Strategic Environmental Assessment in Thailand

A tool to promote ecological sustainability

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Some issues of greatest concern to development planners

1. Where in the planning process should SEAs fit – how do they integrate into the sector and spatial planning?

2. What are the costs of SEA – do they slow down economic development? (leading to resistance in every sector)

3. What should be the legal status of SEAs – should they be mandatory?

4. What is the best institutional arrangement for SEAs?

5. How much emphasis should be placed on stakeholder consultation in SEAs?

6. What happens to SEA reports – how do they influence decision making system?

Strategic issues undermining Thailand's ecological sustainability and happiness

1. The great shrinking of the natural world
2. Climate change
3. Negative environmental quality trends
4. Increasing zoonotic and other diseases

Those strategic concerns and trends are interdependent (inextricably linked)

International response

Biodiversity:

- 2019 Inter-governmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment
- 2020 UN Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 under the Biodiversity Convention
- 2010 Aichi goals to protect ecosystems - after a decade, all goals have been missed

Climate change:

- Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Reports
- 2015 Paris Agreement on addressing climate change - Paris climate goals are not being met, amid record global heating

Sustainable development:

- 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – few SDG targets have been met.

International response:

- The situation is recognised by the UN - The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2021–2030 the "UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration."

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Tools to promote ecological sustainability

SEA is a strategic planning tool to promote

- ecological sustainability
- mitigation and resilience to climate change
- social equity and well being
- environmental quality
- sustainability in natural resource use

- But they are not a magic bullet – to be effective they require a system wide enabling environment in terms of regulation, standards and capacity building

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1. Integrating SEAs with sector and spatial planning – an "audit" tool

- SEAs and spatial/sector planning are intimately linked

- Good spatial plans provide zones and a framework of sustainability safeguards

- Good sector development plans provide a framework of sustainability safeguards

- SEAs act as an auditing tool - in an ideal world SEAs are a tool to ensure that development is following the safeguards and standards for sustainability set out in sector and spatial plans

- Otherwise SEAs will conflict with existing sector and area plans – and sectors will ignore recommendations

- SEAs can progressively influence the shape and content of future sector and area spatial plans

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How do SEAs integrate into the sector and spatial planning?

Some needed enabling reforms if SEAs are to work:

- **Sector sustainability mandates**: The mandates of sectors need to change – to have sustainability as the key driver

- **Sector and area wide sustainability criteria and goals**: Each sector and area needs to have criteria which drives sustainability as the primary goal

- **Sector green reporting and performance penalties**: Each sector needs to submit a green report to parliament/cabinet annually against its sustainability criteria and goals – penalties such as budget reductions for poor performance

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2. What are the costs of SEA – do they slow down economic development?

- Past SEAs in Thailand have cost allot in terms of Baht (eg 32 million) and lasted 1-2 years

- Fear of undermining sector agency mandates and goals – we are here to build roads, we are here to build energy facilities, we are here to provide water

- SEAs should save time and money as problematic options are disregarded early in planning when only few resources have been spent on their development

- SEAs only slow down development if sectors have not done their job

- We are asking the wrong question –the right question of the future is "do SEAs enhance the quality of development"

- The way we assess sector performance needs to change – the indicators of success to shift from just narrow sector specific growth and expansion to shared sustainability criteria

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3. What should be the legal status of SEAs – should they be mandatory?

- **Yes they should be mandatory** for the most "significant" plans (need criteria of significance)
- **Start modest in terms of the mandatory requirement** and include a sun set clause to review how the system is working (eg after five years)
- **A register of "significant"** social, economic, environmental effects is needed as an up front filter

Examples of SEA systems:

- **Vietnam** – SEAs are mandatory but system bogged down through lack of enabling environment
- **China** – SEAs are mandatory and applied consistently – but are they having influence on decisions?
- **Europe** – SEAs are mandatory – system working well and influential
- **Australia** – SEAs are voluntary – left to discretion of sector ministers – SEAs are fading away

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4. What is the best institutional arrangement for SEAs?

- **Sectors need to lead** the SEA system and process – they should create the enabling environment for SEAs to be effective within their sector – eg establish a framework of sustainability criteria and commitments

- **Sectors to decide on how to implement SEA reports** but must report to Parliament and Cabinet on how they have acted on recommendations

- **Integration across sectors and levels of government is the key to success**:
  - Promote collaboration across sectors to identify interdependencies and address cross-sector issues (establish cross sector working groups)
  - Build partnerships and share information across sector agencies
  - SEAs should be collaborative work between national, provincial/municipal levels of government

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5. How much emphasis should be placed on stakeholder consultation in SEAs?

- SEAs are _strategic_ planning tools with broad spatial, temporal and substantive coverage

- It is not possible or desirable to attempt to involve all those with an interest

- It is best to be _strategic_ in identifying "gate keepers" and representatives of interested groups

- Avoid overdoing the consultative process – that can lead to governments and sector leaders avoiding the use of SEAs in future

- BUT apply participatory and communication methods with those stakeholders who are involved

- Make sure that stakeholders enjoy and understand the process and have a real influence on the outcome

- The process should seek consensus and conciliation as far as feasible

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6. What happens to SEA reports – how do they influence decision making system?

- SEA teams must
  - summarise key recommendations
  - Set clear priorities for action and timing
  - Identify lead responsibilities for action
  - Set out the immediate next steps for implementation and institutional arrangements

- Cross sector working group chaired by initiating sector agency to define needed actions in response to the SEA report – and to monitor actions by relevant agencies

- Action on SEA to be monitored by central authority – eg NESDC and/or ONEP

- Initiating sector to report to Parliament and Cabinet on actions taken on an annual basis

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Thank you!

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