

The emperor's new clothes — Reflections on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) practice in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of research which evaluated the performance of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) practice in South Africa in order to develop understanding of how SEA functions within a developing country with a voluntary SEA system. The research applied a combination of methods in a mixed research strategy, including a macro level survey of the SEA system together with case study reviews exploring micro level application. Three main 'system features' emerged, namely expansion of voluntary practice, diversity in practice and general ineffectiveness. The results also highlight a number of 'application features' such as a lack of focus due to an inability to deal with the concepts of 'sustainability' and 'significance', as well as poor understanding and integration with decision-making processes. Moreover, it emerged that none of the case studies seem to have conducted an 'assessment' per se, but rather provided a framework for strategic decision-making. The paper puts forward a number of interrelated explanations for these system and application features. In a parallel to the fable of the 'emperor's new clothes', SEA in South Africa appears to be regarded as the answer to all environmental problems, whilst being ineffective in practice.

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1. Introduction

International consensus supports the notion that SEA needs to be developed and refined within particular contexts (Marsden, 1998; Thissen, 2000a; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). To date, the uptake of

strategic environmental assessment (SEA) has been greatest within the context of developed countries, and subsequently the majority of research and literature also reflects a developed country perspective. In these countries, SEA has mostly emerged as an extension of existing environmental impact assessment (EIA) systems. Developing countries have been much slower in embracing the concept,³ although progress has been

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³ Excluding countries of eastern and central Europe where practice is, in many cases, more advanced than in some developed countries (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005).

made in recent years (Lee and George, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Schmidt et al., 2005). Funding and donor agency requirements, such as the World Bank safeguard policies, were the main drivers for SEA in these countries. However, there are two main reasons why environmental assessment generally, and SEA specifically, are critically important within developing country contexts.

The first relates to the structure of their economies. Developing countries rely heavily on primary economic activities such as agriculture, tourism and mining. Moreover, a large number of developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, also accommodate subsistence farming communities, which are particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation. This implies that the livelihoods and wellbeing of these countries are directly related to the way they manage their natural resources. Secondly, almost all so-called ‘biodiversity hotspots’, and the majority of pristine environments, are located within developing countries (World Conservation Monitoring Centre — WCMC, 2002). This means that sound environmental management in these countries is not only important from a global biodiversity and conservation perspective, but also in terms of ecosystem services provided and therefore contributes to wider well being in these countries.

South Africa is considered a leading developing country in terms of the evolution of SEA (Therivel and Partidario, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005) and a key player in the development of environmental assessment in the African and Southern African Development Community region (Weaver et al., 2002; Southern African Institute for Environmental Assessment — SAIEA, 2003; Tarr, 2003). It is also considered as one of the few developing countries to have developed a ‘home grown’ approach and identity for SEA, and SEA practice in South Africa seems to have expanded rapidly (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism — DEAT, 2000; Rossouw et al., 2000; Retief et al., 2007). Despite this, debates and reflection on the identity of SEA have stagnated recently. The need for SEA, together with its purpose and definition put forward in the SEA guidance, has not been critically reviewed since 2000, and empirical research on the wealth of practice has been very limited. The result is that there is little ongoing understanding of how SEA functions within the South African context. This can be considered a lost opportunity towards gaining a better understanding of SEA within developing countries, and how its evolution might be advanced.

In order to address some of these concerns, the research reported here provides one of the few attempts to gain a better understanding of how, and if, SEA works. A

mixed research strategy was utilised which included a general survey to gauge the overall status and extent of SEA practice, as well as more detailed case study reviews on the quality and effectiveness of SEA. This paper first deals with the macro level ‘SEA system’ by highlighting key features and then provides four possible explanations for these features. This is followed by an analysis of the key features of the micro level ‘application of SEA’, for which explanations are also put forward. Each feature and explanation is described and justified based on the triangulation of the survey and case study research results, together with international and South African perspectives on SEA. The strength of each explanation lies in its ability to provide a plausible account, based on the research results from a range of sources, for each one of the relevant system or application features.

2. Methodology

Empirical research on the performance of SEA is regarded as one of the most important components of any well functioning SEA system (Sadler, 1996; Wood, 2003). Yet, it also proved the most difficult to conceptualise and there has been little empirical research on the subject (Cashmore et al., 2004; Partidario and Fischer, 2004; Sadler, 2004). Dalal-Clayton and Sadler (2005, p. 367) state that to take SEA forward there is a need to,

...undertake reviews of SEA effectiveness and performance, using a systematic framework and criteria to evaluate the lessons of practical experience (learning by doing). This should apply both to the micro level of SEA of an individual policy or plan proposal and to the macro level of the implementing SEA systems. In both cases, the focus should be on the contribution of SEA to decision-making and, as far as possible, on the results achieved.

This paper considers both the macro (systems level) and micro (case level) application of SEA within the South African context. Previous evaluations (see Sadler, 1996; Arts, 1998; Thissen, 2000a; Morrison-Saunders and Arts, 2004; Jones et al., 2005) make a clear distinction between these two levels.

To deal with the macro level the paper reflects on existing knowledge from a survey of individuals representing government, private sector and research institutions, conducted to determine the status and extent of SEA practice within South Africa (see Retief et al., 2007). A flexible and iterative process of investigation and follow-up was utilised to identify specific SEAs. This found that 50 SEAs were

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