EVALUATION IN PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE: THE CASE OF STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA)

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1. Introduction

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a decision support instrument to steer the planning actions towards more sustainable development aims, by integrating environmental considerations into the choices of decision makers. Although this tool is widespread in a large part of the world, the SEA has been normatively formalised only within the European Union through the directive 2001/42/EC. Since 2005, the SEA has become a compulsory component of the planning process, strongly interrelated with plan approval. In respect with the high expectations related to its opportunity to merge environment within planning process, the SEA still not achieved good level of effectiveness. According to Fundingsland Tetlow and Hanusch (2012, p. 20) «the capacity of SEA to exert influence is often limited by SEA having a 'fine-tuning' rather than a 'plan-shaping' role».

In order to suggest possible enhancements for SEA, the aim of the paper is to understand how theories can contribute in stimulating practice improvements, considering on how and which theoretical backgrounds should be explored to reach fruitful developments of environmental assessment. Similarly to Friedmann (2008) which tried to deal the question "planning theory for what(?)", emphasising the achievements of planning practice due to the evolution of theories, a reflection on the role of theoretical debate within SEA theory can stimulate or renovate further challenges. Even with different focus, several studies attempted to find a link between planning and environmental appraisal theories. According to Lawrence (2000), environmental assessment failed to acquire lessons from planning thoughts. Within this debate, Kørnøv and Thissen (2000) addressed the issue of rationality within the SEA practice. On the contrary, Richardson (2005) tried to explore the complicate issue of power relating with the environmental assessment. While, Vicente and Partidário (2006) analysed the communicative potential of SEA, emphasising the opportunity to mediate planning interests through the evaluation. Nonetheless, with the purpose of identifying the main debates of SEA theory, an in depth analysis of the directive (2001/42/EC) has been structured, highlighting three principal theoretical strands. Starting from its object, the directive defined this tool as an environmental assessment for plans and programmes. Reasoning on these few words, the prime theoretical reference is the evaluation in planning that represents the space in which decision-makers' supporting tools have been generated. This task has been interpreted in different manners within diverse planning concepts. As from the Costs-Benefits Analysis, probably the first evaluation methodology applied to planning activity in allocating public resources (Lichfield, 1960), a great volume of research was developed, covering multiple aspects (Lichfield, Kettle, Whitbread, 1975; Oliveira, Pinho, 2010). Environmental awareness emerged in 1970s and 1980s, has consequently generated an extension of evaluation aims, emphasising the environment and its connection with economic sphere. Subsequently, the directive clearly defined the decision making as the SEA domain, so the second key issue explored the decision theories.

Thus, in order to understand the context of SEA, a deep reflection on the classical decision models (Bobbio, 1996) has been structured, underlining the distinction regarding the nature of decision makers, process' characteristics, roles and limitations. With Faludi (1987), the decision was connected with environmental planning, anticipating the sustainable development debate. The SEA should increase opportunity to merge sustainability within decisions but, for this aim, it requires knowledge about descriptive and normative decision theories. Shifting the decision context from a unique decision-maker, typical of rationalist concept, to pluralistic approaches, the factors which affect decision consequently changed as well. Within this context, the directive emphasised the inclusive nature of SEA. Therefore, the last issue is about the public participation which has acquired a core role starting from the debate commonly defined as "communicative turn". Although the environmental appraisal debate offers a variety of explorations on the topic of participation, the SEA can become a place to merging the contributions arising from both rationale and communicative approaches, overcoming current controversial positions developed in planning theory.

Based on existing literature, the study reflects on these three key issues in order to examine the nature, context and embedded mechanism of the SEA, emphasising how to improve impacts on planning decisions. The paper closes by reflecting on the opportunity to integrate considerations developed within theories, proposing a set of perspectives about how SEA practice can learn from these theoretical strands. Questions regarding timing of evaluation, relation between different and powerful stakeholders, role of public administration offices and the need to move from the concept of knowledge to knowledges have been addressed with the aim to emphasise possible fruitful integrations. Recognising the importance as well as difficulty of this matter, a prolific synthesis among tasks and engagements, institutions and actors represents an endless question for the environmental issue. In this terms, the paper defined the SEA as integrative domain for different thoughts, identifying four open challenges which connect theory and practice of environmental appraisal.

The study is structured in two sections. In the first, the three key issues cited above have been analysed, connecting the theories developed in planning with several specific contributions to SEA debate. The second section concerns a consideration about elements of theories which can contribute to improve the activity of the planners and thus, contemporary practise.

2. Evaluation in Planning: from economic values to environmental awareness

As defined in the directive 2001/42/EC, the Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is an environmental evaluation of plans and programmes. The basic aim of this instrument is to provide a structure for decision makers during their planning actions so as to integrate environmental considerations with the social and economic spheres. In these terms, its main theoretical must be identified in the debate about the evaluation in planning. An extensive variety of methodologies, tools and research has been generated within this consolidated tradition of thought (Guba, Lincoln, 1989; Lichfield, 1960; Mastop, 1997). Lichfield (1970, p. 151) defined the evaluation as «the means of aiding the selection by the decision makers (those commissioning the plan) as to which alternative plans they will adopt a the best for the community for whom they are planning; or aiding the planners themselves during the planning process in the similar need for selection», he continues: «Evaluation in the sense is one form of what is called

the testing of plans or parts of plans, also with a view to selection as among alternatives».

One of the first methods, the Costs-Benefits Analysis (CBA) has offered a great aid to decision-makers with regard to the allocation of public resources for projects or plans. In order to cope the problems related to cases which presented "undeterminable" benefits and costs (f. e. human cost, value of life, etc.), the Cost-Effectiveness Analysis-CEA was promoted and it has been used for public investments such as Health programmes. This family of approaches attempts to predict impacts before the implementation by using matrix and/or other techniques in order to simulate the real context, identifying a typical ex-ante model. A substantial innovation was proposed by Faludi (1989) with the concept of "performance" which tried to overcome the timing of CBA, analysing the "on going" dimension of decision making. The attention was referred to the function of the assessment, emphasising the relation between decision-makers and assessors through a system of feedbacks. The Community Impact Evaluation (Lichfield, 1996) is one of the principal instruments arisen starting from this concept. Nonetheless, this tool attempted to move beyond the rigidity of the rationalist approach, stressing the interactive nature of planning process. Within this context, it might be stated that the extension of evaluation practice to the environment is a sort of "issue of value". According to Alexander (2006, p. 11) «in the 1970s and 80s rising environmental awareness, which began in the US and spread throughout the world, stimulated laws and regulations requiring the inclusion of environmental impacts among planning and project decision considerations». The NEPA act in USA (1969) was set out on this frame, introducing the most shared environmental appraisal instrument as first: the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Being presents in 191 of the 193 countries of the world (Morgan, 2012), it mainly analyses several types of project before their implementation with the aim to understand possible risks for the environment, defining mitigation measures. In 1985 the European Community has established its contents through the directive 85/337/ECC. However, the EIA was unsuccessful in supporting the entire decision-making process because its structure struggles with complexity of planning process, failing to attain a real integration with it. Emphasising the decision-centred view (Faludi, 1987), at early 1990s new attempts of environmental assessment applied to planning have been developed. From those and the inheritance of EIA, the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) was established in order to extend the environmental protection to plans and programmes. The European Council formalised this tool with the directive 2001/42/EC, starting to new season of impact assessment. As principal way to merge environment with social and economic issue, the SEA had to be a more flexible approach in order to follow the evolution of planning decision making. However, the SEA has only partly achieved its aims because often it has been interpreted as an extension of EIA model applied to strategic decisions, diminishing the innovative elements which it should have led. Nonetheless, the interactive nature of current planning practice requires to reconsider some structural aspects, emphasising the different factors involved within decision process. The SEA manages to carry out its role of decision-makers support instrument only if it is produced during the plan-making, defining sustainability targets and testing the decisions within a dynamic system of continuous exchange of knowledge and information. Issues regarding timing and integration are often limited within conflicts between private and public as well as the overlapping of public offices' competences. The rigidity of procedural framework often limits successful implementations for the SEA, reducing space for multidisciplinary and multidimensional approaches. Accentuating flexibility, the Sustainability

Assessment (SA) has been introduced in order to better integrate the three pillars of sustainable development: society, economy and environment. However, the borderline between this tool and the SEA has often been difficult to define (Pope, 2006). Nevertheless, a first brief comparison between SA and SEA definitions highlights many common elements, even if the SA aims at overcoming the current deficiencies of environmental assessment applied in Europe to plans and programmes, proposing a more adaptable approach (see Table 1).
Within this context, it might be stated that evolution of appraisal tools has tried to cover the whole context

Table 1. SA and SEA definition: a comparison

Sustainability Assessment	*Strategic Environmental Assessment*
Sustainability assessment is... a tool that can help decision-makers and policy-makers decide what actions they should not take in attempt to make society more sustainable. (Devuyst, Hens, de Lannoy, 2001)	SEA is systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed policy, plan or programme initiatives in order to ensure they are fully included and appropriate stage of decision-making on par with economic and social considerations. (Sadler, Verheem, Bass, 1996)
The aim of sustainability assessment is to ensure that plans and activities make an optimal contribution to sustainable development. (Verheem, 2002)	The formalised, systematic and comprehensive process of evaluating the environmental effects of policy, plan or programme and its alternatives, including the preparation of a written report on the finding in publicly accountable decision-making. (Therivel *et al.*, 1992; Therivel, Partidário, 1996)
A process that directs decision-making towards sustainability. (Hacking, Guthrie, 2008)	A participatory approach for upstreaming environmental and social issues to influence development planning, decision-making and implementation process at the strategic level. (Mercier, Ahmed, 2004)

of planning decision. Improving the quality of debate about SEA, or SA, therefore means investigating on the best way to adapt «planning practices to their real-world constraints» (Friedmann, 2008, p. 250). Planning for sustainability requires a set of instruments able to cover different timing and situations, mixing skills and knowledge. This implies to establish «an approach to connect a level of values and a level of fact influenced by power relations, concrete situation and actor constellations which means that values, facts and aggregation rules have to be clearly laid out for sound decision making» (Stoeglehner, Neugebauer, 2013, p. 247).

3. A decision' centred tool: the decision-making theories and the SEA

Studying of how SEA should work requires to understand how decision is really taken, emphasising elements and factors which affect choices in determinate timing.
According to Cashmore and Kørnøv (2013, p. 24) the study about decision are generally categorised into one of three groups:
– the normative theory – how decisions should to be taken;
– the descriptive theory – how decisions are actually taken;
– finally, prescriptive theory – how decision making can be improved by allocating criticisms identified in descriptive theory.
Roles, tasks and framework have acquired different meaning within the decision theories. Planning was a matter for positivist approaches until the second half of 20th century. Within a paradigm of scientific or comprehensive rationality, the decision was based on linear relation between planners, which analyse context through techniques from "exact sciences" field, and political sphere, which uses the planners' analysis to take the decision. As a typical ex-ante approach, this model operates within a context without uncertainty, recognising the validity only of explicit knowledge (Dente, 2011). Focusing on the decision skills of humans being, Simon (1957), instead, was the first to explore the cognitive limits, describing a process which he defined bounded-rationality. Planning largely adopted this approach, generating many type of procedures and tools in order to simplify the decision context. However, another substantial innovation was proposed by Lindblom (1959) which attempted to investigate how decision is really taken within public context. His model, commonly defined "disjointed incrementalism", described a system of continuous decisions made between a narrow set of alternative, recognising the plural nature of decision-makers. The relation between private and public actors as well as the existence of different type of knowledge have been considered as central factors of decision making. A comprehensive critic to these models was advanced by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) which has highlighted how often decisions are the consequence of accidental bind of problems, stakeholders, solutions, context conditions and opportunities.
Increasing awareness in environmental planning, the study of decision has been largely permeated by the debate about sustainability in planning which achieved an international acknowledgement with the Sustainable Development (SD) Report (1987). However, anticipating this new season for planning, Faludi (1987) introduced the strict liaison between environmental planning and decision-centred approaches. As such, the environmental assessment became a matter for decision theory. As affirmed by Nilsson and Dalkmann (2001, p. 306) «Environmental assessment (EA) was developed in 1960s as a tool to bring environmental concerns into decision making in systematic way».
This connection is definitely emphasised with the SEA directive which established a tool which directly refers to decision making in order to achieve more sustainable choices. Although this relation has been formalized through an international norms, the integration of SEA within decision-making still presents many challenges that invite to enhance reflections about its descriptive and prescriptive dimension. In fact, according to Partidário (2000), though acknowledging the importance of this connection, it is still difficult to clearly identify how SEA influences decisions. Starting from early studies concerning SEA, it has been recognized the need of conformity within the environmental assessment process and framework of planning systems (Bina, 2001; Sheate *et al.*, 2001). Within this context, Kørnøv and Thissen (2000) emphasised the incidence of political factors regarding the concepts of the decision making process. Stressing the procedural sphere, Nilsson and Dalkmann (2001) explored the role of SEA within

different decision models. Richardson (2005) analysed the SEA within political models, exploring the connection of different type of values, competing with one another, in order to integrate the environmental consideration among political setting. In the Richardson's analysis, the issue of knowledge and how power relationships influence knowledge formation have been highlighted. The SEA outcomes and timing have been often conditioned from these relationships. Bina (2007, 2008) analysed the connection between the institutional and organizational context of SEA with the decision making process. In this latter consideration, the role of public administration, as organizational context, tends to be emphasised with the aim to identify how institutionalization problems struggle in reaching enhancements of SEA outcomes. So, understanding theories means investigate how SEA works under determinate circumstances and which elements are directly involved in the decision regarding environmental matters. Currently, the framework of SEA is deeply affected from organizational aspects related to public administrations structures. Nonetheless, enhancing the interactive nature of SEA can be a way to acknowledge the complexity of decision, exploiting the opportunity to cope organizational and procedural constraints.

4. Citizen empowerment, sharing knowledge or minimalising conflicts? An issue of public participation

The exploration about what means participation and what is its role within decision-making acquires high consideration within environmental assessment theory.
The huge debate developed in planning has been summarised within a remarkable synthesis by Lane (2005). According to the author «the role of public participation in planning is largely determined by the nature of the planning enterprise being undertaken» (see Table 2).
The rational paradigm considers the public involvement a marginal element. A considerable shift was achieved with the introduction of pluralist models. Lindblom's incremental theory (1959) recognises the plural nature

Table 2. Conception of Planning and the role for public participation

Level of participation	Planning tradition	Planning school	Planning models
• Citizen control • Delegated power • Partnership	Societal transformation	Pluralism	• Communicative • Bargaining • Marxist • Advocacy • Transactive
• Placation • Consultation • Informing	Societal guidance	Synoptic	• Mixed scanning • Incrementalism • Synoptic planing
• Therapy • Manipulation	Societal guidance	Blueprint	• Blueprint planning • Geddes, Howard • Precinct planners

Source: Lane (2005, p. 286).

of the decision maker which operates in a conflicting society. In 1960s, the advocacy planning developed by Davidoff (1965) was the first concept of planning that could be classified under the umbrella of participatory approaches. Near to this, the transactive planning of Friedmann (1973) and the collaborative planning of Healey (1992, 1997) have emphasised the potential of public participation in planning process.

The potential of diffuse knowledge, fewer problems during the implementation step, enhancing democratic capacity and empowering marginalised individuals and groups are only a few common elements in the approaches above.

As from NEPA act in 1969, the concept of participation during a public decision process has been linked to environmental planning, pointing out the opportunities in terms of increasing the knowledge for decision (Beierle, 1999; Beierle, Cayford, 2002) . According to Beierle and Konisky (2001), the complexity of the decision regarding the environmental issue is related to problems addressed; scientific understanding, which measures the level of relevant scientific knowledge, and geographic complexity which distinguishes, for example, the differences between rural and urban settings. Nonetheless, the inter-scale context (typical of environment) connects the process to a wide range of stakeholders, who could be private citizens or public agencies. Nowadays, according to Reed (2008), «Participation in environmental decision making is increasing, becoming regarded as a democratic right». Starting from this assumption, the role of public has been also emphasised to the directive which at the commemorandun n. 15 clearly stated that in order to improve transparency the process, the public must be consulted during the SEA preparation. In particular, its relevance is connected with the need to integrate planning and SEA process. Stressing the linking role of participation in SEA, Vicente and Partidário (2006, p. 697) stated «this means to integrate strategic environmental assessment in core decision making or, to put in a broader and simpler way, SEA must be able to successfully communicate environmental values in order to reach the core of decisions». Similarly, according to Stoeglehner and Neugebauer (2013, p. 250) «only a few voices in the SEA debate call for separate planning and assessment approach. In our understating, planning and assessment should be merged into one process in line with the majority of SEA scholars which can be also argued from the perspective of communicative and collaborative planning theory as well as learning theory». And he furthers «as assessment process can be designed as a communicative process and integrating values and objectives into planning process might become the most important task of assessment».

Within this context, several authors have highlighted that a good participatory process can avoid, or reduce, problems during the implementation stage (Fischer, 1999; Sheate, 1994). Moreover, the transparency of the process can be increased (Bonifazi, Rega, Gazzola, 2011; Kørnøv, Thyssen, 2000). Furthermore, the lay knowledge produced during the participation phase can add new alternatives and/or mitigating measures. Not only, this kind of process can trigger mutual learning processes (Jha-Thakur *et al.*, 2009; Gazzola *et al.*, 2011). However, the participation within SEA practice still presents many challenges. According to Therivel and Partidário (1996) few SEAs manage to address the public in the decision process and, sometimes, the participation is entirely absent because the contents of the plans are considered too much sensitive for public debate. In fact, the role of public within SEA is often limited to consultation (Gauthier, Simard, Waaub, 2011; Bonifazi *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, Partidário (1996) noted that many public administrations are not able to create the necessary environment for an effective debate. The strong institutionalization of the SEA often is a constraint

for an effective participatory process because it limits the space to integration between planning and environmental assessment process. Understanding the role and task of diverse stakeholders (public and private) within participation can suggest new opportunities to cope current problems, emphasising the quality of different source of information.

5. What is the lesson for practices?

The paper attempted to address the difficult question on the role of theories in order to suggest possible enhancements for practice. As such, the contribute of Friedmann (2008) about the uses of planning theory has been considered to structure this work. Based on the existing literature, the study tries to articulate different bodies with particular emphasis on the connection between planning and SEA theory. Through the exploration of the directive 2001/42/EC, which is the principal normative reference for the SEA, three main theoretical fields have been analysed. The former is the debate about evaluation in planning. Within this context, the role of assessment as a support for decision-makers has been investigated, underlining the evolution of these tools from the first approaches to the application on environmental practices. Flexibility is a key to move beyond the rigidity of contemporary approach for the SEA which is affected by issues related with timing and multidisciplinary. Improving the quality of decision through SEA means increase the integration between planning process and environmental assessment starting from first stages. Emphasising the latter concept, the decision theories has been the second theoretical background examined. In order to support decision-making, the SEA requires a deep understanding of the factors which influence decision within different models. Switching from rationalistic to pluralistic approaches, the SEA struggles with the hard institutionalization of its process. The actions of public offices and their connection with private stakeholders are often bounded within rigid and procedural framework, generating constraints and barriers for the SEA effectiveness. To overcome these conflicts, theories suggest to move towards a more interactive SEA. For this aim, the last issue investigated was the role of participation within the environmental assessment process. Its importance is clearly stated as from the directive 2001/42/EC as a key to integrate environment within planning decision making. In doing this, a good participatory process represents a way to definitely overcome this separation between SEA- and plan- making. In addition, the knowledge produced through public discussion can also promote mutual learning, reducing problems during the implementation. However, the rigid institutional framework as well as the weakness of public administration often reduce the space for public participation. So, in order to cope the complexity of planning for sustainability, how to improve the environmental evaluation practice represents an endless topic. Within this context, the SEA needs to move towards a more integrative domain, embracing different subjects, tasks and knowledge. In so doing, four principal challenges can be raised.

First, the integration between planning and evaluation throughout an in itinere process. Planning and SEA should be merged and their actions and their strategies should be the result of the constant evolution of knowledge and information.

Second, the integration between private economic stakeholders and environmental dimension. Better connections between financial resources with environmental matters have to be clearly formalised, since its first step, maybe through a "opened process" to all actors (public and private). Third, the integration between planning and other public offices and institutions

(environmental and not). The decision making is often a "victim" of continuous overlapping due to its rigid institutionalization, causing delays and "strange choices". Finally, the integration between scientific and diffuse knowledge. The dualistic position of rational and communicative approach often forgets that within an open process different types of knowledge can be combined and each stakeholders «can learn and take advantage of what the other does best» (Innes, Booher, 2014, p. 7).

Note
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