What is SEA? Terminology

by David Hanrahan

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My subject is "What is SEA: The Terminology." Other presenters will be going into the details of application and use, but what we are talking about here are the basic fundamentals of what is an SEA.

Strategic environmental assessment--when we say "strategic," it means that it happens at an early enough stage in the decisionmaking process that it can have a significant influence on key decisions. That means we are not simply interested in changes in the detail, in the small parts of the design; we want to get involved at the point where we can really influence the overall outcomes.

It's an environmental assessment, but frequently, in this case, we use environment in the very broad sense. We obviously look at the biophysical issues, but we often also look at social and economic dimensions, and again, this is one of the issues that will come up in later presentations.

There are a whole variety of SEA approaches. I am sorry to say there is not one single methodology which can be followed. This is unfortunate from the point of view of simplicity and understanding the approach, but it actually gives us a lot more opportunities.

I like to think of SEA as a family of approaches. There are individual differences, but there are a number of basic characteristics which make them all part of the same broad context.

To begin to understand the common characteristics that underlie the different interpretations, we need to look at the purposes and objectives of SEA. I want to say here that the main purpose of SEA is to ensure the early consideration of environmental and social aspects in decisions about policies, plans, and programs. You often see "policies, plans, and programs" abbreviated to "PPP."

Let me talk a little bit about each of these key terms. It needs to happen early so that we can really influence decisions. I have already said that we are looking at environment in the broader sense so that it does include a number of the social dimensions.

I would stress the point decisions, because we are trying to effect a specific decision and not just look generally at a broad set of questions.

And let me comment briefly on the three P's. The first "P" is "policies," and we can think of policy as a very broad approach--for example, a decision about improving the transportation

systems in a region. At the next level down, we typically have the "P" that stands for "plans." This would be a more specific set of issues that might say, for example, we need to improve highways and secondary roads connecting certain cities in a certain area. The third "P" is the "programs," which typically is a set of specific investments and various other decisions that go together to try to implement the broad policies and plans.

The key here is that we are trying to influence things at a level that is both higher in the decision system and earlier in time than the classic project-level EIA. I would note that because it is earlier and because it is higher in the decision system, it does introduce some uncertainties and some difficulties, but the system is designed to try to deal with these.

Another way of looking at the overall Strategic EA is to say that it is an integrative tool to support cross-sectoral approaches, and these are needed to achieve long-term sustainability objectives.

It is integrative, and it is addressing cross-sectoral issues. This means we are not just looking at a narrow set of environment issues, and we are not even just looking at the issues within a specific sector. Important issues which we need to look at in major programs almost inevitably will cut across sectoral boundaries or regional boundaries.

It is essential to take this broad approach of SEA in order to address long-term sustainability, but this does make it more complicated--and again, part of what you will see over the proceeding presentations is how we start to address this complexity.

Working cross-sectorally also means that we need to deal with tradeoffs and with achieving balances between different objectives. Now, I would say from the beginning this is not a concern that we are trying to avoid. We do not want to try to simplify our lives by avoiding these issues. In practice, one of the key contributions of SEA is to bring out very clearly and deal with in an open way some of these tradeoffs.

Then, finally, I would reinforce here that Strategic EA is a tool to achieve certain objectives. We are trying to achieve change, we are trying to reach certain results. We do not want to see it as an analytical exercise or as a bureaucratic tool.

Now, given that there are a wide range of different types of SEA, I like to think of these various approaches as being along a spectrum. They have some common characteristics, but they frequently have different combinations of the basic elements. At one end, there is a version of SEA which derives quite closely from the very standard EIA methodology. I would characterize it by saying there is a formalized methodology set out quite clearly, and we understand what it is. It is an assessment of the impacts of specific proposals, which means there is a clear set of proposals on the table which can be looked at and addressed. And then it is essential that there is a structured opportunity for feedback to decisionmakers, because if the assessment is done too late to affect the decision, then it is never going to achieve our broad objectives.

This sort of structured approach is the one that is written into legislation in a number of developed countries, and the key thing to remember is that it requires a well-organized and

smoothly operating decisionmaking system, policy making system, and bureaucracy, which unfortunately is often not really the case in the countries that we are dealing with.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a set of SEA approaches which is really based on broad policy analysis thinking. The characteristics here are that we don't have a fixed methodology; the timing and the form of the inputs of the actual SEA depend on the decisionmaking process itself; the interventions are made before the final proposals are set--we are not sure exactly what is coming out, and therefore, we are dealing with something which is as yet still uncertain. It tries to influence the overall decision process as it goes along and not wait until a result comes out and then try to have it reconsidered.

It is more flexible. It is more opportunistic. It can be more complicated to apply, but in some cases, it reflects the reality of the circumstances we work in.

And of course, as with any spectrum, there are a range of intermediate approaches which have some characteristics of one end or the other.

Now, in order to try to establish what makes an SEA an SEA, I have listed here some key principles or characteristics that an ideal SEA would include. This is my personal compilation of key principles. I have taken it from several sources. The International Association for Impact Assessment, which is the IAIA, has established a widely recognized set of basic criteria. I have included here a couple of others that I think are important.

I won't go through all of these in detail--and remember this is not a definitive set--but I would like you to think of SEA as being based on a set of principles and then the actual form being adjusted to suit the specific circumstances.

Going very quickly through these--it is fit for the purpose. In other words, we adjust the SEA to suit the circumstances. We don't try to make the circumstances fit the SEA.

It is objectives-led--in other words, we have a specific set of objectives that we are trying to achieve, and the SEA is helping us toward that.

It is sustainability-driven, which means that we are looking to the long term. We are not just looking to influence the immediate outcomes of this process; we are trying to help to guide the overall process to something that will be more sustainable in the long term.

It is comprehensive in scope, which means we address all the key factors that are important. And the trick here is to make sure that being comprehensive does not mean we include a lot of really irrelevant information. It is very important to focus.

It needs to be decision-relevant. This is not a piece of analysis for its own sake. We need to know what is the decision we are trying to effect; what is the policy or the plan that we think could be improved by applying the SEA approaches.

It is integrative. It needs to include the inputs from all the various sectors, from all the various people.

It is participative. In other words, it's not done by a group of experts who then present their answer. It is a process, like the standard EIA, that takes opinions from lots of shareholders and allows discussion.

And then, finally, I have included in here a principle that it should be cost-effective. I think there is a misconception that SEA is a major tool that takes a long time, takes a lot of money, that involves a lot of people. In some cases, that may be appropriate, but in many cases, it is possible to do an effective, influential SEA in a relatively short time with a relatively short amount of money.

Now let me touch again on the complexity. I want to mention here a number of related instruments which are similar to SEA, which in some cases are seen as versions of SEA, although they vary in their use and application.

There are sustainability analyses, abbreviated to "SA"--you'll notice that abbreviations are a big part of the whole SEA discussion. Sustainability analysis is exactly what it sounds like--it is looking at a set of issues and saying in the long term, is this sustainable, and clearly, that can overlap the Strategic EA.

There is an approach known as "Strategic Environmental Analysis," abbreviated to SEAN, which is a structured form of SEA, has many of the characteristics of SEA, and it can often be an appropriate tool.

There is increasing use of an approach called "country environmental analysis," which is more of a diagnostic at the country level, but again in its application and in the issues it touches on, it will have a lot of overlaps with SEA. And I include on this list an instrument called "poverty and social impact analysis," or PSIA, because this is a form of SEA--or a relation of SEA--but a case where the focus is on the poverty outcomes and the social dimension, and clearly, this is one of the areas that will overlap very broadly with the objectives of an SEA.

I'm not setting out these different instruments with a view to confusing you. In fact, quite the opposite. I just want to bring to your attention that there is a wide range of instruments out there, and I would ask you to be comfortable with the fact that there is this variety. What we need to do is to take advantage of all the time and effort, the thinking, and the experience that has gone into developing these different approaches and then to take the time in any particular case to find the approach which is of most use to us.

One more basic point that I want to raise in discussing what is an SEA, what is the terminology, is when is the right time to do an SEA. In a formal SEA process, as I said, at one end of the spectrum, there will be a specific step, a time and a place in the decision cycle, which says at this point, we will do a review of the whole process--we will do a Strategic EA. And in that case, it is quite clear where it fits in.

In the less-structured approaches, there is actually no scheduled time. The decisionmaking process will not stop for the SEA, and the SEA therefore has to adapt itself to fit to the decisionmaking process. This can be more complicated, but in essence, it allows us to target on the specific decision and use the process that is most useful at that point.

But I would add one further aspect of this which has become evident as we have applied these things--that major decision processes are often cyclical. There will be a review after a number of years. There will be different stages in a major development process going from the policy to the plan to the program.

So even if, when we first approach it, the timing is not right for the SEA, we may well find that we can pick up on this ongoing cycle and find the time when we can do an SEA that does become most useful, so we should not despair if the first time we look at a problem, the timing is not right for the SEA.

Finally--because this is really just an introductory presentation--a couple of things that I would ask you to remember. Why do we do SEA at all? Well, the first thing I would say is that we have to look at it as an opportunity to add value to a decisionmaking process. By "add value," I mean we need to convince decisionmakers that doing the SEA can help them to find better solutions and to achieve long-term aims. And I have found that if we talk to decisionmakers in these terms, they are often ready to see SEA as something that helps them and not simply as a bureaucratic requirement.

The second point to remember, I think, is the range of different approaches, which will depend on the context. Again, I don't see this as a level of complexity we should worry about; I see it as the opportunity to choose the tool that is most appropriate for the specific set of circumstances that we are dealing with.

We have to be flexible, but there is a whole range of tools out there that can help us, and we must find them.

The third point I would make here is because of the difficulty and unreliability of predicting large changes due to a major program over a period of time, when we get involved at an early stage, we will never find the perfect answer. We have to be flexible. We have to be prepared to see this as a process of iteration. And in this context, SEA itself can often become part of the cycle of decisionmaking review and improvement.

And then, the final word--I would say don't forget our basic objective. The ultimate objective of the SEA is to help us to make development more sustainable.