

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA)

Integrating Environmental and Social Concerns into Policies, Plans and Programmes

Definition of SEA

SEA can be defined as "the *systematic and comprehensive process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed policy, plan or programme (PPP) initiatives and its alternatives, in order to ensure they are fully included and appropriately addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision making on par with economic and social considerations*". (Sadler and Verheem, 1996)

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) refers to a range of "*analytical and participatory approaches that aim to integrate environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes and evaluate the inter linkages with economic and social considerations*". The aim of SEA is to protect the environment and promote sustainability (OECD, 2006).

There are many definitions of SEA but the principle theme is how environmental concerns should be integrated in Strategic decision-making.

Legislative and Institutional framework for SEA in Uganda

The Environmental legislations in Uganda provides for integration / mainstreaming of environmental issues into development. The National Environment Act, Cap. 153 provides for statutory functions of NEMA, among them to:

- *ensure the integration of environmental concerns in overall national planning through coordination with the relevant ministries, departments and agencies of Government;*
- *propose environmental policies and strategies to the Policy Committee and*
- *ensure observance of proper safe guards in planning and execution of all development projects, including those already in existence that have or are likely to have significant impact on the environment.*

In general, SEA is still relatively a new concept and its application in the country has mainly been donor driven and/or voluntary. The revised National Environment Management Policy, 2016 and National Environment Management Bill have both incorporated the principles of SEA. Thus, once the bill is adopted, it will become legally binding to carry out SEA for selected Policies, Plans and Programs. In the meantime, a detailed SEA regulation and comprehensive step by step guidelines which highlights institutional roles and responsibilities for carrying out, reviewing, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of Strategic Environmental Assessment are under development to back up the Policy and Bill.

Who is responsible for carrying out SEA?

A ministry, department or agency responsible for a policy, plan or programme, is responsible for carrying out a strategic environment assessment that is likely to have a significant or cumulative impacts on human health and the environment.

Benefits of SEA at a glance

- (i) SEA ensures prudent management of natural resources and the environment, providing the foundations for sustainable economic growth.
- (ii) Strengthen project-level Environment Impact Assessment.
- (iii) It will address cumulative and large scale effects;
- (iv) Assists in building stakeholder engagement for improved governance, facilitate trans-boundary co-operation around shared environmental resources, and contribute to conflict prevention.
- (v) Incorporating sustainability considerations into the 'inner circles' of decision-making.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA)

SEA is not a substitute for, but complements, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and other assessment approaches and tools. SEAs are applied at the Policy, Plan and Programme level prior to more detailed EIA's at the individual project level. Actions submitted to SEA are those for which the subsequent implementation is likely to give rise to significant environmental impacts that cannot be satisfactorily assessed later in the planning process.

Although, EIA is a good tool for evaluating the environmental risks and opportunities of *project proposals* and improving the quality of outcomes, there is still need for a similar assessment process *at the strategic level of decision - making*. Leaving environmental assessment until the project stage severely limits the opportunities to identify the strategic choices that might lead to more sustainable outcomes and reduce risks to the environmental resource base that provides the foundations for growth and development.

Comparison of SEA and EIA

EIA of projects	SEA of Policy, Plans and Programmes
Applied to specific and relatively short-term (life-cycle) projects and their specifications.	Applied to policies, plans and programmes with a broad and long-term strategic perspective.
Takes place at early stage of project planning once parameters are set	Ideally, takes place at an early stage in strategic planning.
Focus on obtaining project permission, and rarely with feedback to policy, plan or programme consideration	Focus on decision on policy, plan and programme implications for future lower-level decisions.
Identifies specific impacts on the environment	Also identifies environmental implications, issues of sustainable development
Preparation of an EIA document with prescribed format and contents is usually mandatory. This document provides a baseline reference for monitoring.	May not be formally documented.
Emphasis on mitigating environmental and social impacts of a specific project, but with identification of some project opportunities, off-sets, etc.	Emphasis on meeting balanced environmental, social and economic objectives in policies, plans and programmes. Includes identifying macro-level development outcomes.
Considers limited number of feasible alternatives	Considers broad range of potential alternatives / strategic options
Limited review of cumulative impacts, often limited to phases of a specific project. Does not cover regional-scale developments or multiple projects	Inherently incorporates consideration of cumulative impacts.
Emphasis on mitigating and minimizing impacts	Emphasis on meeting environmental objectives, maintaining natural systems

Application of SEA

Strategic Environmental Assessments has wide applications to: Spatial Plans, Multi-interventions programmes, Cumulative impacts of related developments, Macro-policies and Sectoral-wide policies.

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