Environmental Impact Assessment Review 69 (2018) 32–41

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Impact Assessment Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/eiar

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

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Strategic environmental assessment
Pluralism
Stakeholders
Purpose
Value
Effectiveness
Follow-up
Renewable energy planning

ABSTRACT

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 (Thérivel and Minas, 2002; Fischer, 2002; Retief, 2007b; van Buuren and Nooteboom, 2009; Elling, 2009), success (Sadler, 2004; Runhaar and Driessen, 2007), and follow-up

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2017.11.005
Received 20 June 2017; Received in revised form 20 September 2017; Accepted 27 November 2017

Table 1
Assumed objectives of different participants in EIA.
Adapted from Petts (1999).

Decision-authority	Developer	Local environmental group	Local resident
Resolve conflict so as to reduce appeals	Speed decision process	Stop or delay an unwelcome proposal	Stop or delay an unwelcome proposal
Speed implementation process	Ensure a focus on significant issues	Input detailed knowledge to decision process	Input local knowledge to the decision process
Add to professional knowledge	Reduce or eliminate protest	Ensure alternative knowledge and expertise is input to decision	Ensure personal interests are protected
Introduce additional information and knowledge to the decision process	Bring people onto their side	Protect local environmental objectives	Change proposals to minimize personal and community disbenefits
Provide an additional check on project proponents	Ensure control over the information process	Provide a check on local decision authority	Provide a check on local decision authority
Enhance confidence of politicians to take a decision	Enhance company/organisational image	Protect broader environmental objectives of the group and affiliated groups	Ensure people are listened to
Inform and educate people about the development/planning process	Ensure a permission to develop		

(Morrison-Saunders and Arts, 2004; Cherp et al., 2011; Gachechiladze and Fischer, 2012). Since the early days of SEA the notions that it should provide 'added value' and be 'fit for purpose' have been emphasised (Sadler and Verheem, 1996; Fischer, 1999; Partidário, 2000; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). The understanding has been that for SEA to add value, it should be designed so as to achieve the purpose for which it was intended, however this purpose is understood and/or defined (Partidário, 2000; Sadler et al., 2011). Notwithstanding the wealth of SEA literature, there has been limited reflection on the issue of 'value', even within the EA literature in general, the research by Wessels et al. (2015) on the added value of EIA follow-up verifiers being a notable exception. Moreover, the pluralistic nature of the concept of value has not been explicitly researched within the EA context. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to explore pluralism in SEA by identifying different stakeholder expectations of its value, and the extent to which these expectations are delivered.

One of the reasons for the general lack of EA research on the topic of 'value' is possibly the difficult methodological challenges it presents. Starting with the definition of 'value', defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the importance or usefulness of something", we recognize that it denotes an exceedingly subjective concept (i.e. important to whom? Useful to whom?), which leaves much room for interpretation. Moreover, it represents a concept which is difficult to capture in evaluation (or performance, effectiveness, success) criteria and speaks directly to one of the important kinds of pluralism (plurality of people) described by Leuschner (2012). A particular feature of the SEA evaluation research is that it typically follows a deductive research approach, by measuring performance against preconceived and purposefully designed performance criteria (Lawrence, 1997; Thissen, 2000; Fischer and Gazzola, 2006; Retief, 2007c; Phylip-Jones and Fischer, 2015). However, the subjective and pluralistic nature of the concept of 'value' lends itself better towards more open ended inductive research approaches, as has long since been advocated by authors such as Owens et al. (2004) and Retief (2007c). In order to achieve the main research aim, this paper compares expectations about value of different stakeholders with the perceived realisation of value, within a context where SEA has been well established and is being applied to prominent high level strategic decision making involving a broad range of stakeholders.

South Africa is identified as an ideal context because of well-established SEA practice, since the mid-1990s (Retief et al., 2007; Retief et al., 2008), and its requirement to involve a broad range of stakeholders in the SEA process (CSIR, 1996; Rossouw et al., 2000; DEAT, 2007). SEA practice in South Africa dates back to the mid-1990s (Retief et al., 2007; Retief, 2010) and research conducted by Retief et al. (2007) shows that between 1997 and 2003 a total of 50 SEAs were conducted. Experiences from South Africa represent a broad and diverse range of interpretations and has served as meaningful learning on the implementation of SEA within developing countries in general (Retief, 2007a) and for specific sectors such as water management, planning and conservation (Retief 2006, 2007d, 2007e). The understanding of SEA in South Africa varies between SEA as a re-active assessment instrument (strongly linked to its EIA roots) and a more proactive instrument aligned and integrated with planning processes. In the South African context the distinction between SEA and planning is sometimes blurred. However, this diversity of SEA practice does lend itself to research exploring pluralism. In particular, the recent application of SEA to South Africa's national level renewable energy planning provides an SEA case study with the necessary complexities and broad stakeholder involvement. Moreover, the SEA represents a particularly high profile case, engaging with decision making at national energy and development planning policy level, which includes objectives stipulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) for South Africa. It enjoyed broad engagement, from ministerial level in terms of policy implementation to local level in terms of implications of implementation for local stakeholders. Decisions around the SEA could