SEA and research needs seen from a Nordic perspective


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The need to implement Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for plans was an idea that was already being discussed, internationally, in the mid 1970 (Rodgers 1976). Such notions were later expanded to encompass the additional areas of policies and programmes. The concept of EIA for PPPs (plans, programmes, policies) was thus ‘invented’ and the term Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) was subsequently introduced with reference to impact assessment for so called strategic level planning and decision-making. The level of expectation surrounding SEA has over the last twenty years developed into a veritable ‘cottage industry’ with researchers and officials producing a large number of books, scientific articles and official reports, not to mention also the numerous attempts to provide guidelines. The expectation that SEA can steer planning and programming practice in an environmentally sustainable direction is thus continuously propounded. As such, SEA is in many instances expected to contribute to the implementation of planning practices that are in line with Sustainable Development. Implementation of the EU directive 2001/42/EC: On the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment across the countries of the EU thus increases the need to turn existing SEA experience, normative statements and theories into operational legislation and practice.

The actual amount of practical experience garnered in this context is however not particularly extensive when compared for example to the Environmental Impact Assessment of projects. Indeed, the extensive normative expectations and the lack of empirical evidence of its effectiveness and efficiency (Wood 1999, Emmelin 1998) combined with a lack of clear goals for the implementation of SEA (Hilding-Rydevik 2002) highlights the continuing need for systematic and research based projects targeting these issues. A number of these issues, viewed from the academic SEA discussion and from the Nordic countries perspective, have already been presented by Emmelin, Hildén and Valve, Hilding-Rydevik, Hlokk, Hvidtfeldt and Tesli, in the proceedings from the work-
shop Nordic experiences of impact assessment of plans and programmes (Hilding-Rydevik 2002) preceding the project presented in this report. The issues presented from the workshop and in this volume encompass an overwhelming number of research and development issues relating to the whole R&D field of SEA. The issues put forward also encompass a number of the main issues relating to the development and use of these kinds of ‘tools’ in general. Thus this report has provided a measure of Nordic input into answering some of the questions posed, but it has also provided a number of new statements with regard to the issues of which we still need to know more.

In the coming years the implementation of the EU SEA directive in the Nordic countries will provide ample opportunities to evaluate the impact of SEA, for example raised environmental awareness and on promoting integration of environmental issues in plans and programmes – to understand what kind of ‘intervention’ the directive has become. There will also be significant opportunities through research and development to contribute to these general issues. Further studies are needed in order to:

- Explore and develop the concept of effectiveness in relation to SEA implementation in plans and programmes (when can SEA be considered a ‘success’ and when not) in the long run and for whole national SEA systems and in the short run for each individual SEA process.
- Enhance the understanding of the relationship between the context dependence of SEA and its effectiveness.
- Enhance the understanding of how ‘context’ can be defined in relation to SEA implementation.
- Further the normative statements of what SEA can be, or what SEA should be but do this from more solid base coming out of empirical studies of SEA effectiveness and performance in different contexts and from different point of view.
- Understand the role of SEA in relation to other kinds of ‘tools’.
- Redesign old and develop new context-specific assessment methods in SEA.

References


