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Conclusions Steam C: Linkages between SEA and other assessment or planning tools

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These conclusions are based on the summaries provided by the following session chairs of stream C: Barry Dalal-Clayton, Jenny Pope, David Annandale, Hussein Abaza, William Sheate, Ingrid Belcakova, Peter Nelson, Marie Hanusch, Jo Treweek, Helen Byron, Dave LeMaitre, Martin Slater, Jos Arts and Paul Tomlinson. Draft versions of these conclusions were sent to, commented on and amended by the chairs.

Stream C on the 'linkages between SEA and other assessment or planning tools' covered a wide range of topics, including:

(a) Sustainability Assessment
(b) Integrated Assessment
(c) SEA & environmental planning and management
(d) SEA & spatial planning
(e) SEA & landscape planning instruments
(f) SEA & biodiversity
(g) SEA and EIA tiering

Subsequently, firstly a 'core message' coming out of all seven stream topics is formulated, revolving around the importance and benefits of integration. This is followed by the formulation of 12 key messages. Furthermore, eight learning and action points are established and some general lessons are presented.

1 Core message: The importance and benefits of integration

Integration is of crucial importance for SEA. Within stream C, integration aspects that were found to be important did not only include the integration with other assessment or planning instruments, but also the integration of substantive aspects within SEA (ie economic, social and environmental), the procedural integration of SEA (policy, plan, programme) as well as the integration of different stakeholders through SEA.

Integration of different instruments and tools

The linkages between SEA and other assessment or planning instruments and tools are not well developed, yet. However, there is some widespread agreement that we can learn a lot from other instruments and tools and benefit significantly from their inclusion in an SEA. Therefore, we need to be open to consider their contributions and to make use of these tools wherever appropriate. In this context, if integration is attempted, it is important to carefully analyse what SEA aspects are already covered in existing instruments and tools and then use those within SEA (ie there should be no duplication of effort). Four instruments that may be the basis for SEA integration were discussed in stream C in further detail, environmental management systems in Sweden, landscape planning approaches in Ireland, Canada, Sweden and Germany, integrated development planning in South Africa and sustainability assessment in general.

(a) Environmental management systems are used in Swedish local authorities in a strategic way and there is some overlap with SEA. Therefore, the two instruments may be integrated.

(b) Landscape planning is an instrument for nature conservation and landscape management. It aims to ensure environmental considerations are taken into account in other planning (eg spatial planning). Landscape planning experiences can help to improve a range of important SEA issues. Regarding the examples discussed in stream C, these include:
    - the presentation of the environmental baseline (Germany)
    - monitoring (Ireland, landscape heritage assessment)
    - mitigation (health, Sweden)
    - comparison of alternatives (integrated landscape management models, Canada)

(c) Integrated development planning in South Africa is a legal obligation for local authorities. The Integrated Development Plan is an inter-sectoral plan that identifies priority development needs through a broad consultative process with stakeholders. Following on from its IDP, the municipality produces a Spatial Development Framework that explicitly integrates environmental, socioeconomic and cultural aspects, and sets out intended land-use patterns. Preparation of the Spatial Development Framework effectively follows an SEA process. This Framework defines parameters for land use and management, informing the need for and scope of more detailed EIAs.

(d) Sustainability Assessment is a rapidly developing field which sits on the far end of the continuum of SEA. It requires SEA to address long-term issues and to grapple directly with the issue of sustainability and whether SEA is being effective in changing the way society making decisions and responding to issues. In many ways the recent Millenium Ecosystem Assessment is a global SEA with the aim of assessing the state of the earth and its ability to sustain human well-being and suggesting ways in which to respond.

Procedural integration

Procedural integration is vital for effective SEA. Where planning processes exist and are functional, SEA needs to be integrated with existing procedures. If this is not possible, appropriate processes need to be created. There is a great need to establish well-structured strategic planning processes, be it environmentally oriented or integrated, particularly in many developing countries,.

Substantive integration

Substantive integration of social, economic and environmental aspects needs to be done in a careful manner. In this context, it is important to recall that the main reason for applying SEA is the perceived sub-ordination of environmental to other, particularly economic aspects. If integration is attempted, this should not lead to an 'excuse not to change anything' in existing practice. Equal weight should be given to all three pillars of sustainable development. Contributors from both the sustainability assessment and biodiversity sessions argued strongly that the three pillars view needs to be replaced with a holistic view of the environment in which it is the foundation and support for both the social and economic realms through the ecosystem services it provides (a view presented very clearly in the recent Millennium Ecosystem Assessment). If this was achieved, SEA and sustainability assessment could actually be seen as being 'the same thing'.

Better co-operation and co-ordination through SEA

SEA may lead to better co-operation of stakeholders. Furthermore, it can help to co-ordinate strategies and actions of different ministries or authorities.

2 Key messages

It is possible to identify 12 key messages based on the papers presented and discussions held in the seven topic sessions, as follows:

1 The importance of considering the context within which SEA is applied

In order to develop effective SEA systems, the consideration of the context within which it is applied is of crucial importance. An SEA that does not address the context, at least to the level of identifying and incorporating external forces and factors that could affect the outcome, is likely to prove to be deficient in giving strategic direction. This is closely linked to point 2 below.

There was some widespread agreement among the participants of stream C that what may work in one system may not necessarily be applicable to another. Furthermore, whilst certain SEA principles and frameworks may have general validity, the concrete SEA methodology will vary from case to case and there's no universal model for SEA!

2 The capability of SEA to create a more strategic view in decision making

SEA can force the development of a more strategic view in policy, plan and programme making, leading to the consideration of previously absent strategic options. In this context, there is a need to identify and address the processes that drive environmental problems. This approach has been built into guidance for assessing impacts on biodiversity.

3 SEA for creating transparency and accountability

SEA has an important role to play in creating transparency and accountability. Whilst SEA is important in terms of its technical value, at times the transparency and accountability created through SEA may even be more crucial. Independent review is desirable for achieving good SEA quality.

4 SEA as a management instrument

Effective SEA helps to coordinate planning processes and helps to manage information. It can help to mainstream the environment in policy, plan and programme making. SEA can also help moving away from limiting environmental damage to positive management, conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the long term and for future generations. Furthermore, SEA supports reconciliation of the interdependencies of social and ecological systems, and the linkages with economic systems, simultaneously recognising that biodiversity and ecosystem services largely underpin human well-being.

5 SEA as a tool for effective participation

Public participation is seen as being of crucial importance for effective SEA. For example, only an effective participatory approach allows the clear identification of local, regional and global dependencies on biodiversity.

6 SEA as a tool for achieving global to local aims and objectives

SEA is an instrument that lends itself both, to the identification of context-specific local goals, objectives and targets, and the incorporation of existing international, regional or national goals, objectives and targets (for example, the Millenium Development Goals). Furthermore, it may help to deliver them.

7 Tiering and SEA

Effective tiering means building bridges between different decision tiers or 'islands'. These bridges might be easier to build if PPP and project planning lie in the hand of one agency/authority. Tiering does not just work in a strict top-down manner, ie from policy to plan to programme to project. Rather, lower tier SEAs and project EIAs can also have a "trickle up" effect, leading to an improved awareness of the limitations of prevailing policies, plans and programmes and thus drive improvements. Normally, tiering will be more difficult to achieve across administrative boundaries. Effective tiering might provide opportunities to introduce 'class' approvals, therefore reducing the burden of project assessments. Furthermore, effective tiering can lead to institutional strengthening and better inter-organisational co-operation.

Administrations need to make conscious decisions to consider the decisions taken at other tiers of decision making. In this context, it is important to not leave those alone that have to deal with the issues that a plan generates. In this context, handing over/ 'cascading' environmental responsibilities and action to other sectors/tiers is important if tiering is to work effectively. Within an effectively tiered system, the postponement of issues is acceptable, providing the decision remains robust – and issues are actually addressed elsewhere. In order to allocate issues to different tiers, mapping of issues, interests and stakeholders is essential.

8 SEA for addressing cumulative effects

SEA supports the consideration of cumulative effects. Many negative effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services need to be considered at the regional scale to address probable net changes, and effectively to address linkages with – and effects on – broader social and economic systems. It was noted that biodiversity and ecosystem services was a cross-cutting issue that underpinned most of the Millennium Development Goals.

9 SEA for addressing equity effects

Given the important role played by ecosystem services in supporting the livelihoods, health and wellbeing of rural and relatively poor communities, who are generally most vulnerable and least resilient to change, SEA can provide a useful vehicle for addressing these dependencies. Most of these dependencies cannot be effectively dealt with on a project-by-project basis. If a sustainability assessment approach is followed, this should specifically deal with social justice and equity, beyond issues that are directly related to the environment.

10 SEA for changing minds and established culture

SEA can lead to changing the culture and the mindset of the way plans, programmes and policies are designed and implemented. Biodiversity issues in SEA may raise awareness of the linkages between ecosystem health and human wellbeing.

11 Experiences with legal frameworks and guidance

Most countries operate with very recent legal frameworks and guidance (post 2000). Unfortunately legislation and practice remain insufficiently aligned.

12 The importance to use existing instruments

SEA is only likely to be effective is it is integrated with existing instruments, either in parts (ie for example for collecting or presenting environmental baseline data) or fully (ie sustainability assessment). Whilst the key message presented three such instruments, many others are currently applied in various countries world-wide that may be used in this context.

3 Action points

The following action points indicate where stream C participants felt further efforts were needed in order to achieve more effective SEA.

1 The lack of empirical evidence

We are still suffering from a lack of empirical evidence. – Whilst the practical application of SEA and of the use of different techniques and tools has increased markedly over the past few years, we lack proper evaluation of this practice. In this context, questions that need to be addressed include:

- Why have we used a particular approach?
- Has it worked?
- Why has it worked?
- What are the enabling factors?

Only if these issues are addressed can good practice ultimately be enhanced.

There is a particular need to obtain evidence for how biodiversity issues may be taken into account in SEA effectively. This poses particular challenges in terms of issues of scale and the need to identify and address underlying driving forces that cause environmental change.

2 The importance of developing a clearer understanding of purpose

We need to develop a clear idea of what exactly the purpose of a particular instrument is, what needs are to be addressed, and the desired outcomes. Furthermore, it is necessary to agree on what issues should be addressed at a particular decision tier. Clarity is important in order to be able to influence decision makers and decision making.

3 The desirability of standardisation

There is a question as to how much we should seek to standardise SEA and its linkage to other tools through the use of principles or frameworks when it fundamentally needs to be responsive to the context it is applied in. Broad principles may be fine, but it is questionable whether rigid frameworks are always useful. Adapting SEA to fit existing processes may be sufficient. The decision whether SEA is to be regulated, for example for spatial planning, should be left to a particular country/system. In this context, targeted research needs to focus on organizational and institutional capacity to link tools rather than merely focusing on the tools themselves. The past focus on methodological aspects of SEA on creating new tools should give way to: (a) examining more closely the way in which SEA and other tools are used together, who they are used by and in what ways, and the capacities needed to use them; and (b) assessment of whether or not SEA (and other supportive tools) are leading to the desired outcomes.

4 The need to cross institutional and sectoral boundaries

In order for SEA to be effective, there is an urgent need to learn how to effectively cross institutional and sectoral boundaries. Ways for achieving closer engagement between planners and SEA practitioners need to be explored. Some good examples of this were presented in the session on synergies between biodiversity assessment and integrated environmental planning processes.

5 The 'trickiness' of tiering

Whilst assessment tiering allows for a structured approach to uncertainty, not all policies, plans and programmes lead to projects. In this context, the different ways of how tiering can work need to be explored further.

6 Developing a better understanding of what makes SEA tick

The way in which SEA is applied may depend on a range of aspects, including

- The way the economy is functioning (state run versus free market)
- The geographic impact of the action(s)
- The extent of public engagement
- The decision tier; whereas the importance of content aspects may increase further down the planning hierarchy, the importance of procedural aspects may decrease.

Whilst we have some basic understanding here, there is still a long way to go for developing a more comprehensive picture.

7 The 'E' in SEA

It is somewhat disheartening to hear that the 'E' in SEA still appears to have a bad connotation among decision makers. Therefore, more effective ways need to be developed for driving the message home to decision makers that environmental problems and impacts are inseparably linked with issues of quality of life and socio-economic well-being. In particular, the need to take a long term view, strive for 'no net loss' of biodiversity, and conservation of ecosystem services as insurance for the future was emphasised . The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has used the concept of ecosystem services to convey this message in a language which is easily grasped by a wide range of people. SEA should seek to use this approach to mainstream and upstream the importance of the environment in decision making. In this context, SEA (including sustainability assessment) should be based on an "environmental bottom line" that cannot be traded off.

8 We need to speak the language of those who we are trying to influence

Whilst the importance of trying to speak the language of those who we are trying to influence has been recognised for many years, there is clearly still a long way to go. In this context, the language used by managers, those involved in business, and by decision makers needs to be to learnt by SEA practitioners so as best to influence decisions. A more integrated approach, whereby environmental issues are treated on a par with socio-economic issues therefore seems to be appropriate. In this context, reviewing experiences with environmental management systems and triple bottom line approaches may be helpful.

4 Some general lessons

Finally, some general lessons can be drawn, as follows:

- Consider the context carefully before you start doing anything
  - Not only legal system and formal as well as informal requirements, but also
  - The culture of making PPPs, the political and economic system
  - The culture of how communication and interaction are happening
- Speak the language of those who you want to influence and use concepts that are familiar to those people
- For us, the SEA promoters and champions, to carefully argue our case, possibly avoid broadbrush statements, such as "well, this doesn't exist or that doesn't work"; these statements may reflect your experiences in your specific systems, but may not actually be equally valid elsewhere and may create unnecessary confusion
- We need more research into SEA effectiveness!
- Ultimately, SEA may become redundant if we achieve full strategic integral area development which is able to ensure equal weight is given to the various assessment aspects.
- There is at times a tendency to be rather negative; however whilst there clearly are problems, the alternative to having SEA in place is clearly and ultimately worse.