

What does becoming a Party involve?

The Protocol is open to all Member States of the United Nations. A State does not need to be a Party to the Espoo Convention to join the Protocol. Most countries have a system of environmental assessment or similar process, particularly at the project level. To implement the Protocol, national legislation generally has to be extended to provide for environmental assessment to be applied to plans and programmes. A Government wishing to create an SEA system will need to answer the following questions:

- What are the most effective means for integration of SEA into the development of policies, plans and programmes?
- What are the most effective means for interaction between proponents, public authorities and the general public in the SEA process?
- What assistance should be provided to proponents of policies, plans and programmes to enable them to carry out SEA effectively?
- What capacity-building is needed for public authorities, the public and civil society organizations to carry out effective SEAs?

The Government will then need to take the necessary legislative, regulatory and other appropriate measures to implement the provisions of the Protocol within a clear, transparent framework.

To become a Party to the Protocol, in the case of a State that signed the Protocol, an instrument of ratification, acceptance or approval has to be deposited with the United Nations Secretary-General in New York. In other cases, an instrument of accession needs to be deposited.

If the State is not a member of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the accession has first to be approved by the Protocol's governing body. A first step towards approval would be for the Government — the Minister of Foreign Affairs or of Environment — to write to the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe.

To find out more:

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SEA is not a complicated and theoretical tool. It was a flexible mechanism that gave us feedback from environmental experts. It ran in parallel to the production of the Estonian Single Programming Document and provided operative and practical inputs. It helped us to improve quality of the Document and increased awareness among NGOs of the entire planning process.

Ms. Kerli Lorvi
Ministry of Finance, Estonia

Thorough application of SEA will help us in avoiding large-scale health problems that occur when environmentally problematic strategic decisions are made.

Ms. Mojca Gruntar-Cinc,
Ministry of Health, Slovenia

Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment

What is the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment?

The Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment was adopted in Kyiv in 2003. It entered into force in 2010 and by the end of April 2014 had 26 Parties, including the European Union as a regional organization. The Protocol is linked to the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context at the international level, but is distinct at the national level.

The Protocol requires that a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is carried out for certain plans, programmes and possibly policies and legislation that are likely to have significant environmental, including health, effects. Parties have to integrate environmental assessment into their development plans and programmes at the earliest stages — so helping to lay the groundwork for sustainable development. The Protocol also provides for extensive public participation in the governmental decision-making process. The Protocol applies to development plans and programmes irrespective of whether they are likely to have an impact on the territory of another State.

May 2014

The SEA for the first National Development Plan of Poland provided us with useful recommendations for improved consideration of environmental issues. The SEA has a wider applicability and can also be used in production of other documents. We will be able to use the lessons learned and methodology developed in the future.

Mr. Piotr Zuber
Ministry of Economy, Labour and Social Policy, Poland

SEA helped us to improve the quality of the Hungarian Regional Operational Programme. Proponents of this programme often did not take into account natural resources, which form the basis of any economic activity. The SEA team identified the main relevant environmental issues and helped us to consider this information throughout the entire planning process. SEA also facilitated our cooperation with the Ministry of Environment, other ministries and regional authorities during environmental optimizing of the programme.

Ms. Ágnes Somfai
Prime Minister's Office, Hungary

What are the benefits of Strategic Environmental Assessment?

The purpose of SEA, broadly stated, is to ensure that environmental considerations inform and are integrated into strategic decision-making in support of environmentally sound and sustainable development. The Protocol itself goes even a step further through its requirement to consider also health effects and to involve health authorities.

SEA provides a mechanism for the integration of environmental and public concerns at the the start of development planning, when different development options are still open. Thus, the application of the Protocol will be a concrete step towards Millennium Development Goal 7, "to ensure environmental sustainability", and its first target, "to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources".

High level of environmental protection

SEA should ensure avoidance of irreversible and severe effects, safeguard protected areas and sites, and maintain critical habitats and other areas that are important for the conservation of biodiversity.

Better planning and programming

SEA improves the process of planning and programming by helping it to be more focused, rigorous and open to alternatives, and to consider the full range of potential effects and opportunities for achieving more sustainable forms of development.

More efficient decision-making

SEA enables environmental issues to be taken into account consistently at the different stages or levels of decision-making. Time efficiency, and thus cost effectiveness, is improved by better and more consistent decision-making at the plan or programme level, leading to fewer appeals and less discussion at the operational level.

Identification of new opportunities for development

SEA improves consideration of environmental limits in the formulation of plans and programmes. It helps in considering sustainable alternatives and encourages the search for win-win options that open opportunities for new developments within the carrying capacity of ecosystems.

Preventing costly mistakes

SEA provides early warning signals about unsustainable development options. It reduces the risk of costly remediation of avoidable harm or corrective actions, such as relocating or redesigning facilities. It saves time and money.

Strengthened governance

SEA improves good governance and public trust in policy, plan and programme making through fostering greater transparency in strategic decision-making. SEA allows planners and decision makers to consider opinions of key stakeholders early in the planning process.

Transboundary cooperation

SEA can provide an important arena for regional cooperation to address difficult issues concerning, for example, shared protected areas, waterways, transport connections and transboundary pollution.

Climate change adaptation

As concluded by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "one way of increasing adaptive capacity is by introducing the consideration of climate change impacts in development planning, for example, by including adaptation measures in land-use planning and infrastructure design".

States Parties as
of 30 April 2014

