

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA): A Tool for Mainstreaming Sustainable Development into Development Planning

The course was presented by Professor Maria Rosario Partidario from the Technical University of Lisbon and by Dr. Brendan Barrett, Head of the Media Studio at the UN University in Tokyo. The presentation focused on the use of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in sustainable development decision-making, which provides a cross-cutting perspective that looks at interlinkages among the various themes, such as those of CSD-14, while promoting an integrated approach among the three pillars of sustainable development. SEA facilitates participatory, integrative and strategic programmes and policy decision-making at different phases and over different time spans. This is in contrast to the more limited approach of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is most often used at the project level. SEA has so far been applied in planning or implementing National Sustainable Development Strategies, Country Assistance Strategies, Energy Policy Reforms, Poverty Reduction Strategies, Fiscal Reforms and other cases. The application of SEA has faced a number of challenges, including the setting up of multidisciplinary institutional arrangements with highest political support and appropriate resources; the need to promote integrative thinking in decision making; creating a strategic culture and actively engaging all the stakeholders.

The course presented many useful case studies, as well as promoted interactive discussions both in small groups and as a whole. The case studies of how SEA has been applied in various concrete situations in different countries are also available on the UNU-SEA website. It was suggested that lessons learned from these case studies be widely shared so as not to reinvent the wheel. SEA does not require a new system or institution but can rather be built on existing arrangements. Moreover, the basic principles of SEA may already exist under different names and forms. The important thing is to assess and learn how best to apply SEA in specific situations of different countries.