

SEA in Latvian rural spatial planning

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Abstract

In Latvia, SEA as a conceptually new procedure has been first introduced only in 2004 following the EU directive obligations. Since then SEA has been continuously applied to more than 100 municipalities' spatial planning procedures. Therefore the first experiences can be now retrospectively evaluated. Several scholars have pointed to the problematic nature of SEA quality and efficiency assessment methodology. The current study used an innovative approach to assess the success of SEA performance in rural Latvian municipalities by involving the in-depth interview method. Interview results are then combined with SEA documentation analysis. The in-depth interviews reveal some aspects that would have been hidden by formal documentation and procedure analysis, allowing for insight "from below" to the SEA process. The results indicate that in Latvian rural regions the environmental problems arise rather due to the absence of human activities than due to the overexploitation of natural resources. This is especially contrasting to the developed Western countries (where SEA largely originates) and SEA performed within the overexploitation paradigm leads to descriptive generalisations without locally relevant analyses. The inactivity of rural residents in public consultation process is interpreted as selective ignorance of "top-down" processes as opposed by the presence of widespread informal activities. Nevertheless, public involvement is regarded as crucial by interviewees. Consequently, the contribution of SEA to spatial plans is effectively missing which leads to the question of meaningfulness of the SEA process. Therefore the SEA approach needs to be strongly adjusted to local conditions.

Introduction

In Latvia, SEA is a conceptually new procedure that was first introduced in 2004 following the EU directive's 2001/42/EC obligations. The respective requirements were mainly translated from the directive and incorporated in the EIA body of legislation [1,2]. This Latvian legislation took effect on 01.05.2004, that is before the final introduction deadline set out in the directive as of 21.07.2004.

Since then SEA has been continuously applied to various plans and programmes, the majority by far being the territorial planning (TP) procedures of more than 200 local municipalities (parishes - *pagasts* in Latvian).

The focus of the current study is on SEA applied to TP procedures of Latvian rural districts (that is outside metropolitan Riga and a few other larger cities) in 2006-2009 as the first experiences can now be retrospectively evaluated with regards to its efficiency and impact upon TP.

Methods

Several scholars have pointed to the problematic nature of SEA quality and efficiency assessment and a variety of methods has been applied [3-5]. The current study used an innovative approach to assess SEA performance by using an in-depth interview method. Borrowing the term from the social sciences, such a method allows for insights into SEA process "from-below" [6,7]. That is how the SEA is perceived and used by its intended primary users - local communities and decision makers.

The interviews were carried out during years 2010 and 2011 with current or former parish leaders or planning persons either directly involved or having general responsibility for

development and territorial planning, including SEA in their parish or in the whole district. The in-depth interviews were semistructured, including some basic questions regarding SEA process (see table 1.), but were carried out in a free conversational manner and lasted on average 1 hour.

Altogether 10 parishes have been selected for this study grouped in three clusters in western, central and eastern Latvia respectively as shown in figure 1: Ēdole, Renda, Gudenieki - part of Kuldīga district in western Latvia; Arona, Vestiena, Sarkaņi - part of Madona district in central Latvia; Mākoņkalna, Čornaja, Kaunata, Andzeļi - part of Rēzekne and Dagda districts in eastern Latvia.



Figure 1. Location of selected parishes for the study

Results and discussion

The summary of answers to the basic questions is shown in the Table 1. Answers are not represented in the table as citations but only the main message of the answer is included to allow for overview and categorisation.

Table 1. Summary of answers to the basic questions

No	Basic questions	Answers of the respondents	Number of answers
1	Environmental problems in the parish/district (Total number of answers - 23)	No problems There are no environmental problems	4
		Observable problems Outdated waste water treatment plants	2
		Ruined buildings	2
		Heightening of lake water level due to the lock operator	2
		Activities of State Forest company (clear-cutting)	2
		Illegal garbage depositing	2
		Overgrowing of agricultural lands	1
		Expansion of wetlands by re-naturalisation processes	1
		Expansion of hogweed	1
		Administrative problems Bureaucracy of the environmental authorities	1
		Nature protection sites (<i>Natura 2000</i>) as a problem	3
		Afforestation not envisaged in spatial plans	2

2	Activity in public consultations <i>(Total number of answers - 14)</i>	No public activity Relatively active, different levels of activity People with specific interests are active	9 3 2
3	Reasons of low activity <i>(Total number of answers - 11)</i>	Lack of understanding of the procedure There are only a few active persons in the parish Convincement that the opinion will not be taken into account; it will be of no influence Environmental issues are perceived as a burden Everyday work is more important	5 2 2 1 1
4	Impact of SEA on SP <i>(Total number of answers - 14)</i>	No impact No opinion Do not know if there was an impact It would have been easier without SEA; it was not needed. There was a general impact	4 4 3 2 1
5	The essence and sense of SEA <i>(Total number of answers - 12)</i>	It is hard to see any sense, or it is unclear The SEA was of no sense Individually educative, a source of information The sense is doubted An additional possibility to block undesirable projects	6 2 2 1 1

Environmental problems

In taking a first look at the answers to environmental problems it can be seen that one group of them (4 answers) represent the opinion that no environmental problems are present in respective municipalities. Here and further in the text some citations from the interviews are given and are as close to as possible translations from Latvian to English. For example as one parish leader explained *"We do not have things like environmental problems. [...] Storks thrive, frogs are jumping"*.

Another category of answers can be described as reflecting the abandonment of the countryside and the resulting re-naturalization processes and lack of human activities. For illustration a parish planner responds after thinking: *"Nothing like that. [...] Lautere has many ruined buildings"*. Other problems include the overgrowing of abandoned agricultural lands, expansion of wetlands, expansion of hogweed and afforestation planning.

Expansion of wetlands is caused both by abandonment and non-maintenance of amelioration systems as well as by the large number of beaver dams on small streams. Indirectly illegal garbage dumping can also be linked to this category as a lack of personal resources and/or responsibility in combination with availability of abandoned spaces for dumping.

It is especially worthwhile to emphasize the answers where the protected nature territories themselves (*Natura 2000* EU network) are regarded as a problem. For illustration, a particularly colourful interview with a parish leader: *"[...] many people, afraid of liens and restrictions on their property, have abandoned their land, and so the property has become overgrown and derelict. Because of this, in some areas it looks like we have returned to the stone age, with wild animals ready to eat us.[...] I think that we don't have to protect nature as much as we have to control it, we have too much of it already. Our environment is controlling us."*

Public participation

Typically public hearings of the SEA are not attended by the local public in rural Latvia. If attended, the interest mostly concerns various restrictions or other aspects of the territorial plans. It was stated quite clearly by one planning head who had been leading the preparation of several SEAs *“There has been no interest in SEA reports from the local residents.*

Meetings that dealt with the report were either poorly attended by the local residents or else those who attended were mainly concerned only with territorial planning issues.”

Altogether 9 of the answers reflected this absence of public activity (see Table 1). Further, in 3 cases there were mentioned different levels of public activity. And two answers indicated that it was a particular group of people which was active in their parishes - several people who had specific interest in building permits on attractive locations, and which were not parish locals. Asked for the reason for low public activity, parish representatives in 5 interviews explained that it was because of not comprehending the procedures, and with regards to both TP and SEA. But other possible reasons were also mentioned (see Table 1). Notably, it was mentioned in most of the interviews that it would be important to involve or at least to have the opinions of the local public in order to make TP and SEA procedures more meaningful.

Impacts to territorial plans

Answers to the question of whether SEA had had an influence on TP revealed no opinion in any of the parishes that SEA would have mitigated or eliminated any environmental impact. Generally, the interviews revealed little or low expectations toward any influence of SEA upon TP. Answers to this question were usually short, as if reflecting some degree of surprise or great difficulty to answer. For example, a planning responsible person first instinctively re-asked: *“Did SEA report influence the TP? How shall I say it, specifically maybe [not]”*. Half of the answers reflect this type of attitude: parish representatives either do not know (3 answers), or have no opinion (4 answers), and one ambiguous answer that SEA had some undefined effect upon TP.

In another six interviews there was more or less clearly formulated opinions that SEA did not have any effect upon TP (4 interviews) or that SEA was not needed at all (2 interviews). For example: *“[if SEA has not been applied] nothing would have been different [...] I think that the strategic assessment of impact to the environment has a lot of useless talk dealing with this stuff.”*

This result perhaps explains to a large extent the opinions on the significance of SEA procedures, where as many as 9 interviews state that it makes no sense or that it is difficult to see or of doubtful importance. In two interviews the SEA report was seen as personally instructive, and one planning head saw SEA also as a means to block some unwanted activities.

SEA reports

SEA is predominantly performed as an analysis of a ready TP and concentrates mostly on the report preparation itself. The review of SEA reports showed that a large part of the report is given to descriptions of environmental background data including items with little relevance to the impact assessment (as if to fill the space). And proportionally very little space is left

for the impact analysis itself. Perhaps rightly, as it seems to be difficult to find relevant impacts to analyse within the overexploitation paradigm. Typically, it is concluded in the reports that if all the environmental regulations are followed no negative environmental impacts can be foreseen.

As stated by the representative of the competent authority responsible for the reviewing of the SEA reports, such formal attitudes to SEA and its contents *"are known to the authority"*. However, it was added that there are some improvements now as compared to reports prepared in the years following the introduction of the SEA directive.

The re-naturalisation processes may seem to be facilitating the environment; however it is not always the case. For example, overgrowing and abandonment of agricultural lands is a serious threat to the biological diversity (as is overly intense and monoculture farming). The leading environmental discourses, prevailing policies and legislation are largely based on the overexploitation and sustainable development paradigms. And so are the IA tools - SEA has been primarily constructed to timely avert the negative impacts of the development - as the upstream tool of EIA. So this contradiction between the overexploitation paradigm, prevailing in "official" environmental discourse, including SEA and the widespread abandonment and re-naturalisation processes in the Latvian countryside with very little or no development planned is a challenge to SEA methodology and approach in rural Latvia. As can be seen from the interview results, thinking in overexploitation terms is certainly not present in the parish representatives' mind-set.

Thus where appropriate, the overexploitation paradigm has to be abandoned, and instead an approach strongly tailored to the local conditions must be adopted - a new paradigm of abandonment and re-naturalisation should be applied.

Conclusions

In Latvian rural regions the environmental problems arise rather due to the absence of human activities and re-naturalisation processes than due to the overexploitation of natural resources. This is especially contrasting to the developed Western countries (where SEA largely originates) and SEA performed within the overexploitation paradigm leads to descriptive generalisations without locally relevant analyses. A new paradigm of abandonment and re-naturalisation should be applied.

Introduction of the SEA directive without a clear public understanding of its aims and without wider discussions, especially taking into account that there has been no previous experience in the country with strategic impact assessments contributes to the inefficiency of the SEA procedures.

Finally, the in-depth interview method proved to be very valuable. It is time and resource consuming, but allows for a deeper understanding of attitudes and reveal some aspects that would have been hidden by only documentation analysis, allowing for insight "from below" to the SEA process.

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