



SEA effectiveness criteria—equally valid in all countries? The case of Italy

Thomas B. Fischer*, Paola Gazzola

Department of Civic Design, The University of Liverpool, 74 Bedford Street South, Liverpool L69 7ZQ, UK

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Abstract

Recent years have seen the introduction of various sets of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) effectiveness criteria in the professional international literature. Content analysis of key international SEA publications suggest that these have been developed based on the experiences of a selected number of countries only, and to date, the question whether they are fully valid in all systems and countries worldwide has not been addressed sufficiently, yet. In this context, the paper discusses the validity of effectiveness criteria for Italy, a country from which authors have only contributed to a very limited extent to the international SEA literature. It is concluded that, particularly in the light of experiences with a ‘flexible’, but ineffective EIA system, in Italy SEA needs to be applied in a systematic and rigorous manner, aided by strong enforcement mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, a number of authors have introduced SEA effectiveness criteria in the international professional literature. Whereas there normally appears to be an implicit assumption that these are universally applicable, authors as well as case studies presented appear to come from a selected number of countries only. It may therefore be suggested that effectiveness criteria reflect experiences only from certain SEA systems and the question to what extent they are also valid in those countries that have not been represented in the literature, arises

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: fischer@liverpool.ac.uk (T.B. Fischer).

(see Marsden and Dovers, 2002; similarly for spatial/land use planning Faludi and Hamnett, 1975 and Kunzmann, 2004).

This paper is divided into seven sections. Following this introduction, results of a content analysis of forty-five key SEA related books and conference proceedings up to 2002 are presented. This is done in order to show that the international professional literature has indeed been dominated by authors from a few countries only, who focus on practice from a limited number of systems. In this context, the following questions are addressed:

- what countries have SEA authors been based in?
- how many case studies have been discussed/reviewed from what countries?
- how many SEA systems have been considered from what countries?

Subsequently, SEA effectiveness criteria introduced by different authors are summarised, subdividing them into contextual and methodological aspects. The presence of contextual aspects and the validity of methodological aspects in Italy is established and discussed. In this context, Italy was chosen for the following three reasons:

- Up to 2002, Italian authors appeared to have contributed only to a very small extent to the international SEA literature and Italian practice was considered only very rarely;
- There are indications that Italy's planning system and traditions regarding the consideration of environmental aspects differ from those countries predominantly considered in the international professional literature. This has in fact been previously remarked by numerous authors, including Schmidt di Friedberg (1995), Barp (1996), De Lucia (1992), Longhi (1996), Peano (1992), Voghera (2004), and similarly also for spatial planning by Newman and Thornely (1996), Janin Rivolin and Faludi (2005), Böhme (2002), Faludi and Waterhout (2002) and the EU Compendium on spatial planning systems and policies (EC, 1997).
- There are indications that Italy is performing poorly in terms of most SEA effectiveness criteria introduced in the international professional literature (Schmidt di Friedberg, 1995, 1997; Bettini, 1995).

The section on SEA in Italy is based on a review of the relevant literature and the results of a questionnaire survey with Italian SEA experts conducted in 2003. These included academics, government officers, private consultants and representatives of the National Ministry of Environment and Territorial Protection. Following the critical review of the Italian situation, the paper will present a set of tailor-made SEA effectiveness criteria for Italy. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

2. Content analysis

Forty-five key international SEA publications, including single, co-authored and edited books, conference and workshop proceedings and research project reports that were published up to 2002 were reviewed. Publications were selected based on a comprehensive screening process that took several months to complete. As the focus was on the international literature, most of the publications were in English, except for a few examples, including conference proceedings of the francophone section of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA). Publications were selected based on whether they included international overviews of

SEA systems, methodologies and case studies. Another selection factor was the accessibility of publications to a wide international audience. Subsequently, the rationale for using content analysis is explained. Main findings of the exercise are then summarised.

2.1. Rationale for using content analysis

Content analysis is a research technique used to identify the frequency and nature of certain concepts or words within documents. Generally speaking, it may be used whenever a manifestation of communicative language occurs. Based on content analyses, the use of words and concepts within documents and the different messages resulting from their use are identified, analysed and quantified (Robson, 1993). The wide scope of application makes the use of content analysis suitable for many different fields and disciplines.

In this paper, content analysis is the basis for deciding on whether the assumption that the international professional literature is dominated by authors and practice from certain countries only, is indeed valid. Similarly to what has been observed in, for example, spatial/land use planning, publishing in English currently appears to be the main requirement for making a contribution to the international debate (Faludi and Hamnett, 1975; Kunzmann, 2004) and consequently the key international SEA literature is published mainly in this language. Whilst it is acknowledged that various national SEA literatures exist as well, these tend to be more inward looking, contributing to the development of SEA in a specific national context.

2.2. Findings

Subsequently, findings are summarised in terms of the three main questions stated in the Introduction. Regarding question 1, Fig. 1 shows the number of publications in terms of the country an author writing on SEA is based in. In this context, NGOs and international

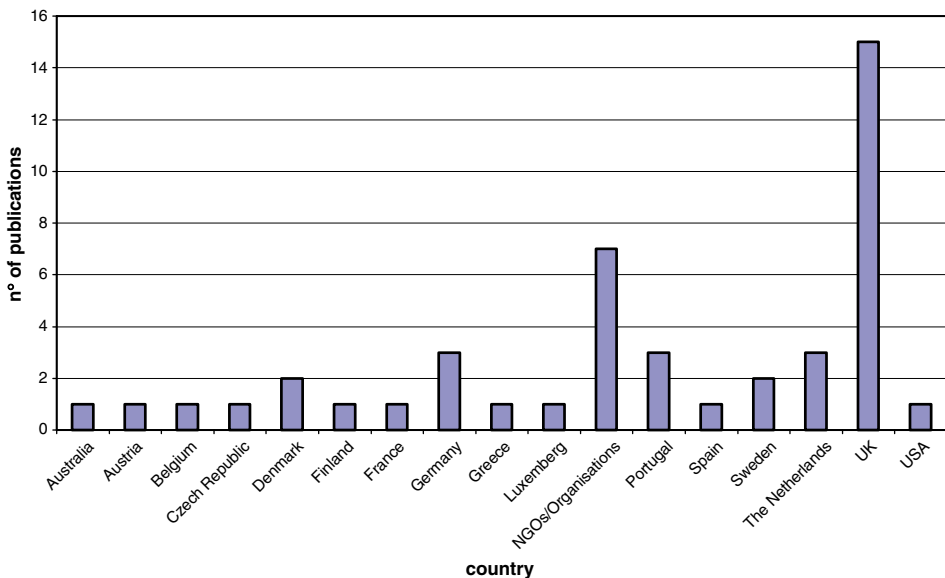


Fig. 1. Number of publications by the country an author is based in.

organisations, such as the World Bank or UNEP, are grouped into one non-country specific category (NGOs/organisations).

UK-based authors contributed to the largest extent to the international SEA literature with 15 of the 45 publications, i.e., 33%. If NGOs and international organisations, which authored seven publications, are excluded, this figure rises to 40%. Authors from all other countries are represented only up to three times (i.e., 6.7%). Cumulatively they represented 27% of all publications. Furthermore, authors from certain countries had previously been connected with a UK-based institution and may therefore be said to be influenced by UK thinking and practice, including, for example, the Portuguese author Maria Partidario (Aberdeen) and the German author Thomas Fischer (Manchester and Bristol). Without these two authors, whilst Portugal would not have appeared at all, Germany would have counted only one publication (Kleinschmidt and Wagner, 1998). There have been no authors at all from Italy.

Regarding question 2, Fig. 2 shows the number of SEA case studies listed by the country of origin mentioned in the 45 publications. Overall, a total number of 243 case studies were mentioned. Most of these were from The Netherlands, reflecting the country’s extensive experience with sectoral SEAs (e.g. waste, energy and transport), prepared according to the national EIA Act. This is followed by the UK, for which mainly SEAs for spatial/land use and transport plans and programmes were mentioned. Taken together, the UK and The Netherlands make up 47% of all cases. Italian cases only represent 2% of all case studies portrayed in the international SEA literature. These were reviewed within EU wide research projects, mostly funded by the European Commission.

Finally, regarding question 3, Fig. 3 portrays the frequency with which different SEA systems were considered in the 45 publications. In this context, the UK represented 14% of all cases, The

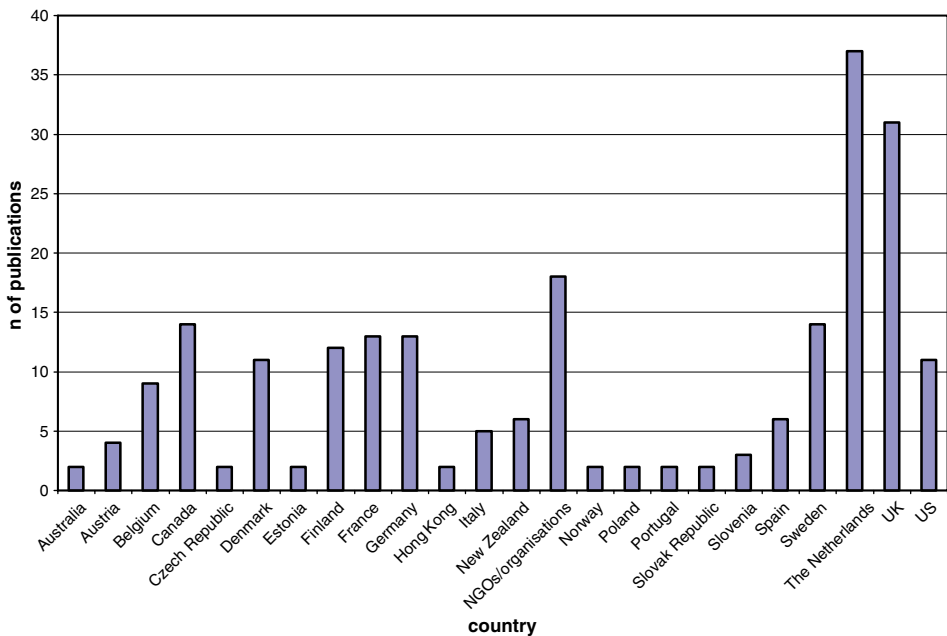


Fig. 2. SEA case studies per country mentioned in the international SEA literature. The following countries scored 1 and are not graphically represented in the chart: Bangladesh, Brazil, Greece, Guyana, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Latvia, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Tobago, Ukraine, Venezuela, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

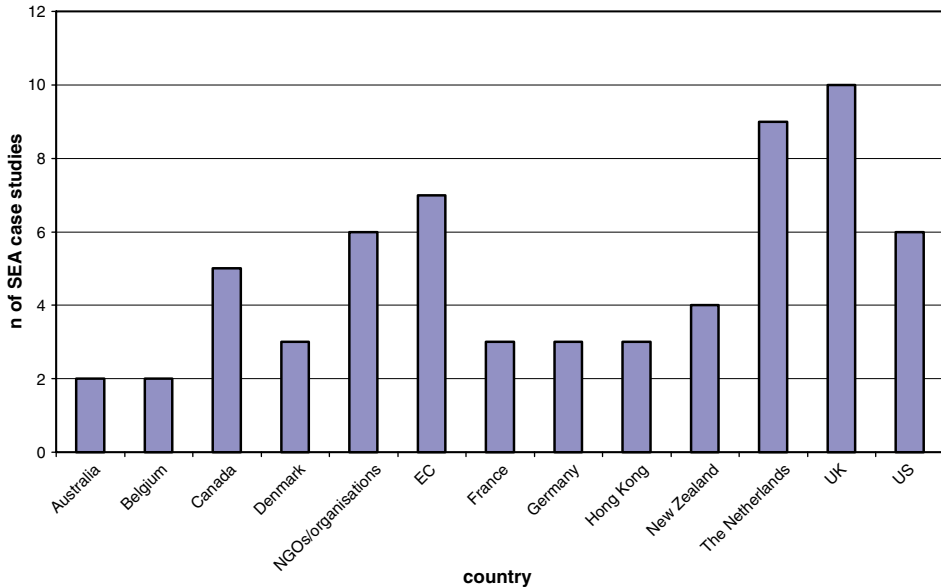


Fig. 3. Practice of different countries considered in SEA publications. The following were considered only once and are not graphically presented in the chart: Austria, Brazil, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, East Asia and Pacific, Finland, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa.

Netherlands 13%, the US 8%, Canada 7% and New Zealand 6%. Furthermore, European Commission–EC and Development Banks/Aid Agencies were considered in 10% and 8% of all cases, respectively. Italy did not feature in any of the publications.

In conclusion, content analysis of forty-five key international SEA related publications up to 2002 indicates that practice and experiences of a selected number of countries only had been the subject of attention in the professional SEA literature. In this context, practices from the UK and The Netherlands were the most frequently considered. UK authors had a particularly high share of all publications. Whereas case studies came from a wider range of countries, together, the UK and The Netherlands made up roughly half of all cases. It is therefore likely that the lessons learnt and conclusions drawn reflect particularly the experiences of these countries. As effectiveness criteria have been developed, based on the experiences portrayed in the professional literature, their general validity for all countries and systems may therefore be questioned.

3. SEA effectiveness criteria

SEA effectiveness criteria first appeared in the international professional literature in the mid-1990s. In this context, the terminology used has varied. In the forty-five publications included in the content analysis, reference was made, for example to ‘basic elements for effective SEA’ (Sadler and Verheem, 1996), ‘SEA good practice elements’ (Partidario, 1997), ‘basic principles of SEA’ (DETR, 1998), ‘conditions of effectiveness for SEA’ (Nooteboom, 1999), ‘principles for SEA guidelines’ (CSIR, 2000), ‘factors for SEA effectiveness in decision making’ (Finnish Ministry of the Environment, 2001), ‘SEA performance criteria’ (IAIA, 2002) and ‘SEA principles’ (Fischer, 2002). Subsequently, however, only the term ‘effectiveness criteria’ will be used, as all authors have had one overall aim in mind, namely to make SEA application

effective. **Box 1** draws together the main elements of the effectiveness criteria advertised in the professional literature.

In summary, SEA effectiveness criteria revolve around issues of objective-led, efficient, relevant, accountable, transparent, iterative, adaptive, flexible, integrated and sustainable decision making. Overall, they consist of two main aspects, the decision-making context SEA works in, and the specific SEA methodology. The presence of certain context criteria is understood to be a necessary framework condition for effective SEA.

In order to be able to use effectiveness criteria in the review of the Italian situation, for the purpose of this paper they are translated into context and methodological criteria, as follows:

- Context criteria for effective SEA application:
 - (a) The existence of an established institutional framework for the effective consideration of the ‘environment’ (including, in particular, biophysical aspects) in PPP making, including an awareness for ‘environmental’ problems as well as the existence of a sustainable development framework that provides for SEA objectives;
 - (b) The existence of effective co-operation and public participation in PPP making;
 - (c) The existence of an effective project EIA system with which SEA can be tiered.
- Methodological criteria for effective SEA application:
 - i. A high degree of accountability and quality control in SEA;

Box 1

SEA effectiveness criteria advertised in the professional literature

- SEA should be effective in ensuring environmental aspects are given due consideration in policy, plan and programme (PPP) making;
- SEA should be integrated and sustainability-led, supporting a pro-active planning process that is driven by clear goals and objectives; apart from environmental aspects, SEA should also consider economic and social aspects.
- SEA should be carried out with professionalism and those conducting it should be made accountable; SEA should document and justify how environmental and sustainability objectives are considered in PPP practices in a transparent and simple manner; in this context, quality control is said to be of great importance;
- SEA should be stakeholder-driven, explicitly addressing the public’s inputs and concerns, ensuring access to relevant information of the PPP making process;
- SEA should provide sufficient, reliable and usable information in a cost and time efficient manner;
- SEA should be iterative, being part of an ongoing decision cycle; it should inspire future planning through the potential amendment of strategic decisions; in this context, SEA needs to be applied in a tiered manner with effective project EIA within an established PPP framework;
- SEA should be flexible and adaptive to the PPP process

- ii. A stakeholder driven, focused, iterative, flexible and adaptable SEA process that is open to the input of the general public;
- iii. Cost and time efficient generation of sufficient, reliable and usable information on environmental baseline, impact and alternative assessments in SEA making.

A question arising is whether it would still be possible to conduct SEA effectively even in the absence of one, two or several of the context criteria. In this context, whether different methodological criteria would then need to be applied has to be established. In order to address this question, in the subsequent section we look at the extent to which context criteria are currently present in the Italian PPP making system, i.e. within a system that has only very rarely been considered in the international literature and that therefore has not contributed to the development of the SEA effectiveness criteria, advertised in the professional literature. This is followed by a discussion on how the SEA methodology may be best conducted in Italy.

4. The existence of SEA context criteria in Italy

This section establishes whether the SEA context criteria introduced above are in place in Italy. This is based on a questionnaire which was sent to a total of 20 Italian experts, covering different geographical regional areas and roles, as mentioned in the Introduction (response rate 25%). Furthermore, it includes the results of a literature review on the Italian situation, using published documents, reports and books, written mainly in Italian.

4.1. *The existence of an established institutional framework*

Traditionally, in Italian planning, the environment is considered mainly in terms of its cultural features, including for example the quality of the historic centres, the landscapes and monuments (Scandurra, 1995; Boato, 1996). Up until very recently, the biophysical environment (which is an important substantive issue in SEA) only received limited attention and even in current practice, it is still frequently not considered in public decision-making processes at all. In this context, it is probably fair to say that there is a comparatively low awareness for “biophysical” environmental problems in Italian PPP making.

After World War II, Italy adopted a development rationale in policy, plan, programme and project making that could be portrayed as being based on an “emergency blackmail” approach (De Lucia, 1992; Salzano, 1992). This was first practiced in reconstruction plans during the post-war years. In this context, moratoriums, building remissions¹ and emergency plans were applied for addressing “environmental problems” (Salzano, 1985, 1992; Williams, 1984; Sapelli, 1995; Bonavero et al., 1999; Lewanski, 1998). However, in this context, “the environment” was considered mainly based on certain landscape values. Starting in the 1970s, “environmental” laws with a bearing on planning were introduced. Amongst others, these included, for example, the so-called “Legge antismog” (n.615/1966) against atmospheric pollution; the “Legge Merli” (n.319/1976 amended by law n.650/1979 “Legge Merli-bis”) on the protection of water and on the regulation of water discharges, and law n.979/1982 on the protection of the sea and of coastal zones. However, to date various authors observed that most of these environmental laws have had little impact (De Lucia, 1992; Salzano, 1992; Boato, 1996). A basic awareness for

¹ “Building remission” stands for “condono edilizio”, a planning procedure based on which existing illegal buildings (built without permission) are made legal.

biophysical environmental problems in Italian public decision making only started to develop in the mid-1980s (Dunnage, 2002). This was triggered mainly by the introduction of the “Legge Galasso” (Galasso law n.431/1985), according to which planners were asked to include a “territorial” component in their considerations (Salzano, 1992, 1998). In this context, the state started to recognise that regions have a right and an obligation to pursue the protection of the environment. Landscape plans or “urban-territorial plans”, which also included some biophysical environmental aspects, were therefore introduced. However, despite of the Galasso law, the traditional landscape based perception of environmental protection still remained very much in place in Italian planning.

Regarding the existence of a sustainable development framework, there are currently neither national nor regional sustainable development strategies in place that might be used as the basis for SEA. Furthermore, even though sustainable development has often been mentioned as a generic objective in planning documentation, it is probably fair to say that to date this has not become a priority on Italy’s political agenda, yet (Schmidt di Friedberg, 1995, 1996, 1997; Cederna, 1992; De Lucia, 1992; Bettini and Gazzola, 2001; Gazzola, 2002).

4.2. The existence of effective co-operation and public participation

In Italy, a barrier to effective SEA implementation has been said to include a lack of effective co-operation and co-ordination between different actors, sectors and levels of planning. This has been described previously as being in the way of more consistent and transparent decision making (La Spina and Sciortino, 1993; Carter, 2001). Despite regionalisation and administrative reforms, which took place in Italy in the 1990s, devolving planning power and control to local governments, hierarchical top-down thinking is still predominant (Lewanski, 1998, 2002). Furthermore, a ‘sharp and ambiguous’ separation of competences between different levels of government (Vinci, 2002) has been observed. This is mainly due to the difficulty of co-operation and collaboration between the community (public, private and volunteers) and those institutional actors responsible for policy making in various sectors (Vinci, 2002).

Generally speaking, the role of the public in Italian public decision making is rather limited and regulated by national and regional laws. In project EIA, whilst certain institutional stakeholders need to be fully involved in the process, generally speaking, there is only limited scope for the public to participate (Lewanski, 1998). According to the Italian regulation that implemented the EIA Directive (the DPCM² of 1988), the provisions and procedures give the “public no power (information) or low power (consultation)” (Del Furia and Wallace-Jones, 2000, p. 467). Furthermore, “the public is only involved at a post-EIA stage, when the application for the judgement of environmental compatibility is made” (Del Furia and Wallace-Jones, 2000, p. 467). Those Italian regions that have already introduced SEA provisions only consult regional and provincial governments and government agencies (see, for example, Gazzola and Caramaschi, 2005 and Arcari et al., 2003). The fact that Italy does not have a framework EIA law has been suggested to contribute to the ineffectiveness of public participation and EIA (Del Furia and Wallace-Jones, 2000). As there are currently no indications that there will be a framework law for SEA, the same problem is likely to arise here.

² DPCM, Decree of the president of the ministry council.

4.3. *The existence of an effective EIA system*

The Italian EIA system has been described by various authors as not being effective. Whilst EIA regulations were introduced in 1988, following European requirements (337/85/EC), EIA has had very little impact, mainly because enforcement has been weak. Project planning processes have continued to be unstructured, non-transparent, insufficiently open and highly political. In this context, EIA has been applied in a highly flexible manner, depending largely on the will – and at times whims – of project proponents (Lewanski, 2002). Furthermore, projects are usually developed and advanced before EIA is started. As a consequence, EIAs are mainly applied in an ex-post manner, justifying certain projects rather than pro-actively influencing their preparation (Schmidt di Friedberg, 1995, 1996, 1997; La Spina and Sciortino, 1993; Bettini, 1995). EIA usually does not allow for the consideration of the do-nothing option. Consequently, since firstly being introduced, EIA has been conceived in Italy as an obstructing and superfluous element, particularly as there appear to have been only very limited benefits resulting from its application (Conference on SEA, *Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei*, 2002).

Problems in the context of effective EIA application include the continuous lack of methodological guidelines and the only partial implementation of the 1985 Directive at the national level (exclusion of Annex II of Directive 337/85/EEC—see Bettini, 1995). The national level is still missing an EIA framework after more than 25 years and has failed to provide any guidelines. Whilst almost all Italian regions now have their own EIA laws, they differ in meaning and terminology. According to Schmidt di Friedberg (1995), following EU requirements for project EIA, Italian politicians prefer to do “the minimum required to fulfil the Commission’s request and delay attacking more difficult problems”. One of the main reasons for this attitude is undoubtedly that an environmental awareness has not fully developed, yet.

5. The validity of methodological aspects in Italy

The previous section has shown that context elements for effective SEA application are currently underdeveloped in Italy. There is no established institutional framework in place, and an awareness for environmental problems is poorly developed. There are no sustainable development strategies in place defining environmental objectives. Whereas there are regional differences, generally speaking, the Italian EIA system is currently not working effectively. EIA is usually applied too late and is conducted in a highly flexible manner according to what proponents consider suitable. Finally, the public is insufficiently involved in public decision-making processes. Subsequently, we take a closer look at how methodological SEA effectiveness criteria are being met.

5.1. *A high degree of accountability and quality control*

According to the findings of a research project comparing international planning practices carried out by IsoCarp,³ ‘problems of effectiveness, accountability and coordination lie at the heart of the whole machinery of [Italian] planning’ (Malusardi and Talia, 1992; Newman and Thornely, 1996; Jones, 2003). In a country where PPPs’ contents tend to be determined by political considerations and negotiations, in order for SEA to be able to work effectively, roles

³ International Society of City and Regional Planners, <http://www.isocarp.org>.

and responsibilities need to be more clearly identified and monitored (Vittadini, 2003). Whilst this was thought to be one of the main tasks of the Italian EIA Commission,⁴ its role and competencies have recently been reduced as a result of some fundamental changes brought forward by the Berlusconi government. Currently, quality control mechanisms of both, SEA process and SEA outcomes are poor. In this context, it is particularly important to note that in most cases, the PPP's proponent is not distinguished from the assessor and responsibilities are unclear (Patassini, 1997). As a consequence, it is currently not possible to say what the impact of SEA is in PPP making. Undefined roles and responsibilities have led to a situation where, for example in the Region of Lombardia, municipalities are legally required to self-approve their own plans, without any proper independent checks. If SEA was introduced as part of specific planning processes currently conducted, 99% of them would be self-approved, i.e., there would be a lack of accountability and quality control (Gazzola et al., 2004, p. 196).

5.2. A stakeholder-driven, focused, iterative, flexible and adaptable process that is open to the input of the general public

As mentioned earlier, in Italy, policy, plan, programme and project making and SEA as well as EIA processes are highly politicised, with little public involvement. Those who have power, such as politicians and industrialists tend to drive these processes in a highly flexible and adaptable manner. As a consequence, decisions are frequently the result of non-transparent and secretive political negotiations and transactions, rather than the outcome of participatory, stakeholder-driven, open and transparent planning processes. Furthermore, the majority of strategic decisions occur at the higher government tiers. Because of the hierarchical and subsidiarity principles that underlie the Italian planning system, these decisions cannot subsequently be amended or rejected. Within this context, and given the poor levels of accountability and quality control mentioned in the previous section, the risk of favouring political, industrial or other types of interest over those of the general public is high. As a consequence, approval of PPPs and projects is closely connected with these interests (Gazzola et al., 2004). Therefore, if SEA was applied in a flexible and adaptable manner, as suggested by the SEA effectiveness criteria coming out of the international literature, it is likely that proponents would use it in a way they felt fit. Ultimately, this would lead to cementing the secretive, non-transparent and closed nature of PPP making and SEA.

5.3. Cost and time efficient generation of sufficient, reliable and usable information

Currently, inter-institutional conflicts, bureaucracy, secrecy and insufficient participation in policy, plan, programme and project making as well as SEA and EIA are in the way of producing sufficient, reliable and usable information. In this context, the Italian experts participating in the questionnaire survey suggested that new SEA requirements should be introduced, together with new legislation for PPP making in order to make it less political, secretive and non-transparent and more "rational". In this context, they also suggested that SEA should be based on making extensive use of clear and transparent environmental baseline data and to adopt an EIA-based approach to SEA.

⁴ Italy has an EIA Commission which has been instituted in 1988. It has the function to give opinions on the EIA studies presented and if specifically requested by the Minister of the Environment, it verifies and assesses the EIAs (Ministry for the Environment and Territorial Protection, <http://www.minambiente.it>, 2005).

6. SEA effectiveness criteria for Italy

The previous two sections showed that both, context criteria and methodological criteria for effective SEA application are currently underdeveloped in Italy. Based on the literature review and the results of the questionnaire survey of the Italian experts, an alternative list of SEA effectiveness criteria for Italy can be designed. This is shown in [Box 2](#).

The main differences between the effectiveness criteria coming out of the international literature and those presented in [Box 2](#) concern the way in which SEA should be developed and applied. According to [Box 2](#), an effective SEA system is expected to develop in Italy only once mandatory requirements are effectively enforced, possibly by an independent body. Stronger environmental legislation and a clearer definition of roles and responsibilities is also thought to be important in order to make SEA effective. Furthermore, adoption of an environmental baseline approach and the definition of minimum environmental compatibility thresholds are expected to support SEA that can make PPPs more environmentally sustainable. Opposite to these very rigorous and prescriptive criteria, according to the effectiveness criteria presented in the international literature (see [Box 1](#)), effective SEA systems are thought to develop if a flexible, adaptive and integrated approach was applied (see also [Fischer, 2003](#)). Similarities between the criteria presented in [Boxes 1 and 2](#) include the presence of certain context aspects, such as the existence of established institutional and legal (environmental) frameworks as well as accountability of those responsible for SEA and quality control.

Based on these findings, the main suggestion for Italy is that a flexible approach to SEA should not be applied. Experiences with flexible EIA have been negative and flexible SEA would probably simply mean to leave the highly political, non-transparent and non-accountable nature of policy, plan and programme making unchanged. It appears that rather, SEA in Italy should be based on a rigid and structured process which is being subjected to rigorous controls, for example by an independent body. This body needs to obtain enough power for being able to have a real impact.

Box 2

SEA effectiveness criteria for Italy

- Rigid and clear procedures and prescriptive government provisions for SEA
- Accountability of those responsible for SEA through strict controls and verifications by an independent body
- Stronger environmental legislation, including project EIA
- Clearer definition of roles and responsibilities, separation of proponents and assessors
- Environmental baseline approach to SEA, with the use of “environmental compatibility criteria”, based on minimum thresholds
- Formal requirements to consider various alternatives, including the do-nothing alternative in ex-ante SEA
- More resources and better training

7. Conclusions

Using content analysis, this paper has shown that SEA effectiveness criteria advertised in the international professional literature have been developed based on practices and experiences of a selected number of countries only. These particularly include the UK, The Netherlands and NGOs/international organisations. Up to 2002, Italy only had a very limited input to the international SEA literature.

SEA effectiveness criteria introduced in the international literature can be sub-divided into context and methodological aspects. Context aspects include a sustainable development framework that provides for the aims and objectives underlying SEA, effective co-operation and public participation and an effective EIA system with which SEA can be tiered. Methodological aspects include a high degree of accountability and quality control, a stakeholder driven, focused, iterative, flexible and adaptable SEA process that is open to the input of the general public and cost as well as time efficient generation of sufficient, reliable and usable information on environmental baseline, impact and alternatives assessment.

In Italy, context aspects have been found to be largely underdeveloped. In the absence of clear environmental objectives and in the presence of a highly politicised policy, plan and programme making culture, it is doubtful whether SEA should be introduced as a flexible instrument. This is supported by the observed ineffectiveness of a flexible EIA system. In this context, it may be suggested that in Italy, flexibility is likely to serve existing political interests by functioning as an excuse not to change anything.

Based on the evidence obtained, it is suggested that an effective SEA system in Italy would need to be based on clear, rigid and prescriptive government provisions. Generally speaking, environmental legislation needs to become stronger, including project EIA. Those responsible for SEA need to be made accountable and SEA needs to be subjected to strict controls, possibly by an independent body. In this context, roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined and there needs to be a separate assessor from the PPP proponent. An environmental baseline approach to SEA should be followed. Ultimately, better enforcement will depend on the political will to fully consider the biophysical environment in planning. Whilst this willingness would express itself in the development of favourable framework conditions for effective SEA, we do acknowledge that in the current political climate, this will be difficult to achieve.

It is concluded that whilst SEA effectiveness criteria can successfully help practitioners, they need to be tailored to the specific system of application. In this context, seeking the opinions of representatives of those countries which have not participated to the development of the international SEA literature is crucial. Within this context, not only does information on the effectiveness of a country's legal and institutional framework need to be provided, aspects relating to the system's decision-making culture also need to be highlighted.

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