Exploring pluralism – Different stakeholder views of the expected and realised value of strategic environmental assessment (SEA)

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores the concept of pluralism by evaluating different stakeholder views on the expected and realised value of strategic environmental assessment (SEA). The research followed a single embedded case study approach (of a national-level SEA for renewable energy planning in South Africa) and engaged with four different stakeholder groups, namely government, industry, conservation groups, and interested and affected parties (IAPs). A total of 21 different value expectations (VEs) across all four stakeholder groups were identified. However, stakeholder groups contrast significantly in terms of VEs, with government concerned more with process and mandate; industry with cost, efficiency and certainty; conservation groups with data and technical aspects; and the IAPs with local scale issues. In terms of realisation of VEs the results suggest that SEA does provide opportunities for learning; focussing project level EIA and providing spatial guidance on the location of projects. However, SEA was less successful in realising integration of decision making and alignment of policy within government. Recognition and better understanding of the pluralistic nature of expected and realised VEs could potentially improve the legitimacy of SEA processes and methodologies if they are designed and implemented to accommodate pluralism.

1. Introduction

Environmental assessment (EA) is generally characterised by widely different theoretical approaches and perceptions as well as methods and processes. This is because EA is applied in very different contexts and draws on a wide range of scientific disciplines, dealing with a broad spectrum of issues, and questions (Retief, 2010; Fischer and Onyango, 2012; Pope et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2009; Montano et al., 2014). Moreover, it involves a broad range of stakeholders during different phases of the EA process, all with differing views and expectations on aspects such as key issues, impact significance ratings, and required level of public participation (Fuller, 1999; Robinson and Bond, 2003; Nadeem and Fischer, 2011; Ehrlich and Ross, 2015; Huang et al., 2017). This diversity in theoretical grounding, procedural design, scientific methods and stakeholder engagement has given rise to a pluralistic nature of EA. Leuschner (2012), who explores plurality from a philosophical perspective, argues that there are different kinds of pluralism that support the characterization of EA, namely plurality of theoretical approaches for solving a problem, plurality of methodological procedures, and plurality of people who assess a phenomenon from different value perspectives.

Petts (1999, p.149) identified “commonly expressed objectives” associated with different stakeholders for the EIA process. Table 1 reproduces these suppositions which were based on the authors’ expertise rather than stakeholder interviews.

Table 1 clearly illustrates the perceived differences in views and values held by different stakeholders, but is subjective rather than the result of rigorous research into stakeholder views. Indeed, the difficulty and complexity of dealing with the concept of pluralism in EA has been highlighted by different researchers (Peterson, 2010; Bond et al., 2013). However, the authors of this paper are specifically interested in the plurality of different stakeholder expectations around the value of strategic environmental assessment (SEA).

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a well-established form of EA, now applied in more than 60 countries world-wide (Fundingsland-Tetlow and Hanusch, 2012). Over the years a wealth of scholarly research has been produced on various different topics related to the general performance of SEA such as quality (Retief, 2007a; Geneletti, 2015), effectiveness (Thérielle and Minas, 2002; Fischer, 2002; Retief, 2007b; van Biuren and Nooteboom, 2009; Elling, 2009), success (Sadler, 2004; Runhaar and Driessen, 2007), and follow-up...
### Table 1: Assumed objectives of different participants in EIA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-authority</th>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>Local environmental group</th>
<th>Local resident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolve conflict as to which approach to take</td>
<td>Stop or delay an unwelcome proposal</td>
<td>Stop or delay an unwelcome proposal</td>
<td>Stop or delay an unwelcome proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add to professional knowledge</td>
<td>Provide an additional check on project proponents</td>
<td>Provide alternative knowledge and expertise to decision process</td>
<td>Support personal interests are protected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform and educate people about the development/planning process</td>
<td>Provide an additional check on project proponents</td>
<td>Enhance confidence of politicians to take a decision</td>
<td>Enhance confidence of politicians to take a decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure a focus on significant issues</td>
<td>Ensure control over the information process</td>
<td>Ensure control over the information process</td>
<td>Ensure control over the information process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure a permission to develop</td>
<td>Ensure a permission to develop</td>
<td>Ensure a permission to develop</td>
<td>Ensure a permission to develop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Petts (1999).
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