



# Success Factors for SEA Capacity Development: the Macedonia Case

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EU Member States work with the requirements for strategic environmental assessment (SEA) laid down in the SEA Directive 2001/42/EC. Countries that aspire to become an EU member, such as Macedonia, are in the process of implementing European legislation. The Netherlands has a long track record in SEA. Sharing the Dutch experiences with Macedonian colleagues supports them in bringing their SEA system into line with the European standards. This article describes the NCEA's approach to this kind of peer-to-peer capacity development and identifies the key factors for success.

In 2009, the Macedonian Ministry for Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP) completed the regulatory framework for SEA. The number of SEAs started to shoot up rapidly, but the MoEPP was not satisfied with the quality of the SEA reports that were submitted for review. These reports demonstrated a widespread lack of understanding of the basic principles and purpose of SEA. It was not applied as a tool to bring the environmental consequences of strategic decisions into view, or to identify and explore alternative options and measures. Instead, most planning authorities seemed to approach SEA as a final administrative requirement. Many SEAs were initiated when the draft plan was already close to being finalized, and the SEA's influence would be limited at best. From the questions coming in, the ministry also noted that some procedural aspects of SEA were unclear or inefficient. The MoEPP decided that both the regulatory basis for SEA and the level of practice needed to be improved over the coming few years. It requested a cooperation project with the Netherlands to support this effort.

**“The number of SEAs started to shoot up rapidly, but the Ministry was not satisfied with their quality.”**

In the Netherlands, SEA became a requirement in 1987, in conjunction with the introduction of EIA. An estimated total of 330 SEAs had been undertaken by the end of 2011. Practice currently stands at approximately 30–50 SEAs per year. This gives the Netherlands a head start in implementing SEA, compared to Macedonia. The two countries have good relations, and the Netherlands Ministry for Infrastructure and Environment had funds available for a cooperation project. The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) was asked to undertake this project, because it has a comprehensive overview of Dutch SEA experience and its mandate in SEA in the Netherlands overlaps with some of the Macedonian ministry's tasks in SEA. Both organizations review SEA quality and give guidance on the application of SEAs (see box Ensuring the quality of SEA).

The NCEA and the MoEPP agreed to work together on improving SEA regulation, strengthening the capacity of the ministry's staff involved in SEA and raising awareness amongst other actors with roles in SEA. The cooperation took the form of a government-to-government project (see box) and ran for just over two years. In this article, we set out the capacity development approach taken in this project, describe the results achieved and identify success factors.

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### **Ensuring the quality of SEA**

In the Netherlands, all SEAs are reviewed by the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA). This commission is a government-subsidized, independent expert body that checks whether the SEA report is accurate and adequate for decision-making. Although review by the commission is a regulatory requirement, the commission can also advise on a voluntary basis during other stages in the SEA process, specifically during scoping. The NCEA is also tasked with a knowledge centre function for SEA practice. It provides interested parties with information on the SEA procedures, case examples and good practice.

This idea is confirmed by a recent evaluation of the Dutch government support capacity development. See the NCEA article on the lessons learned on capacity development for environmental assessment

## The NCEA's capacity development approach

### Keeping the whole SEA system in view

The NCEA has now been supporting the development of SEA capacity in various countries for over a decade. In that time, the ideas on what constitutes effective capacity development have evolved. It is becoming increasingly clear that capacity development should tackle the whole SEA system, that is, not only the regulation for SEA, but also the institutional, organizational and human capacity needed for effective SEA, both within government and in society. A systems approach to capacity development considers the roles that need to be allocated in an SEA system, and the range of actors that should be involved. The NCEA looks at the capacities that each actor group needs in order to fulfil its role, and aims to support capacity development where there are weaknesses. Of course, it is rarely possible to take on all the capacity needs within a given SEA system simultaneously. Choices have to be made depending on the scale of the cooperation and who the willing partners for cooperation are. In this case, the government-to-government nature of the project determined at the very outset that the project would predominantly focus on the capacities of the MoEPP.

In the early stages of the project, the Macedonian and Dutch counterparts jointly analysed the SEA system from two angles. First, they identified the various roles that need to be allocated within an effective Macedonian SEA system. For example, all SEA systems require a steady influx of young SEA professionals. Thus, there must be training opportunities for people who are interested in this field. The question was, who should be offering such training, and how can it be ensured that it is structurally available? The ministry counterparts decided that, in Macedonia, this role is best performed by universities and the training institute for government staff. Another important role is that of a high-level champion of SEA within the administrative or political system. Here, the SEA staff of the ministry thought that the Council for Sustainable Development could play a part. The ministry staff concluded that they themselves should be responsible for advising on both the SEA procedures and on practice. While certified SEA consultants (see figure) could advise in specific cases, the ministry should have a help-desk function within the Macedonian SEA system. In this way, the analysis helped the ministry to determine which roles it should take on and how it should organize itself to effectively embody these roles.

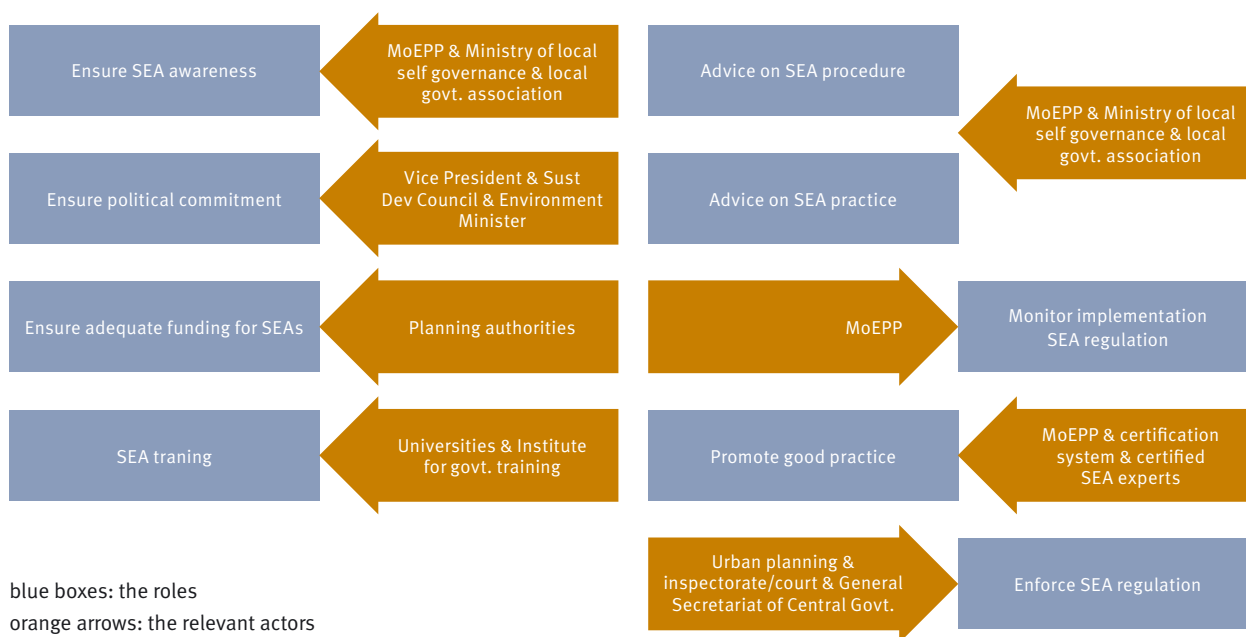
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### Government-to-government cooperation

Under the Dutch government's government-to-government programme (G2G), Dutch agencies with a public function are teamed up with corresponding agencies in eligible countries. The aim is to foster bilateral relations and to contribute to sustainable economic development in the receiving countries. Cooperation projects in the field of the environment are usually funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. Agency NL administers the programme and oversees the cooperation projects.

In this case, the project was initiated by the MoEPP. The NCEA was subsequently asked by Agency NL to draw up a project plan together with the MoEPP. The budget provided by the Netherlands Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment was almost EUR 300,000. The project ran from January 2010 until February 2012.

**Figure: Outcome of a work session at the MoEPP on SEA roles**



Second, the Macedonian and Dutch counterparts looked closely at the SEA procedure as prescribed by the legislation. Here, the questions were: who is involved in which step? What are their tasks, and how are they prepared to carry out these tasks? One of the insights that came from this exercise is the importance of the planning authorities themselves. These authorities need to initiate the SEA procedure when there is sufficient information for screening, but before the plan is fully developed. They are also responsible for organizing public participation in SEA, and need to combine this with the participation required for the plan itself. To be able to integrate SEA into planning, these authorities must have a good understanding of the SEA process. This applies especially to municipalities, as the bulk of planning procedures in Macedonia take place at the local level. At the same time, the ministry noted that many municipalities were struggling to make sense of SEA. To address this priority, a number of cooperation activities were designed to specifically target municipalities.

### Learning by doing

The systems perspective is one of the characteristics of the NCEA's capacity approach. Another is learning by doing. The Macedonian and Dutch counterparts jointly selected two planning processes to which SEA would be applied. Both plans were in their early stages and could serve as the testing ground for any new guidance and working procedures developed in the course of the cooperation. The cases would also provide the ministry staff with a first-hand SEA experience. The selected planning agencies had high ambitions for their SEA, and were willing to subject their work to some interference from the ministry and the NCEA.

The first case was the SEA for the Lake Prespa watershed management plan. This SEA did not lack data or expertise: the challenge was to organize the data into environmental priorities and policy options, and to arrange a structured debate with the



The Macedonian counterparts worked on the wording of the screening lists to get a more focused appreciation. They also redesigned the screening procedure. Together with the Dutch counterparts, they devised a screening form that takes the planning authorities through the screening process step by step. Examples of completed screening forms were prepared to give planning authorities guidance, and a team of Dutch and Macedonian colleagues toured the country to explain the new screening approach. After it had been tested and widely discussed, the new screening approach was effectuated with an amendment to the regulation.

According to the ministry's SEA team, this change has distributed responsibility for SEA more equally between the ministry and municipalities. SEA is no longer predominantly seen as a ministry instrument. The ministry is also impressed with the quality of the screening decisions now being made. It checks all the screening decisions and agrees with the screening decision in about 95% of the cases. As final proof: the number of SEA applications has gone down in comparison to 2009.

#### **Improved SEA regulation**

The changes in the screening procedure were not the only improvement to the Macedonian SEA regulation. Arrangements were incorporated for transboundary consultation on SEAs concerning plans that will have cross-border effects. Following the Dutch example, the ministry also developed a specific clause to allow for a combined assessment procedure for those planning decisions that require both and EIA and an SEA. Small irregularities in the regulation were also ironed out. Although minor tweaking will continue and future implementation issues may give rise to further amendments, for now the regulation is coherent, consistent with the ministry's vision on SEA and meets EU requirements.

#### **Improved capacity of the ministry's SEA staff**

It was clear at the very beginning of the cooperation that the discussions within the ministry's SEA team were constrained by their limited experience with SEA. A study tour was therefore organized early in the project. The SEA team was immersed for about a week in Dutch SEA experiences. It looked closely at how the NCEA organized its work, discussed law drafting with the Netherlands Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, and heard how the municipality of The Hague and the Province of Overijssel organized their SEAs. The level of discussion within the team was greatly elevated after that week, and the team had much more well-defined opinions on what should happen with SEA in Macedonia. When, more than a year later, a delegation of the team attended an international conference on SEA, they could comfortably hold their own amongst counterparts from all over Europe (see quotes).

This positive trend continued throughout the project. The ministry's staff steadily became more confident and convincing in the various workshops and seminars on SEA that were held in Macedonia. At the end of the project, the ministry staff were asked to complete a self-assessment questionnaire. As they had completed the same questionnaire at the beginning of the projects, the results could be compared. Each individual reported an increase in the relevant skills and knowledge, as well as an in-depth understanding of the SEA process and its added value. The team also reported that its expertise is recognized by SEA practitioners. It is now more common for planners and SEA experts to consult the ministry on on-going SEAs.

**'We're moving in the right direction. We've overcome some challenges that other countries are still dealing with. For example, we've devolved the screening decision to the planning authority, which helps build its ownership of SEA.'**

*Jadranka Ivanova, head of the Department for the EU.*



See also: [www.sea-info.mk](http://www.sea-info.mk)

### Improved SEA awareness

Outreach activities were a major part of the cooperation project. An online SEA portal was set up as an interface between the MoEPP and people working with SEA throughout the country. The portal was used to disseminate the regulation and all the guidance and case material produced. The Macedonian and Dutch counterparts jointly organized three national SEA seminars, and three series of smaller scale workshops at various locations throughout the country. The regional workshops engaged municipalities and focused on local planning. Here, people could take part in more intimate discussions on how SEA affected their work. Municipalities appreciated the fact that the ministry's experts had come to them, rather than the other way round. This approach paid off, and the ministry feels that a real difference in the awareness of SEA has been achieved at the municipal level. It has seen the number of good practice SEA examples increase accordingly. The national sessions were aimed more at central agencies and national-level planning. These sessions were also popular, but the ministry feels that the awareness results are more modest. There is still confusion amongst the sector ministries and other national agencies about what SEA means, and work remains to be done.

### More and better certified SEA experts

The Macedonian regulations require an SEA to be undertaken with the involvement of at least one certified SEA expert. This is a relatively uncommon feature of SEA systems in Europe; only Romania and the Czech Republic have a certification system in place. The fact that the experts are certified should guarantee a minimum quality of the work delivered. However, in the early years of SEA implementation in Macedonia, the SEA certification system was not working as intended. The key problem was that the pool of certified experts was far too small. In 2009, there were only five certified experts, and some were spreading themselves very thinly across assignments yet still charging a hefty fee. Now, in 2012, the number of certified experts is heading towards 30, and there is enough competition to keep everyone on their toes. The quality of the experts has also increased, as practice has matured, and there have been more opportunities for professional exchange, in particular through this cooperation project. A testament to this observation is the fact that the percentage of candidates who pass the certification exams has increased. In addition, far fewer complaints are now made to the ministry about the certification system.

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## Success factors for capacity development

At the end of the cooperation, the MoEPP and NCEA counterparts jointly evaluated their experience. Several success factors were brought to the fore.

### A systems approach

The systems approach to SEA capacity development provided a useful framework for the Macedonian–Dutch cooperation. It helped the counterparts to make key decisions on the role of the ministry in SEA and to engage relevant stakeholders. This cooperation project resulted in a number of regulatory changes, and the system’s perspective facilitated careful consideration of how a regulatory change would affect the various actors within the system, and what strategies could be followed to bring those actors on board in effecting the change.

### Dedicated people

At the start of the cooperation, the ministry set up an informal team of staff members as counterparts to their Dutch colleagues. This ‘SEA team’ consisted of people from the two key departments involved in SEA, with an additional expert from the spatial planning department. Having this core team in place turned out to be a success factor for the project. The team composition remained more or less the same throughout the project. As a result, the Macedonian and Dutch colleagues got to know each other and could develop a shared understanding of the Macedonian SEA system. It also helped to establish a practice of cross-departmental cooperation that did not exist previously but is crucial for an interdisciplinary instrument like SEA. The main challenge for the future is to structurally embed in the ministry’s arrangements the capacity that has been built – an issue that should perhaps have been addressed more directly at the beginning of the project when the team was put together.

### Flexible approach

Another success factor was the flexible approach both parties took to the cooperation. New insights emerged in the course of the 2-year cooperation. For example, in the second year, public participation became a more prominent topic. The importance of early public participation in identifying environmental priorities and planning options was discussed especially at the regional SEA workshops. During these meetings, municipalities indicated that they were not always able to organise effective interaction with the public. To address this, additional cooperation activities were set up, and the Dutch Centre for Public Participation was asked to provide its expertise. Although such project changes are labour intensive, they generally make a project more relevant to what people are dealing with at the time.

### Local assistance

Finally, it is important to realize that cooperation activities in this kind of project are added to the day-to-day responsibilities of the ministry. None of the team members was working on SEA exclusively; each had a range of additional responsibilities, and limited time and resources. A local NGO was engaged to provide assistance. This proved crucial in maintaining the momentum in the Dutch–Macedonian communication. The NGO also took care of all the more time-consuming details, such as the logistical preparations for workshops and seminars. Without that type of assistance, it would have been necessary to scale back significantly the ambitions for the cooperation projects.

‘It seems all countries have similar challenges with SEA implementation. This gives us confidence, because our problems with SEA implementation are not so much about our lack of capacity, as about the complexity of the instrument.’

*Kaja Sukova, head of the Department of Sustainable Development.*

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