

NCEA Partner conference for French-speaking Africa

Saly, Senegal
27-29 October 2025



Netherlands Commission for
Environmental Assessment



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Conference

At the end of October 2025, the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) organized a peer-to-peer learning meeting with its government partners from ten French-speaking countries. This brief report contains the main learnings and observations from this meeting.

Occasion and participants

Present: policymakers from ten countries, two regional unions, and three river basin organizations

The conference brought around the table policy makers from eight West African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Two West African unions, ECOWAS and UEMOA, three river basin authorities (OMVS, ABV, and Mouhoun Water Authority), as well as policymakers from Burundi and Morocco were also present. The participants represented authorities for environment, mining, energy, maritime affairs, agriculture, and water management.

Countries represented at the conference.



43 participants



10 countries



3 days

Objective of the conference

The objective of the conference was to facilitate deep learning from and between government actors on how to make Strategic Environmental Assessment more effective in informing sustainable policy development. To achieve this, the NCEA promoted peer-to-peer learning based on active, just realized, or potential SEA trajectories in the region.

Set-up and cases

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a systematic, proactive process for evaluating the environmental, social, and economic effects of proposed plans, policies, or programmes before adoption. By integrating sustainability early in decision-making, it aims to prevent negative impacts, identify alternatives, and promote environmental protection and sustainable development. By conducting SEA during planning, more effective and efficient sustainable solutions can be found and applied. The number of countries incorporating SEA into their legislation or applying it voluntarily, is steadily increasing.

The set-up of the exchange was inspired by the Mastercircle,^① a method to solve complex dilemmas through cocreation. The participants presented their approaches and received feedback from their peers. This was done in small groups, moderated by the NCEA. A lot of attention was paid to preparing the cases: the NCEA helped the presenters to come up with a short pitch and to articulate the challenges they faced in strategic planning. It gave participants the opportunity to be 'learner' and 'master' at the same time and to reflect deeply on how they approach complex planning and decision-making processes. In total, 13 cases were prepared and pitched: two on agriculture, four on integrated water resource management, three on mining, two on land use planning, and two on energy and transport (see page 5).

1. | Mastercircle is a Dutch method to discuss and solve complex dilemmas with a group of participants, a facilitator, and a 'master' who can help others to reflect based on their rich experience.



Overview cases



Agriculture

Cacao – Côte d'Ivoire
Intensive rice culture – Mali



Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM)

Saloum delta – Senegal
River basin planning Sourou – Burkina Faso
Lac Nokoué – Benin



Mining

Strategic sectoral planning – Burkina Faso
Strategic sectoral planning – Burundi
Strategic sectoral planning – Guinea



Land use planning

Maritime and coastal zone management – Senegal
Niger Valley – Niger



Energy and transport

Green hydrogen development – Mauritania
Green hydrogen development – Morocco





Key observations

The applied approach turned out to be highly insightful, and not only for the participants. Here we share some insights gained by the NCEA as a result of the cases exchange.

The peer-to-peer exchange circled around two main questions: how to establish an effective governance framework for SEA^② to make it influential on strategic planning and decision-making (1), and how to make a good division of responsibilities in the preparation and implementation of SEA (2).

SEA is one of the few routes for collaborative governance in West Africa. It plays an important role in promoting inclusive decision making and holistic approaches to policy development.

This may also explain why SEA is gaining momentum in West Africa. The NCEA is seeing a growing number of requests for assistance, particularly from ministries other than the Environmental Departments. The presence and genuine involvement of various line ministries during the Saly conference is also indicative of this trend.

The influence of SEA on sustainable decision-making largely depends on how broad and how proactive the SEA is understood or applied.

Narrow versus broad: in the narrower application, SEA is perceived as a tool in the hands of the Ministry of Environment, used 'only' for generic environmental and social mitigation. In its broader application, SEA is embraced by various ministries as a starting point to align economical, social and environmental considerations leading to sustainable sector alternatives. Reactive

versus proactive: this dimension is about the moment when SEA comes into the picture: as an assessment of the draft plan (reactive) or as an analysis informing the first plan (proactive).

When it comes to legal frameworks, effective cooperation arrangements, and so on, there is already a wealth of knowledge and experience in the region! This knowledge, however, is often 'locked up' in countries, ministries, or even departments. Lack of time and capacity plays an important role in this. Some examples of interdepartmental information sharing were presented.

Presenting and comparing the cases made us realize that informal leadership within national and regional administrations is a crucial factor in determining how effectively SEA can support strategic, coherent and sustainable decision-making.

In other words, the success of strategic planning with SEA depends not only on knowing and following the formal procedure, but equally on the ability to engage with other ministries and civil society, to improvise, to share information, and to collaborate creatively throughout the governance process.

^{2.} | Meaning the institutional and legal framework as well as formal or ad-hoc interinstitutional collaborative procedures/ processes that ensure increased influence of SEA in strategic planning.



The discussion of the cases provided a wealth of lessons for the participants, such as:

- Build **stronger engagement** between sectoral and environmental ministries;
- To achieve this, a **dynamic governance framework** is needed: with interministerial steering committees, technical committees, and inter-stakeholder working groups;
- Meaningful **public participation** is key: democratic and representative, but adapted to fragile contexts;
- Political will and legal anchoring needs to be organized: **integrate SEA into sectoral laws**;

Lessons learnt as collected by the participants based upon the cases discussion.

Partners conference 2025 in Senegal

1

Put in place a suitable institutional and consultation framework for the effective conduct of an Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

2

Improve access to information, facilitated by digitization, in order to support the coordination of institutions and their involvement and to reduce administrative delays.

3

Perceive and communicate SEA as a governance tool rather than an administrative process.

4

Identify stakeholders comprehensively, and raise their awareness over the long term.

5

Create the political will at the highest level to use SEA to integrate sustainability into strategic planning. Demonstrate the added value of SEA for the development of plans, programmes and policies

6

Integrate SEA into strategic planning processes as early as possible to make them sustainable.

7

Use the representative democracy approach to ensure public participation within the SEA.

8

Specify the roles and responsibilities in conducting an SEA and monitoring stakeholder commitments.

9

Perceive and communicate the SEA as a complementary approach to IWRM, which can, among other things, improve the consultation framework and ensure a balance between sectoral issues and those of water.

10

Establish an agenda for advocacy on the application of SEA, with internal and external allies such as neighboring countries, ECOWAS, WAEMU, NCEA, etc.

11

Recruit consultants who have genuine knowledge of SEA to support you in these processes.

Key lessons learned

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More conference
resources
(in French)



Evaluation and follow-up

The participants of the Saly conference expressed high interest in continued peer-to-peer learning and on-the-job-coaching. In the countries they are representing, there is a great need for cross-sectoral and cross-country exchange on strategic planning, SEA, and joint governance for sustainable development.

At the end of the conference, the NCEA organized an evaluation session around the question: '**How can we improve our cooperation with governmental agencies?**' In addition to the aforementioned capacity strengthening, participants mentioned facilitating cooperation between different authorities (reinforcing collaborative governance), supporting in reaching out to funding opportunities, and continuing to strengthen SEA (and ESIA) systems with a particular focus on monitoring/follow-up and inspection once ESIA is completed.

The NCEA takes this feedback into consideration and uses it as input for program adaptation where possible.

The **river basin authorities** expressed the need to make better use of the complementarity of SEA and Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM).

As interdepartmental and cross-border organisations, they are ideally placed to benefit from Strategic Environmental Assessment for collaborative governance.

Finally, the conference served as an **effective platform for the NCEA to exchange with all its partners**; not only for bilateral programmes but also between multiple countries at a regional level.

Throughout the conference, agreements have been made with countries and individual organisations regarding follow-up actions.

The NCEA is willing to organize an in-depth conversation about these outcomes in case you want to know more.

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About the NCEA

For over 35 years, the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) has been involved as an independent advisor and reviewer in high-impact projects and plans in West Africa, such as land use planning, integrated water resources management, mining and energy. Through strengthening Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedures and practices, the NCEA supports balanced and well-informed decision-making towards sustainable investments and works solely at the explicit request of governments.