

SEA: Main Characteristics and Linkages to EIA

by Jean Roger Mercier

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The way we are going to conduct this session is we will start by saying something about SEA and sustainable development; then moving to how much SEA can contribute to decisionmaking; explaining why SEA is more than EIA applied to policies, plans, and programs; what are the main characteristics and the main approaches to SEA; how to develop synergies between SEA and EIA; and at the end, we will try to summarize the key learning points or messages from this session.

First of all, SEA and environmental impact assessment are two complementary instruments to help countries mainstream sustainability into their development strategies. Although they play a slightly different role, SEA in particular is key to help countries achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals, notably the development goals that deal with integrating the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs, and reversing the losses of environmental resources, which is a commitment that countries would be reversing these environmental losses within the next years. And it's one of the duties of the World Bank to help the countries do that.

The World Bank did an environmental strategy, which was approved in July 2001. As one of the key documents going along with the environmental strategy is a key document on strategic environmental assessment in World Bank operations, and a few of the examples and a few of the lessons learned in this presentation today come from this very important document.

How does SEA influence decisions? Well, basically, as we will see later, SEA has to influence decisions; otherwise, SEA doesn't really fulfill its purpose. I can identify three major ways in which SEA influences decisions. The key way it does is really by bringing into the decisionmaking process all the available knowledge, first of all, in a timely manner. More often than not, a good SEA is an SEA that reached the decisionmakers at exactly the right moment when the policy was going to be approved or during the process of preparing a plan or a program.

The second way in which SEA brings additional knowledge is by providing data and a rational approach to decisionmaking, and then providing an in-depth analysis of the programs, plans, or policies.

The second way in which SEA influences decisions is by making stakeholders' lives easier and making more stakeholders participate in the decisionmaking through a transparent and consultative mechanism.

And the third way in which SEA influences decisions is by making scientists and the technicians who are the ones who are usually preparing an environmental assessment of any sort, communicate in real time with decisionmakers and in a sense sharing their languages and sharing their concerns for better decisions.

What if SEA does not influence decision? Well, in a sense, it would be fair to say that most of the value would be lost if SEA did not influence a decision, and that all the corresponding efforts of data collection and dialogue and involvement of stakeholders would probably have been partly wasted in the process. Experts in SEA may disagree on some of the fine points of how to do the optimal or the best possible on earth SEA. However, they all agree on the absolute necessity of the impact of SEA on decisionmaking.

Now, sometimes even a bad-quality SEA, an SEA that has not fulfilled, can, in fact, be useful for decisionmaking because of arrangements that can be made at even the last minute, and because sometimes the process of preparing an SEA takes over on the quality and the content of the SEA. But it's not something that obviously is recommended. It's always better to have a good-quality SEA and a good-quality decisionmaking process.

I've tried to give a graphic illustration of SEA versus EIA versus EA at a projects level, and on the vertical axis you have from the concrete projects done at the bottom all the way to the more abstract policy at the top, with programs and plans in between. And the horizontal axis is the life cycle of a project or a program or a policy. And, by and large, we see EIA as something which is very specific to projects, and which is very specifically before a project or an investment is approved.

The concept of environmental assessment as adopted by many international organizations like the World Bank has been on the project level, expanding the kind of scope, time scope of environmental impact assessment into something that we often call from cradle to grave, instead of just before approval. But, clearly, we have this distinction with EA or EIA being more at the project level and SEA covering the whole range, program, policy, and the whole life cycle of a plan, program, or policy, sometimes referred to as PPP.

Now, how do we distinguish SEA and EIA? EIA applies to projects, usually defined as physical investment, a road, a bridge, or a power plant. SEA applies to programs, plans, and policies. In this course, you will hear many times about this topic, so obviously SEA and EIA apply to two sets of different objects.

There are, however, some other major differences. We have the feeling that SEA involves a greater variety of skills and institutions than EIA, and that SEA utilizes a much broader set of techniques and approaches. And I want to highlight the three main types of approaches of SEA and how they relate to EIA.

The first one, of course, is the one that more closely relates to EIA, which is SEA when it looks at trying to prevent and mitigate impacts of plans, policies, and programs. Like EIA's linear sequence of analysis, SEA can be undertaken using the same logic and starting with taking a non-green, a non-environmentalized program, plan, or policy and green it through a thorough analysis of what would be the impact of the program, plan, and policy and trying to prevent or mitigate these impacts.

However, when you do this at the strategic level, you realize that the closer you get to policy, the more difficult it is to predict what the impact of a policy like trade liberalization or currency devaluation will be on the environment. And, by definition, if it is difficult to identify these impacts, then it's difficult to safeguard against them.

So that's why there's another, a second approach to SEA, which is pretty much the approach dealing with objectives-led SEA where an environmental management objective is the starting point of the SEA. In other words, you're looking at trying to achieve an environmental objective, and you're working backward into often multiple sector planning, for instance, intervening in the agricultural, forestry, and transport sectors to combat deforestation.

It's very clear that this second type of SEA, which is, again, moving further away from the traditional EIA approach, is quite well suited for policy as well as to programs and plans. But as the first one was slightly uncomfortable with policy, the second one seems to be more comfortable with policy.

And then there is that third approach to SEA which is more the integrated approach, where, in fact, SEA can be disappearing and vanishing in terms of not producing a discrete product, but more into flowing naturally into the existing planning and policymaking processes in which in such a way that the final outcome is influenced and has environment and, to some extent, some social attributes, even if you cannot identify a discrete or separate strategic environmental assessment product. And we have several examples, for instance, in Hong Kong urban planning, to illustrate the relevance of the integrated approach.

But back to some basic differences between SEA and EIA. First of all, we have the feeling that institutions are key to sustainable development, and if you will allow me another World Bank parentheses, the World Bank Report on Sustainable Development, the 2003 report, which was presented at Johannesburg in Rio Plus Ten, makes a big presentation on the role of institutions. It looked back at 50 years of unsustainable development around the world and made the case that institutions were key to bringing about sustainable development.

It's true also in the SEA and EIA spheres, EIA implementation in terms of institutions tend to be a rather simple model, where you have a model of regulators versus regulated and, in a sense, a kind of bipolar model. SEA tends to involve more players and more out-of-the-usual-environmental-box players. By this we mean it tends to involve other forms of decisionmakers, sometimes of a higher level, like Ministers of Finance or Ministers of Planning or people in charge of trade in the countries.

And, of course, for SEA development, because SEA is a more amorphous approach, using the network approach both in-country and across countries is a very important aspect also of SEA.

Now, at the end of the day, is there a relationship between SEA and EIA? The first thing that I want to put on the table is that SEA is not just a solution to problems that EIA will not have solved. Sometimes people tend to think that EIA has been such a limited approach that it needs something that will, you know, bring more value and more effectiveness.

Frankly, the experience worldwide of 20 to 30 years of EIA is that EIA has solved problems in its own field and its own scope, and that it will continue to increase its effectiveness as it sharpens its focus and as more science becomes more available.

SEA, on the other hand, can enhance EIA under certain conditions. These conditions--and we've tried to put a few of these conditions on the next slide--need to be identified and built into an explicit linkage between SEA and EIA that just don't come magically. There is a need for organizing the link between SEA and EIA.

Here we have quoted extensively from a study that was done for the European Union by a person by the name of Nootebom. That's why it's called the Nootebom slide. And it produced four very interesting and striking results from looking at some 13 case studies.

First of all, SEA can propose alternatives which may not be appropriate at the EIA level. For instance, when you look at program, plan, and policy using the SEA tool, you might be looking at the impacts or the opportunity of changing prices, pricing systems or tariffs in a country. That's something that's usually beyond the reach of an EIA. The second point is that SEA can assess impacts which EIA may not be able to assess, and the classic example, of course, is large-scale impacts or very long-term impacts--long term in the sense of several decades and not just a few years ahead--and also the notion of cumulative impacts that SEA can sometimes be more able to deal with than EIA.

Now, having said that, SEA and EIA can be vertically integrated, and we've seen several examples where SEA of policies, plans, and programs, for instance, in the transport sector, could be extremely useful and relevant for project-level EIA. And if well done and, again, if organized and well planned, SEA has the potential to reduce the resources which are required for EIA both in terms of time and cost resources.

Again, however, this does not happen by itself, and it needs some advanced planning and coordination among many players to make it happen.

What are the main highlights of this session (which is probably too short to really pay a full tribute to a very complex subject)? SEA is clearly substantially and institutionally different from EIA. SEA can help prepare better EIAs, but this needs specific attention to SEA design and preparation, and, in particular, it requires a lot of communication and coordination among various people who are preparing or using SEA and EIA.

The selection of the appropriate form of SEA should be based on a sound comparison of the three main forms available: impact-based, objective-led, or integrated. And last, but not least, if SEA, like EIA, does not influence a decision, then clearly SEA should not be undertaken.