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Integrating strategic environmental assessment into spatial planning in Egypt



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2015
Received in revised form
3 May 2015
Accepted 4 May 2015

Keywords:

Egypt
Strategic Environmental Assessment
Environmental development
Spatial planning

ABSTRACT

Like most developing countries, Egypt has been undergoing rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. Recently, Egypt is progressing in many planning sectors; nevertheless, it is argued that there have been many undesired effects on the environment resulted from these development processes. In fact, it could be said that development processes, as a result of national policy over the past three decades, have been associated with the extensive exploitation of natural resources for urban growth. Since sustainable development or sustainability has been highlighted as an essential principle in development planning, it is deemed necessary to modify the existing planning systems so as to cope with the challenges various developments are being confronted with and realise the purpose of sustainability. Thus, in order for better environmental policy and decision making this paper advocates that SEA is the right way towards achieving more sustainable patterns of development. It is felt that the major contributions of this research are: first, to discuss environmental assessment for urban development PPPs which has to date been neglected by the Egyptian government; Second, to propose a model to incorporate SEA process within the spatial planning process in the country.

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1. Introduction

The need for a combination of development and environmental conservation in order to achieve an improved quality of life has been acknowledged by international organisations and many national

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governments, mainly from the developed countries, since the 1970s. In the late 1980s, the environmental movement raised awareness for the need to take environmental aspects into account in policy making at an early stage. In 1989 the actual term (Strategic Environmental Assessment) (SEA) was coined in the UK, an understanding of the concept was derived from that of project based EIA.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is considered as one of the key instruments applied to integrate the environmental issues into a spatial planning process effectively (Alshuwaihat 2005; Jones, et al., 2005). While Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been used to assess the environmental impacts of development projects. The SEA is applied on a higher decision making level to assess the environmental impacts of policies, plans and programs (PPPs) (Sadler and Verheem, 1996; Kjörven and Lindhjem, 2002; Ahmed et al., 2005).

Furthermore, SEA is designed to help countries to make their policies, plans and programs more sustainable. Therefore, it is considered as an essential tool to achieve sustainability and to assist countries meeting their obligations under target 9 of the Millennium Development Goal 7: *“to ensure sustainability by integrating the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reversing environmental degradation”* (Therivel and Partidário, 1996; Ahmed et al., 2005).

The basic aim of the SEA is to ensure that environmental considerations are fully integrated into a decision-making process from the earliest possible stages (Sadler and Verheem, 1996). Implementing SEA of spatial plans has the potential to reduce the negative environmental impacts and enhance the positive effects (Jones et al., 2005). Additionally, the use of SEA at earliest stages of the spatial planning process has guaranteed that environmental issues beyond the boundaries of the project area were incorporated into the design process (Goodstadt and Partidário, 2010). Discussing the benefits to be gained from this integration, Jones et al. (2005) argued that the perceived benefits of SEA in terms of delivering sustainability aspects stem from its proactive, strategic nature and its capacity to effectively integrate the environmental concerns with social and economic issues during the decision-making process. Other widely acknowledged benefit of SEA process is that it can streamline and strengthen project EIA practices. Others argued that SEA can raise the environmental awareness and understanding amongst participants and can potentially enhance transparency and equity during the preparation of spatial planning (Jones et al., 2005).

Egypt suffers from several environmental problems that resulted from numerous factors: poor environmental planning and lack of environmental issues to be fully studied and considered at early stages during the preparation of spatial and detailed plans. Indeed, there are no clear mechanisms for how the environmental considerations are taken into account during the preparation process of strategic spatial plans. Consequently, a wide range of contemporary problems are raised such as erosion of farmlands, traffic congestion, high population densities, deterioration of infrastructure in addition to various social, economic, health, and psychological problems. The existing legislation requires only EIA for the projects according to specific guidelines. However, Environmental Assessment for the plans and policies is not compulsory in the Egyptian legislations to date. According to several studies, traditional project-based EIA has approved inadequate incentives and capacity to assess the environmental impacts at a broader temporal or spatial level (Abdel Wahab, 2003; Abul-Azm et al., 2002; Badr, 2009). Therefore, it is recommended that EA process should be applied at the strategic level. At present, there is no formal provision for the process of SEA in the framework of environmental legislation in Egypt.

Given this background, the objective of this paper is three folds: to explore how SEA, as a tool, could be introduced into the spatial planning process in the Egyptian context within an appropriate legal and institutional framework in order to guarantee that environmental issues are effectively considered at an early stage into the existing spatial planning process, to identify the benefits and constraints of this integration and to propose an institutional framework model to include SEA into the existing legal framework. The paper is divided into six parts; the first part is the current introduction, the second part illustrates the Egyptian environmental context, the third part presents the research methodology, the fourth part examines how the environmental issues are being considered during the existing spatial planning process in Egypt, the fifth part presents the results of the potential benefits and constraints to integrated SEA into the spatial planning process, and finally the paper suggests a model through which SEA can be integrated into spatial planning system. This model can contribute for the national discussion on this integration.

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