

Building the conditions for successful SEA

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Environmental assessment at a cross-roads

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Presentation overview

1. Focus of presentation
2. The current situation at the federal level
3. Six conditions for success
4. Conclusion

1. Focus of presentation

- Focus on federal practice
 - SEA is also practiced in many other jurisdictions
- Forward-looking
 - Will not review the results of the 2009 government-wide evaluation of SEA practice at the federal level

2. The current situation

- SEA was first mandated in 1990
 - Cabinet Directive was re-written in 1999 and extended in 2004
- Implementation has been disappointing
 - CESD (2004):
 - Insufficient senior management commitment
 - Lack of central ownership and support
 - Limited integration into decision-making
 - Insufficient transparency
 - Incomplete guidance
 - Inadequate training

3. Identifying six conditions for success

1. Broad environmental objectives
2. Sound information base
3. Greater transparency
4. More effective policy analysis
5. Process improvements
6. Supporting political environment

A perceived lack of tools is not a major constraint to successful SEA

3.1 Broad environmental objectives

- Essential to guide policy development and the assessment of proposals
- Provide the answer to “how clean is clean?”
- These have not really existed to date:
 - National environmental objectives are difficult to set in a federal state
 - Departmental SDS goals are not measurable and the targets are too conservative
 - Departments continue to operate in silos (environmental policy is Environment Canada’s responsibility) with weak horizontal leadership on environmental issues
- Will the goals and targets in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy help?

3.2 Sound information base

- Effective policy-making relies in large part on sound information
- Information collection, analysis and dissemination are core government responsibilities
- The federal government's investment in environmental information has long been inadequate
 - Jurisdictional issues
 - Low priority
- Funding for the Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators initiative runs out on March 31.

3.3 Greater transparency

- Most SEAs are conducted in secret because they address Cabinet confidences.
- More transparency is needed at the front end of the process, not just at the back
 - Policy-making requires trade-offs
 - White papers, green papers, consultation processes
- Greater transparency should help improve quality (and accountability) over time

3.4 More effective policy analysis

- SEA assumes a deliberate process of policy analysis that does not always exist.
- Policy analysis is more complex than ever before: horizontal issues, more actors, faster pace yet ...
- Federal capacity to conduct policy analysis has diminished:
 - Program cuts in the 1990s have not been restored fully;
 - In-house science capacity has been reduced;
 - Post-Gomery reforms have reduced the space available for informal policy dialogues between the government and stakeholders
 - Policy-making has become centralized.
- SEA cannot succeed where policy capacity is weak.

3.5 Process improvements

- A central agency has an essential role to play in setting expectations, cultivating a community of practice and monitoring performance. TBS plays this role for many internal government processes. A lack of an analog for SEA has allowed the process to drift.
- Need to respond to CESD observations

3.6 Supportive political environment

- Civil servants and politicians reflect prevailing societal values.
- The Canadian public has not demonstrated strongly enough that it wants more environmentally-sustainable policies:
 - The ecological limits are not as evident as in other countries
 - Canadian environmental lobby groups are weaker than their industrial counterparts
 - Few visionary leaders
- The capacity of the media to do investigative stories and hold the government to account on environmental matters has declined.

4. Conclusion

- SEA remains an essential tool to promote more sustainable forms of development
- Experience in Canada and other countries shows that SEA can be applied successfully to integrate environmental considerations into sectoral policies
- As the federal government considers how to improve SEA practice, it needs to address the deficiencies in the supporting factors that can make SEA more effective.