

International Experience and Perspectives in SEA

*A special thematic meeting of the International Association for Impact Assessment
26-30 September 2005 • Prague, Czech Republic*

Conference Highlights



From September 26 to 30, approximately 400 delegates gathered in Prague to discuss international experience and perspectives in SEA. The conference venue was the suburban campus of the Czech University of Agriculture. Many delegates stayed in or near to the historic town centre, twenty minutes and 200 years away, and used the local bus system to commute to and from the venue. Some of them might find a metaphor for SEA in Prague's highly efficient public transport: initially daunting with directions in an unfamiliar language; becoming easy to navigate with practice.

Hosted by the University and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC/CEE), this conference represented a new departure for IAIA. First, it was held in addition to the Annual Meeting (Boston, May 2005). Second, it focused exclusively on one particular area of assessment and attempted to address the field in its entirety; the Prague agenda covered five streams¹ and 37 topics plus a well attended pre-conference workshop on SEA in development cooperation. Third, it was intended to be an interactive forum, based on working papers, facilitated discussion to address key issues and a common reporting format.

In keeping with this aim, plenary sessions were confined to the beginning and end of the conference. The opening plenary fell into two parts. The first featured a keynote address on Czech experience in SEA of 'concepts' by the Minister of the Environment (HE Libor Ambrozek), and an overview of SEA development and capacity-building in the CEE region (Marta Szigeti Bonifert, REC Executive Director). The second part focused on macro-scale SEA, drawing on New Zealand and Australian (State of Victoria) experience of public inquiries into major policy issues. As described first hand by the NZ Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (Morgan Williams) and the Victoria Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (Ian McPhail), these reviews combine both assessment and audit functions.

For the bulk of the conference, the work was carried out in topic sessions. These varied in their degree of interest to delegates (as reflected in attendance), process dynamics and quality of inputs and insights. All topic organizers were asked to make their sessions interactive and keep them on track (easy to call for, hard to do). Generally, the impression given was of a concerted attempt to do so, although, perhaps inevitably, some fell back on the orthodox approach of presented papers with the attendant traffic of people arriving and leaving. Even so, the level of open discussion appeared to go beyond that normally attained at IAIA conferences and the survey of delegates (now being conducted) should be of interest to organizers of future events.

The final day of the conference was devoted to five sub-plenary sessions facilitated by the respective stream coordinators (Urszula Rsezot, Rob Verheem, Thomas Fischer, Ralf Aschermann and Maria Partidario) and a closing plenary (chaired by Jiri Dusik). Each sub-plenary brought together the topic leaders to report on their individual sessions and to discuss the overall lessons that had emerged. At the closing plenary, the main highlights were then summarized by the stream coordinators, together with the statement on SEA in development cooperation delivered by Linda Ghanime on behalf of the organizing group.² The business of the conference concluded with brief wrap up of the key messages (see box), and it remained only to thank all those who had worked hard to make the conference a success and to invite delegates to reassemble in Stavanger for IAIA 06.

It will take time for the lessons of Prague to be fully digested and disseminated. A considerable body of information on the status and quality of SEA was brought together. First and foremost are the discussion papers, responses and posters delivered at Prague, session profiles compiled by the topic leaders and the summaries prepared by the stream coordinators. Much of this information will be posted on the IAIA website. Second, other materials of interest distributed at the conference can be ac-

cessed by those who did not make it to Prague (some examples are referenced below).³ Further publications based on the work of the conference are planned but for now the above reading should be enough for even the most avid SEA enthusiast.

- *Barry Sadler, IAIA SEA Prague Program Co-chair*

¹ The five streams comprised: SEA legislation and policy, SEA practice in key sectors, linkages with other policy tools, cross cutting issues in SEA practice and improving standards and building capacity.

² The text of the statement can be accessed at www.seataskteam.net public space. The organizing committee comprised Hussein Abaza (UNEP), Kulsum Ahmed (World Bank), Linda Ghanime (UNDP) and Jon Hobbs (UK DFID/OECD/DAC task team on SEA)

³ The materials distributed to delegates included SEA: A Sourcebook and Reference Guide to International Experience (Earthscan); the World Bank report on Integrating Environmental Considerations in Policy Formulation (available on www.worldbank.org/sea); and SEA at the Policy Level, focusing on developments in selected countries and released by the Czech Ministry of the Environment in collaboration with Netherlands VROM, REC and UNECE (now available on the IAIA website)

Key messages

On the status of SEA

- *SEA is fast moving and diversifying field* reflected in legal innovations, process developments, new areas of application and take up in developing countries
- *SEA encompasses an extended family of instruments* which have the same aim (integrating environment into policy and plan-making) but vary in provision, scope, staging, elements, etc.
- *Internationally, two key trends stand out:* the entrenchment of EIA-based procedure in the EC Directive on SEA (now being implemented across the 25 member states of the European Union); and the array of SEA-type tools that have evolved within multilateral and bilateral aid agencies in support of policy-based lending and development cooperation
- *Emerging directions include the shift toward a more integrative approach* (sustainability appraisal) which seems to be generally welcomed, provided environmental concerns are not downplayed in the process (some see this as a serious threat)

On the quality of SEA

Despite considerable progress, there are many areas of shortfall remain in SEA practice and, amongst others, a better job needs to be done of:

- *'Walking the talk'* or implementing the SEA process a) in accordance with jurisdiction-specific guidance or b) to meet IAIA or other widely accepted performance criteria
- *Talking the language of decision-making* or becoming policy literate when communicating the results of SEA
- *Adapting the approach* to the context and content of specific proposals so that SEA is fit for purpose (particularly at the policy level)
- *Delivering better outcomes* through objectives-led SEA and systematic follow up, and
- *Remembering why we do SEA* in the first place, which is to safeguard the environment (a vocation that was conspicuous by its absence from much conference discourse)

Source: from author's comments to the closing plenary