



# Strategic environmental assessment in post-modern times

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## Abstract

The increasing awareness of the findings of policy and decision making theory in the environmental assessment community has recently led to an intensifying debate on the theoretical foundations and the appropriate practical use of strategic environmental assessment (SEA). In this context, most of the recent suggestions on how to improve practice have been influenced—consciously or sub-consciously—by the post-modernist paradigm, focusing particularly on a better integration of SEA into ‘real’ decision making and procedural flexibility. There have also been suggestions that traditional project environmental impact assessment (EIA)-based SEA approaches are generally inadequate. Reacting to the latter criticism, this paper aims at defending ‘traditional’ systematically structured and normative approaches to SEA. While it is acknowledged that a purely professional and technological paradigm to SEA is something of the past, it is proposed that leaving the design of ‘flexible’ SEA to the will of proponents and stakeholders might ultimately render it incapable of protecting the environment.

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## 1. Introduction

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a decision making support instrument for the formulation of sustainable spatial and sector policies, plans and programmes, aiming to ensure an appropriate consideration of the enviro-

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onment. SEA is the ‘big brother’ of environmental impact assessment (EIA) for projects, which has been applied to a large extent in many countries world-wide. Environmental assessment requirements were formulated firstly based on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969 in the USA. Before its introduction, the consideration of environmental aspects in strategic and project decision making largely took place in an incremental manner, i.e. practice was to move away from problems rather than towards achieving objectives (see Meyer and Miller, 1984). In order to remedy this unsatisfactory situation, formal environmental assessment (EA)<sup>1</sup> was introduced as a pro-active instrument for addressing environmental consequences before practical action.

The procedural origins of EA are rooted in rational planning theory, developed in the mid-1950s (see Meyerson and Banfield, 1955) and widely discussed and propagated in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Faludi, 1973). Current understanding of SEA is that it is inherently marked by *bounded* rationality. While certain procedural stages are predefined, policy, plan and programme (PPP) objectives and targets are not defined within SEA, but taken from other sources, such as environmental action programmes or sustainable development strategies. Therefore, SEA is marked by *instrumental* rationality. Since the early stages of its development, environmental assessment has usually been perceived as a learning and negotiation process between multiple actors (Caldwell, 1982; Elliot, 1981).

Based on the currently widespread perception that an instrument rooted in rational planning theory does not reflect ‘real’ decision making, many authors have suggested that SEA should not be predefined, but adapted to the process of the underlying PPP and act in a fully flexible manner. However, while this appears to satisfy the current post-modernist paradigm in planning, it is potentially at odds with the perception that ‘impact assessment and planning serve different but complementary functions’ (Berzok, 1986). Whereas SEA can ultimately benefit from the current debate on flexibility and adaptability, dominated by policy analysts, a reminder is needed that SEA is an applied instrument used by a variety of disciplines that is not only interpreted in one, but in several ways.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, opposite to what is often suggested, there is evidence that both, pre-structured and pro-active EIA and EIA-based SEA are actually effective in improving decision making in terms of a better consideration of the environment, at least at plan and programme levels of decision making in established planning systems (see Ortolano et al., 1987; Wood, 1995; Rees, 1999; Fischer, 2002). Whilst it is probably fair to say that over the past 30 years the environmental assessment community has tended to follow policy analysis, decision making and planning theory debates somewhat from the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, EA is used as a generic term that comprises both, SEA and EIA.

<sup>2</sup> The ecological economist Söderbaum (1999), for example, suggested that EIA was introduced in order to overcome the *rational*-based planning approaches cost–benefit analysis (CBA) and multi-criteria analysis (MCA), developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

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