

Strengthening Strategic Environmental Assessment Guidelines for Pacific Island Countries and Territories.

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Abstract

The Pacific region is faced with several environmental and socio-economic challenges requiring strategic planning and decision-making to safeguard the environment and promote sustainable development. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP) is mandated to promote cooperation in the Pacific islands region and to help protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. SPREP's mandate is delivered through technical and policy advice and support in the key strategic priority areas of Climate Change Resilience; Islands and Oceanic Ecosystems; Waste Management and Pollution Control; and Environmental Monitoring and Governance. Articulated in Regional Goal 4 of the SPREP Strategic Plan (2017-2016), the organization and its members have identified the promotion of environmental assessment as a priority area, given the increasing development and emerging issues in the region. To support its members by safeguarding them from these driving forces, SPREP developed the "Strengthening Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Guidelines for Pacific Island Countries and Territories" as a strategic planning tool that would support sound development decisions and the path towards attaining environmental sustainability and sustainable development. The SEA Guidelines have the potential to be a useful tool for decision-making and can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the Pacific island's region. However, to effectively implement these guidelines and mainstream them into decision-making processes, SPREP requires the support of regional and international development partners as well as its member countries. This paper introduces the SPREP SEA Guidelines and how the tools can support the informed strategic decision making across the region and explores the challenges and opportunities associated with its implementation.

1.0 Introduction

The Pacific region is home to an exceptional natural and cultural biodiversity, featuring unique ecosystems that sustain the livelihoods of millions of people. Yet, as the region continues to experience rapid population growth and increasing economic development, the environment faces unprecedented challenges. Climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss are just some of the complex and pressing issues that the Pacific region is confronting. These challenges have elevated the importance and complexity of environmental assessments in the Pacific, requiring more advanced

tools and methods to ensure sustainable development and protection of the region's natural resources.

In 2023, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Program (SPREP) celebrates its 30th anniversary, since its establishment in 1993. As the regional organisation established by the Governments and Administrations of the Pacific charged with protecting and managing the environment and natural resources of the Pacific, SPREP has achieved significant milestones in its vision of "A resilient Pacific environment sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures."

SPREP's commitment to promoting and advancing Environmental Assessments (EA) in the Pacific region is at the core of its work. The promotion of environmental assessment was further emphasized as a priority area in SPREP's Strategic Plan 2017-2026. One of its key strategic programs of action is the Environmental Monitoring and Governance Programme, which aims to enhance the capacity of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) to monitor and manage their natural resources effectively.

SPREP provides technical assistance and guidance to member countries and territories to facilitate the development of regional policies and frameworks and build capacity for environmental assessments. To this end, SPREP has been involved in the development of various regional and national environmental assessment guidelines and frameworks. In 2015, SPREP developed the "Strengthening Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Guidelines for the Pacific Islands and Territories" with Member countries and partners to provide a framework for the conduct and review of EAs in the region. Since then, SPREP has been continuously working with PICTs to strengthen their capacity in conducting EAs and ensuring that they adhere to best practices and meet international commitments.

Over recent years, the environmental assessment landscape in the Pacific has evolved significantly. The region has experienced an increased demand for infrastructure development and resource extraction, leading to a growing number of large and complex projects. These projects have significant implications for the environment, society, and economy of Pacific Island communities. Therefore, the need for robust and effective environmental assessments has become more critical than ever before. This necessitated the need to embrace higher level environmental planning decision making tools. Building on the success of the regional "Strengthening Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Guidelines for the Pacific Islands and Territories" the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Guidelines for Pacific Countries and Territories were published in 2020. The guidelines provide comprehensive guidance for conducting SEA at the national and regional levels, with the aim of promoting sustainable development and environmental protection in the Pacific region.

Although applied globally since the 1960s, SEA is a relatively new concept in the Pacific region, with only a few examples of its application. Hence, the development of the SEA Guidelines is crucial and timely given the increasing interest to effectively address new emerging issues such as seabed mining and multiple development projects across the region. It ensures environmental assessment is fully embedded in broader

national and sectoral policy, planning and programmes to achieve sustainable development at a much larger scale. SEA provides a systematic process by which environmental and climate change considerations are required to be fully integrated into the preparations of development plans, proposed sector policies and strategies, and development programmes prior to their final adoption.

This paper discusses the aim of the SEA guidelines and its purpose and benefits for the Pacific Island Countries and requesting support and guidance on establishing SEA as a decision making tool in the Pacific region.

2.0 What is Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA)?

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a powerful tool for assessing the potential environmental, social, and economic impacts of policies, plans, and programs (PPP), to help decision-makers make informed decisions that promote sustainable development outcomes.

The SPREP SEA Guidelines aim to:

- a. provide guidance on the application of SEA as well as support environmental policy decision making for environmental sustainability and ultimately contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals;
- b. intended to assist local authorities such as Environment Agencies and National Planning Offices and Strategic Offices in Pacific Island Countries and Territories with understanding what Strategic Environmental Assessment is, the benefits that can be achieved through its targeted use and how and when to apply it to ensure that environmental and social matters are integrated into policies, plans, programmes and projects; and
- c. used by other Government Sectors and non-government organisations in terms of developing and implementing of new policies and programs with a view of better informed public participation in strategic planning.

SEA shares many similarities with EIA as they are both used as a means of evaluating and mitigating potential effects of a proposal. However, EIA is applied on a project basis, whilst SEA is generally applied at an earlier stage, during the development of PPP. SEAs do not require the same level of in-depth investigations to gather data and information; SEA are not intended to be overly burdensome or gather new data. Unlike EIA which require location specific detailed data it is acceptable for SEA to rely on existing information and even non-quantifiable data when needed.

Because SEA is applied at an earlier stage than EIA, there is a greater opportunity to influence environmental and socio-economic outcomes by integrating these considerations into the PPP before it is implemented. This process enables the identification and promotion of positive environmental and socio-economic outcomes and can allow significant adverse impacts to be avoided entirely. For instance, by conducting an SEA

it is possible to influence where and what type of development occurs i.e. steering suitable developments towards less sensitive areas, rather than simply trying to minimise the impacts in a specific location once a project proposal has been submitted.

3.0 How can SEA be used?

SEA is a process that can be used in three main ways:

1. To assist prepare a strategic development or resource use plan for a defined land and/or ocean area;

This is the systematic assessment of land potential and alternatives for optimal land uses and improved economic and social conditions through participatory processes that are multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and scale dependent. The purpose of land-use planning is to support decision makers and land users in selecting and putting into practice those land uses that will best meet the needs of people while safeguarding natural resources and ecosystem services for current and future generations. Tools and methods for land-use planning at appropriate scales should encourage and assist the diverse and often competing users of land resources in selecting land-use and management options that increase their productivity, support sustainable agriculture and food systems, promote good governance over land and water r

2. To examine the potential environmental impacts that may arise from, or impact upon, the implementation of government PPP;

SEA is a good mechanism to facilitate consultation and public participation in the evaluation of environmental aspects of policy, plan, or program formulation. Consultation and public participation at the beginning of the planning process brings valuable information into the SEA and thus increases the credibility of the policy, plan, or program that is finally accepted. The benefits of applying SEA to national sectoral policies, plans and programmes are well recognised by development agencies and governments in developed countries. The scale and nature of programmes require more than traditional EIA. SEA examines the environmental and health risks associated with the PPP reforms, support and investments in a sector, and enables a framework for environmental and health management and monitoring to be agreed and built into the specific elements of the sector programme and its implementation mechanisms.

3. To assess different classes, sectors or types of development projects, so as to produce general environmental management policies or design guidelines for the development classes/types.

For instance, SEA could include the development of a water resource management plan for a catchment or aquifer, to support sustainable water use and water security; the preparation of a whole-of-island agricultural development plan, with an aim of increasing local food security; the development of a multi island infrastructure programme such as for harbours or rural roads; or the development of a marine spatial

plan that is based on informed and coordinated decisions about how to use a range of marine resources sustainably, within a defined area.

4.0 What are the Benefits of SEA?

The key benefits of SEA are that it:

- Ensures that PPP development is consistent with the national policy and legal framework and promotes achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Encourages the integration of environmental and socio-economic considerations into national/ government policies, plans and programmes during the early stages of their development. This can, in turn, help to establish a governance framework for sustainable and resilient development;
- Adds value to decision-making processes, by highlighting the key opportunities and risks, enabling opportunities to be maximised and risks to be avoided or mitigated;
- Promotes transparent governance by encouraging public involvement in policy development and planning;
- Provides early warning of cumulative and transboundary impacts as well as any unintended consequences from the PPP, as cumulative effects are best anticipated at a strategic level.
- Identifies trade-offs between environmental, economic and social issues and enhances the chance of finding win-win options;
- Sets a broad environmental and sustainable development vision for defined land/sea areas, economic sectors or themes, which in turn sets the context for project specific EIA and supports consistent decision-making for individual development projects;
- Provides a strategic environmental management plan (SEMP) which sets out the management action to be taken, the responsible person or organisation, the timeframe and budget to achieve the actions to be taken. The SEMP will also include the institutional arrangements that will be necessary to 'drive' the implementation of the SEMP, including the coordination of several different government and nongovernmental organisations;
- Provides confidence to development agencies and stakeholders that environmental and social safeguards have been incorporated into the PPP development process, and that specific project proposals are developed within a sustainable framework;
- Reduces the time and effort required for project EIA by addressing the more significant risks at an earlier stage.

5.0 Users of the SEA Guidelines

The SEA Guidelines are intended for use by all sectors including non-government organisations and development partners to guide and support planning and decision making for environmental sustainability and sustainable development at national and regional levels.

6.0 Current challenges facing SEA adoption and implementation in the Pacific.

- **Lack of Capacity:** Many Pacific nations lack the necessary capacity, expertise, and resources required to conduct comprehensive environmental assessments. This is primarily due to limitations in funding, access to technology, and a shortage of qualified personnel.
- **Limited Technical Expertise:** Another major challenge is the limited technical expertise available to conduct environmental assessments. This results in assessments being carried out by individuals who may not have the necessary skills and knowledge, leading to sub-par assessments.
- **Inadequate Legal and Institutional Frameworks:** In many Pacific nations, there is a lack of adequate legal and institutional frameworks to support effective environmental assessment processes. This includes weak legislation, limited enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient coordination among government agencies responsible for environmental governance.
- **Lack of reliable environment data:** The availability of complete and accurate data is critical to conducting thorough environmental assessments. However, data collection and management systems in some Pacific Island countries and territories are not adequate, leading to incomplete or unreliable data.

7.0 Strengthening SEA in the Pacific Region

- **Rolling out awareness raising, capacity building and training on the Guidelines** as part of SPREP's on-going capacity building programme on environmental assessment for its Pacific Members. This is important to allow better understanding on its application and purpose. In order to deliver on this, SPREP will need the support of the development partners and donor agencies to design a proposal for long term support on the application of the tool.
- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** Governments in the Pacific region recognize the need to strengthen legal frameworks governing environmental assessments. This includes reviewing existing laws and regulations and enacting new ones that are more comprehensive and enforceable.

- In the global direction of managing activities in Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), SEA and EIA are identified as key elements of the International Legally Binding Instrument that will govern and provide decisions and direction on activities beyond our exclusive economic zones. Review of existing policies and legislation to factor in SEA in areas beyond national jurisdiction will be a major task that will need to be undertaken by Governments in the Pacific region.
- Collaboration with donors and partners: Inviting development and donor partners to work with SPREP in developing projects and programs to strengthen and develop national guidelines and policies on the application of the SEA guidelines.
- Strengthening the application of Geospatial Information on Strategic Environmental Assessment in the region.
- Incorporating traditional knowledge: Traditional knowledge and practices can provide valuable insights into environmental impacts and can inform SEA processes. Incorporating traditional knowledge can help ensure that SEA reflects local values and priorities.
- Utilization of existing data and information portal at SPREP as a Data repository center for environmental Assessment in the Pacific region and strengthen the utilization of the SPREP Pacific Network of Environmental Assessments to raise the decision capacities of environmental assessment practitioners in the region.

Conclusion

References and link:

1. Strengthening Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Guidelines for Pacific Island Countries and Territories (<https://www.sprep.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/SEA-Guidelines.pdf>)
2. SPREP Strategic Plan 2017-2026. (https://www.sprep.org/attachments/Publications/Corporate_Documents/strategic-plan-2017-2026.pdf)
3. Strengthening Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Guidelines for the Pacific Islands and Territories (<https://www.sprep.org/attachments/Publications/EMG/regional-eia-guidelines.pdf>)



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