



Strategic Environmental Assessment and its development in China

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Abstract

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a frontier subject in the field of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). This article describes the current situation of SEA in China, discusses major problems with SEA, and then recommends improvements in the system. In the past two decades, but especially in recent years, the inherent limitations of conventional project EIA have come to light. Thus, to pursue a broader course of sustainable development, the Chinese government has attached more and more importance to SEA. Some legislation has been enacted, and some research has been conducted on the topic in China, but most of the research has been focused on the concept, theory, and method of SEA. Comprehensive application of SEA in China has yet to occur, and only a limited number of case studies are available. SEA as applied today in China is confronted with a host of methodological and procedural limitations. Moreover, public participation is often extremely limited, because procedures restrict public participation. Policies and strategies are kept secret from the public. We believe SEA can be improved by the following recommendations: introduction of procedures to ensure the appropriate level of SEA be conducted for strategic proposals, development of strategic evaluation tools and techniques, encouragement of public participation, organization of educational programs, and implementation of SEA “experiments.” © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Strategic Environmental Assessment; Development pressure; Regional Energy Strategy; Automobile industry policy; Coastal zone planning; Air Pollution Prevention and Control Act; Environmental sustainability; Public participation

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1. Introduction

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for policies, plans, and programs (PPP)—also known as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)—is not legally required in China at present, nor has the government published any guidelines for SEA. However, considerable work has developed in SEA since 1995, and SEAs are increasingly being carried out in practice. These activities are taking place partly in response to the inherent limitations of conventional project EIA, and partly because the government has recognized the significance that SEA is a useful and effective tool for sustainable development.

Since the implementation of economic reform and the opening up to the outside world, the Chinese economy has grown quickly and steadily. Per capita GDP in 2000 exceeded US\$800, and average annual GDP growth for 1979–1998 was 9.7%. But with years of development and a population of 1.297 billion, land resources are becoming more and more scarce; resource consumption and its pressure on the environment are rising. Meeting the needs of its people and the development of the economy on the one hand, while protecting and conserving the fragile environment and limited natural resources on the other, is becoming more difficult.

Taking into account social, economic, and environmental considerations at the earliest appropriate stage of decision-making is an essential component of sustainable development. SEA supports this process by providing appropriate environmental information. Therefore, SEA is required to assist the government in the formulation of future development strategies (including PPP).

2. Current SEA status

2.1. *Development process of SEA*

EIA was legislated by the Regulation on Promoting Previous Work of Basic Construction Project, which became law when the Environmental Protection Act of the People's Republic of China was enacted in 1979. EIA procedures at the project level were mandated, and this became an important cornerstone of feasibility studies of capital construction projects.

In the subsequent 20 years, project EIA has grown, and China also has developed Regional Environmental Assessment (REA) (Peng and Wang, 1996). Especially in recent years, the inherent limitations of conventional, project EIA have become apparent—particularly in its failure to suggest alternative projects and alternative sites. SEA can compensate for some of this deficiency. This has been recognized by the Chinese government, which has subsequently come to attach more and more importance to SEA.

Agenda 21 in China states the need for objectives-led planning and broadening of the appraisal process to encompass the whole range of sustainability.

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