



Netherlands Commission for
Environmental Assessment



Strategic environmental assessment

What is SEA?

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) can be defined as a range of “analytical and participatory approaches that aim to integrate environmental considerations into policies, plans, and programmes and evaluate the interlinkages with economic and social considerations” (OECD, 2006). It is a tool to:

- Structure public and government debate in the preparation of policies, plans and programmes;
- Feed this debate through a robust assessment of the environmental and, where needed, social and economic consequences;
- Ensure that the results of assessment and debate are taken into account during decision making and implementation.

The applicability of SEA is wide. It aims at better strategies, ranging from legislation and country-wide development policies, to more specific sectoral and spatial plans. SEA is applied in different shapes and forms, and in countries as diverse as Ghana, Indonesia, Bolivia and the Netherlands. This variety inspired the OECD-DAC to develop harmonised SEA Guidance. The information provided in this key sheet is in line with this Guidance.

What are the advantages of SEA?

- Better insight into the trade-offs between environmental, economic and social issues, enhancing the chance of finding a win-win situation.
- Warns decision-makers and the public about unsustainable development options, which helps prevent costly and unnecessary mistakes, as well as conflicts around natural resource use.
- A better understanding of the cumulative impacts of multiple smaller developments, and the opportunity to improve the coherence between projects.

- Enhanced credibility of government decisions, leading to more public trust in the planning process and more support for plan implementation.
- Easier ESIA at the project level, because strategic decisions, for example on locations, have already been addressed in the SEA process.

SEA for a land use plan, Kenya 2015

The combination of an SEA and land use plan (LUP) process for the Tana Delta was a first-of-its-kind for Kenya. Thanks to its institutional setup, there was broad ownership of and commitment to the process and LUP. For instance, the process was steered by an inter-ministerial Delta Committee, and extensive local consultations helped local communities bring up problems and possible solutions. The resulting plan is therefore broadly accepted and helps to prevent water-based conflicts. The SEA-LUP process won the RTPI International Award for Planning Excellence and is being replicated in other Kenyan deltas.



What does an SEA process look like?

The SEA process can be divided into stages, consisting of various steps to be taken. However, an SEA should always be tailored to the specific planning process that it is supporting. That means that it needs to be applied flexibly.

The following ‘good practice’ sequence of steps should be adapted to the country context, and to the dynamics of the policy, programme or plan.

A. Establishing the context for SEA

- Screening: decide on the need and role of SEA.
- Identify the stakeholders and plan their involvement.
- Develop, with the stakeholders, a shared vision on the key (environmental) problems, objectives and alternatives for the policy or plan.

B. Implementing SEA

- Scope the content for the SEA, including a look at synergies or conflict with existing policy objectives.
- Collect baseline data.
- Assess alternatives.
- Identify how to use opportunities/mitigate 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 dialogue among stakeholders on SEA results and make recommendations for decision-making.
- Justify the (political) choices that have been made in the finally adopted policy or plan.

D. Monitoring and evaluation

- Monitor the implementation of the adopted policy or plan and alignment with the SEA.
- Evaluate the alignment of the SEA with the outcomes of the policy or plan.

SEA and ESIA

SEA has evolved out of project level environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA), to address the need for a similar assessment at strategic decision-making levels. SEA is not a substitute for ESIA, but complements it. The table below shows the main differences between the two.

ESIA	SEA
Applied to projects and their specifications	Applied to policies, plans and programmes with a broad and long-term perspective
Usually well-defined, linear process	More multi-stage, iterative process
Limited range of project alternatives	Broad range of policy options and alternatives
More narrow perspective, with emphasis on minimising and mitigating impacts	Broader perspective, emphasis on balancing environment, social and economic objectives
Responsibility of the project proponent	Responsibility of the planning agency

SEA for an irrigation plan, Mali 2016

Malinese authorities decided to integrate SEA in the planning process of their new large-scale irrigation plan (PAHA). Since SEA applies a broad view to development – also assessing the effects of a plan on other sectors and locations – this SEA revealed important issues that might have otherwise remained unconsidered. Expansion of the irrigation area would cause water scarcity in Niger and Nigeria. Moreover, higher water availability in the irrigated area would attract people from elsewhere, possibly leading to an increase in ethnic conflicts.

SEA services provided by the NCEA

The NCEA offers a range of services to support SEA implementation:

- Advice on the set-up and improvement of an SEA system in a country (see key sheet SEA introduction programmes);
- Advice on scope and quality review of individual SEAs (see key sheet SEA advice);
- Introductory SEA awareness raising sessions and training;
- Coaching and on-the-job training of SEA and planning teams.

Please contact the NCEA for support on SEA in your country, or visit our website.

More information

OECD-DAC: www.seataskteam.net

This website also contains the OECD SEA Guidance:

OECD (2006): Applying Strategic Environmental Assessment. Good Practice Guidance for Development Cooperation.

IAIA SEA Performance criteria: www.iaia.org

Video on what is SEA:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTHKqx-C_C8&feature=youtu.be.

Contact

Mrs Anne Hardon

Knowledge Manager at the NCEA

e-mail: ahardon@eia.nl