

*Article*

# Network strategic assessment approach for dialogue and capacity development in NGOs

Juan Azcárate\* and Berit Balfors

Department of Land and Water Resources Engineering, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, SE-100 44, Stockholm, Sweden.

Accepted 4 February, 2013

**As platforms for dialogue non-governmental organizations play an important role in facilitating the inclusion of a diversity of views in the debates and decisions that shape society. However, to successfully influence societal development non-governmental organizations need to develop and mobilize their capacities. This paper argues that organizational capacities can be developed and mobilized with strategic dialogues, which can be enabled and fostered with network strategic assessment approaches. Through a case study, research was carried out to draw experiences from designing a network strategic assessment approach in the context of a network-based non-governmental organization that aims to strengthen the development of its members and communities. Even though conceptualizing the network strategic assessment approach was challenging, research results were participant engagement, process ownership and strategic dialogues. It is argued that by fostering strategic dialogues network strategic assessment approaches allow networks to synchronize and mainstream their strategic elements in the daily activities of their member organizations. Moreover, it is claimed that such approaches contribute to integrate aspects of capacity development with network planning and decision making, enhancing organizational understanding and performance.**

**Key words:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, capacity development, dialogue, strategic environmental assessment.

## INTRODUCTION

As part of civil society non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a multiplicity of roles. They serve as government watch dogs, capacity brokers, private sector partners and government service providers (Mueller-Hirth, 2012). Moreover, NGOs act as fora for dialogue and as capacity building arenas for marginalized and vulnerable communities (Hilderbrand, 2002). A growing number of NGOs also promote development by committing themselves to human rights based approaches (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003), and are networking and internationalizing their operations to allow a variety of actors to access different arenas and

influence international debates (Nelson, 2002). Through networks, NGOs encourage a free exchange of ideas, skills and experiences amongst a wide sector of society, and facilitate the inclusion of locally anchored perspectives on development in the planning and decision making processes that shape society (Gardner and Lewis, 1996).

However, the role of NGOs as fora, arenas and networks that enable dialogue, debate and capacity building is widely contested. According to Edwards and Hulme (1996), NGOs are criticized for failing to effectively develop participatory approaches for internal debate and decision making, and for not being able to achieve changes without becoming entangled in politics. Moreover, Jordan and Van Tuijl (2000) state that NGOs find it challenging to generate trust and effectively carry

---

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [azcarate@kth.se](mailto:azcarate@kth.se).

out actions in local and international decision making arenas to bridge organizational, cultural, professional and individual borders. In addition, it is claimed that NGOs are often perceived as institutions that consult from a distance, which leads to difficulties in coordination with partners, duplicity of projects and a lack of optimization in the use of resources (Bontenbal, 2009). Most importantly, it is argued that, even though assessing the capacities of NGOs is vital for an effective implementation of their programmes, NGOs give limited formal consideration to organizational capacity assessments (Schuh and Leviton, 2006).

As a way to tackle these challenges and increase the potential of NGOs becoming effective platforms for dialogue and change, Edwards and Hulme (1996) and Bontenbal (2009) suggest that NGOs should identify and develop their key capacities by engaging in a partnership approach where participation, learning, reciprocity and transparency are emphasized. This idea is shared by Banerjee (2006) who stresses that NGOs should develop certain capacities to reach their high-end goals of survival and effectiveness. However, Banerjee (2006) claims that understanding the correlations and causal relationships of complex capacities still remains an outstanding challenge for organizations.

Despite these challenges, a process-based concept that can enable NGOs to assess their organizational capacities and even include capacity development programmes in their organizational planning and decision making is the process of capacity development. Specifically, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) encourages the use of a five step capacity development process that focuses on actor engagement and capacity assessment, programme formulation, implementation and monitoring (UNDP, 2009). It is claimed that capacity development processes like the one proposed by the UNDP are processes that enhance the exchange of skills and knowledge at multiple organizational levels and facilitate multi-actor agreements to reach long term organizational transformations (UNDP, 2002; OECD, 2006).

However, it is argued that to effectively develop capacity development processes organizations need to understand and identify complex and key issues that are related to their capacity development processes, as well as they need to enable a large actor participation to reach empowerment and process ownership, all of which is challenging to achieve (OECD, 2006; UNDP, 2009).

Using planning and decision making support processes such as strategic environmental assessment (SEA) can be one way for organizations to overcome the above mentioned challenges and design capacity development processes. SEA is considered to be a tool that takes a strategic approach to improve planning and decision making (Partidário, 2000, 2007). SEA is also viewed as an instrument that has the potential to involve actors in strategic and complex decision making contexts (Sheate

and Partidário, 2010), and that enhances collaborative learning (Jha-Thakur et al., 2009). However, as SEA practice has been largely dominated by its application as a technical, impact assessment based tool rather than a strategic planning enhancing tool (Jiliberto, 2007), there is a growing need for examples of SEA application as a strategic focused process that adapts to complex strategic planning and decision making contexts (Vicente and Partidário, 2006).

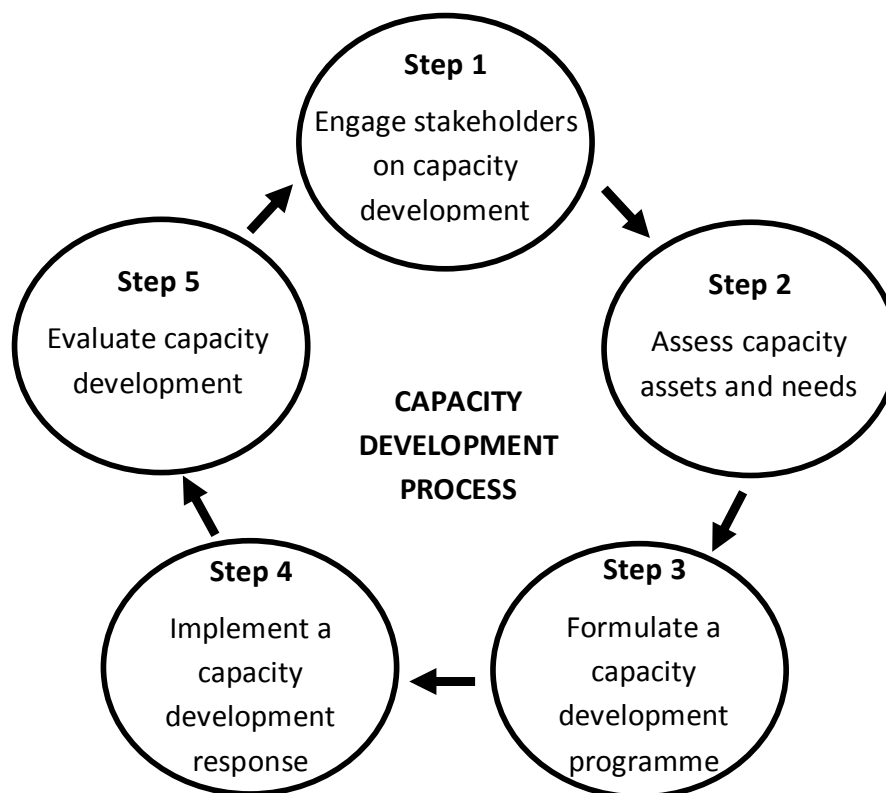
In light of the above, a research case study was designed and carried out in the context of a network-based NGO that works to develop the capacities of its member organizations and communities. The aim of the research case study was to examine how network-based NGOs can generate strategic dialogues to develop and mobilize their capacities and improve network planning and decision making. Specifically, the research case study explored if it was possible to design a strategic focused SEA approach based on the strategic elements of the network to effectively steer and frame dialogue, idea, skill and experience sharing within the network.

In this particular case study of strategic focused SEA design, the words “strategic” and “assessment” in SEA were highlighted to stress the strategic nature of the approach. Moreover, the word “environment” was left out and the word “network” was added to highlight the flexibility and adaptability of the approach to its context. These SEA lexicon changes resulted in the start of the conceptualization and development of a “network strategic assessment approach” in the context of the studied network-based NGO.

The purpose of this paper is to present the practical experiences that were gained by designing and developing a network strategic assessment approach in the studied network-based NGO. Focus is placed on providing organizations, particularly network based NGOs, with examples on how the strategic elements of networks can be synchronized and used in the daily activities of their members. Moreover, an account is given on how different aspects of capacity development can be integrated with network planning and decision making to develop and mobilize organizational capacities towards the attainment of their goals.

## **PROCESSES FOR ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Public and private organizations have the common purpose of transforming human, financial and physical resources into policies, regulations, knowledge, products or services to benefit society (UNDP, 2009). A way to reach this common purpose is for organizations to concurrently develop their capacities and focus on their strategic issues, for which capacity development processes and strategic focused SEA processes can be of use (OECD, 2006; Vicente and Partidário, 2006).



**Figure 1.** Steps in the UNDP Capacity Development Process (UNDP, 2009).

### Capacity development

Capacity development is seen as a process that, based on the expressed needs of involved actors, enables the right conditions to design strategies for development (UNDP, 2006). Capacity development became of interest in the 1990s due to the limited success of technical cooperation in the development sector (Berg, 1993), and has gained increasing recognition among governments, the private sector, civil society and international development organizations (ECDPM, 2008).

For instance, governments consider the concept of capacity development to be fundamental to formulate policies and strategies for long term sustainability (UNDP, 2006). Moreover, in the private sector the concept is viewed as a basic determinant for companies to improve their performance and profit (UNDP, 2002), and in civil society public and private NGOs have linked their success to their readiness to develop their capacities (OECD, 2006). In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank have adopted the concept (Bontenbal, 2009), and declared capacity development a critical factor to reach the Millennium Development Goals (OECD, 2006).

Furthermore, UNDP (2009) has designed a capacity development process consisting of five functional

capacity steps (Figure 1). In this process, step 1 focuses on facilitating dialogue between actors and encouraging engagement; step 2 on assessing existing, desired and missing capacities to define development visions; step 3 on formulating programmes and strategies; step 4 on managing and implementing activities; and step 5 on evaluating and monitoring identified key issues.

Despite the fact that definitions for capacity development have caused confusion on its scope and meaning (ECDPM, 2008; Bontenbal, 2009; Kühl, 2009), what is important to understand is that capacity refers to the abilities or skills needed to achieve objectives, and capacity development to the means to use and develop these abilities or skills (UNDP, 2002).

In addition, while capacity building can be a one-time action, capacity development is considered to be a continuous and evolving process that focuses on local ownership and long term transformations (UNDP, 2009). The process is also considered to be endogenous, empower and strengthen local capacities, build on available human capital, stimulate self-esteem and respect local values (OECD, 2006; UNDP, 2006).

Another important aspect of capacity development is that it addresses different capacities at the individual, institutional and societal level (ECDPM, 2008). At the individual level personal skills, experiences and

knowledge are addressed, at the organizational level the capacities to connect individual skills to reach common goals are considered, and at the societal level the rules, laws, policies, power relations and societal norms influencing a specific context are analysed (UNDP, 2006; UNDP, 2009).

By using a multi-level approach, capacity development could be a way for organizations to engage with actors in various societal sectors and reach multi-actor agreements (OECD, 2006). Multi-actor agreements could be an opportunity for organizations to reach sustainable results through partnerships in projects that focus on developing existing capacities (Bontenbal, 2009). Moreover, multi-actor agreements could entail that organizations become engaged in networks, which can be a powerful tool providing members with a forum to access and exchange information, skills and methodologies (UNDP, 2002).

However, organizations that adopt a capacity development process can experience difficulties to measure its benefits (UNDP, 2009). This is so because comprehensive analyses are needed to understand complex multilevel relations and the non-linear evolving nature of capacity development processes, and because results with capacity development take time to be delivered (OECD, 2006). Moreover, for capacity development to contribute to measurable long lasting improvements, ownership, a large participation and local knowledge have to be reached, enabled and considered, all of which is challenging for organizations (UNDP, 2009).

To address these challenges and meet the pressing needs of organizations to efficiently use their resources (Degnbol-Martinussen, 2002) and continuously search for effective strategies to improve their learning abilities (Kühl, 2009), it seems essential for organizations to design supporting approaches to mainstream the capacity development concept in their planning and decision making processes.

### **Strategic focused strategic environmental assessment (SEA)**

SEA is a process that promotes sustainable development by improving planning and decision making processes (Therivel and Partidário, 1996). SEA has its origins in the field of environmental impact assessment (EIA) of projects (Partidário, 2000), but focuses on the enhancement of strategic, higher level actions such as policies, plans and programmes (DEAT, 2000; ODPM, 2005; EC DG TREN, 2005).

SEA became well known through the European Union Directive on the Effects of Certain Plans and Programmes and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Protocol on SEA (OJEC, 2001; UNECE, 2003). After the enactment of the SEA Directive

and Protocol, many developed countries embraced SEA in their legal systems (Fischer, 2007), and with the encouragement of organizations like the World Bank and Regional Development Banks, SEA was introduced in developing countries (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005).

In recent decades, different types of SEA approaches have been developed that vary in focus, in the level of public participation and in length (Verheem and Tonk, 2000; Therivel, 2004). These different approaches to SEA have caused confusion as to what SEA is to achieve and how it should perform (Verheem and Tonk, 2000; Vicente and Partidário, 2006). Moreover, EIA has limited SEA by perpetuating evaluation patterns that are not appropriate for assessing strategic decisions that usually present undefined, unclear and complicated planning and decision making contexts (Partidário, 2000; Álvarez-Arenas, 2006; Bina, 2007; Jiliberto, 2007). In these situations, involving individuals in SEA has been challenging (Rauschmayer and Risse, 2005; Sinclair et al., 2009), as has been involving the public at an early stage in the formulation of visions and the identification of key issues (Sheate and Partidário, 2010).

Despite this, it is argued that SEA contributes to sustainable development (Eggenberger and Partidário, 2000), as it places strategic issues and decision making in focus (Rossouw et al., 2000; Nilsson and Dalkmann, 2001; Vicente and Partidário, 2006; Jiliberto, 2007), enhances cooperation between institutions, and can potentially improve actor involvement in planning and decision-making, facilitating the inclusion of the perspectives of multiple actors in complex decision making situations (Hedo and Bina, 1999; Sheate et al., 2001; Nilsson et al., 2005; Bina, 2007). In fact, it is claimed that with SEA spaces have been opened for community groups that have normally not been involved in strategic planning issues (Sheate and Partidário, 2010), which improves transparency in decision making (Hedo and Bina, 1999; Xiuzhen et al., 2002; Therivel, 2004) and facilitates collaborative learning within organizations and with the wider society (Jha-Thakur et al., 2009).

Moreover, SEA application can be flexible and differ significantly (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). For instance, SEA can exclusively focus on the environment (Fischer, 2003) or include social and economic issues when necessary (Verheem and Tonk, 2000). SEAs can also run in parallel to, be integrated with or replace planning and decision making processes when required (Sheate, 2010; CEA, 2006). Additionally, a variety of assessment techniques and tools, such as scenarios based on geographical information systems (GIS), life cycle assessment and environmental management systems, can be used and linked to SEA processes, adding considerable robustness to its application (Therivel, 2004; Sheate, 2010).

However, there seems to be consensus in that SEA should be even more flexible, adaptable and participative.

Hildén (1999) and Nitz and Brown (2001) argue that the role of SEA in planning needs to be developed so that SEA better adapts to different situations and conditions. Likewise, it is suggested that a new path for SEA would be for it to cross fertilize with other fields (Bina, 2007), to plan for suitable participatory and communicative practices (Doelle and Sinclair, 2006), and apply techniques to exchange and transfer knowledge (Sheate and Partidário, 2010). In addition, it is considered that the role of SEA needs to become more dynamic to better understand decision making processes and to address the strategic dimensions of planning (Partidário, 2000; Nilsson and Dalkmann, 2001; Vicente and Partidário, 2006; Jiliberto, 2007). Partidário (2007), for instance, claims that SEA should aim at becoming a strategic focused instrument that effectively influences planning and decision-making processes. To do so, Partidário (1996) argues that SEA should assess the strategic components, objectives or principles that shape the visions that are put forth in planning and decision making. Furthermore, Partidário (2000, 2007) stresses that for SEA to attain a stronger strategic focus, SEA should assess strategic actions in a sustainability impact assessment context and a lexicon for a “strategic” SEA should be developed. However, according to Vicente and Partidário (2006) in SEA practice there are many examples of technical EIA-based SEAs and a lack of SEAs that take a more strategic approach.

In this particular research of SEA design, the challenge of conceptualizing and developing a strategic focused SEA approach is taken. As a start, and as suggested by Partidário (2000, 2007), the words “strategic” and “assessment” in SEA are highlighted to stress the strategic nature of the approach. As well, to highlight the approach’s flexibility and adaptability to the studied context, the word “environment” in SEA is left out and the word “network” is added, resulting in the beginning of the conceptualization and development of a “network strategic assessment approach”.

## METHODS

To explore how strategic focused SEA processes, in this case a network strategic assessment approach, can be conceptualized and developed to enhance capacity development and planning in network-based NGOs, a qualitative research strategy was undertaken with the use of a case study design and literature reviews and participant observation methodologies for data collection and analysis.

A case study design was chosen to gain an in depth understanding of the studied setting (Yin, 1984; Bryman, 2012), and literature reviews and participant observation methodology were chosen to gain an insider perspective of the studied context, set and reformulate research variables, and collect data to reinforce the scientific value of existing theories (Kurz, 1983; Black, 1983).

The case study design and the chosen methodologies were applied in the context of Samp Intercontinental Museum Network (Samp). In the case study design, four workshops were planned and implemented, allowing to make, analyse and link field

observations with data collected from the literature reviews of the material concerning Samp and the concepts of capacity development and SEA.

## CASE STUDY OF SAMP INTERCONTINENTAL MUSEUM NETWORK

Samp is a Swedish registered network-based NGO open to all museums from any country, having over 20 years of experience in connecting cultures (Samp, 2009a). The purpose of Samp is to facilitate the development of museums as fora for dialogue to promote human understanding and human rights together with the community, through responsible use of heritage, history and science (Samp, 2009b). To achieve its purpose, Samp connects member museums and their communities through joint projects, courses and meetings (Samp, 2009c), and uses its core values as guiding principles to facilitate and frame the exchange of skills, experiences and ideas within the network.

As the network has been largely financed by Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), a Sida policy (Sida, 2002) requires Samp to use EIA-based assessment approaches to account for the effects of Samp’s activities on its member organizations and communities. However, to meet Sida’s policy requirement and at the same time improve network planning and gain a better understanding of how Samp is perceived among its members and communities, the network decided to develop a strategic focused SEA approach or its network strategic assessment approach.

### Samp’s network strategic assessment approach

To provide Samp’s network strategic assessment approach with a strategic character, four strategic themes, *Sharing*, *Cross-border*, *Dialogue* and *Respect*, were used in its design. The strategic themes were based on Samp’s core values or guiding principles, which were established by the network to provide a value-based framework to link network activities with its vision, mission and overall purpose. For Samp *Sharing* means learning by sharing ideas and experiences; *Cross-border* means a precondition for mutual exchanges of ideas and experiences across different types of borders; *Dialogue* means willingness to create and use new ways of communication; and *Respect* means an equal right to be seen and listened to, and tolerance and openness to change. By using strategic themes to shape Samp’s network strategic assessment approach, it was possible to link the approach to Samp’s strategic elements.

After framing Samp’s network strategic assessment with four strategic themes, a three step approach was designed (Figure 2). The first step was a participative screening step to assess the network’s interest in developing such an approach, engage participants early

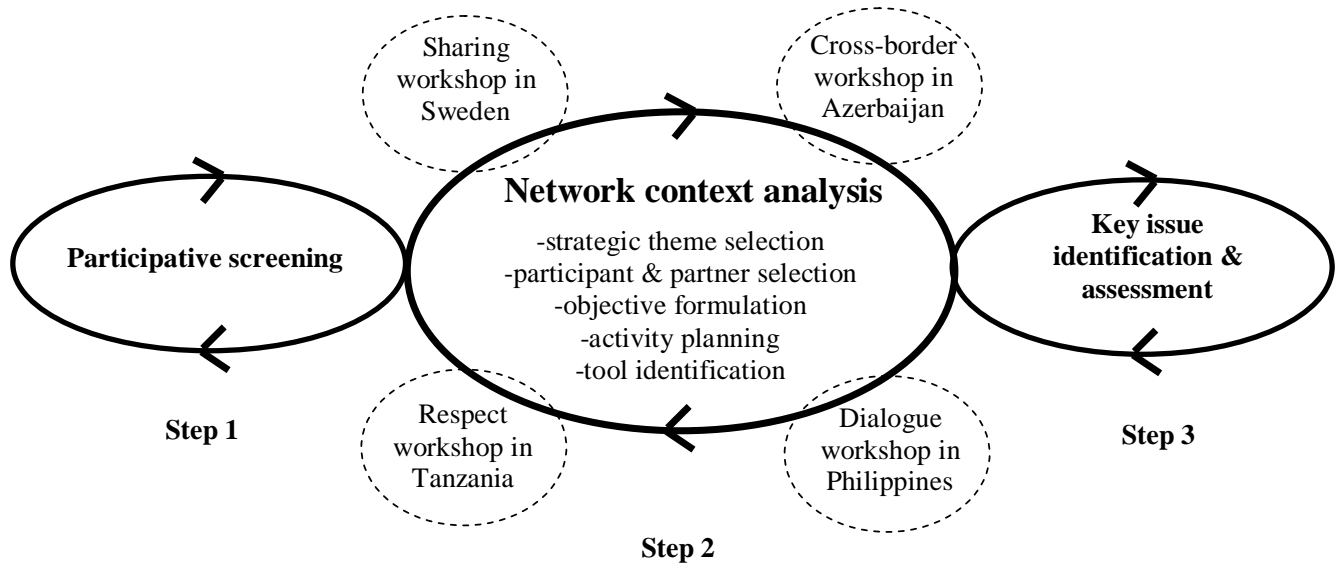


Figure 2. Samp's Network Strategic Assessment Approach.

on in the conceptualization of the approach, and establish a strategic assessment team responsible of driving all approach activities. After consultations, Samp's museum members showed interest in the approach and a decision was taken to go on with its development. The member museums showing interest in the approach were analysed with respect to their organizational diversity, cultural contexts and their abilities to contribute to the selected strategic themes. Based on these criteria, a network strategic assessment team was established. The team was represented by participants from three network member museums: the State Museum of Azerbaijan Musical Culture, Azerbaijan, the Museo Sang Bata sa Negros, Philippines, and the Museum and House of Culture, Tanzania.

The second step in Samp's network strategic assessment approach was a network context analysis where the network strategic assessment team started to develop the approach by designing and executing four workshops.<sup>1</sup> The first workshop took place at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden, the second workshop at the State Museum of Azerbaijan Musical Culture in Azerbaijan, the third workshop at the Museo Sang Bata sa Negros in the Philippines, and the fourth workshop at the Museum and House of Culture in Tanzania. The strategic themes *Sharing*, *Cross-border*, *Dialogue* and *Respect* were used to conceptualize all workshops, and a specific strategic theme was emphasized per workshop. For instance, *Sharing* was specifically addressed in Sweden, *Cross-border* in Azerbaijan, *Dialogue* in the Philippines, and *Respect* in Tanzania.

In the workshops, the strategic themes were used to

facilitate the selection of participants from the staff and communities of participating network member museums. Selected individuals from the staff of museums were directors, curators, technicians, receptionists and junior volunteer guides. Chosen individuals from the known communities of member museums were school students and teachers, friends of museums, artists, politicians and a journalist. Gender, age, skills, positions and professions, as well as willingness to share, capabilities to contribute, and potential to engage in dialogue in relation to the strategic themes were considered when selecting the individuals.

The strategic themes were also used to select the community partners with whom the participants of the network strategic assessment team should interact in the workshops. The selected community partners came from urban and rural settings, mainly from marginalized communities. The community partners included vulnerable community groups like fishermen, their wives and families, artists, carvers, and disabled musicians, in addition to the staff of a private firm and an NGO, and students and teachers of a public university. Community partners were chosen to expose the network strategic assessment team to less well known community groups in their societies, and to obtain a high diversity of views to shape Samp's network strategic assessment approach.

Additionally, the strategic themes were used by the network strategic assessment team to formulate workshop objectives, plan activities, and select network communication tools to facilitate interaction and exchanges of information in the workshops. The activities that were carried out by the team during the four workshops in Samp's network strategic assessment were characterized by an iterative exchange of skills, experiences, and ideas. This iterative exchange approach

<sup>1</sup> Reports per workshop and a final synthesis report can be found at [www.samp.org/search/documents/reports](http://www.samp.org/search/documents/reports)

**Table 1.** Key Issues and Strategies for Samp's Strategic Themes.

<b>Strategic themes</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>	<b>Strategies</b>
Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Research</li> <li>-Communities</li> <li>-Organizations</li> <li>-Individuals</li> <li>-Environment</li> </ul>	Multi-level inputs for profound sharing
Cross-border	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reporting</li> <li>-Network communication</li> <li>-Location</li> <li>-Participant selection</li> <li>-Collaboration partner</li> </ul>	Multi-actors and places for cross-border exchanges
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Empowering and engaging</li> <li>-Attentive proactive behaviour</li> <li>-Brewing conceptualization</li> <li>-Vital participation</li> <li>-Diverse methods fostering creativity</li> <li>-Crossing human, organizational, and spatial borders</li> <li>-Mutually benefiting all</li> <li>-Inclusion and encompassing</li> </ul>	Empowering, engaging and including for active participation, and brewing a cross-border conceptualization for mutual benefits
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Process attitudes</li> <li>-Challenge preconceptions</li> <li>-Being marginalized</li> <li>-Increase self-esteem</li> </ul>	Challenge preconceptions and process attitudes

became central to the network strategic assessment approach as it allowed for a Samp context analysis to take place.

In the third step of the approach, the key issue identification and assessment step, the data that was collected in the iterative dialogues that took place in the workshops was assessed to derive key issues and network based strategies to facilitate understanding Samp's core values and enhance planning to reach the network's purpose (Table 1). The assessment was carried out with the use of a mapping technique that is facilitated to visualize the links between collected data, key issues, strategies and Samp's core values.

In this step, the collected data was also used to assess how the network strategic assessment approach could be linked to the capacity development process proposed by the UNDP (UNDP, 2009). Focus was placed on studying how Samp's network strategic assessment approach engaged actors on capacity development, and how the approach facilitated the identification of network capacity assets and needs.

The overall result of Samp's network strategic assessment approach was the establishment of a strategic dialogue framework that served to encourage member museums, communities and partners to engage

in iterative dialogues on the core values of the network. Based on workshop evaluations, participants mentioned that their perceptions on Samp's core values and in general of the network had been "synchronized". With a synchronized view of the network and its core values it was possible to start work to operationalize Samp's core values and to identify Samp's capacity assets and its capacity needs.

During the development of Samp's network strategic assessment approach the network did however emphasize that the approach and its four workshops were only an initial step towards future work with its strategic elements. In this sense, the design of Samp's network strategic assessment approach was a way for the network to begin consolidating its strategic work and more efficiently direct its actions towards the achievement of its purpose.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Participative screening to conceptualize network strategic assessment approaches**

The initial consultations that took place with Samp's

member museums revealed that there was enough interest to justify the development of a network strategic assessment approach. These consultations were equivalent to the screening step in a standard SEA process where the relevance of applying SEA is determined (García-Montero et al., 2010). However, in Samp's screening step participating network member museums determined the type, scope and aims that Samp's network strategic assessment approach should have, hence making Samp's screening step participative in nature. In the participative screening step, Samp took the decision to develop a flexible, adaptable and network owned strategic assessment approach rather than importing a standard EIA-based approach to SEA. Moreover, in the participative screening step it was decided that Samp's network strategic assessment approach should measure the network's contributions to society and aim to enhance Samp's performance by improving its planning making processes. Based on this, it can be claimed that screening, which is currently viewed as an SEA orphan by various assessment practitioners and scholars<sup>2</sup>, was fundamental to determine the relevance of Samp's network strategic assessment approach, to enhance an early and active involvement of network museum members in designing the approach, and to set the aims and type of approach that should be implemented. Furthermore, it can be argued that networks interested in designing network strategic assessment approaches can benefit from using iterative participative screenings to gain a wide acceptance for their approaches and to adequately conceptualize and tailor these to the particular needs and conditions of their organizations.

### **Enabling and fostering strategic dialogue in networks**

As enabling and fostering dialogues on strategic issues is challenging (Dalkmann et al., 2004), a starting point could be for networks to establish a strategic dialogue framework based on various strategic themes. In Samp's network strategic assessment approach, the network's core values *Sharing*, *Cross-border*, *Dialogue* and *Respect* were used as strategic themes to drive an iterative network context analysis and engage participants in strategic focused dialogues. Even though enabling and fostering strategic dialogue in Samp was difficult to achieve, selecting participants and conceptualizing approach activities based on the identified strategic themes was essential.

### **Selecting network participants and partners using strategic themes**

Interest to participate, willingness to share and potential

contributions to identified strategic themes should be used as a basis for participant selection in network strategic assessment approaches. Using these criteria can help to establish a diverse group of participants, enable strategic dialogues, and link different points of view to the visions, goals and other strategic elements of networks. In Samp's network strategic assessment approach a diverse team was selected from the staff and communities of three network museum members, and the team was engaged in dialogue with various network partners using the network's strategic themes in four workshops. The selection of individual participants to each workshop, on average seventeen per workshop, was linked to workshop objectives and activity programmes and to Samp's identified strategic themes. These linkages allowed collecting varied understandings and perspectives on Samp's role as a network, and allowed to identify key issues and formulate strategies to start the operationalization of Samp's strategic themes (Table 1). However, it should be noted that using the network's strategic themes as participant selection filters and as a strategic dialogue generation framework was difficult and time consuming, mostly because continuous analyses on the potential contributions that each participant could have to the network's strategic elements were required.

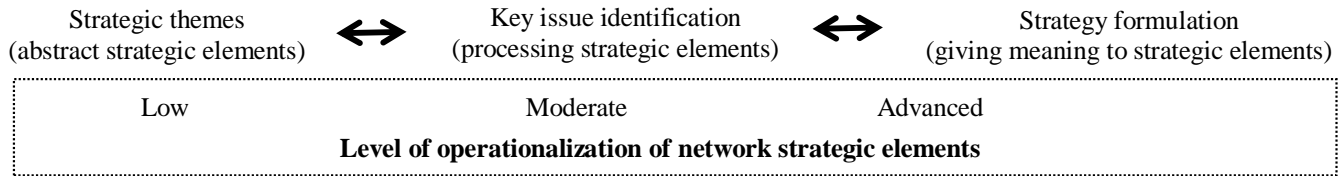
### **Conceptualizing approach activities using strategic themes**

To foster strategic dialogues, the activities and objectives of network strategic assessment approaches should be linked to network strategic themes and to the specific conditions of the network member organizations carrying out the activities. Each activity and objective should also be linked to a set of programmed sub-activities valid for the entire duration of the planned activity. Moreover, the scope of the sub-activity programmes should include the identification of suitable participants, work configurations and tools. For instance, each of the four workshops in Samp's network strategic assessment approach had a maximum of four objectives that were linked to the identified strategic themes and to the specific conditions and skills of the member organizations hosting the workshops. Moreover, sub-activity programmes of maximum three days, with clear starting and finishing times for each sub-activity were conceptualized for each workshop. The sub-activity programmes linked back to workshop objectives and to Samp's strategic themes and included instructions on how selected participants and partners should be grouped and work in each workshop. Additionally, tools with their instructions were identified to motivate workshop participants to engage in dialogue, and instructions were given on how participants should report their results when implementing the programmed activities.

Although workshops were carefully conceptualized to

<sup>2</sup> Jos Arts, Francois Retief, Bill Ross, Johan Nel, and Angus Morrison-Saunders at the session: "A visit to the orphanage of impact assessment" of the IAIA 2011 annual conference ([www.iaia.org](http://www.iaia.org))





**Figure 3.** Operationalizing the Strategic Elements of Networks.

drive Samp's network strategic assessment approach, devising and implementing workshop activity programmes was demanding as linking the network's strategic themes with operable actions was complex. Network participants were, for instance, unaware of Samp's core values and had difficulties understanding their meaning, which led to complications when choosing appropriate discussion themes, activities, locations and other workshop participants. Moreover, maintaining participant motivation and engagement in workshops was hard to achieve as there were many programmed activities, participants had to confront many new impressions, and much travelling was required. At occasions, workshop programmes had to be changed on site due to unforeseen practical problems. Some programme changes meant that certain activities had to change completely or even be cancelled, which directly impacted the strategic dialogue generation that was aimed for in Samp's network strategic assessment approach. Nevertheless, it can be stated that having invested time and resources in constantly adapting Samp's network strategic assessment approach to changing conditions, allowed participants to engage in open dialogues on the strategic themes of the network, enabling Samp to gain a deeper understanding of its role as a network.

### Operationalizing the strategic elements of networks

Network strategic assessment approaches can provide members in networks with an opportunity to come in direct contact with the strategic elements of their networks and facilitate their operationalization by deriving key issues and formulating strategies. In Samp's network strategic assessment approach twenty two key issues were identified for the network's *Sharing*, *Cross-border*, *Dialogue* and *Respect* strategic themes (Table 1). The key issues were linked to Samp's strategic themes and strategies for each strategic theme were formulated after having mapped and analysed the data that was collected from the generated strategic dialogues. This result can be considered a starting point for the operationalization of Samp's strategic elements (Figure 3). However, by further developing the approach, Samp members could gain a deeper understanding of the network's strategic elements, plan their daily activities in accordance to the network's strategic elements, and ultimately work in a

synchronized manner to reach the network's overall purpose and vision.

### Linking capacity development and network strategic assessment approaches

Samp's network strategic assessment approach facilitated the consideration in network planning of the first two steps proposed in the UNDP process for capacity development (Figure 1). The approach served as a framework to "*engage stakeholders on capacity development*", the first step of the UNDP capacity development process, by actively allowing and encouraging participants to shape Samp's strategic assessment approach. Engaging stakeholders from the beginning in the approach led to approach ownership, participant empowerment and creative dialogue generation, which served as a base to "*assess network capacity assets and needs*", the second step of the UNDP capacity development process. In this step, it was recognized that the network, at its individual, organizational and community levels, had ideas, skills and knowledge that should be mobilized to develop its member museums. It was also recognized that Samp's core values, organizational structures, and working approaches and tools, were network capacity assets that, if appropriately used, could guide its members to design and implement their activities in line with network objectives and strategies. Additionally, the generated strategic dialogues in Samp's network strategic assessment approach allowed identifying several capacity requirements. It was found that the network should become more aware of the contexts of its member organizations, of the network resources that are available at individual, museum and community levels, and of the inputs that its member museums have in their communities. Moreover, it was found that member museums need to improve their understanding and use of network core values to effectively synchronize the design and implementation of network activities in accordance to its vision and objectives. It was also observed that network member museums should develop activities to attract target communities, with special focus on marginalized communities, and that network museums should encourage the participation of their communities in museum activity planning and implementation (Table 2).

**Table 2.** UNDP Capacity Development Process and Samp's Network Strategic Assessment.

UNDP Capacity Development Process	Samp's Network Strategic Assessment Approach
Step 1: Engage stakeholders on capacity development	<b>Participative screening (step 1)</b> -Consulting stakeholders on their interest in a Samp network strategic assessment and establishing a strategic assessment team.
	<b>Network context analysis (step 2)</b> -Stakeholder involvement in mapping and identifying participants and network partners at individual, organizational and community levels for workshops. -Workshop conceptualization: stakeholder participation in objective formulation, activity programme set up and selection of network tools. -Strategic dialogues enabled and maintained, endogenous network issues addressed, and consolidation of process ownership by network stakeholders.
	<b>Key issue identification and assessment (step 3)</b> <i>Recognized capacity assets:</i> -diversity of views, ideas, skills, knowledge and experiences at individual, organisational, and community network levels. -network strategic elements, organizational structures, and working approaches and tools.  <i>Recognized capacity needs:</i> -Improve museum awareness of the contexts, conditions, capacities and needs of their communities. -Recognize and enhance museum inputs in communities. -Use network core values to guide the work of member museums. -Create awareness of network resources at individual, organizational and community levels and improve their use. -Reach and attract known target museum communities and identify unknown ones (focus on marginalized communities). -Better the involvement of museum communities in museum activity planning and implementation.
Step 3: Formulate a capacity development programme	-The results of Samp's network strategic assessment serve as a base to complete the remaining steps in UNDP's capacity development process. However, an application of a full scaled Samp network strategic assessment will further facilitate their completion.

Even though the initial scope of Samp's network strategic assessment approach focused on addressing steps one and two of the UNDP capacity development process, it can be stated that the data that was collected serves Samp to address the remaining steps (steps three to five) of the UNDP capacity development process. It is moreover argued that enabling participative and legitimate approaches in the initial steps of capacity development processes (steps one and two) is fundamental to continue with a successful formulation, implementation and assessment of capacity development programmes for network organizations. For this reason, it is suggested that Samp and other networks that aim to mainstream capacity development processes in their operations should develop flexible, adaptable and participative network strategic assessment approaches

that accompany each of the steps of their capacity development processes.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is fundamental for network-based NGOs such as Samp that aim to develop and mobilize their capacities and those of their member organizations to design approaches that enable and foster open, creative, and strategic dialogues. The case study presented in this paper demonstrates that network strategic assessment approaches that focus on the strategic elements of networks can be a way for networks to frame strategic dialogues for capacity development and mobilization.

In Samp's network strategic assessment approach

multilevel and cross border dialogues on the strategic elements of the network were generated. With these dialogues, it was possible to collect data, derive key issues and formulate accepted strategies for the network's core values, marking the start of their operationalization. Operationalizing the strategic elements of networks provides member organizations in networks with a tool to plan, synchronize and implement their activities in line with the visions and objectives of their networks, which can lead to an increased overall understanding of the network and even to improve network efficiency and performance.

In addition, it was learnt from the case study that network strategic assessment approaches can frame and accompany the formulation of organizational capacity development programmes. Samp's network strategic assessment approach showed that it was possible to address the steps of UNDP's proposed capacity development process by engaging network actors in strategic dialogues, identifying network capacity assets and needs, and establishing a base on which Samp can design, implement and evaluate its own comprehensive capacity development programme.

Furthermore, the Samp case study provides networks with valuable experiences on how to shape network strategic assessment approaches. It showed that participative screening is useful to gauge the interest and relevance of developing the approach, to determine the aims and the type of approach that should be developed, and to ensure an early and active participation of different actors in its design. Moreover, the case study showed that network strategic assessments can be designed using the strategic elements of networks. These elements can be used to map and select participants, choose methodologies, define activity programmes and their aims, and select tools and appropriate locations to develop programmed activities.

Finally, coinciding with Vicente and Partidário (2006), it is concluded that research examples on strategic focused SEA approaches like the one that was carried out in Samp are further needed. A relevant context for the study of this type of SEA can be its application in a transboundary context, where there is usually a need to address complex issues and conflicting and competing interests in a multiplicity of scales, and where main purposes could be to reach agreement on and assess different possible pathways to enhance sustainable development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A note of gratitude is extended to the Executive Director of Samp Intercontinental Museum Network and the staff and communities of the State Museum of Azerbaijan Musical Culture, the Museo Sang Bata sa Negros and the Museum and House of Culture for making this study possible.

## REFERENCES

- Álvarez-Arenas M (2006). Perfil Estratégico de la Evaluación Ambiental del Plan Estratégico de Infraestructuras y Transporte PEIT. (Strategic Profile of the Environmental Assessment of the Infrastructures and Transport Plan PEIT), Ciudad y Territorio, Estudios Territoriales, Tercera Época. 38(149–150):607–624.
- Banerjee N (2006). A Note on Capabilities that Contribute to the Success of Non-Governmental Organizations. Discussion paper 57 pp. Maastricht: ECDPM.
- Berg E (1993). Rethinking Technical Cooperation: Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa.
- Bina O (2007). A Critical Review of the Dominant Lines of Argumentation on the Need for Strategic Environmental Assessment. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 27:585–606.
- Black P (1983). Participant Observation and Logical Positivism in the Social Sciences: A Note. *World Dev.* 11(4):389–390.
- Bontenbal M (2009). Understanding North–South Municipal Partnership Conditions for Capacity Development: A Dutch–Peruvian Example. *Habitat Int.* 33(1):100–105.
- Bryman A (2012). *Social Research Methods*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Commission for Environmental Assessment (CEA) (2006). Biodiversity in EIA & SEA: Background Document to CBD Decision VIII/28: Voluntary Guidelines on Biodiversity-Inclusive Impact Assessment. The Netherlands: CEA.
- Dalal-Clayton B, Sadler B (2005). *Strategic Environmental Assessment: A Source and Reference Guide to International Experience*. London: Earthscan.
- Dalkmann H, Jiliberto HR, Bongardt D (2004). Analytical Strategic Environmental Assessment (ANSEA) Developing a New Approach to SEA. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 24:385–402.
- Degnbol-Martinussen J (2002). Development Goals, Governance and Capacity Building: Aid as a Catalyst. *Dev. Change* 33(3):269–279.
- Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) (2000). *Strategic Environmental Assessment in South Africa*. Pretoria: DEAT.
- Doelle M, Sinclair AJ (2006). Time for a New Approach to Public Participation in EA: Promoting Cooperation and Consensus for Sustainability. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 26:185–205.
- Edwards M, Hulme D (1996). Too Close to Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Non-Governmental Organizations. *World Development* 24(6):961–973.
- Eggenberger M, Partidário MR (2000). Development of a Framework to Assist the Integration of Environmental, Social and Economic Issues in Spatial Planning. *Impact Assess. Project Appraisal* 18:201–207.
- European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) (2008). *Capacity Change and Performance, Insights and Implications for Development Cooperation*. Policy Management Brief No. 21. Maastricht and Brussels: ECDPM.
- European Commission on DG TREN 1 (2005). *The SEA Manual. A Sourcebook on Strategic Environmental Assessment of Transport Infrastructure Plans and Programmes*. Brussels: EU DG TREN.
- Fischer T (2003). Strategic Environmental Assessment in Post-Modern Times. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 23:155–170.
- Fischer T (2007). *The Theory and Practice of Strategic Environmental Assessment. Towards a More Systematic Approach*. London: Earthscan.
- García-Montero LG, López E, Monzón A, Pastor IO (2010). Environmental Screening Tools for Assessment of Infrastructure Plans Based on Biodiversity Preservation and Global Warming (PEIT, Spain). *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 30:158–168.
- Gardner K, Lewis D (1996). *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge*. London and Chicago, IL: Pluto Press.
- Hedo D, Bina O (1999). Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydrological and Irrigation Plans in Castilla y León, Spain. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 19(3):259–273.
- Hildén M (1999). Myths and Reality in EIA and SEA, in H. Bjarnadóttir (ed.) *Environmental Assessment in the Nordic Countries - Experiences and Prospects*. Proceedings from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nordic Environmental Assessment Conference in Karlskrona, Sweden, 22 – 23 November, 1999. Stockholm: Nordregio R2000:3.

- Hilderbrand ME (2002). Capacity Building for Poverty Reduction: Reflections on Evaluations of UN System Efforts. Unpublished manuscript, Boston, MA: Harvard University.
- Jha-Thakur U, Gazzola P, Peel D, Fischer TB, Kidd S (2009). Effectiveness of Strategic Environmental Assessment – The Significance of Learning. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 27(2):133–144.
- Jiliberto HR (2007). Strategic Environmental Assessment: The Need to Transform the Environmental Assessment Paradigms. *J. Environ. Assess. Pol. Manage.* 9(2):211–234.
- Jordan L, Van Tuijl P (2000). Political Responsibility in Transnational NGO Advocacy. *World Dev.* 28(12):2051–2065.
- Kühl S (2009). Capacity Development as the Model for Development Aid Organizations. *Dev. Change* 40(3):551–577.
- Kurz D (1983). The Use of Participant Observation in Evaluation Research. *Eval. Program Plan.* 6:93–102.
- Mueller-Hirth N (2012). If You Don't Count, You Don't Count: Monitoring and Evaluation in South African NGOs. *Dev. Change* 43(3):649–670.
- Nelson P (2002). New Agendas and New Patterns of International NGO Political Action. *Voluntas: Int. J. Volunt. Non-Profit Organ.* 13(4):377–392.
- Nelson P, Dorsey E (2003). At the Nexus of Human Rights and Development: New Methods and Strategies of Global NGOs. *World Dev.* 31(12):2013–2026.
- Nilsson M, Björklund A, Finnveden G, Johansson J (2005). Testing an SEA Methodology for the Energy Sector: A Waste Incineration Tax Proposal. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 25:1–32.
- Nilsson M, Dalkmann H (2001). Decision Making in Strategic Environmental Assessment. *J. Environ. Assess. Pol. Manage.* 3:305–327.
- Nitz T, Brown AL (2001). SEA Must Learn How Policy Making Works. *J. Environ. Assess. Pol. Manage.* 3(3):329–342.
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (2005). A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- Official Journal of the European Communities (OJEC) (2001). Directive 2001/42/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of the 27 June 2001 on the Assessment of the Effects of Certain Plans and Programmes on the Environment. *Official Journal L197/30*, 21.07.2001.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006). The Challenge of Capacity Development. Working Towards Good Practice. Paris: OECD.
- Partidário MR (1996). Strategic Environmental Assessment: Key Issues Emerging from Recent Practice. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 16:31–55.
- Partidário MR (2000). Elements of an SEA Framework – Improving the Added Value of SEA. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 20:647–663.
- Partidário MR (2007). Scales and Associated Data - What is Enough for SEA Needs? *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 27(5):460–478.
- Rauschmayer F, Risse N (2005). A Framework for the Selection of Participatory Approaches for SEA. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 25:650–666.
- Rossouw N, Audouin M, Lochner P, Clark SH, Wiseman K (2000). Development of Strategic Environmental Assessment in South Africa. *Impact Assess. Project Appraisal* 18:217–223.
- Samp (2009a). To Be a Member, Ser Miembro, Etre Member. Stockholm: Samp Intercontinental Museum Network.
- Samp (2009b). Strategic Plan 2010–2014. Stockholm: Samp Intercontinental Museum Network.
- Samp (2009c). Exit Strategy Report. Stockholm: Samp Intercontinental Museum Network.
- Schuh RG, Leviton L (2006). A Framework to Assess the Development and Capacity of Non-Profit Agencies. *Eval. Program Plan.* 29:171–179.
- Sheate WR (2010). Tools, Techniques and Approaches for Sustainability. Collective Writings in Environmental Assessment Policy and Management. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Sheate WR, Dagg S, Richardson J, Aschemann R, Palerm J, Steen U (2001). SEA and Integration of the Environment into Strategic Decision-Making (3 Volumes). Final Report to the European Commission, DG XI, Contract No. B4-3040/99/136634/MAR/B4. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Sheate WR, Partidário MR (2010). Strategic Approaches and Assessment Techniques – Potential for Knowledge Brokerage Towards Sustainability. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 30:278–288.
- Sida (2002). Handledning för Granskning av Miljökonsekvensbedömningar. Hållbar Utveckling? (Review Guidelines for Strategic Environmental Assessment - Sustainable Development?). Stockholm: Elanders Novum AB.
- Sinclair AJ, Sims L, Spaling H (2009). Community-Based Approaches to Strategic Environmental Assessment: Lessons from Costa Rica. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 29:147–156.
- Therivel R (2004). Strategic Environmental Assessment in Action. London: Earthscan.
- Therivel R, Partidário MR (1996). The Practice of Strategic Environmental Assessment. London: Earthscan.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2002). Capacity for Development. New Solutions to Old Problems. Executive Summary. London: Earthscan.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2006). UNDP Capacity Development. Practice Note. New York: UNDP.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2009). Capacity Development: A UNDP Primer. United Nations Development Programme. New York: UNDP.
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2003). The Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment. Geneva: UNECE.
- Verheem R, Tonk J (2000). Strategic Environmental Assessment: One Concept, Multiple Forms. *Impact Assess. Project Appraisal* 18:177–182.
- Vicente G, Partidário MR (2006). SEA – Enhancing Communication for Better Environmental Decisions. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 26: 696–706.
- Xiuzhen C, Jincheng S, Jinhui W (2002). Strategic Environmental Assessment and its Development in China. *Environ. Impact Assess. Rev.* 22:101–109.
- Yin RK (1984) Case Study Research. Design and Methods. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.