



Benefits of and barriers to SEA follow-up – Theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

If SEA is to facilitate 'strategic' changes, it needs to focus on shaping the ways in which strategic initiatives are implemented, not just formulated. This is why follow-up which refers to postdecisional activities of SEA and strategic initiatives is increasingly seen as crucial. However, to date follow-up has only received limited attention in the SEA literature, as well as in practical guidance. The key reasons for why post decision activities are often overlooked are the lack of understanding of its actual benefits and purportedly multiple problems with its accomplishment. This paper reports on the results of a comprehensive literature review and an international e-survey on the topic, as well as an in-depth analysis of six SEA follow-up cases from England and Canada. Practically encountered and perceived benefits of, and obstacles to SEA follow-up are identified and discussed.

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1. Introduction

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) aims to identify, predict, and evaluate environmental, as well as potentially socio-economic, consequences of strategic initiatives, such as programmes, plans, or policies (PPP) in advance of any decisions on implementation (see Fischer, 1999; Sadler and Verheem, 1996). The promulgation of SEA is primarily associated with the concept of 'sustainable development', which has put SEA forward as one of the tools able to facilitate 'strategic' transitions towards sustainability (Bina, 2007; Fischer and Gazzola, 2006; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Fischer and Seaton, 2002; Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001; Xuqingrui, 2001.) Another impetus for furthering SEA lies with its potential to reinforce project-level EIA (Partidario, 2000; Sadler, 2005). SEA has spread to different countries and jurisdictions, based on, in particular the European Union (EU) member states' SEA Directive of 2001, and the UNECE SEA Protocol to the ESPOO Convention.¹

SEA has traditionally focused on influencing the *formulation* stages of strategies, often leaving their *implementation* aside (Gachechiladze et al., 2009). Meanwhile, post-decisional stages of SEA or SEA *follow-up* are essential for achieving overall effectiveness of SEA and for

the sustainability-friendly delivery of strategies. Follow-up is essential, particular due to uncertainties intrinsic in strategic planning, frequent divergences at the project level from what has been designed at strategic levels, unexpected circumstances that often emerge when implementing strategies, and the need to track the actual ramifications of strategies in order to provide for feedback and learning (Cherp et al., 2010b; Fischer et al., 2010; Morrison-Saunders and Arts, 2004; Partidario and Arts, 2005; Partidario and Fischer, 2004). We argue that if SEA is to help achieve actual 'strategic' changes towards sustainability, it needs to extend its boundaries from assessing strategy formulation to influencing implementation of strategies. Only in this way will it be able to integrate the environment throughout planning as well as implementation.

Despite its importance, SEA follow-up is frequently not given sufficient attention. To date, comparatively few publications have looked specifically into SEA follow-up. These emphasise various aspects, e.g., the need for SEA follow-up per se (Cherp et al., 2010b), its potential (Partidario and Arts, 2005; Persson and Nilsson, 2007), methodological propositions (Cherp et al., 2010b; Nilsson et al., 2009), tiering (Fischer, 2006a; 2006b), and some empirical research results (Gachechiladze et al., 2009). Frequently, it is suggested that further research is needed (Hanusch and Glasson, 2008; Partidario and Fischer, 2004). Overall, however, little is known about the nature of SEA follow-up in practice, its benefits for strategy improvement, and emerging challenges (Gachechiladze et al., 2009).

One of the key reasons for why SEA follow-up is given insufficient attention is the poor understanding of the benefits it can bring to its users (Gachechiladze, 2010). Another reason is for barriers to actually practise it (see e.g., Arts, 1998). Thus, there is a need to enhance the understanding of the actually perceived and observed benefits of and

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¹ Other national specific requirements include, for example, the Canadian Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals of 1999 and China's Plan-EIA of 2008 (Bao et al., 2009; Fischer and He, 2009; Lam et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2009; Zhou and Sheate, 2009).

obstacles to SEA follow-up. This paper aims to address this gap through learning from practical lessons, thus hoping to help facilitate a wider application of SEA follow-up.

The paper consists of seven sections. After this introduction, the methodology is explained. Then, state-of-the-art of SEA follow-up and its activities, based on a comprehensive literature review is established. Subsequently, results of an international e-survey and an in-depth review of six follow-up case studies from England and Canada are discussed. The paper concludes with synthesising the findings and making suggestions for advancing theoretical and practical aspects of SEA follow-up.

2. Methodology

The methodology underlying this paper consists of the following elements:

- (1) A literature review,
- (2) An international electronic survey on follow-up, and
- (3) An in-depth review of six follow-up case studies from England and Canada.

The literature review is based on a systematic analysis of the available extensive knowledge body on SEA, identified through library and internet searches. A retrospective approach was taken, moving from the broader SEA literature and cross-cutting disciplines to the SEA follow-up literature.

The e-survey aimed at enhancing the understanding of the current state of SEA follow-up practice, as well as laying the grounds for advice on improving SEA follow-up. It was conducted in 2008, utilising the database of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), which presents the most extensive international network of EA practitioners and researchers. Based on the literature review, a number of important benefits of and barriers to SEA follow-up were identified, which were then included in the survey. Respondents were asked to grade the significance of the following SEA follow-up benefits:

1. 'control of a strategy to verify conformance',
2. 'flexible and adaptive decision-making',
3. 'learning and knowledge transfer (feedback and feedforward),
4. 'open and transparent communication/cooperation',
5. 'links within a strategy and between related horizontal, vertical and diagonal tiers',
6. 'capacity-building and management competence', and
7. 'interest in and credibility of the strategic action via informal communication stemming from SEA'.

Respondents were asked to grade these benefits in terms of 'not significant', 'moderately significant', 'significant', 'strongly significant', to 'very significant'. Furthermore, barriers were also identified, based on the following four major obstacles to practising SEA follow-up:

1. lack of legal/formal requirements;
2. lack of clear guidelines and methods;
3. lack of institutional commitment; and
4. lack of resources.

Respondents were asked to grade these obstacles in terms of 'no obstacle', 'minimal obstacle', 'obstacle', 'significant obstacle', and 'not sure'. 42 responses from SEA practitioners, academics, and officials from the bodies implementing policies, plans or programmes that include SEA were obtained. Some respondents specified additional benefits and barriers. In this context, SEA follow-up cases were reported from 31 countries, including 17 developed and 14 developing countries² (see Table 1).

² The division is based on the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database (IMF, 2008).

Table 1
E-survey countries and number of respondents.

	Developed countries	Number of respondents	Developing countries	Number of respondents
1.	The UK	2 ^a	China	2
2.	The Netherlands	1	Tanzania	1
3.	Australia	2	Kosovo	1
4.	Slovenia	1	South Africa	1
5.	Norway	1	Nigeria	1
6.	France	1	Peru	2
7.	Denmark	1	Pakistan	1
8.	Canada	3	Bolivia	1
9.	Spain	1	Ghana	1
10.	Austria	2	Zambia	1
11.	Sweden	1	Kenya	1
12.	USA	3	Cameroon	1
13.	Ireland	1	Sri Lanka	1
14.	Greece	1	Vietnam	2
15.	Brazil	1		
16.	Taiwan	1		
17.	Italy	2		
	Total:	25	Total:	17

^a One each, from England and Scotland.

Whilst the SEA literature is dominated by cases and authors from developed countries (see Gazzola et al., 2004), this survey includes a good representation of developing countries. It should be noted, though, that SEA in developing countries is still not common practice. The instrument is mainly promoted and financed by international organisations, such as the World Bank, OECD, or UNDP. These tend to have more stringent requirements for SEA and follow-up than the countries they are operating in (Cherp et al., 2010a).

Finally, a review of English and Canadian SEA follow-up cases was conducted, including the following methodological elements:

- a. A preparatory telephone and email correspondence with 10 people to determine the main actors/organisations/authorities and responsible persons to be interviewed (using the snow-ball principle);
- b. 12 field trips to case study locations, for data collection and review of available case materials' purposes;
- c. 39 semi-structured interviews, both, face-to-face and telephone-based, supplemented by 20 informal consultations, as well as follow-up correspondence with interviewees and other relevant people;
- d. analysis of field notes, interview transcripts, collected country-specific publications and case documents conducted in three steps: data management, descriptive and explanatory analyses;
- e. comparison of the identified problems and benefits across cases.

The six follow-up cases were selected after a 9-month long search, which was based on the principles of positive replication logic (see Yin, 2003). Cases include four Local Transport Plans (LTPs) in England (Merseyside, Lancashire, Blackburn and Darwen as well as Blackpool). Furthermore, two SEAs from Canada were included, namely the Core Area (Federal Lands) Sector Plan and the Saskatchewan Pasquia-Porcupine Forest Management Plan (FMP) SEAs.

2.1. SEAs of English Local Transport Plans (LTPs)

SEA became a statutory requirement in the UK in 2004. SEAs of LTPs follow a standardized methodology set out in government guidance³, as follows:

- a. setting the context and objectives and establishing the baseline,
- b. deciding on the scope and developing alternatives,

³ E.g., a Practical Guide to the SEA Directive (ODPM et al., 2005), Sustainability Appraisal of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents (ODPM 2005), and the Guidance on SEA for transport plans and programmes (DfT 2004).

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