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15 years of international work by the NCEA: What have we achieved and what are our plans for the future?

In the early 1990s the Directorate-General for International Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) and the NCEA achieved consensus about the potential of environmental assessment (EA) to make an important contribution to implementing DGIS policy. The importance of the support to EA practice in the approximately 40 ‘partner countries’ singled out for Dutch aid was, moreover, confirmed by the prominence assigned to EA in the Rio Declaration of 1992. Poverty reduction was one of the key objectives in sustainable development even then.

EA’s prominence has not diminished, as evidenced by the explicit attention it received in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005). EA – particularly strategic EA (SEA) – was also seen as one of the most important instruments for achieving MDG7: the integration of sustainability into strategic policy-making. It is for these reasons, for example, that at the request of DGIS the NCEA has invested much time in the OECD DAC SEA Task Force: an international network of SEA experts that is attempting to strengthen and harmonise the application of SEA in international cooperation.

The consensus in 1992 led to the first agreement between DGIS and the NCEA¹. We are now halfway through the second agreement, which runs to 2012. In this agreement the objectives have been extended. In addition to the activity

which started it all – improving EA reporting by means of independent advice from the NCEA – another important objective has been introduced: capacity development. In this way we contribute to improving existing EA practice and legislation in partner countries and to enlarging the capacity for strategic environmental assessment.

Being a relatively small organisation we must, moreover, make choices; so the following priority points have been incorporated in the agreement:

- capacity development in the Great Lakes, Horn of Africa and Congo Basin regions;
- the mainstreaming of the environment in the water sector;
- safety and reconstruction in conflict areas;
- the integration of biodiversity into strategic planning;

EA for decision-making in Georgia

The NCEA gave advice at five points during the decision-making process for the BTC oil pipeline in Georgia. The advice led to more attention being paid to participation and compensation for the local population and more safeguards to prevent oil leakage in sensitive areas.

EA training in Bolivia

In Bolivia the NCEA carried out 'training on the job' by advising, together with a team from the Ministry of Environment, on the procedure and content of an SEA for the development of the Pantanal. This yielded the insight that the large-scale development of susceptible areas is only sustainable if planning is transparent and includes the participation from all those involved. The Ministry subsequently applied this approach to a second planning procedure, carrying out all the preparations autonomously.

EA for poverty reduction in Ghana

At six points in time the NCEA gave advice on an SEA for the poverty reduction strategy (PRSP) in Ghana. This SEA report resulted in a PRSP 2006-2008 in which environment was more integrated. Implementation is currently ongoing. In addition, eight ministries are now applying the practical experience gained from the SEA to their policy, new budget lines have been opened for environmental goals, and in five ministries environmental units have been created. In 120 districts SEA is being carried out for the long-term development plan.

EA and safety in Rwanda and Congo

At the request of the Rwandan government the NCEA facilitated a workshop in which parties from both sides of the Rwanda-Congo border were brought together to discuss methane extraction from Lake Kivu. The aim of the meeting was to solve the existing impasse on how to monitor the gas extraction. Monitoring is essential for the safety of the extraction and to prevent conflicts between both countries. The workshop was a success: Both governments signed an MoU for collaboration. The Netherlands subsequently decided to provide funding for this and the NCEA was requested to provide technical recommendations for the methane extraction and to carry out the monitoring.

EA and wastewater in Colombia

The NCEA advised on the route of a new channel linking the lagoon near Cartagena, Colombia, with the sea. This channel is intended to reduce the pollution in the lagoon, through regular replenishment with clean seawater. The EA report was to underpin the best route chosen. However, the NCEA pointed out that it was necessary to concomitantly tackle the source of the pollution: the inflow of wastewater into the lagoon. This has been taken on board and work is currently in progress on measures to tackle the source of the pollution.

EA and biofuels

During the COP9 at the Biodiversity convention in Bonn the NCEA – together with GTZ and the Swiss Intercooperation Foundation – presented the new factsheet 'SEA & biofuels'. The factsheet will form part of the OECD DAC SEA guidance that aims to achieve the SEA objectives stated in the Paris Declaration.

EA and good governance in Mozambique

The NCEA issued advice on the new EA regulations in Mozambique, with particular attention to the guaranteeing of transparency (for example, the publishing of decisions) and the creation of opportunities for participation. The advice was taken on board. And in an evaluation of the new regulations, the Ministry of Environment concluded that in certain aspects the regulations had indeed been greatly improved.

Supporting civil society: the Central Africa programme

It has recently been realised that sufficient EA capacity within the civil society in partner countries is essential for both the continuity and quality of EA systems. For this reason, DGIS recently augmented the existing agreement with the NCEA with a programme to support 'EA associations' in eight countries. In this instance, the NCEA is experimenting in managing the budget for the associations, in addition to managing the budget for its own activities. The support to the associations is linked to the capacity development of the governments of the countries concerned.

EA and good governance in Indonesia

- To prevent Jakarta being flooded, a project is being carried out which entails resettling the people living illegally on the canal banks, dredging the canals, storing the dredged material and making a maintenance plan. The NCEA has advised on the EIA carried out for this.
- WALHI is Indonesia's largest forum for environment NGOs. It is an important critic of the Indonesian government. As part of the modernisation of EIA and the introduction of SEA in Indonesia, a delegation from WALHI was trained by the International Institute for Geo-information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) and the NCEA. Part of the training was a discussion between the government and WALHI on improved participation in the new EA regulations. This was the first ever such strategic discussion on EA. Previously, WALHI had mostly operated reactively.

- the harmonisation of EA methods and toolkits;
- a knowledge centre for embassies, DGIS and partner-countries.

Results

In terms of concrete output, the results are clear. Fifteen years of agreement (with a budget of approx. 1 million per year, at current price levels) has led to:

- some 100 independent advisory reports on over 70 projects and plans, 70 advisory reports on EA systems, 150 advisory reports on subtopics being issued by the secretariat (usually at the request of an embassy) and 30 training events (requested by partner countries);
- capacity development in 7 regions in four continents: 20 countries in Asia, 25 in Africa, 12 in Latin America and 2 in Europe.

However, strengthening EA capacity and practice in partner countries is not the final objective of the agreement. As the diagram below shows, as well as improving the environment, the NCEA's work must ultimately lead to poverty reduction, more economic growth and better governance.

So, achieving the NCEA's goal entails many links. As a result, it is not always easy to establish a direct correlation between the input of the NCEA and – for example – poverty reduction and improved governance. There is nevertheless much to say about 15 years' cooperation between DGIS and the NCEA. For example, there are many examples of successes, some of which are mentioned in this article. Others can be found in the independent evaluations of the NCEA's work commissioned at various points in time by DGIS. Independent evaluations of the agreement by DGIS also indicate that the demand from countries and embassies for support to EA is undiminished, and that the services supplied have been found to be effective and efficient.

Ideas for the future

The world does not stand still: hence the need for the NCEA's work to be continually renewed. In the first place, because it may emerge that actions could be more effective.

For example, we have learned that recommendations about a concrete EA are much more effective when linked to a programme for capacity development, and that a focus on the aspects of partition in EA contributes more to poverty reduction than a total focus on the environment. Where do the economic benefits end up? Where are the environmental disadvantages? And what most benefits the poor?

A second important basis for new ideas is the search for dovetailing of our work and the long-term policy of DGIS which is, of course, continually evolving. In 2008, for example, this led to NCEA and DGIS jointly naming of five priority topics for the application of EA in coming years: biofuels, climate change, valuation of ecosystems, local government, and conflict and safety.

In conclusion

EIA and SEA are emerging rapidly around the globe as important tools to help governments achieve sustainable development in their countries, both locally and nationally. We are delighted to be part of this process and look forward with energy and enthusiasm to the years ahead. This gives us the incentive to continuously seek to introduce innovations into our practice, based on our own experiences and those of our partners and colleagues around the world. Key to this is knowledge sharing. We hope that the case studies included in this publication will inspire others to document their own ideas and lessons learned.

- *Author: Rob Verheem, deputy director at the NCEA.*
- 1 *In this article we discuss the international work done by the NCEA under the agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A small proportion of our international activities is funded from other sources, e.g. by other ministries, multilateral organisations and development banks.*

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Advice on specific EA reports

