STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: An International Review

With a special focus on developing countries and countries in transition

By

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PREFACE

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) of policies, plans and programmes is a rapidly evolving field. New approaches and areas of application are emerging all the time, particularly in the fields of development cooperation and international trade. Recently, for example, the Network on Environment and Development Cooperation (ENVIRONET) of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) established a Task Team on the role, scope and contribution of SEA in support of development cooperation. This review is intended to provide a baseline for the ENVIRONET work programme on SEA. It also supports a UNEP programme, initiated in 2003, to develop a generic framework for "strategic integrated assessment" building on the strengths of SEA and earlier work on Integrated Assessment of Trade Liberalisation and Trade-Related Policies.

Both the UNEP and OECD/DAC initiatives respond to the change that is taking place in the agenda for international development, where the focus is increasingly shifting away from individual projects and toward policy-based lending and sector-level programming. This transition has placed a new emphasis on approaches and tools for strategic environmental assessment. It is an 'upstream' continuation of a larger, decade long process of integrating environmental and social considerations into the mainstream of development planning and decision-making across all sectors. Recently, there has been a call for more proactive, integrated approaches, notably in the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

In light of these developments, a review of SEA experience with a particular focus on developing countries, countries in transition and development cooperation agencies seemed to be timely and relevant. To date, the literature on SEA has concentrated predominantly on progress and issues in developed countries. Our initial intent was to avoid reference to this material. But we were persuaded otherwise by southern colleagues who suggested that it would be of considerable help to include a chapter on SEA practice in developed countries (for accessing relevant information and for comparative purposes).

Yet this book does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather it aims to describe the key trends and rapid evolution of SEA, and to provide a picture of the different approaches being used in particular countries and by a range of agencies. Inevitably, the coverage is uneven and varies in extent and depth.. We have been dependent on the information we have been able to identify and access or that individual contributors have offered and provided. In addition, SEA is a fast-moving field where information quickly becomes dated. As far as possible, we have tried to present the latest position but, inevitably, by the time this review is published, things will have progressed again.

The particular focus on developing countries and international agencies has necessitated taking a pragmatic view of SEA in this review. We consider SEA to comprise a broad and diverse family of approaches that includes 'para SEA' processes — a term we use for processes which do not meet formal definitions of SEA or their specification in law or policy but which have some of their characteristics and elements. The concern is to look at SEA and 'para-SEA' from three perspectives:

- 1. What is in place in developing and transitional countries, whether applied domestically or in relation to development assistance and lending?
- 2. How well does this process works, especially from the standpoint of addressing the environmental and resource management agenda agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)? And

3. Which options and measures could strengthen SEA application in the formulation of policies, plans, programmes, legislation and other higher level proposals; and particularly to integrate the environment into economic development, and poverty reduction and sustainability strategies at all levels.

It is apparent that there is resistance in some quarters (particular amongst some senior decision-makers) to even considering the use of SEA. This arises for various reasons, for example: the role and methods of SEA are seen as unclear; or it is perceived to be too difficult, too time-consuming, too costly, etc. (all similarly unfounded criticisms of EIA in its early days). In other circumstances, various methods have been used to assess environmental dimensions and integrate these in the development of strategies, policies, plans and programmes. But these approaches have not been called SEA and those involved do not necessarily recognise them as a form of SEA.

A word on the structure of the book is warranted: The first chapter is introductory and sets SEA in its international context, whilst Chapter 2 discusses terms, principles, benefits and the evolution of SEA. Chapters 3-6 represent the core of the book and deal with SEA experience and practice in different regions/areas of application. But their structure varies. Chapters 3 (developed countries) and 6 (developing countries) are set out along on a country-by-country basis (alphabetically). Chapter 4 (development cooperation) is organised in two main sections dealing with multilateral development agencies and bilateral aid agencies – again alphabetically. But Chapter 5 (countries in transition) is presented in a more thematic manner. This is partly a reflection of different experiences in applying SEA. In the CEE region and NIS, there has been a focus on regional learning, much helped by the EIA and SEA programme work of the Regional Environment Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), which has enabled sharing and distillation that we have been able to draw upon. Chapter 7 discusses the role of SEA in strategic planning processes, particularly strategies for sustainable development. Finally, in Chapter 8, we present our conclusions and recommendations and consider future directions and challenges for SEA.

We are conscious that this is a long book, which covers a lot of ground. This approach is warranted because as far as we know there is no comparable survey of the state of play in SEA development and practice, worldwide. Also adding to the length are many examples of SEA practice and more detailed case studies, which we consider necessary to illustrate SEA in operation and the pros and cons of particular arrangements and approaches. We hope this material will be of interest and help to SEA practitioners and observers, as well as development planners, policy analysts and others involved in preparing strategies and taking actions to integrate economic, environmental and social factors in sustainable development.

Barry Dalal-Clayton and Barry Sadler London, Uk; and Victoria, BC, Canada July 2004

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