



# The role of environmental assessment in the landscape approach

Finding joint solutions

*By Gwen van Boven*

Since 2017, the NCEA has been in a new type of partnership: the Shared Resources, Joint Solutions (SRJS) programme, which is a strategic partnership of IUCN-NL, WWF-NL and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The NCEA is the knowledge partner on environmental assessment.

### The programme

The SRJS programme (2016-2020) focuses on safeguarding ecosystem-based services such as water supply, food security, and climate resilience in 16 low- and lower-middle-income countries across nine regions. IUCN-NL and WWF-NL and their CSO partners (Civil Society Organisations) in the countries concerned are working on planning the land use and sustainably managing selected landscapes that provide the ecosystem services essential for the local communities and broader economic development. On their own, however, CSOs cannot secure ecosystem services. To do so they need to enter into dialogue with government and the private sector. To fulfil their potential, SRJS trains and assists CSOs to play their role in integrated landscape management and facilitates multi-stakeholder cooperation.

### Why environmental assessment?

SRJS sees the role of environmental assessment in integrated decision making and implementation of monitoring processes as great potential to the landscape approach. In developing economies, ESIA (Environmental and Social Impact Assessment) is a potentially powerful tool for making fact-based, inclusive, transparent and accountable decisions at project level. The SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) instrument, which brings various stakeholders to-

"During the formulation of the SRJS programme, we realised that investments in infrastructure would become key in our landscapes. We would not be able to address that through only sector engagement; we needed to work through the formal system too. That's how we arrived at environmental assessment as an instrument with legal basis".

*Bart Geenen, WWF-NL*

"The name Shared Resources, Joint Solutions not only covers the aim of the programme but also reflects how we see the NCEA. This is what you do through environmental assessment: find joint solutions."

*Lucia Helsloot, WWF-NL*

### Box 1: Environmental assessment and the landscape approach

The landscape approach and environmental assessment complement each other in several ways:

- Environmental assessment is mandatory for projects (ESIA) in almost all countries around the world, and a growing number of countries are making it mandatory for strategic decisions on plans, policies and programmes (SEA). The landscape approach is usually voluntary.
- Environmental assessment is intrinsically linked to formal decision making: the granting of a project licence requires ESIA, and the adoption of a plan, policy or programme requires SEA. As such, environmental assessment complements the landscape approach by giving decisions a strong legal basis.
- The landscape approach promotes multi-stakeholder engagement in decision making. ESIA and SEA can strengthen this as they are often the only formal processes for which public participation is statutorily required. Also, they often require that documents produced in the process are made public, thereby allowing effective participation.
- An important step in both ESIA and SEA is the development and equitable comparison of alternatives. This allows the best option to be selected for a project or plan, given the economic, environmental and social considerations expressed by the different stakeholders.

gether around strategic-level decisions on plans, policies or programmes, may also be instrumental in implementing the multi-stakeholder approach. This approach is promoted in the SRJS programme and in dialogues facilitated between CSOs, government and private sector parties. Being an impartial tool linked to formal decision making, SEA brings clear added value to the landscape approach (see box 1).

### Why the NCEA?

According to Cas Besselink, SRJS coordinator at IUCN-NL: “The NCEA’s independence and professionalism makes them a credible player to government, non-government and businesses. They have an overall vision of the instrument that others would not have. Their position opens doors, brings other institutions to the table, and as such gives the entire SRJS programme more impact.”

The NCEA has achieved this position over 25 years by being an independent adviser on ESIA and SEA for complex projects and plans, working in response to demand and at the request of government authorities. In addition, over the last

15 years the NCEA has also supported the strengthening of environmental assessment systems, working together with government, EA associations and CSOs.

Our role in the SRJS programme entails working closely with international NGOs and their CSO partners, which is new for us. Since our impartial and independent position is key in this partnership, we carefully select the activities to suit our role and at the same time to be an added value for the target groups. In practice this means that the NCEA may:

- facilitate workshops and training on environmental assessment, preferably for multi-stakeholder groups
- coach ESIA / SEA processes requested by the competent authority
- support the strengthening of environmental assessment system functions, such as the regulatory framework, at the request of the competent authority

on condition that we:

- always inform or engage relevant government organisations
- do not facilitate activities with individual actors



“As I mostly work with ESIA at project level, I am impressed by the overview of what SEA entails. It has given me guidelines for a more integrated approach to the development of different sectors, taking into consideration the importance of environmental and socio-economic aspects”

*Quote from a workshop participant in Surinam*

### Some experiences to date

A needs assessment conducted at the start of 2017 revealed that many SRJS partners thought that ESIA and/or SEA could be important tools to work with, but were uncertain whether they had the skills and capacity required to use them. Several indicated that in addition to their own experience with these tools being limited, the overall practice in their countries was not yet well developed, especially with SEA. They wanted to know how to apply ESIA and SEA more effectively to make better decisions in the landscapes they were working in. They also needed to know what role CSOs could play and how they, government and private sector could work together more effectively.

When the NCEA was starting out, it gave introductory SEA workshops in several countries such as Madagascar, The Philippines and Tanzania; more recently, workshops have been given in Guyana, Surinam and Paraguay. In Indonesia, a country with a more established SEA system, workshops have helped participants learn to see how the instrument could be made more effective in practice. In Benin, Burkina Faso and Zambia, initial sessions on ESIA have revealed different needs related to strengthening capacity and to systemic features. These initial sessions were specifically intended to be introductory and exploratory: to bring the different stakeholders around the table to discuss the concepts and potential applicability of environmental assessment in the country in question. What could be next steps for them?

## The Philippines

**In the Philippines**, a group consisting of 40 local and national NGOs, government agencies and researchers joined in the first SRJS workshop to look at the elements of a good practice SEA system for their country. They concluded that the next steps should focus on improving the SEA regulation, raising awareness of its importance for The Philippines and starting learning by actually doing SEA.

An immediate result of the introductory workshop is that government agencies in Zamboanga del Norte province have decided to carry out an SEA for joint land use planning in District 1 of this province. To launch this SEA a joint workshop for government and NGO stakeholders was facilitated by the NCEA. In this conflict-sensitive area of the country, it was inspiring and encouraging to see how these stakeholders collaborated to solve puzzles and start a joint SEA process. SRJS will now assist these actors to carry out the SEA; the NCEA will act as a coach.

**Mr. Noy Panorel of PARTS (Philippian NGO):** *‘The NCEA’s SEA support has a unique place in the Philippines, in the heart of environmental planning and decision making processes over land use, where alternative development options must be designed and decided upon in a participatory way’.*

## Madagascar

IUCN-NL is collaborating with several local partners in Madagascar on the sustainable management of the Ampasindava peninsula. Could SEA – an approach not yet widely applied in the country – be a good means of achieving that? The NCEA facilitated an introductory workshop on SEA for the local stakeholders, including government, NGOs, local tourism operators and a mining company.

Cas Besselink: *“Madagascar is a good example of what we envision with SRJS and SEA. Government, CSOs and even the mining corporation joined the table. Discussions started out by being pretty emotional, but everyone hung on and after three days a more objective debate was being held on possible future steps. The first demonstration of the added value of an SEA approach in practice?”*

The SRJS partners in Madagascar and the Environment agency ONE are together exploring the application of SEA for the municipal and regional land use plans to be developed for the Ampasindava peninsula. They are also studying the lessons learnt so far and how these can be translated into a better SEA regulatory set-up in the country.



## Paraguay

In **Paraguay**, WWF organised an SRJS workshop on SEA with the Ministry of Public Works, facilitated by the NCEA which was attended by civil servants of the Ministries of National Planning, of Environment, of Forestry and of Trade.

**Ms Daphne Willems of WWF-NL** was also present: *“The theme was the Hidrovía, or ‘water highway’: enhancing navigation of the Paraguay river, which flows through the Pantanal, the largest wetland on the planet. It was a fantastic session. Having all these ministries in the same room was in itself special: cooperation between these departments is scarce. The - mostly young - civil servants were hungry for information. They practised enthusiastically with everything related to the Hidrovía: drinking water supply, irrigation, flood risks, water quality, nature values and impacts for people living along the river, including the Guaraní Indians. They developed a plan for participation, they learnt how to set up an integrated team. The Ministry has decided to set up a team to do such analysis structurally. Mission accomplished?”*

The participants also evaluated the workshop positively, which led to this feedback from WWF Paraguay: “I am very satisfied with the great appreciation the participants express for the importance and applicability of SEA in the planning processes of plans, policies and programmes. It would be good to evaluate internalisation of this tool in the near future”.



## Zambia

Zambia wants to strengthen ESIA and set up a sound SEA system. But how to do this? WWF Zambia and the Zambia Environmental Management Agency jointly requested the NCEA to help diagnose needs and identify ways forward. An exploratory mission examined the legal and technical aspects. And especially how do the actors see their own and other's roles? How could everyone play their roles more effectively? During a second visit to Lusaka, the NCEA continued to work with ZEMA on updating the ESIA regulations. The NCEA and WWF Zambia, ZEMA, CSO and government partners launched a new approach to reviewing ESIA's – one that can be applied even when time is short and no high-tech expertise is available. Multi-stakeholder discussions on how Zambia could work with SEA resulted in a broad consensus of the need to start with SEA. These were exciting weeks, full of variety! WWF Netherlands is now considering which of the resulting recommendations it will finance as part of the SRJS programme.

**Bart Geenen:** *"Our partners in Zambia have been working on ESIA's for years but have been much more successful since the cooperation with the NCEA started. WWF would typically focus on environmental impacts of the specific project. We are not ESIA specialists and now understand we should also focus on the ESIA system and processes. You do need to be aware of these things if you want to be effective. In Zambia, they are very impressed by the steps that have been taken together with government. The NCEA opens doors."*

## The coming years

It is still early days, but after these sessions, the SRJS partners and governments in several countries asked for support to strengthen ESIA and SEA. In Madagascar, The Philippines and Tanzania, the desire to gain practical experience with SEA has stimulated the stakeholders to prepare for SEA to be applied to specific plans: they have requested the SRJS to assist and the NCEA to coach. In Madagascar and Zambia, the SRJS has resulted in government and SRJS partners becoming interested in jointly investigating strengthening the SEA and ESIA regulatory frameworks respectively. Will SRJS partners in other countries also request support in setting up SEA for their landscapes? The NCEA is waiting to see where the demand will arise, but is encouraged by these first initiatives. In a few years' time we'll see whether commitment for ESIA and SEA has grown and has helped to promote sound landscape management.

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