

SEA integration in sustainable planning frameworks

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Abstract

In only few decades SEA has grown worldwide, taking different forms in different international contexts. This paper compares current SEA policy across two countries with different institutional and planning systems: Queensland, Australia and Lombardia, Italy.

Assessment of the key strengths and weaknesses for SEA conferred by sustainable planning legislation in our case studies is supplemented by 30 interviews with planners and others involved in sustainable planning. It highlights a critical gap between SEA theory, legislative guidelines, and practice in urban and regional planning. More integrated forms of SEA have the potential to achieve a new generation of more effective sustainability assessments and improve legislation and SEA practice.

Aims of the study

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), the ‘family of tools’ (Partidário, 2000, p. 655) developed to implement ‘sustainability’ in urban and regional planning schemes, is apparently failing “on its inherent promise” (Bidstrup & Hansen, 2014, p. 34) to “make the world a greener and more liveable place” (Thérivel, 2004, p. 3). Firstly, the general quality of this instrument seems to benefit only in marginal ways from the current proliferation of SEA tools and procedures (Dalal-Clayton & Sadler, 2014). Because of this, “talks of streamlining in the name of efficiency” (Morrison-Saunders, Pope, Gunn, Bond, & Retief, 2014, p. 7) suggest that the whole family of Impact Assessments –which SEA belongs– is facing “marginalisation and or even extinction” (ibid.). Secondly, it is useful to recall that SEA applies to a variety of policies, plans and programs (PPP), in a variety of institutional and geographical contexts (Sadler et al., 2011). To address this issue, theorists and practitioners need to follow integrative approaches to make SEA “effective as a strategic decision-making support tool” (Partidário, 2007, p. 470), resisting any temptation to adopt blueprint standardised solutions (World Bank, 2011). Although fifteen years has passed since Nitz and Brown wondered “if SEA has learnt how policy making works” (Nitz & Brown, 2001), this question seems more actual than ever considering the current uncertain scenario of unsatisfactory outcomes (Fischer, 2010). Since SEA relies heavily on stakeholders’ participation and skills (Sadler & Verheem, 1996; Mathur, Price, & Austin, 2008), exploring how capacity-building processes involve social and institutional actors is a required step to identify current issues affecting the design and implementation of SEA in diversified frameworks (Partidário & Wilson, 2011). Assuming stakeholders’ involvement as a key factor to bridge the gap between SEA theoretics and practitioners, in this paper we investigate how administrators and professionals contribute and comply with legislation and guidelines on sustainable planning schemes. The study is developed in Australia and in Italy, two countries with different planning and sustainability assessment traditions, as well as diversified socio-political frameworks (Farinós Dasí, 2006; Fischer & Gazzola, 2006; Sadler et

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al., 2011). The focus on the regional and local level outlines to what extent the national legislations actually foster the integration of SEA in urban and regional planning.

Analytical framework

Building on this premise, previous analyses on the Australian and the Italian context have outlined how SEA is shaped and enforced through legislation and guidelines respectively in Queensland (Baresi, Vella, & Sipe, 2015) and in Region Lombardia (Baresi, Vella, & Sipe, 2014). The main difference identified concern the role of the sustainability assessment of policies, plans and programs (PPP), which is compulsory and external to the planning process in Lombardia, whereas it is either integrated in the planning process or generally optional – with few exceptions– in Queensland. However, because of the similarities identified in such different planning and institutional systems, we decided to advance our exploration by collecting the perspectives of relevant stakeholders belonging to government and non-government organizations, academic and professional associations. Theorists, legislators, administrators and practitioners are selected at several institutional levels, to gather a wide spectrum of perspectives. About 15 representatives are considered in each case study, with a focus on State, regional and local level in Queensland, and a focus on regional, provincial and local level in Lombardia.

We then define key themes to investigate by adapting the thematic areas utilised in previous studies on legislation and guidelines in Queensland and Lombardia (Baresi et al., 2014, 2015). These refer to: (A) legislation and guidelines, (B) integration between sustainability assessment and planning process, (C) sustainability goals and indicators, (D) organization of technical aspects, (E) organization of participatory aspects, (F) arrangement of the monitoring phase. Consequently, we define a set of questions to be delivered through semi-structured interviews. Advancing the format of previous studies on topic (De Montis, 2013; Rega & Bonifazi, 2014; Van Doren, Driessen, Schijf, & Runhaar, 2013), our questionnaire investigates the feelings and role of each interviewee in the planning process. This relates both to tasks undertaken and relationships among stakeholders, investigating and how each organization could optimize its contribution to sustainable planning.

Areas of investigation	Topics explored
<u>1. Current scenario</u>	
Interviewee's profile	a. Professional tasks
	b. Perceived priorities to achieve sustainable planning
Interviewee's organization	a. Tasks undertaken and structure of the organization
	b. Current flaws and suggested improvements
Relationship with other organizations	a. Coordinated tasks
	b. Interactions with external organizations
	c. How to achieve better collaboration and outcomes
<u>2. Hypothetical, desirable scenario</u>	
Interviewee's organization	Potential involvement designing and implementing more effective sustainable planning practices
Relationship with other organizations	Potential cooperation designing and implementing more effective sustainable planning practices

Table 1 The categories of questions featuring the questionnaire

Results and discussion

Overall, most of the Italian interviewees (77%) criticised the way planning schemes relate to sustainability assessments (B). SEA, conceived as a separate procedure which is compulsorily drafted in parallel to PPP, was described as a muddled, 'bureaucratic impediment' with no real impacts on the decisions undertaken by local councils. A first cause lies in the unclear allocation of competences between PPP proponents and SEA developers, which often coincide. Because of this, the regional authority is relegated to a formal role of assessor without real influence on SEA and therefore on plan's contents. Second, the local level of planning is not perceived as suitable for the current format of SEA, for two reasons. On the one hand, many environmental phenomena require analyses far beyond local administrative boundaries. On the other hand, minor local councils struggle drafting satisfactory SEAs because of shortage of financial and administrative resources. Third, the lack of efficacy appears embedded in a poor way to involve stakeholders in the decision-making process (E). Although regional legislation mandates stakeholders' participation to SEA conferences, most of them reluctantly participate by keeping passive attitudes and releasing feedback only at the end of the process. Fourth, SEA is apparently falling short to support planning decisions because of unresolved issues affecting the measurement of PPPs impacts on the environment. A reason is identified in the discretionary way that local councils select convenient indicators to assess their own plans through SEA. Most of the interviewees addressed this four-fold problem as a priority to be resolved by: (D) establishing agreements between local councils and regional bodies on database organization and management (61%); (C) defining suitable sustainability indicators (67%); and consequently (F) organizing monitoring reports (78%). From this perspective, a recognized priority is to select a reduced number of univocal, significant indicators not only to resolve conflicts between organizations using different datasets, but also to reduce the amount of workload and resources currently spent to build extensive, hardly updated and redundant databases. In order to achieve these results, some activities involving the revision of the regional planning law (n.12/2005) and the regional plan are redefining how SEA is conceived in Lombardia. Referring to ecosystem services, this process identifies few relevant and measurable indicators to be calculated within homogeneous territorial areas (ATO) which ideally resize and supersede the existing provinces. This process is supported by an innovative online regional portal to foster the flux of data from local councils to regional offices, one of the main current problems outlined by provincial and regional stakeholders involved with planning, SEA, and data management.

In Australia, 'SEA' identifies national appraisals run by the federal government on projects and plans impacting ecological valuable areas (Ashe & Marsden, 2011). Although this procedure could be developed at the local level on a voluntary basis, the Queensland interviewees did not identify it as a useful practice since its costs are higher than the benefits achieved (B). As a result, sustainability assessments currently rely on the State Interest Review, a procedure run by state departments to verify if the contents of local plans comply with state policies (e.g. State Planning Policies) and regional planning schemes. Because of the lack of external sustainability assessments, the interviewees focused on how to improve the existing integrated process.

Most of the interviews (82%) raised the need to improve how 'monitoring' (F) assists local councils understanding the effectiveness and environmental impacts of their policies. This could be pursued by linking in a cyclical way the policies adopted by local councillors, the actions enforced, their outputs, and the resulting outcomes. Some organizations (e.g. Planning Institute of Australia) are working together to improve the existing scenario, bringing their contributions in a moment of political change impacting on state legislation (A) and planning schemes. This process directly involves an update of the statutory Regional Plans, dealing with land use, and indirectly affects the non-statutory Natural Resource Management (NRM) plans dealing with environment and natural resources. Since the statutory Regional Plans lack clear sustainability indicators, they often refer to NRM plans when it comes to address environmental indicators and parameters (C). However, the non-statutory regime of NRM plans and their consequent lack of value in Courts intrinsically undermine the position of local councillors when it comes to assess and eventually reject the feasibility of developers' proposals. The decision of keeping environmental sustainability indicators outside of statutory documents is one of the reasons why many interviewees labelled the current planning framework as 'development oriented' and 'developers-friendly' rather than 'sustainability driven'. When asked about hypothetical ways to overcome this 'impasse' affecting the pursuit of sustainability, most of the interviewees agreed on the development of effective operative guidelines (A) to detail clear sets of simple but effective indicators, univocal databases to use and periodically update, and the organizations responsible for these processes (D). In order to proceed this way, a shared recommendation was to learn from previous analogous institutional attempts, when the state of Queensland drafted a South-East Queensland regional plan including 'too aspirational' indicators which were perceived as 'incredibly difficult to achieve'. This perception nourished as no guidelines were provided on how to measure those indicators, who was responsible for the process, and who was overseeing their implementation. As a consequence, 'they lost credibility and they were therefore ignored' at the local level of planning.

Towards more integrated SEA

Respectively, the current procedures enforced to achieve sustainable planning are defined as 'nebulous' and 'undefined' by Australian interviewees, and too bureaucratic and resources-consuming by Italian stakeholders. Lack of effective integration between planning process and sustainability assessments can be traced in flawed attempts to transpose the theoretical goals of sustainable development (SD) into practice. Although the pursuit of the triple-bottom line of SD is among the goals of legislation in Queensland and Lombardia, operative guidelines have failed addressing how to achieve this goal. This lack of clarity led to redundancy in tasks management and ultimately to weak positions of local councillors when facing developers lobbies. Therefore, any attempt to achieve more integrated SEA relies on bringing together heterogeneous stakeholders to address and support the political process towards sustainable outcomes, balancing the lobbying activities delivered by developers and economic interests. Most of the interviewees agreed that the outputs of these activities should be finalised at the regional level of planning, considered the most suitable to enforce state and regional policies in local planning schemes.

Further studies will illustrate how Region Lombardia is succeeding revising its SEA procedure to increase its efficacy and integration with planning processes, and how Queensland is improving integrated sustainable planning while keeping the properly labelled 'SEA' as a separate, national procedure utilised for ecological purposes.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

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