

Potential of Strategic Environmental Assessment Follow-up for Institutional Learning and Collaboration:

A case of Merseyside Local Transport Plans, UK

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Abstract

SEA is an internationally recognized process for buttressing more environmentally sustainable strategic policy making. The current thinking of SEA places it in the category of proactive SD evaluations with a focus on ex ante evaluation of socio-economic and environmental impacts of strategies. Meanwhile, in reality strategies are rarely implemented according to the formulated due to uncertainly, lack of feedback, etc. Thus, a shift to ex-post evaluation in SEA or SEA follow-up is needed to cope with a gap between the predicted and actual impacts of strategies.

SEA and SD literature acknowledges the promise of SEA follow up but due to virtually no research such important questions are unanswered as: Whether and how can SEA follow-up improve capacities and collaboration through feedback, feedforward, and learning activities for “sustainable” realization of strategies? How can it ensure transfer of scientific and technical knowledge to future strategies? Etc.

This paper explores the potential of SEA follow-up (if it exists) to enhance institutional learning through planning cycles and to improve collaboration between tiered strategies. It adapts favourable criteria from a conceptual framework developed for a mother study, elaborates on their essence and investigates them in the context of two Merseyside Local Transport Plans.

Alongside expected outcomes such as an identified tiering and continuity principle in planning strengthening feedback and learning loops, some unexpected added values of SEA follow-up were revealed. These show that SEA follow-up a) shifts a focus to the realization of importance of social learning and collective cognitive; b) establishes, operationalizes, and maintains links within a strategy and in-between different tiers and levels; and c) supports collaboration and multiple information flows both outside and inside the implementing institution.

The paper summarises the beneficial features of SEA follow-up and concludes that it could improve learning and collaboration for successful strategy implementation in support of SD ideas.

Key words: SEA follow-up, ex post evaluation in SEA, learning, collaboration, successful strategy implementation.

1. SEA in the context of SD evaluations

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (SD) (Johannesburg 2002) has lucidly showed that mechanisms to deliver sustainability and to operationalise its concept at different levels of planning are to be streamlined (Dalal-Clayton *et al.* 2002). Evaluations are key elements of those delivery SD mechanisms (i.e. strategies, visions, agendas, plans, etc.) and depending on the goals and areas of application they may take various forms. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is among the evaluation processes developed to facilitate efforts in sustainable strategic planning. In fact, SEA has been identified as bearing a spirit of SD-evaluations according to the review of 10 country SD-evaluation reports by EASY-ECO researchers (Martinuzzi 2004).

SEA is conventionally understood as a systematic process of integrating environmental considerations alongside economic and social ones into early phases of policy, plan or program (PPP) development¹. Being a wide evaluative notion, SEA can contribute towards sustainability in a number of ways, e.g. it:

¹ Adjusted from (Sadler 1996)

- ensures the consideration of environmental issues from the beginning of decision-making process;
- can detect potential triple-bottom line impacts at an early stage of strategy designing
- provides a framework for the chain of actions, and
- contributes to integrated policy making, planning, and programming (Arce & Gullon 2000).

Unsurprisingly, since its launching in 1970s, SEA has often been perceived as a panacea for various environmental “malaises” and a potential means to achieve SD (Stinchcombe & Gibson 2001). How successful is this potential means is an issue to be approached from the ex post evaluative viewpoint which however is rather underemphasized within the SEA concept as will be shown further.

2. Ex-post evaluation in SEA: research problem, questions and aim

The recent thinking of SEA places it in the category of proactive SD evaluations with a focus on the ex ante evaluation of socio-economic and environmental impacts of strategies (PPPs, visions, etc.). As a rule, SEA includes such tasks as scoping, identification and comparison of alternatives, evaluation based on technical and publicly adopted criteria, reporting, public participation, and monitoring and evaluation (Partidario 2000). Of all these constituents of SEA only one element, i.e. monitoring and evaluation, refers to the post-decisional stage of strategic initiative.

Meanwhile, in reality strategic initiatives are frequently implemented differently from what has been formulated due to uncertainty, lack of feedback, low cooperation, etc. Thus, a shift to ex-post evaluation in SEA, also referred to as SEA follow-up, is needed to cope with a considerable gap between the predicted and actual impacts of formulated strategies. The current literature defines SEA follow-up as “monitoring and evaluation of the impacts of...plan for management of, and communication about its environmental performance” (Morrison-Saunders & Arts 2004).

Although SEA and SD literature acknowledges the need and promise of SEA follow-up, virtually no research has been conducted. Very few studies agree that “*consideration of SEA follow-up raises a lot of questions that cannot yet be answered because of lack of experience to date*” (Partidario & Arts 2005). So, many important questions are still unanswered such as: How to track the actual affects of a strategy on the environment in order to verify that the implemented and predicted impacts conform? How can strategic initiatives flexibly deal with the unpredicted and emergent changes in the environmentally friendly way? How to improve collaboration, capacities, scientific and technical knowledge for strategies through feedback, feedforward, and learning activities? Etc.

This paper focuses mainly on one of these questions. Specifically, it seeks to explore a potential of SEA follow-up within the context of its strategy to enhance institutional learning through planning cycles and to improve collaboration between it and the related/tiered strategies². This paper is a part of a larger research deploying qualitative methods to develop a conceptual framework for interaction of strategies and ex-post evaluation in SEA. Several sets of criteria derived from this framework were further translated into the testable ones. From those sets of evaluation criteria only several were opted for the paper as described in Section 3 and applied to two Merseyside Local Transport Plans (corporate strategies of five district councils and Merseytravel, UK, 2001/02-2005/06 & 2006/07-2010/11).

The idea of the paper is to use an “open-minded” approach to explore the potential of SEA follow-up rather than to evaluate it in the course of the case study against the pre-defined criteria. The reason for this is that first the existence of SEA follow-up per se in practice is questionable; second if SEA follow-up is identified it is arguable whether its conceptualization is adequate to the practice, and finally, practical experience can inform the theoretical premises and help refine the “success” criteria.

² In SEA tiering is defined as the linking of assessments for PPPs and projects to achieve a logical hierarchy and avoid unnecessary duplication of assessment work” (DfT 2004). Tiering develops in a three-level system between SEA for PPP and EIA for projects, in a two-level tiering between national, regional and local levels’ initiatives (DGTREN 2005; Therivel 2004) as well as across the sectors but at the same administrative levels (Partidario & Fischer 2004; Sadler 2005b; Sadler 2005c) and diagonally across the sectors at the different administrative levels (Arts *et al.* 2005; Therivel 2004).

3. How, where and when could ex-post SEA contribute to strategy delivery?

Before proceeding to features and potentials of SEA follow-up beneficial for strategy realization, it is necessary to understand how and at what points and stages it can be conducted and its results used. The results of the literature review have revealed a strong belief that SEA follow-up has a potential to facilitate and ensure a continuing integration of environmental considerations into implementations of strategies via its purposes, which basically are:

1. Track initiatives and their environmental impacts to verify conformance,
2. Enhance public acceptance, cooperation and communication,
3. Integrate with other relevant information (Morrison-Saunders & Arts 2004),
4. Improve scientific and technical knowledge and provide for feedback and feedforward and (Arts & Morrison-Saunders 2004b),
5. Maintain flexibility of decisions, cope with uncertainty and increase adaptability of management in changing context (Morrison-Saunders & Arts 2004; Partidario & Fischer 2004);

The relevance of various theories and notions to SEA follow-up and a virtual absence of research on how the current SEA trends shape decision-making during a life of strategy triggered the extension of its conventional boundaries. Correspondingly, the interaction points of SEA follow-up and its strategies, i.e. the moments when the activities of the former could influence (positively) the latter had to be formulated with reference to multiple theories. Those served as a background for deriving the initial interaction framework and included Strategic planning and Strategy formation theories, selected models from decision-making and policy-making theories (relevant to Strategic planning); Social (esp. organizational) learning theories and information flow models, Adaptive management theories, Strategy evaluation approaches, etc. The guidelines in this derivation process were as follows:

- SEA follow-up includes monitoring, evaluation, management, and communication and desirably screening with scoping;
- SEA follow-up could be considered successful if the goals and intentions laid in its design are met contributing towards environmental and SD goals of the strategy;
- SEA follow-up is an “open and learning” system;
- The backbone for the framework should be principle issues, good practice and experience of SEA and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) follow-up and strategies.

Through the analytical discourse along those guiding principles and based on the germane documentary background i.e. SEA guidance and guidelines, manuals, laws, etc., evaluation criteria for an umbrella research were derived. Grounded on them, the criteria for this paper were selected and reformulated from the perspective of their relevance to institutional change and learning, cooperation and participation mindsets. They constitute seven social, physical, political and institutional factors-statements that may theoretically enable the contribution of ex-post evaluation in SEA to strategies. Summarised in **Table 1**, they are further substantiated with the theoretical elements from which they stem and immediately explored in the context of the case study in Section 4.

Table 1 Criteria for social and institutional aspects of SEA follow-up needed to facilitate strategy

1.	Existence of formal provisions for SEA follow-up and specification of its position in planning cycle and decision - and policy-making processes
2.	Explicit statement of SEA follow-up rationales and goals for different decision-making and planning tiers (i.e. organizational anchoring, if possible)
3.	Provision of adaptive management approaches in SEA follow-up
4.	Clear expression of commitment coupled with managerial competence
5.	Ensurance of open (coordinated) stakeholder cooperation and accountability including a right for feedback and participation
6.	Formulation of transparent frameworks for SEA follow-up delivery activities and their contribution to strategy goals
7.	Determination of practicable resources for SEA follow-up

4. Merseyside Local Transport Plans

4.1. Background information

Merseyside is located in the North West of the UK and encompasses five districts, namely St. Helens, Wirral, Knowsley, Liverpool, and Sefton. The five District Councils formed a partnership with Merseytravel, a public transport-coordinating body, to develop a program of transport improvements across the region. The result of their joint work was a so-called Merseyside Integrated Travel Study (MerITS, 1993) which in the absence of Environmental Assessment (EA) had nonetheless the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) and environmental targets and indicators set to be monitored during its implementation.

At the end of 90s environmental awareness in the UK started to rise with more attention devoted to creation of corporate strategies. In 2000 the UK Government devised a new framework for transport planning by local authorities called the Local Transport Plan (LTP) (HoC 2006). The Merseyside partnership in the same composition prepared the first LTP (LTP 1) approved by the Government in 2000. The LTP1 (2000/01 - 2005/06) as well as the following second LTP (LTP2, 2006/2007-2011/2012) is a five year strategy set out to address local transport issues in an integrated manner.

The link between the environment and transport and advantages of taking corporate responsibilities were better recognised and integrated over the life of the LTP 1. However, no special environmental follow-up schemes were envisaged for it and no EA was in place then. To a certain extent monitoring, evaluation and management of mandatory indicators, some of which were environmental, were conducted as per the national policy requirements³. The most heed was paid to health issues and the HIA inherited from the strategy preceding the LTP1, i.e. the MerITS, follow-up to which could nonetheless be considered a sort of environmental follow-up. The MerITS's environmental monitoring at that time was focused only on CO2 indicator but interviewees are not aware if it has been ever undertaken. For the LTP2 both SEA and HIA⁴ are in place serving as a start point for SEA follow-up.

4.2. Existence of formal provisions for SEA follow-up and specification of its position in planning cycle and decision - and policy-making processes

Substantiation. The existence and integration of follow-up requirements in EA regulation is vital for the development of the SEA follow-up practice as a general SEA process becomes most effective when there are legal/formal provisions for it (Sheate *et al.* 2001). The SEA Directive has rather vague monitoring requirements (Article 10):

1. *Member states shall monitor the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plans and programmes in order, inter alia, to identify, at an early stage unforeseen adverse effects, and to be able to undertake appropriate remedial action.*
2. *In order to comply with paragraph 1, existing monitoring arrangements can be used to if appropriate, with a view to avoiding duplication of monitoring (EC 2001).*

Mainly the same requirements are in the SEA Protocol (Article 12) with the addition that:

2. *The results of the monitoring undertaken shall be made available, in accordance with national legislation, to the authorities referred to in article 9, paragraph 1, and to the public (UNECE 2003).*

Formal provisions define the fact of a necessary preparation of SEA follow-up. However, when SEA follow-up should enter the planning cycle and how it interacts with SEA and its strategies as well as whether it has to predict the effects of changing strategies or look at the follow-up of the past planning efforts is a debatable issue. Legislation and guiding documents, i.e. SEA manuals and guidance to a certain degree define the timing of monitoring element of SEA follow-up in the SEA elaboration and

³ For example, as dictated by the White Papers "Our Towns and Cities: The Future- Delivering an Urban Renaissance" (2000, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/citiesandregions/ourtowns>) and "The Future of Transport" (2004, <http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/whitepapers/fot/>), UK Biodiversity Action Plan (1996, <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/>), etc.

⁴ See the official website <http://www.letstravelwise.org/ltp/sea/hia.html>

strategy implementation periods. Whilst the SEA Directive is not very informative in relation to the positioning of SEA follow-up, the European Council (EC) manuals and guidance are more concrete, e.g. the EC Guide on the SEA Implementation (EC 2003) states:

Clause 8.5. If monitoring can be satisfactorily integrated in the regular planning cycle, it may not be necessary to establish a separate procedural step for carrying it out. Monitoring may coincide for example with the regular revision of a plan or programme, depending on which effects are being monitored and upon the length of intervals between revisions.

Merseyside strategies. In the line with the SEA Directive, the UK has worked out guiding documents with certain provisions for developing SEA follow-up elements (Barth & Fuder 2002; DGTREN 2005; ODPM 2003). They tend to locate SEA follow-up in a rather strict position in relation to strategy implementation process depending on the sectoral belongingness. This relation is determined mostly in standardized and mechanical-technical frames. In other words, formally SEA follow-up in the UK tends to highly formalized. So, as per the soft legislation the fixed position of SEA follow-up smoothly fits into the current vision of hierarchical setup of SEA in planning and decision making in the UK.

With a clearer positioning of SEA and strategy, tiering takes more practical forms operating alongside another “linking” and networking system observable in the UK transport strategies and essential for their implementation. This system of links supplements tiering system as will be shown in Section 6. Tiering or “policy context” in the UK specifies the position of (S)EA follow-up of Merseyside strategies amongst other related strategies and their SEAs and ex post evaluations (follow-up to HIA and SEA for LTP2) both at the same and other decision- making and planning levels. Meanwhile, the identified linking system within tiers focuses more on the relations between the institutions and responsible people and on the ways of rationalising data collection and data exchange between the six Merseyside Partners and beyond.

Whilst the position of environmental follow-up in the planning process of the LTP1 is not so straightforward and is blurred by the performance monitoring, it could be much easier tracked in the LTP2. Here SEA follow-up activities are also generally integrated with the implementation monitoring of a transport strategy without any separate strategic environmental management plans. However, there are a number of environmental follow-up – aiding background papers, reports and protocols that are prepared during the operation year and used for an annual reporting.

Overall, the SEA Directive and the UK regulations guide the elaboration of SEA follow-up. The placement of ex-post evaluation in SEA in the structured hierarchy of the Merseyside LTPs is rather well specified and matches the performance monitoring. The practice shows that such approach is beneficial for reaching and tracking the strategies’ objectives and targets. The next section discusses how important the clarity of such structured systems is when it comes to opinions of actors involved.

4.3. Explicit statement of SEA follow-up rationales and goals for different decision-making and planning tiers (i.e. organizational anchoring, if possible)

Substantiation. Organizational theory devotes a lot of heed to designing a structure able to successfully implement the strategy. Taking into account the unpredictability of the tasks and general environment, coupled with the limitations of our knowledge and resources, our organization structures will be imperfect at best. The flexibility of the proponents to respond to a variety of the most likely contingencies is vital (Gerloff 1985). The links between the layers - organizations implementing SEA follow-up should bear the capacity to arrive at the common goals or to be able to translate them in a comprehensive manner to provide for anchoring of organizations as cement for bricks. Learning and cognitive processes are factors existence of which enables “cement” to dry and holds the structure of SEA follow-up.

Formulation of clear goals is an essential prerequisite for effective SEA (OECD 2006) providing guidance for action in SEA, linking its environmental objectives with SD ones, informing decisions on alternatives, etc. (Arts 1998; Fischer 2005; Gachechiladze 2007). Whether the proponents of strategy intend to revise a strategy to start a new planning cycle with new decisions or whether they need to

completely replace it and prepare a new SEA will significantly influence the design and implementation of ex post evaluations.

Often, it might be hard to develop comprehensive goals and explain rationales behind them as a clear “rational” goal to one actor might seem senseless to another. Different stakeholders have different goals and even conflicting interests that should be addressed through negotiation and consultation in the SEA follow-up process (see also Points 4.5 & 4.6.). Although evaluation concept rarely involves participatory elements in the basic setup (Martinuzzi 2004), this, perceived as a way to integrate participatory approaches in evaluation for better strategy management, could be a goal of SEA follow-up per se.

Clearly, SEA follow-up process may encompass a set of consequent and interrelated SD evaluations. One reason for this is that SEA framework allows the principle of sustainability to be carried out down from higher policies to individual projects (Therivel & Partidario 1996). SEA follow-up may deal with re-evaluation of strategies before regular updates or new strategies are initiated in a planning cycle. A mixture of numerous goals, targets, rationales, purposes of SEA follow-up of related strategies might result either in high level of separation and/or abstraction (a sort of NIMBY) or in structureless efforts.

In Merseyside strategies setting clear goals for SEA follow-up occurs but is basically downscaled to a command and control reaction. The first priority is to meet international and national standards, then regional and sub-regional ones and finally local ones. The Government deploys methods of financial incentives (close to a punish-then-reward pattern) through a system of different financial awards and moral encouragements (titles, etc.). The potential of SEA follow-up is not fully acknowledged as virtually no shaping of goals in a bottom-up manner is in place. People try to think in conjunction during the implementation of the LTPs. A big plus is that tracking the consequences and performance outcome of their strategies they keep the “partnership” as a form of relations with and share culturally provided tools and implements.

The proponents of the LTPs possess information or can request it if needed on the ongoing horizontal and lower strategies and are ready to take responsive or corporate actions in case of necessity. This implies that performance monitoring is open to side-effects observations, however when asked to illustrate that the interviewees did not recall any actual example. The situation is seen here is twofold. On the one hand, an indication exists that there is a limitation of information inflow which is understandable as due to large amounts of information people are selective (otherwise an information fatigue will occur). On the other side, it is not clearly agreed with other strategies’ proponents in which cases they will automatically provide information without request (adverse effects, change of political priorities?). Probably, a principle of corporate responsibility is intuitively used being based on personal and professional contacts and information exchange.

The interviewees have demonstrated a rather clear understanding of situational relations between the LTPs and the related upper, horizontal, diagonal, and lower strategies. There are quite coherent common objectives-oriented connections which are particularly obvious for the LTP2 at least at the strategy formulation level. For both LTPs, mostly in case of exceeding the standards or emergency or non-compliance with an objective or a target the responsible people report to the upper tiers (on their problems) and the necessary (emergent) sequence of actions is instigated. Several *waves of decisions* usually follow such reporting starting from the epicentre of an emergence of some observed effect, i.e. incompliance case or unpredicted change in actions, and extending further in upper and lower directions to allow for consistency in planning.

In general, the strategic planning context of the LTPs provides for a possibility of liaison with the subsequent decision-making. In the sequence of several hierarchically lower located actions each decision-making level within the LTPs shows its rationales for subsequent follow-up and performance monitoring. This means that SEA follow-up is to a certain extent supplemental to the rationales for ex post evaluation of the LTPs and other tiered to it actions. In other words a tendency to integrate follow-up to strategy implementation and SEA becomes observable in the UK practice.

4.4. Provision of adaptive management approaches in SEA follow-up

Substantiation. The importance of an adequate manoeuvring and decision-making in a specific and dynamic context has brought about the third component of SEA follow-up, *management* (see the definition in Section 2). It represents a process of translation of the information gained through the application of the preceding components, i.e. monitoring and evaluation into the reactions and adjustments of strategy to unanticipated situation (Arts & Morrison-Saunders 2004b). Another point highlighted in the literature is that follow-up activities should include monitoring that can be connected to adaptive design and management (i.e. actions to ensure flexibility and to identify and correct unanticipated or excessive effects) (Hunsberger *et al.* 2005).

The idea of Adaptive Environmental Assessment and Management (AEAM) as such is not new. It has been discussed as early as 25 years ago and has been repeatedly discovered throughout the history of EIA and SEA in response to the limitations of the rational planning approaches. In the initial ABEAM theory it is argued that search for better solutions in EAs and their objects should include “trial-and-error” attempts alongside monitoring; however most effort is to be put not into lessening of uncertainty but into designing for uncertainty to obtain benefits from the unexpected (Holling 1978).

Principles of organizational learning involving the determination and correction of error, and then testing and restructuring organizational setup or goals (Argyris & Schön 1996) match the philosophy of adaptive management. The current SEA literature mentions that though AEAM approach may be applied to strategic initiatives it “has not been extensively reflected in the SEA discourse, possibly because of its inherent scepticism regarding the viability of deliberate strategies” (Cherp *et al.* 2007). However, adaptive management is seen to be a potentially important principle in scoping for future planning. In this light SEA follow-up might play a role of a means of adaptive planning (Partidario & Arts 2005). On the other hand, follow-up to SEA must be coordinated with the follow-up to strategic initiative and modified if it is modified, which might be hard in practice (Partidario & Arts 2005).

Merseyside strategies. The LTPs are quite sensitive to the external changes occurring in the political, economic or public environments. While it is not always possible to immediately adapt to them due to a planning operation and budget cycle they seek to change accordingly. SEA follow-up to LTPs tends to be able to follow the content of updated strategic actions and re-assess their consequences for the environment. An essential role here is played by the stakeholders who strive to design and fulfil SEA follow-up in a way that its actions are responsive to long-term (implementation) and short-term environmental changes (adaptive management).

In fact, several cases of minor changes either in the major schemes due to environmental monitoring or in the monitoring plans due to unpredicted alterations in strategy have occurred. Thus, admitting that the proponents do practice adaptive management, the question arises whether it is done only within one structure (within the boundaries of the Merseyside partnership) or through information channels and (un)official links with other related strategies as well (see Sections 4.6 and 6).

The practical quest has showed that in relation to SEA follow-up a principle of continuity starts to play a significant role. Although not set out as a separate evaluation criteria in this research it has regained its value during the field research. The continuity is important not only to ensure that a current strategy is implemented according to the intended, and not even to ensure that adaptive environmental management is in place, but to provide for the continuity of experience. With this internal capacity, a feedback for planning authorities gains adequacy and supports collective learning. The continuity principle is frequently merged with managerial component and capacity building potential.

4.5. Clear expression of commitment coupled with managerial competence

Substantiation. Existence of formal requirements is not always enough for SEA follow-up to be properly designed and conducted. Institutional maturity, general interest, professional input and routine efforts are needed to keep follow-up program running:

“SEA will only be effective where an institution (in most cases the state) exists in a country that has the mandate, the capacity and the willingness to follow-up on the key results of agreed actions in an SEA” (Marsden & De Mulder 2005).

As stated by many authors there are three principal “parties” engaged in SEA follow-up, i.e. *proponents, regulators and community* (Arts 1998; Arts & Morrison-Saunders 2004a; Dalal-Clayton & Sadler 2005). SEA follow-up should be able to deal with and account for cognitive sides and social values of all parties as this is a prerequisite for personal as well as collective commitment.

The lack of political commitment and poor capacity for strategic thinking and long-term planning needed for successful managerial process have been indicated as major problems of SEA (Dalal-Clayton & Sadler 2005). This is especially important for SEA follow-up as is a long-term process that requires continuous commitment, willingness and capacity to learn from previous successes and failures.

Competence of parties, especially of the proponents of SEA follow-up is crucial for a meaningful evaluation of monitoring results and for their adequate use for management. Competence as a wide notion would include abilities to acquire, generate and provide a comprehensive feedback to different stakeholders and to incorporate it in subsequent planning efforts. As elements of competence, education and training are important in SEA (Fischer 2005), particularly to enhance the interest towards social learning and commitment of different actors.

Merseyside strategies. The commitment of the parties during the times of the MerITS was quite low due to a low awareness as it was explained in Section 4.1. The LTP1 tended to ensure compliance with the monitoring tasks set in it however if SEA follow-up existed there with all its components the commitment towards environmental targets would be higher. All six Merseyside partners do express commitment to implement the SEA follow-up measures stated in the LTP2 and the recent first annual report confirms it⁵.

Although all partners to the LTPs are required to do nearly the same in terms of measuring environmental indicators and other indicators relevant to SEA and HIA follow-up, they have different technical resources and capacities. The practice shows that commitment might either internally come from a person or organization or be stimulated through external incentives (national awards, grants, etc.). In the case of Merseyside strategies commitment of proponents has found to be related to the possession of technical capacities. This relation will be covered in more detail in Section 4.8.

The managerial competence for SEA follow-up implementation for both LTPs is basically in place however it is also related to the resource availability and capacity building factors (see Section 4.8).

On the whole, the proponents who agreed to conduct performance monitoring and report on targets and objectives in the LTPs, SEA and HIA are committed to carrying out their responsibilities, e.g. monitoring, evaluation, specific actions, etc. For meaningful implementation of environmental and performance monitoring outlined in the follow-up programs the allocation of corresponding tasks and duties was undertaken with corresponding timetables. This created a basis for a proper coordination and cooperation of the parties.

4.6. Ensurance of open (coordinated) stakeholder cooperation and accountability including a right for feedback and participation

Substantiation. Any organization by definition is a collective, with individuals and larger units in different roles that involve different perspectives and values, passing information through their own filters. How the information is filtered and interpreted and by whom and to whom and for what kind of purposes it is communicated should be framed. Participants to the SEA follow-up process should seek consensus on procedures and approaches to be applied and should ensure that subsequent decision making be informative for SEA follow-up in terms of backward linkages to. Authorities should provide support and supervise the implementation of SEA follow-up or run auditing and self-compliance schemes for their actions in case they are the proponents (this is mostly the case). Also, to support idea of open cooperation and to ensure a right for feedback from the wider public the results of follow-up actions should be communicated to stakeholders concerned (e.g. annual reports, etc.).

⁵ For the report see http://www.letstravelwise.org/uploads/documents/oct_07/trav_1193319856_06-07_APR.pdf

There are many reasons for enhancing public participation, e.g. increasing transparency in decision-making, increasing support for the adopted policy, plan or programme, by involving external groups in the planning process, helping to avoid subsequent controversy, confrontation and delays in the decision-making process due to public opposition; enhancing the credibility of selected strategies, providing a better understanding of the receiving environment and individual and community in issues and values (Rauschmayer & Risse 2005).

Participation should not be single-sided or absolutely restricted but should incorporate multiple viewpoints. Any parties have or may involve experts with specialist knowledge on how to design and conduct follow-up, such as academic and scientific communities, consultants, (sub) contractors, etc. Quite a wide circle of actors can be found in the SEA follow-up process. A structure or mechanism should be set out to ensure coordinated cooperation of stakeholders.

Merseyside strategies. No special “communication plans” were envisaged in the MerITS or the LTPs. However, what was created for the LTPs is a sufficient organizational setup to ensure communication of the SEA follow-up results. The results of follow-up actions or programs in the form of the annual reports are posted on the website of the partnership and further enquiries are answered by the LTP Support Unit. The District Councils’ websites also contain detailed information on underway and completed actions and maintain Transport Forums for the local population. Nonetheless, the Merseyside partners suppose that there is rather low interest from the population unless some issue directly relates to inhabitants.

The central authorities provide a possibility for partnership to require monitoring data from other sources rather than those owned by the partners. The supervision by the Government is set in a form of control of annual reports that are first elaborated by each district individually with support of the monitoring consultancy – MISS/McDonalds and then submitted to the Steering Group for compiling and editing. So, there is a division of monitoring data based on the acquisition sources.

Within the LTPs, the Steering Group consisting of the representatives of all partners is in charge of considering the ongoing issues and finding the solutions as well as ensuring and coordinating the collaboration of the partners. Beyond the LTPs, cooperation and partially coordination of issues does occur even in the absence of formal requirements. Informally the actors of one strategy share the information with the actors of the related strategies if they deem it to be important. For example, no official obligations require the LTPs’ actors to report on their performance to the proponents of the Liverpool City Region Development Plan. Notwithstanding this, the operation staff of both Plans who worked together during plans and SEA elaboration keep in touch conducting unofficial consultations, discussing the problems and issues of implementation. They talk about the issues specified in the SEA & HIA as well as those set for monitoring. So, it might be suggested that links and connections created during SEA are maintained if SEA follow-up is carried out. This is crucial for learning when implementing the LTPs as actors from different strategies even unofficially collaborating learn from each other, advice each other and tend to act having the goals in mind.

4.7. Formulation of transparent frameworks for SEA follow-up delivery activities and their contribution to strategy goals

Substantiation. How monitoring information is gained, evaluated and communicated could be clear to one group of stakeholders and vague for others. The proponents of strategy (including their sometimes numerous contractors) might belong to dozens of different organizations. But since they implement the SEA follow-up activities for a particular strategy they need to work as a single collective in a cooperative and transparent way. The motives of decisions and actions undertaken by actors at different levels and in different positions should be as transparent as possible to others in order to reduce conflicts of interests and mutual mistrust and dissatisfaction.

To some extent, the formulation of transparent framework for SEA follow-up will derive from its rationales and goals and from goals of strategy under implementation. Clear division of tasks among the actors involved in accordance with the common values and objectives will not only provide for more transparency but also increase the commitment of the actors (as suggested in Point 4.3.).

Activities of SEA follow-up might be better delivered if stakeholders believe in their usefulness and can see how those contribute to achieving strategic goals. There is an obvious link to institutional or social learning abilities as it focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 1999) and how they accumulate knowledge thus improving adaptive capacity and organizational performance (Weick 1991).

Merseyside strategies. The final component of SEA follow-up, i.e. communication is considered as a process able to secure the transparency of strategy implementation. While cooperation and coordination occur within the Merseyside Partnership, “communication” is more focused on the public and interest groups. With the public it occurs via public forums on the same official Internet sites that were designed for strategy formulation and represents a sort of performance monitoring. This supports the continuity of information flows. The Internet sites just change the functions following the strategy life cycle. Complaints and opinions of people are attempted to be taken into account with consultations arranged to consider them.

The ways of transferring data from the LTP1 to the LTP2 are more transparent than those between the MerITS and the LTP1. It could be argued that SEA follow-up in a form it exists now can serve as a mechanism facilitating the process of inheriting and transferring relevant environmental and socio-economic elements from one planning cycle’s strategy to another (i.e. from the LTP1 to the LTP2). This potential of SEA follow-up should be developed more to ensure that the next strategies absorb information from the preceding ones.

The means by which SEA follow-up actions are determined for LTP2 are rather fair and transparent as per the comprehensive SEA and HIA with all parties being accountable for their actions. Less clarity existed in tracking environmental implications of the LTP1 actions. Nowadays, the ways how SEA follow-up actions can contribute to achievement of strategy’s objectives and goals become clearer to stakeholders but are still to be perceived and digested.

4.8. Determination of practicable resources for SEA follow-up

Substantiation. A long life cycle of a strategy calls for a long-lasting SEA follow-up with extensive inputs of time, money and human resources by all stakeholders. Already during SEA and strategy preparation (ideally, at the stage of scoping for SEA follow-up) a pragmatic approach towards feasibility of SEA follow-up should be taken. SEA follow-up actions need to be evaluated against the constraints of money, time, resources, geography, the level and nature of strategy and vulnerability, and the attitudes and desires of the affected communities and proponents. To reduce costs where possible existing monitoring and management schemes (e.g. strategic environmental management plans or state of the environment reporting) and simple but effective techniques (e.g. observation and inspection) could be explored.

Budgets for strategies and SEA should not only include the appreciation of SEA follow-up but also should be sensitive to the context of the local environment and culture, to decision-making levels and planning traditions, to type and scale of strategy. Adequate resources are also needed if effective consultation and participation processes are to take place (Fischer 2005).

Merseyside strategies. No financial information was available on the MerITS during the field research mostly due to the age of this strategy designed 18-17 years ago. Although the staff rotates rates are not very high, many actors involved in strategy preparation and implementation have passed away or left the partner structures. This has significantly hindered tracking of the function of SEA follow-up from the very early days of the Merseyside strategies.

Developmental budgets for the LTP1 included monitoring costs and strategies performance costs as well as allocation of means towards lower schemes and programs. The LTP2 has the same financial clauses with larger resources for monitoring; however they have not been increased proportionally and equally for all the Partner-districts (conditional on their local needs and capacities). SEA for the LTP1 has no reference to funding for monitoring and evaluation, however it identifies monitoring technique, timing and responsible parties, etc. (Maunsell 2005).

Echoing the discourse on adaptive management, divergent and emergent actions are frequent in routine implementation of the LTPs and are followed by corresponding changes in monitoring and management practices. The planning personnel put efforts in making them consistent with the objectives of the LTPs and commensurate with time and human resources available. Meanwhile, the commitment and managerial competence as was mentioned heavily depend on the resources at hand. One of the interviewees described a hierarchy of necessary (but not minimum) equipment and personnel as follows:

District	Stakeholders' capacity to conduct ground level SEA follow-up
Sefton	Advanced sophisticated equipment, enough qualified people
Liverpool	↓
Knowsley	
Wirral	
St. Helens	

The SEA follow-up could bear a possibility to ensure that all partners have sufficient resources to cope with their environmental concerns.

6. Other observations

A relative openness of the empirical research in this paper to factors and processes other than those derived from the conceptual framework helps in capturing unexpected benefits of ex post evaluation in SEA. It also allows changing the focuses of criteria and emphasising other aspects important for practical SEA follow-up and its strategy. Those findings can be used in further research.

This section elaborates on the beneficial side-effects or added values of SEA follow-up revealed during the empirical examination of the MerITS and the LTPs, UK. Surprisingly, they mostly refer to the ideas that are hard to be measured, e.g. perceptions and changes in perceptions of those involved in SEA follow-up, (informal) communication and collaboration issues, personal vs. collective learning of different stakeholders, etc. Some of them are described below.

6.1. SEA follow-up might shift a focus to the realization of importance of social learning and collective cognitive processes

For the times of the MerITS the embryonic state of organizational learning was already visible; however it dropped over the LTP1 and started to revive for the LTP2. The interviews and a character of the LTP2, which seems to be more collective thinking oriented, show that there is a certain turn to the realization of importance of social learning. This however would highly happen if learning from the MerITS and the LTP1 had not occurred to inform, shape and support collective cognitive processes of the LTPs. The revival of organizational learning was possible due to the ground formed during the MerITS and the LTP1. The key changes initiated during these strategies are upheld and advocated via SEA follow-up (sometimes intuitively, even without intention). They include:

- Organizational change. The ways, in which the Partners function have changed as well as the procedures they deploy and their day-to-day activities (this type of change maintained by SEA resonates one of the functions related to a perception of SEA effectiveness, namely to “changing routines function” (Fischer 2007).
- Attitudinal change. Several people working for more than 12-15 years with the transport strategies in Merseyside highlighted that they observed changes in attitudes and ideas of both policy makers (reflected in instructions coming from the Government) and local population (raising number of comments on the LTPs at the Transport Forum of Partner-Councils). Some changes occur in ways of thinking about the links between environment and planning and managing transport.
- Behavioural change. It could be argued that some changes occur in how people interact with others and how they engage in collaboration. Presently, the enthusiasm and commitment to fulfilling the LTPs is obvious as the interviewees claim they feel that new strategies might make difference and their goals although a bit ambitious can be realized.

6.2. SEA follow-up establishes, operationalizes, and maintains a system of links both within one strategy and in-between different tiers and strategic levels

How to ensure that the revived gains and institutional changes will sustain and the new capacities and strengthened cooperation will be maintained? SEA follow-up has a direct potential to address these questions of institutionalising SEA. If SEA and HIA have created conditions for developing implementation and cooperation capacities of the Partners, SEA follow-up becomes responsible for the operationalization and maintenance of the created links and anchors.

For the LTP1 the organization of implementation of strategy and environmental monitoring was less cooperation-oriented with the Districts focused narrowly on their own tasks. As it has been mentioned, the corporate nature is different for the LTP2. The cooperation processes, when developing the LTP2 and SEA in parallel, had greater value and were well established thus providing for successful strategy formulation. The implementation is facilitated by the fact that the Partner-organizations that developed the LTPs are mostly in charge of their implementation (apart from some minor schemes) in this way avoiding the problem of “losing organizational anchoring” (Cherp 2007).

6.3. SEA follow-up supports collaboration and multiple information flows through links within tiers both outside and inside the implementing institution

Tiers resemble wide channels between the strategies through which the exchange of information occurs (like boats travelling at different frequency in both directions to various destination points). However, this is not a single or periodic data transfer; the data might be perceived and assimilated or might be neglected at a time and requested later. Thus, the real-time continuous communication and multiple exchange of information take place through dozens of links within the tiers both outside and inside one organization and one strategy. The example of the LTPs and the Liverpool City Region Development Plan, the properties of which have been integrated into the objectives of the LTPs has informed this position. Subsequently, SEA elaborates on the impacts and effects of for instance the LTP2 taking account of this tiering. So, the tier is established at the pre-launching stage however as both plans are commenced and run simultaneously changes might occur to either of them and this needs to be captured, reflected upon and transmitted to another plan. Again, such exchange of information happens de facto and is not specified by any official requirement.

7. Conclusions

This section summarizes the revealed capacities of SEA follow-up to improve strategy learning and collaboration for its successful implementation. Those could be used as recommendations when setting out a comprehensive and high-quality SEA follow-up.

Basically, the arrangements when ex-post evaluation in SEA matches the performance monitoring of strategy has found to be rather beneficial for reaching and tracking the strategies' objectives and targets. This on a par with a clear positioning of SEA follow up facilitates information flows for better tiering, linking and networking within and beyond the Merseyside strategies.

The potential of SEA follow-up to establish and maintain a system of links between different tiers and strategies should be stressed to ensure that the future strategies are not in the less uncertain conditions than previous. As a result the learning and collaboration may acquire continuity necessary to allow for implementation of strategies as intended and application of adaptive environmental management in practice.

Then, the continuity principle merged with commitment, managerial competence and learning capabilities of stakeholders via the SEA follow-up activities provides ground for enhancing feedback and management functions. However, the additional efforts may be needed to ensure proper collective-thinking oriented training and education to obtain the mentioned beneficial to strategies' facets.

In a wider perspective, organizational, attitudinal and behavioural changes that may be delivered through ex post evaluation activities in SEA are important as they reflect the movement towards the

principles of SD. To institute changes in the corporate culture and values of strategy proponents is a long process which nonetheless could be appropriately guided by a sound SEA follow-up.

Environmentally sustainable and successful strategy implementation benefits from clearly formulated environmental and performance monitoring schemes which define tasks, timing, budgets, resources and coordination issues for stakeholders. In the course of their development communication, i.e. consultations, negotiations, etc. can take place which may secure transparency about rationales, goals, tasks of strategy and its implications. With raising transparency about their roles and contribution to gaining strategic outcomes, commitment and accountability of stakeholders will also enhance.

It is suggested that policy learning could be buttressed facilitated if the links and connections created during SEA and strategy elaboration are maintained via SEA follow-up. Even if formal contacts are not required during strategy implementation actors continue to unofficially collaborate, to share concerns and experiences, to think collectively and to learn from each other. In case of emergent actions or divergences stakeholders are able to require additional information needed to cope with a situation and address appropriate people. Interaction platforms such as official Internet Forums provide for continuous inputs from the public, NGOs, etc. as well as for communicating the results of SEA follow-up activities.

Overall, the paper shows that promises of SEA follow-up are not only theoretical. The benefits initially associated with it based on the desk research have been testified to a certain extent by the practical experience. It has also revealed other aspects of SEA follow-up able to improve strategy learning and collaboration for its successful implementation.

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