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## Review

# Policy trends of strategic environmental assessment in Asia



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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview on the policy trends of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) in Asia. SEA is promoted as a system of incorporating environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes (PPP). SEA has evolved from an alternative of environmental impact assessments (EIA) to a potential environmental policy integration (EPI) tool in national policy planning. Nevertheless, SEA trends in Asia require a re-examination on its role and effectiveness to avoid SEA implementation in Asia mimicking SEA developments in Europe without customizing its application to local conditions in Asia. Policy trends of SEA in Asia indicate that it is currently an important environmental policy consideration for countries in the region with the formulation of SEA legislations in Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and Indonesia. Nevertheless, SEA implementation also has been impeded by challenges in realizing practical SEA public participation especially in countries with traditionally high cultural power distance dynamics such as China, Indonesia and Vietnam. Meanwhile, countries such as Japan and Pakistan have voluntarily implemented SEA elements such as public participation without legislative provisions while countries such as Thailand, Philippines, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are resisting the adoption of SEA. The primary problem of SEA implementation in Asia has been its limited integration in strategic decision making due to the highly political nature of policy planning framed within the cultural context of Asian countries. Notable progress of SEA implementation in Asia has been the emerging awareness on the need for SEA. Interestingly, SEA prospects in Asia seem to be in the development of international regional cooperation on SEA capacity building. Meanwhile, SEA implementation range from the use of structured policy instruments such as legislative frameworks to non-structured policy instruments such as stakeholder engagement. Consequently, the SEA paradigm analysis suggests that SEA integration in Asia requires a paradigm shift to address the primary strategic gap of over-reliance on structured policy instruments such as legislation. This fundamentally means an adaptation towards a hybrid of structured and non-structured policy instruments to super-stream the benefits of SEA. In conclusion, SEA trends in Asia indicate a sagacious realization that SEA in theory may be a strategic and rationale approach to integrating environmental considerations. However, SEA in practice is a complex, dynamic and challenging process that requires political will, legislative framework and a transparent stakeholder engagement process framed within the cultural context of Asian countries.

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## 1. Introduction

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a system of incorporating environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes (PPP) (Fig. 1). SEA is described as the evaluation of the likely environmental effects of PPP and includes the preparation of an environmental report and the carrying out of public participation and consultations (United Nations, 2012). SEA was initially promoted to address the gaps in project based environmental impact assessment (EIA). This was due to the inability of EIA to address environmental policy integration (EPI) at strategic levels especially during the policy and plan-making process. EIA is limited in its ability to account for the strategic impacts of cumulative effects of multiple and successive projects in a particular area (Dennis and Agamuthu, 2012a) (United Nations, 2003). Consequently, SEA added value by analyzing PPP at an early stage and setting the framework for EIAs at the Project level (OECD, 2006).

SEA has evolved from an alternative to shortcomings perceived in the project based EIAs in the 1970s to an environmental policy planning tool in the 1990s. Currently, it is hailed as a potential strategic environmental governance instrument in national policy planning. The current proliferation of SEA legislation around the world emphasizes the role of SEA as an essential environmental policy planning tool to integrate environmental considerations as well as to complement EIA in environmental protection. SEA potentially can satisfy the emerging need for environmental policy integration (EPI) at a more strategic level than the project level (Dusik and Xie, 2009; Rachid and El Fadel, 2013; Thérivel, 1997). This enables governments to integrate environmental and sectoral policy objectives in national policy planning (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003).

Nevertheless, international trends in SEA is increasingly re-examining and questioning the role and effectiveness of SEA in environmental policy planning. This is due to potential gaps in SEA integration and towards fulfilling its full potential as a strategic environmental governance instrument (Sadler et al.,

2011; Tetlow and Hanusch, 2012). This is to avoid SEA implementation in Asia mimicking SEA development in Europe without customizing its application to local conditions (Agamuthu and Dennis, 2013). This also ensures that SEA fulfils its potential as a strategic environmental governance instrument in Asia. Consequently, this paper aims to provide an overview of SEA policy trends in Asia by conducting an extensive literature review of SEA policy trends of 15 countries in Asia. Subsequently, the authors analyzed the SEA application in these countries on its problems, progress and prospects with a summary on the presence or absence of SEA legislation and public participation provisions in contrast with the practical application of SEA in policy planning and public participation. Furthermore, each country overview was also discussed in the framework of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions of power distance index (PDI) to provide a comparative cultural context on similarities and divergences on SEA implementation across Asia. This is because national cultures differ at the level of unconscious values held by society and is generally stable over generations. Hofstede defines power distance as the extent to which the less powerful members of society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2010). Typically, PDI ranges from 0 to 100 with higher scores for Asian countries than their European counterparts where the average PDI in Asia is 71. Thus in theory, countries that have a lower PDI expect and accept power relations that are more consultative and open to public participation which is one of the key drivers of SEA. Finally, the findings were synthesized within a SEA paradigm framework consisting of structured vs. non-structured policy instruments and their effectiveness in Asia. The purpose of this paper is to expand the SEA subject knowledge by providing insights on SEA policy drivers in Asia.

## 2. Overview of sea in Asia

In Asia, SEA has been translated into national legislation in a number of countries including Hong Kong, China, South

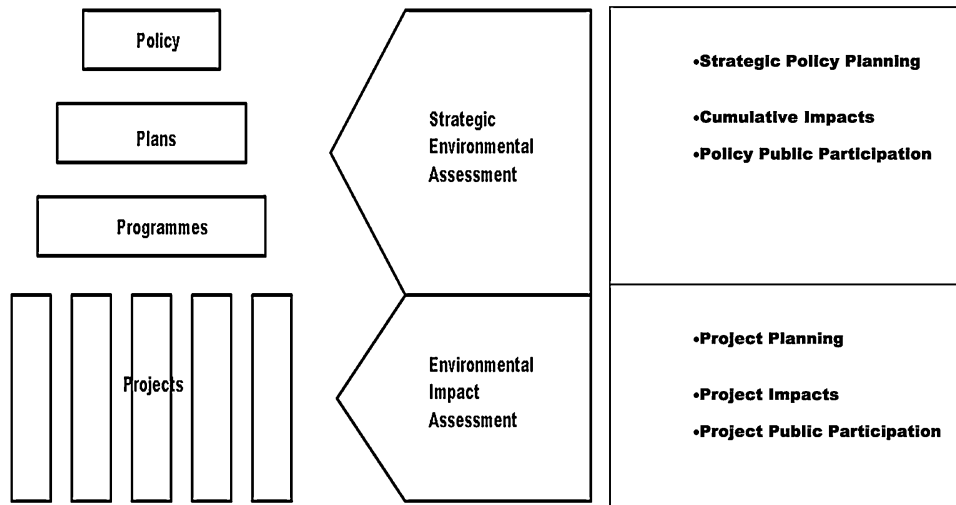


Fig. 1 – SEA and EIA in PPP. (Adapted from OECD, 2006).

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