

# **A SIMPLE GUIDE TO STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA)**



**CENTRAL ENVIRONMENTAL AUTHORITY**

## MESSAGE FROM CHAIRMAN, CEA

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is now a widely used tool worldwide, to ensure due consideration is given to environmental and other sustainability aspects during the development of Policies, Plans and Programmes. It is being widely used in many countries as an aid to strategic decision making.

In Sri Lanka, project level Environmental Impact Assessment has been effectively implemented since 1993. Although project level EIA is effective in addressing environmental impacts at the project level, it often fails to take into account cumulative impacts of projects. Strategic Environmental Assessment could prove to be a more effective tool in this regard, as SEA is applied at a higher strategic level, thereby ensuring that possible environmental impacts of a Policy, Plan or Programme are addressed at the strategic level.

This handbook on Strategic Environmental Assessment has been prepared by the Central Environmental Authority in order to provide a simple guide to Government Ministries and Agencies on what SEA is, and how to carry out a SEA for a Policy, Plan or Programme.

In May 2006, the Cabinet of Ministers directed that in future, all new Policies, Plans or Programmes to be implemented by Ministries and Government Agencies should be subjected to SEA.

It is in the interest of the Ministry or Agency developing a new Policy, Plan or Programme as well as the general public who will be affected by such Policies, Plans or Programmes if Strategic Environmental Assessment is carried out prior to a Policy, Plan or Programme being implemented, as it will ensure the long term sustainability of the Policy, Plan or Programme.

We hope this short guide will prove useful to Ministries and other Government Agencies in carrying out an evaluation of the possible environmental impacts of new Policies, Plans or Programmes.

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**Chairman**  
**CENTRAL ENVIRONMENTAL AUTHORITY.**

# **HANDBOOK ON STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **What is Strategic Environmental Assessment?**

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is the systematic and comprehensive process of evaluating the environmental effects of a policy, plan or programme and its alternatives. Although the emphasis is on examining environmental effects, most SEAs may also identify significant economic and social effects. In short, its purpose is to promote integrated decision making.

SEA is, in many ways, similar to environmental assessments of projects. It should be noted however, that unlike project level EIA's, SEA does not require in depth analysis, as the focus is more on sustainability issues. Like typical environmental assessments, the process of conducting SEA involves answering a series of questions during the development of a policy, plan or programme. In addressing these questions, any potential negative impacts of the proposal can be identified and mitigated. At the same time potential positive impacts could be enhanced.

### **CABINET DECISION ON SEA FOR POLICIES, PLANS & PROGRAMMS**

In May 2006, the Cabinet of Ministers approved a Cabinet Memorandum submitted by the Central Environmental Authority through the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, recommending that in future, all policies, plans and programmes should be subjected to a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) during their development.

### **KEY FACTS ON STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL SESSMENT**

- SEA is being widely adopted in almost all developed countries as well as some developing countries in order to ensure the long term sustainability of policies, plans and programmes.
- SEA does not usually go for in depth analysis but focuses more on overall sustainability issues.
- Since most environmental issues are resolved at the SEA stage, the scope and depth of project level EIA would be lessened.
- SEA reports have to be prepared by the Agency, Ministry, Provincial Council or Local Authority during the process of policy, plan or programme development.

## **BENEFITS OF SEA**

The key benefits of SEA are as follows:

- SEA provides a means for systematically incorporating environmental, as well as social and economic considerations into policies, plans and programmes.
- SEA allows for consideration of cumulative and synergistic effects. As such, the cumulative impact of a series of smaller projects on the environment could be better understood through a SEA.
- SEA facilitates the implementation of more environmentally sustainable projects. SEA helps identify the most practicable alternatives for achieving positive outcomes and minimizing potentially adverse effects of policies, plans and programmes, thereby resulting in the implementation of more environmentally sustainable projects.
- SEA strengthens policy, plan and programmes decision making processes.
- SEA may reduce the requirements of detailed study during individual project EIA's.

SEA is widely applied in different forms and shapes, and in countries as different as Canada, Nepal, Mozambique and Bolivia. Just as an EIA aims at better projects, SEA aims at better strategies, ranging from legislation and country-wide development policies, to move concrete sector and Spatial Plans. The variation in application is reflected in a number of definitions for SEA. But all good practice SEAs do comply with common basic principles. (Ref - Netherlands Commission for Environmental Impact Assessment publication on SEA)

## **WHEN IS SEA REQUIRED?**

SEA would require to be carried out for the following:

- Policies
- Provincial / Regional / District / Local Authority Plans
- Development Programmes
- Strategic Plans

Strategic plans or programmes relating to defense are excluded from the requirement of SEA. Similarly, proposals prepared in response to a clear and immediate emergency situation are exempted from the requirement of SEA.

In many countries, SEA is carried out on a routine basis for policies, programmes and plans. The examples given below illustrate different programmes for which SEA was successfully carried out in countries as different as Ghana, Mozambique and the Netherlands. (Ref – Netherlands commission for Environmental Impact Assessment publication on SEA)

## **SEA FOR POVERTY REDUCTION**

In 2002 Ghana published its Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy. When drawing up this strategy, little attention was given to environmental issues, such as the impacts of transport, agriculture and private sector developments on the environment. It was therefore decided to carry out a SEA to adjust the strategy where needed. SEA was applied at both national and district level, providing win-win options for the future update of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy and recommendations on how to make over a 100 district development plan more sustainable. (Ref – Netherlands Commission for Environmental Impact Assessment publication on SEA)

## **SEA FOR TRANSPORT POLICY**

In Mozambique an EIA was planned for the proposal to construct a highway to the coast for the transport of bulk products from an Inland Titanium Smelter. The Government of Mozambique decided to carry out a SEA to look at a strategic alternative that might be more beneficial for the country as a whole, the upgrade of a railway line. In addition to transport of mining products, this would also improve conditions for the local population and ecotourism. On the basis of the SEA it was decided that the concessions for the mining companies are granted only for 20 years. During this period an alternative infrastructure plan with a North-South connection has to be developed. Until then the East-West road could be constructed and used. (Ref. Netherlands Commission for Environmental Impact Assessment publication on SEA)

## **SEA FOR SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Dutch province of North Holland developed a new spatial plan to deal with a number of pressing issues, such as poor economic growth, traffic congestion and increasing pressure on nature. A SEA was carried out to find the most sustainable alternative. To begin with, four possible scenarios were worked out, each from a different perspective.

One scenario focused on economic growth, another on protection of the existing identity of the region, a third on development of the tourism sector and a fourth gave priority to nature and quality of life. Through stakeholder participation, involving both civil society and top decision makers, the four scenarios were translated into two integral alternatives. In one alternative it was accepted that the region needed to change. The other tried to find situations within the existing identity of the region. The SEA enabled to find the best option; a plan based on the second alternative including the best elements of the first one. (Ref - Netherlands Commission for Environmental Impact Assessment publication on SEA)

## **SEA FOR THE TRINCOMALEE AND HAMBANTOTA DEVELOPMENT PLANS**

In Sri Lanka, the Central Environmental Authority is in the process of carrying out a SEA for the proposed Trincomalee Development Plan. This development plan which is a high priority plan of the Government, consists of several development projects in Trincomalee such as industrial areas, tourism development area, port related activities, power generation projects and other infrastructure such as roads, housing etc.

A SEA has been carried out in order to find out the best project option and to accommodate the proposed industrial development areas within the plan while conserving the unique environmental features of the area, with special emphasis on the Trincomalee Bay in particular.

It is hoped to carry out a similar SEA for the Hambantota Development Plan in the near future.

## **PROCEDURE TO BE FOLLOWED IN CARRYING OUT SEA FOR POLICIES, PLANS OR PROGRAMMS**

**STEP 1 -** Preliminary Scan - to determine if there are important environmental effects of a policy, plan or programme.

The process of quickly identifying potential significant environmental effects whether they are positive or negative, is referred to as a "preliminary scan".

The following questions can be used to perform a preliminary scan

- What is the content of the proposal (policy, plan or programme)?
- What area or sector is targeted in the proposal?
- Is the sector known to have, or is it likely to cause, environmental effects (eg. energy, transportation, housing, agriculture)?

- Are there components which are likely to have cumulative or long term consequences for the environment (eg trade, industrial diversification, technology development, crop diversification)?
- Does the proposal initiate activities that will have direct environmental impacts or have little or no environmental consequences?

## PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING A SEA

A SEA should explicitly document the consideration of any potential environmental effects that may result from a policy, plan or programme proposal. A SEA should not be viewed as an add-on process but one linked with ongoing economic and social analyses of the proposal. Most importantly, the SEA must demonstrate that environmental factors have been integrated into the decision making process.

The level of effort involved in conducting the SEA will vary according to the scope of the initiative and the significance of the anticipated environmental effects. If previous research or assessments related to the initiative are available, this information should be included in the SEA.

SEA should be started early in the development of a policy, plan or programme proposal. Development of plans and programmes and even policies often involves a steering committee. These committees too should be involved in the process of conducting the SEA. SEA's benefit from the inclusion of outside perspectives. If stakeholder consultations are being conducted for the policy, plan or programme proposal this feedback should be integrated into the SEA.

If the preliminary scan indicates that the implementation of the proposal may result in important environmental effects, whether positive or negative, a SEA should be conducted. A SEA may also be conducted if it will help achieve sustainable development goals, or if there are strong public concerns about the potential environmental consequences of a policy, plan or programme.

The preliminary scan will enhance understanding of the number of environmental issues involved, as well as their magnitude and scope and possible cumulative effects. This information will help estimate the level of effort required to complete the SEA.

**NOTE :** *If the preliminary scan indicates that implementation of the proposed policy, plan or programme will not result in important environmental effects, a SEA is not required to be carried out.*

## **CONDUCTING THE SEA**

The SEA report need not be a very long or detailed report. However the report should necessarily contain the following information.

- What are the goals and objectives of the policy, plan or programme?
- What are the feasible options for delivering the policy, plan or programme?
- What are the most pronounced environmental issues (both positive and negative) associated with each of the preferred options?
- How significant are these environmental effects?
- What can be done to avoid or lessen the negative effects and enhance the positive effects?

## **THE SEA REPORT**

The findings of the above study should then be presented in a short report. It is recommended that the report should not be more than 10 pages maximum. The following areas require to be specifically mentioned in the report:

- The existing situation in the particular sector and/or region.
- The major goals and objectives of the policy, plan or programme.
- The most pronounced environmental issues (adverse as well as positive) of the preferred options.
- The significance of these environmental effects.
- What can be done to avoid or lessen the negative effects and enhance the positive effects?
- Details of consultations with any stakeholders including internal meetings with other sections as well as with external agencies and how the out comes of these consultations were integrated into the policy/plan/programme.
- State how the findings of the SEA influenced the final policy / plan / programme.
- State how the environmental effects associated with the policy, plan or programme will be mitigated and monitored and reported upon.



***Note: a copy of the SEA report should be sent to the Central Environmental Authority for review and comments if any. It should be noted that unlike in the case of project level EIA reports there is no legal requirement for obtaining CEA approval for SEA's at present.***

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