Easier assessment at the project level because strategic discussions, e.g. on locations, have already been brought to a conclusion.

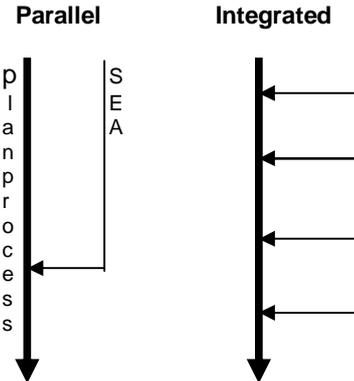
Some examples of the benefits of SEA in NCEA's experiences are shown in the boxes.

SEA for transport planning

In Mozambique an EIA was planned for the proposal to construct a highway to the coast for the transport of bulk products from an inland titanium smelter. Government decided to carry out an SEA to look at a strategic alternative that might be more beneficial for the country as a whole: the upgrade of a railway line. In addition to transport of mining products, this would also improve conditions for local population and eco-tourism. On the basis of the SEA the decision was made that the concessions for the mining companies are granted for 20 years only. During this period an alternative infrastructure plan with a North-South connection should be developed. Until then the East-West road can be constructed and used.

How is SEA conducted?

Starting points for SEA design are the national context and the characteristics of the planning processes in which SEA is applied. Traditionally, SEA is often applied as a stand alone process, parallel to planning. This is a good way of learning how to carry out SEA. From here, SEA can be further developed into its most effective form: integrated in the planning process, bringing stakeholders together during key stages of the planning process and feeding their debate with reliable environmental information.



Good practice SEA steps

SEA principles are similar for policies, plans and programmes. However, SEA processes and procedures may differ. The following SEA steps apply mainly at plan and programme level.

A. Establishing the context for SEA

- Identify stakeholders in the planning process and prepare a communication plan;
- Screen and decide on the need for SEA;
- Set objectives; develop with all stakeholders a common vision on (environmental) problems, objectives and identification of alternatives;

B. Implementing SEA

- Scope the content for the SEA;
- Collect baseline data;
- Assess alternatives;
- Identify how to enhance opportunities and mitigation of impacts;
- Assure quality through independent review and public involvement of draft reports;
- Document results and make these available;

C. Informing and influencing decision-making

- Organise a dialogue among stakeholders on the SEA results and make recommendations for decision making;
- Justify in writing the (political) choices that have been made in the finally adopted policy or plan;

D. Monitoring and evaluation

- Monitor decisions taken and the implementation of the adopted policy or plan;
- Evaluate both SEA and policy or plan.

SEA is flexible, i.e. the scope and level of detail of the above steps can differ depending on time and resources available. Available time mainly depends on the timing of the planning process. Costs for SEA may vary correspondingly from a few thousand to half a million Euros.

SEA for spatial development

The Dutch province of North Holland developed a new spatial plan to deal with a number of pressing issues, such as poor economic growth, traffic congestion and increasing pressure on nature. An SEA was carried out to find the most sustainable alternative. To begin with, four possible scenarios were worked out, each from a different perspective. One scenario focused on economic growth, an other on protection of the existing identity of the region, a third on development of the tourism sector and a fourth gave priority to nature and quality of life. Through stakeholder participation, involving both civil society and top decision makers, the four scenarios were translated into two integral alternatives. In one alternative it was accepted that the region needed to change. The other tried to find solutions within the existing identity of the region. The SEA enabled to find the best option: a plan based on the second alternative, including the best elements of the first one.

Differences between EIA and SEA

The key phases of SEA resemble those in EIA. However, the actual tasks during those phases may be quite different.

	SEA	EIA
Process	Iterative	Linear
Screening	Mostly decided case by case	Projects requiring EA are often listed
Scoping	Combination of political agenda, stakeholder discussion and expert judgement	Combination of local issues and technical checklists
Public participation	Focus on representative bodies	Often include general public
Assessment	More qualitative (expert judgement)	More quantitative
Quality review	Both quality of information and stakeholder process	Focus on quality of information
Decision making	Comparison of alternatives against policy objectives	Comparison against norms and standards
Monitoring	Focus on plan implementation	Focus on measuring actual impacts

When is SEA undertaken?

Ideally SEA is integrated throughout the development process of a specific legislation, policy, plan or programme, starting as early in the process as possible. However, even when decisions have already been taken, SEA can play a meaningful role in monitoring implementation. For example, to decide on necessary mitigating actions or to feed into future renewal of decisions. SEA may even get the form of a sector assessment used to set the agenda for future policies and plans.

Services provided by the NCEA

With regard to SEA, the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment can participate in and contribute to:

- Introductory training and general support;
- Institutional assessment;
- Coaching and training on-the-job of SEA teams;
- Introduction and design of SEA systems (see SEA key sheet 4);
- Advising on ToR for and quality review of individual SEAs.

Please contact us for further information.

Links

- Netherlands Commission: www.eia.nl (including SEA database and various key sheets)
- OECD-DAC: www.seataskteam.net
- IAIA SEA Performance criteria: www.iaia.org
- ODI keysheet 15 on Policy Planning and Implementation: www.keysheets.org

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