

# A performance evaluation of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) processes within the South African context

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## Abstract

SEA has been described as being more about process than about product. Yet very little research has been conducted to gain a better understanding of how SEA processes perform within developing country contexts. To address this gap in knowledge the research underlying this paper aimed to evaluate the quality of SEA processes within the South African context against specifically designed key performance indicators. Comparison of the different data patterns revealed general SEA process features as well as three broad models, namely the ‘stand alone’, ‘central to decision making’ and ‘integrated’ models. The research results suggest a particularly poor performance in terms of process quality for the SEA case studies investigated. Moreover, it shows that there is no one understanding of SEA process within the South African context. The main limitations related to a weak understanding of the decision making processes SEA aimed to inform, as well as an inability to incorporate flexibility into process design. To take the debate forward it is proposed that SEA follow-up and effectiveness research be explored to determine which of these models (if any) ultimately contributed to influencing decision making and promote sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

SEA practice has been expanding internationally at a rapid rate, both within developed as well as developing country contexts (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Schmidt et al., 2005). Key

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landmark events such as the European Union SEA directive in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 promoted the concept further and facilitated wide adoption. Since the earliest conceptualisation of SEA, understandings of SEA ‘process’ have been central to debate (Lee and Walsh, 1992; Therivel et al., 1992; Wood and Djeddour, 1992; Sadler and Verheem, 1996; Therivel and Partidario, 1996). Various interpretations have emerged from simple procedural checks to comprehensive processes, depending on the context and availability of resources (Brown, 2000; Therivel, 2004). Years of debate at the International Association for Impact Assessment culminated into international criteria for quality SEA processes (IAIA, 2002). Research in the application of the criteria suggested that it is not equally valid for all contexts and/or all types of assessments (Fischer, 2002; Noble, 2003; Fischer and Gazzola, 2006).

This notion that SEA needs to be developed and refined within a particular national context has been widely supported (Marsden, 1998; Thissen, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). Internationally South Africa is highlighted as a leading developing country in terms of the development of SEA<sup>1</sup> (Therivel and Partidario, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). It has a long history of environmental assessment, which dates back to the 1970s (Sowman et al., 1995; Mafune et al., 1997). Proposals for the introduction of SEA started in the early 1990s, and in 2000 SEA guidance was published (DEAT, 2000; Rossouw et al., 2000). In terms of SEA practice, research shows that SEA has been widely undertaken voluntarily since the mid 1990s, with more than 50 SEAs identified (Retief, 2005). Yet, no empirical research has been conducted to describe the application of SEA processes within the country. The lack of empirical research to evaluate and learn from this wealth of practical experience can be considered a major lost opportunity not just for South Africa but also for the development of our understanding of SEA internationally and especially in the developing world.

This paper provides the results of a review of the quality of SEA processes for six selected SEA case studies within South Africa. It starts by providing an overview of the international and South African debates around SEA process. This is followed by a brief overview of the research methodology after which the results are presented. The paper concludes by interpreting the research results in relation to the international debates on SEA process and by making recommendations for future research.

## 2. International perspectives on SEA process

The evolution of SEA debates has shifted in its views of the SEA process as a formal process, similar to EIA, to a much more flexible and adaptable approach based on procedural principles rather than prescribed steps or phases. It has been argued that SEA is more about ‘process’ than about ‘product’ (Partidario, 1996; Brown and Therivel, 2000) and that in order to deal with the diversity required from SEA applications it should be conceptualised as a framework, defined by core elements or principles, that are incrementally integrated into policy and planning procedures and practices (Partidario, 2000; Verheem and Tonk, 2000). In an effort to provide principles to serve as core elements, IAIA (2002) proposed a set of process quality performance criteria presented in Table 1. In relation to these principles a good quality SEA process is described as one that:

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<sup>1</sup> It needs to be emphasised that due to the broad interpretation of the term ‘environment’ within the South African context (to include the biophysical, social and economic components) SEA is interpreted similar to sustainability appraisal/assessment in other contexts.

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