



Feature article

# The potential role of strategic environmental assessment in the activities of multi-lateral development banks

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## Abstract

Over the last 10 years, strategic environmental assessment (SEA) has become an important policy instrument for national governments, particularly in Europe. Many of the countries that have experimented with SEA at the national level have begun to extend its use to bilateral development cooperation. Despite these innovations, SEA has yet to gain a serious foothold in the work of multi-lateral development banks (MDBs), although significant advances have been made by the World Bank. In a number of ways, the activities of MDBs are ideally suited to SEA. Unlike most national governments where responsibility for policies, plans, and programs (PPPs) is divided among departments and jurisdictions, MDBs tend to have more control over the different levels of the PPP hierarchy. This means that one of the core focuses of SEA, the notion of “tiering,” is perhaps more readily achieved in MDBs than elsewhere. As a consequence, there are genuine efficiency gains to be had, along with potential improvements in environmental outcomes in recipient countries. This paper presents an outline of a generic, comprehensive SEA system that could be applied to the lending and granting activities of MDBs. The main focus of the paper is the design of a linkage between SEA and the programming cycle of MDBs, where

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental impact assessment (EIA) is now well established and accepted at the national level and in development cooperation. Over the 30 years since its modern introduction, EIA has developed a strong institutional basis and a series of well-tested techniques.

In recent years, however, it has become obvious that while EIA may be a valuable tool for incorporating environmental issues into the design of individual projects, it is not necessarily able to deal with cumulative impacts, indirect impacts, and large-scale effects. As a consequence, EIA's contribution to sustainable development is relatively limited.

At the same time, there has been an obvious trend among bilateral and multi-lateral donor agencies to concentrate more actively on higher-level investments, the idea being that development cooperation might be more effective if it focuses on improving sustainability at the national level, as opposed to a more limited project-driven approach.

Some commentators have suggested that, just as the economic focus in multi-lateral financial institutions has begun to move away from individual projects to macroeconomic adjustments through "policy lending," so there is a need for environmental issues to be dealt with at higher levels (Goodland and Tillman, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

Higher-level investments have been assessed for economic and social impact for some time. However, environmental assessment at this strategic level is relatively rare and the outcome has arguably been a situation where environmental considerations are not systematically taken into account at the level of national planning.

However, this anomaly has finally been recognised and the last 5 years have seen a rapid growth of interest in strategic environmental assessment (SEA).

SEA has expanded significantly at the national level, especially in Europe, and it now has formal institutional backing in many countries. Interest in SEA has also been shown by bilateral donors, to the point where many have guidelines and procedures for applying SEA concepts (ERM, 1999; OECD/DAC, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> It should be stressed that "policy lending" is not a trend that has been followed by all MDBs. Some, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the International Finance Corporation, are predominantly project-oriented banks for the private sector.

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