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Strategic Environmental Assessment for development programs and sustainability transition in the Colombian post-conflict context



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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical analysis of the applicability and relevance of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) in the post-conflict period in Colombia as a means to support societal sustainability transition and avoid the depletion of natural resources and the emergence of new conflicts. Colombia, emerging from decades of war between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), is experiencing an urgent need to allocate financial resources to large-scale projects with the aim of supporting post-conflict development activities, potentially resulting in rapid and hyper-development conditions and causing severe environmental impacts. Theoretically, SEA can be seen as one way to assist the Colombian government in their strategic decision-making and planning. However, the use of SEA will be bound by the post-conflict conditions and the more general institutional setting in Colombia. This article is focused on identifying the opportunities and challenges arising from the post-conflict context and the SEA action arena in Colombia. By doing this, the article provides a better understanding of institutional processes and resources in Colombia and contributes to the limited scholarly literature that is available on the application of SEA in post-conflict contexts, including research on the institutional capacity involved.

1. Introduction

The Colombian government and the guerrilla leftist group FARC-EP signed a peace agreement in November 2016. Since then, Colombia has entered a post-conflict stage that is expected to last 20 years (DNP, 2016). After a peace agreement in a country, there is political pressure to show affected communities the immediate development benefits as well as to carry out development plans for generating better living conditions in the places most affected by war and to build peace and stability for the most vulnerable and the poorest segment of the population (Brown et al., 2012). In some post-conflict countries, development programs are partially financed by bilateral agencies and multilateral aid organizations, and, therefore, resources need to be rapidly allocated in the beginning. According to Bouma (2012), official development assistance tends to peak in the years immediately following a peace agreement and tends to gradually decline thereafter.

In Colombia, decisions about development programs are going to be outlined in the “Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial-PDET” (Territorially Focused Development Programs, PDET). A total of 16 PDETs are currently being developed, these cover 170 post-conflict

municipalities. These municipalities are located in areas with great wealth in terms of natural resources, such as protected natural parks, wetlands, and the Amazon and Darién tropical forests, among other relevant landscapes in the country. Under these circumstances, the recovery period in post-conflict municipalities can be characterized by hyper-development conditions, potentially causing severe environmental impacts. For this reason, the national government has the challenge of addressing development plans in such a way that environmental protection and management are integrated. Moreover, the incorporation of environmental issues into the development plans has the potential to avoid future conflicts, and the management of natural resources is relevant for peacebuilding and long-term stability (Bouma, 2012; Jensen and Lonergan, 2012; OECD, 2008; Verheem and Switzer, 2005).

One option for addressing environmental considerations in reconstruction planning is to use environmental assessment tools such as strategic environmental assessment (SEA). SEA is an instrument that can assist the formulation and implementation of strategic initiatives (Partidário, 2012) and play a political role in decision-making processes (e.g., Noble and Nwanekezie, 2016).

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As a tool for integrating environmental issues in development processes (Partidário, 2012), SEA has the potential to incorporate environmental management into the development plans in post-conflict scenarios. For instance, UNEP suggests that the SEA approach provides a framework for addressing environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction during reconstruction and development planning processes in post-conflict contexts (UNEP, 2011). In agreement with this, Jensen and Lonergan (2012) suggest that SEA could be carried out in post-conflict scenarios to identify the sectors and programs that may cause the greatest environmental impacts. The experience of UNEP in post-conflict assessment has shown that there is a need to build institutional capacities for environmental management immediately after the conflict in order to ensure sustainability by identifying the potential impacts of reconstruction and development projects (UNEP, 2003). Nevertheless, developing countries fail to integrate environmental issues into policies, plans, and programs (PPPs) during post-conflict stages because governments are overwhelmed with coordinating aid and arranging institutional responsibilities (Bouma, 2012), because most of these countries do not have a legal and regulatory framework regarding SEA, and because they have neither the institutional nor human capacity to apply SEA to post-conflict reconstruction investments (Verheem and Switzer, 2005).

The current literature on environmental assessment tools, including SEA, applied in post-conflict countries is scarce and the cases currently studied are reported mainly by agencies such as UNEP, UNDP, the World Bank, and the OECD. Nevertheless, there is some literature linking the use of environmental assessment tools and disaster risk management in post-recovery scenarios (Fischer, 2014).

From the reported cases and available literature, it can be said that there is evidence to claim that SEA has the potential to provide an added value for planning and decision-making processes under post-conflict circumstances. For instance, OECD (2008), Jensen and Lonergan (2012), and Verheem and Switzer (2005) present lessons about the opportunities and challenges of applying SEA in post-conflict countries (summarized in Table 1).

Current experience reveals the opportunities that are associated with the use of SEA in post-conflict settings. Further exploration is needed to identify the added value that SEA can provide for environmental management when planning reconstruction (or development) in a country after an armed conflict. With the aim of contributing to this topic, the current study explores and addresses how SEA can be used for integrating environmental aspects into the PDETs in Colombia's post-conflict municipalities, including the influence and importance of the institutional setting. To analyze this, the study identifies: 1) the planning process for development plans in the post-conflict context in Colombia and how this represents opportunities and barriers for undertaking SEA, and 2) the action arena of the institutional context for SEA in Colombia and how this constitutes opportunities and barriers for undertaking SEA.

The methodology is presented in the following section. Sections 3 and 4 present the characteristics of the post-conflict context in Colombia and the action arena of SEA in the country, respectively. Finally,

Table 1

Lessons regarding the opportunities and challenges of applying SEA in post-conflict countries. (Source: own authorship based upon OECD, 2008; Jensen and Lonergan, 2012; and Verheem and Switzer, 2005).

Opportunities	Challenges
Help to identify environmental risks and opportunities for recovering and reconstruction PPPs in early stages of development and ensure that this does not harm peace. Provide appropriate resource management frameworks and governance, and minimize potential causes of new conflicts. Strengthen and restore the natural resource base and livelihoods in resource-scarce settings. Help in reducing opportunities for natural resource-based trade to fuel war economies. Identify cumulative effects of PPPs that could be missed when only the potential impacts of individual projects are considered.	Possible resistance to applying a comprehensive and extensive SEA due to the urgent needs for humanitarian relief, reconstruction, and security. The local governments may not see the relevance of considering environmental issues in planning in the early stages of reconstruction. Institutional mandates and capacity of authorities are usually weak, making it difficult to implement SEA in the early stages of post-conflict development.

the last part of the article provides an analysis of the findings and summarizes them in the conclusions.

2. Methodology

The approach used in the current study considers the relevance of the contextual factors for conducting SEA in Colombia. Currently, several authors have argued that SEA practitioners must understand the complex institutional planning framework and governance conditions affecting the decision-making processes within which they operate as well as the role that the context plays in SEA effectiveness (see Marsden, 1998; Brown and Thérivel, 2000; Nilsson and Dalkmann, 2001; Fischer, 2005; Runhaar and Driessen, 2007; Jiliberto, 2011; Fundingsland Tetlow and Hanusch, 2012; Noble and Nwanekezie, 2016).

For this reason, the current study analyzes two different contexts: the institutional context, relating to practical issues of applying SEA (referred to as *action arena*), and the post-conflict context affecting the development planning process in post-conflict municipalities. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the constraints and opportunities related to applying SEA to PDETs.

The institutional analysis is based on the analytical framework developed by Slunge and Tran (2014). This framework is based on Williamson (2000) and Ostrom's (2005) previous works, which study institutions at four different levels: 1) *social embeddedness* (customs, norms, traditions, religion, culture, etc.), 2) *the institutional environment* (formal rules and power distribution), 3) the location of *institutions of governance*, and 4) *the action arena* that captures the practice dimension. The current study analyzes only the action arena dimension of the practice of SEA in Colombia. *Action arena* refers to the practical aspects of SEA in Colombia, such as the current experience in using the tool, the level of awareness about SEA in the government, the capacity and knowledge of applying these types of assessments, and the financing mechanisms to support SEA undertakings.

This framework level was selected for two main reasons. First, it is recognized that contextual factors affect the practice of environmental assessment systems. Second, the authors claim that their proposed framework, developed from experiences in Vietnam, may be useful in countries such as Colombia where formal and informal institutions differ considerably from those in Europe and the United States. Table 2 shows how the analytical framework was used by Slunge and Tran (2014) to analyze the empirical data and how it was used in the current article (this is only related to the action arena level):

On the other hand, to contribute to the understanding of the post-conflict context in Colombia, official and public documents from the Colombian government, policy documents, press releases, and reports from non-governmental organizations were analyzed. Furthermore, the office of Sustainable Development of UNDP was contacted informally in order to verify whether SEA was a planned activity or whether it was a requirement linked to the funds supporting the post-conflict activities. It was found that SEA was not a requirement or an activity related to the funds or to the UNDP agenda for post-conflict. In addition, it was

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