

A critical review of the dominant lines of argumentation on the need for strategic environmental assessment

Olivia Bina*

*Research Fellow, Centro de Sistemas Urbanos e Regionais, IST, Lisbon, Portugal
Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal*

Available online 12 July 2007

Abstract

In spite of almost two decades of experience, Strategic Environmental Assessment's (SEA) foundations remain unclear to the point that the case for needing an instrument called 'SEA' could be questioned. The aim is to ask: what problems was SEA meant to solve, and what needs was it meant to address, by reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of SEA thinking to date. I do so by organising the reasons and arguments offered by scholars and practitioners under three 'lines of argumentation' related to the strategic dimension of SEA, its methods and purpose. I explore how each line of argumentation affects the concept of (the purpose and role) and approach to (the procedures, methods and tools) SEA. The problematisation of these arguments and their evolution makes a case for the urgent acknowledgment of misleading simplifications. From this analysis I propose a number of promising fields of inquiry that could help respond to the growing expectations attached to SEA and strengthen its 'strategic' dimension: revisiting the concept of assessment in SEA, promoting strategies for the introduction of SEA, and strengthening the contribution of theory to SEA practice.

© 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: SEA; Lines of argumentation; Purpose; Role; Approach; strategic

1. Introducing the problem

This paper engages with the foundations of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as an assessment concept and practical instrument. Although SEA has been the subject of theoretical and practical development for almost two decades, scholars and practitioners remain divided on whether it is theoretical or methodological issues that require additional attention. Back in 1993 scholars maintained that theory had been addressed but that methodologies were lacking: 'SEA has been considered much more from a theoretical than a practical perspective, SEA methodologies are

* CESUR — IST, Avenida Rovisco Pais, 1049-001 Lisboa, Portugal.
E-mail address: o.c.bina.92@cantab.net.

neither well-developed nor commonly agreed upon' (Thérivel, 1993:164). Yet a decade later, questions about the conceptual basis of SEA were still being raised by scholars: '[SEA is] a ... theme in need of reflection, since there has been much development of procedures and methodologies, but significantly less conceptual development' (González, 2001:5). Practitioners agree: 'SEA practice is ahead of theory ... though we are not sure whether this is a good or a bad thing'.¹ These concerns suggest, at a minimum, that early theoretical efforts have left several questions unanswered. Since the early 1990s, SEA commentators have mainly focused on specific practical aspects of SEA as a 'tool' applied to development initiatives (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Fischer, 2002; Partidario and Clark, 2000; Thérivel, 2004; Thérivel et al., 1992), with comparatively few efforts dedicated to SEA theory (Caratti et al., 2004; Partidario, 1996; Richardson, 2005; Thissen, 2000; Wallington, 2002).

Despite SEA's roots in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) – which developed in the late 1960s – and almost two decades of experience, scholars and practitioners appear divided on such fundamental matters as the *concept of* and the *approach to* SEA. Throughout the instrument's career, divisions over these matters have contributed to innovations in process design and a widening choice of methods and tools, resulting in significant diversity in practice (for a recent overview, see Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). Yet despite such progress in practice, SEA's foundations have remained unclear: Does SEA differ from EIA? If so, are these differences related to the concept or the approach to assessment, or both?

These are decisive times for SEA and such questions need urgent answers. Widespread application has led to a process of transformation involving greater complexity and differentiation in the way SEA is understood and applied. There has also been a systematic growth of expectations attached to SEA. Given the growing investments of governments, and multilateral and bilateral agencies, throughout the developed and developing world aimed at institutionalising SEA, it seems imperative to take stock of developments to date, so as to deepen our understanding about the kind of phenomenon SEA is and should be. This paper is intended as a contribution towards a better understanding of the *foundations*, the *raison d'être*, of SEA. The aim is to clarify the challenges to, and potential of, SEA at this critical and opportune stage in the instrument's evolution — a stage when significant attention and resources are being directed to its institutionalisation and application. To do so, I focus on the way scholars and practitioners have framed the case for the development of SEA: What problems was it meant to solve? What needs was it meant to address? To what extent has any of this been achieved?

The arguments put forward by members of the SEA community (including scholars and practitioners) in answer to these questions are identified, in this paper, from multiple sources: published academic research, brown literature (especially guidance documents and case study reviews), 'action research' (SEA training, capacity building and review of SEA processes),² interviews conducted as part of previous research undertaken by the author,³ and observations at

¹ Comment made by Jon Hobbs, of the Department of International Development, during his presentation at the Joint DFID/OECD-DAC Task Team Workshop on *Strategic Environmental Assessment/Sustainability Impact Assessment*, Novartis Foundation, London, 13/10/03.

² Including interactions with trainees at capacity building courses for the Maltese and Bolivian Governments in 2005.

³ This includes my doctoral thesis (Bina, 2003, 2005) and a research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council 'Appraisal, institutional learning and sustainability: defining a new agenda' (see: www.psi.orh.uk/EHB and Owens et al., 2004). Interviews were conducted with academics, SEA and EA experts, government bureaucrats, and decision-makers in the following arenas: Italian Ministry of Transport and related institutions (interviews 2002); Chilean Public Works Ministry and World Bank (interviews 2001-03); and the UK's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (interviews 2003-04).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات