



Netherlands Commission for
Environmental Assessment



SEA introduction programmes

Country specific SEA

Since 2000 the NCEA has assisted more than 15 countries with the introduction and strengthening of strategic environmental assessment (SEA). We have learned that SEA can only be effective if it is country specific. Below we set out 8 questions that need to be addressed when designing a tailor-made SEA system.

1. Where to apply SEA?

SEA is not simply an environmental tool for national environmental agencies. SEA has added value to government planning at both central and decentralised levels, and across sectors. We advise to involve all sectors and all levels of government in a discussion on the purpose and implications of SEA, and then jointly decide where it should be applied. This helps to build broad commitment for SEA.

2. Regulatory requirements for SEA?

A sound legal basis contributes to the effectiveness of SEA, but it is not necessarily a condition. There are some good examples of effective voluntary SEA systems. Before adopting detailed regulation, a country can first build up experience with SEA in selected (priority) economic sectors. There where it will make the most difference. On the basis of the lessons learned a more permanent legal basis can be established.

3. Who should be in charge of SEA?

Often, a country's Ministry of Environment will step forward to take charge of SEA, because the tool might strengthen their influence on planning. However, practice shows that environmental objectives can often be achieved more effectively when the owner of the plan or programme, e.g. a Minister of Energy, is the owner of SEA as well. This can be complemented by an advisory role for the Minister of Environment, who may also review the SEA quality.

International SEA experiences

Between 2003 and 2012, the NCEA assisted the Bolivian government with the introduction and implementation of SEA. The NCEA provided:

1. assistance in establishing SEA regulation;
2. SEA capacity building;
3. assistance in 5 SEA pilots.

The co-operation resulted in a diverse range of SEA applications, in different sectors as well as trained government staff. A number of strong SEA ambassadors emerged, who promote the added value of SEA in Bolivia. As a last step in the co-operation programme, a distant learning course on SEA was developed. The course targets technical ministerial staff responsible for SEA, consultants and institutes working with SEA, who have basic/advanced knowledge on SEA. Course participants engage in interactive lecture series and undertake practical exercises and assignments. Upon completion, they should be able to prepare for, coordinate the execution of, and manage the overall process of SEA as well as its integration into decision making. This 8 week course is hosted by a Bolivian university.

4. Should policies also be subject to SEA?

SEA for high level policies or laws is often considered more complex than SEA for plans and programmes. For technical as well as political reasons. Therefore, when introducing SEA, we generally advise to start with SEA for selected national, regional and local plans and programmes. After a number of years, the application can be expanded to policies and laws.

5. How broad should the scope of SEAs be?

An SEA does not need to be restricted to environmental impacts. The scope can also include social, health and economic impacts. More and more, we see that SEA is used to assess the contribution of a plan or programme to sustainable development of a country or region.

6. Who bears the costs of an SEA?

As a rule, the agency in charge of the plan pays for the assessment, as well as any public participation activities. Government agencies (e.g. Ministry of Environment) who are consulted in the process, cover their own costs. Experience has shown that budget limitations can be a major hurdle. A lower budget will result in a more limited SEA. Although a low budget SEA can have added value, we generally advise countries to invest in a smaller number of good quality SEAs, rather than a substantial number of poor quality SEAs.

7. How to link SEA and Environmental Impact Assessment?

In an ideal situation, EIA and SEA are combined in one system for environmental assessment. For example, by drafting one framework law for both, but separate detailed procedures for each. This way gaps and overlap between EIA and SEA can be minimized.

8. What kind of institutional framework is needed for SEA?

Successful SEA introduction requires careful design of the institutional framework. Several models can be considered. For example, an SEA secretariat within the Ministry of Environment, combined with SEA units in the sectoral ministries and agencies. An high level SEA steering group or task force can also be very effective.

Lessons learned

The NCEA approach to SEA introduction is based on lessons learned in a variety of countries. The most important characteristics of this approach are:

- Start with **pilot SEAs** to enable relevant decision makers and other stakeholders to get to know the added value of SEA. In the pilots, staff can be trained on-the-job.
- Any SEA legislation developed should be based on the **practical experiences** gained during these SEA pilots. This is more likely to lead to a regulation which can realistically be applied in the specific planning context.
- An **inter-ministerial team** coordinates and implements the SEA introduction programme. The NCEA can share its experience and knowledge by training and coaching

such an SEA team. In turn, this team can share their experiences more widely. The team also acts as SEA ambassadors, both within and outside government.

- Close **cooperation** with government authorities is key to developing an effective country specific SEA system.
- But the NCEA also works in **partnerships** with local consultants or training institutes.
- A certain level of good governance and **political will** is needed before the NCEA becomes involved in SEA introduction in a country.

Components of an SEA programme

The SEA introduction programmes in which the NCEA takes part typically consists of the following components:

- Execution of a country-specific **needs assessment** to assess the planning experience within the relevant agencies, to identify which agencies want to be involved in the introduction of SEA, and which plans, programmes or policies would make suitable **pilot SEAs**.
- Design of an effective SEA system and drafting of **legislation and procedures**.
- Preparation of country specific **guidance** for staff in the agencies involved and a strategy for dissemination of guidance material.
- High level meetings for decision makers and top level staff in ministries involved. These meetings should be organised at the start of programme implementation in order to **raise awareness** and **create commitment**.
- On-the-job **training** for both government staff and consultants who will draft SEA reports. SEA requires a different set of skills and methods in comparison to EIA. Also, NGOs should be trained on their role in the SEA process. Curriculum development at universities would be beneficial to educate future SEA practitioners.
- Data requirements in SEA differ from those in EIA. An SEA introduction programme should identify relevant GIS data and information systems in the country and, if needed, improve **data management** and accessibility.

An introduction programme of two years is a good starting point. But a four to five year programme provides a more effectively foundation for future SEA practice.

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