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FOSTERING PARTICIPATION AND DIALOGUE USING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

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LIST OF PAPERS

- I. Azcárate, J. & Balfors, B. (2009). Participative SEA approach for data collection and objective formulation. *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management*, 11(2), 189-211.
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ABSTRACT

Various international conventions and several theories and approaches from the planning and environment fields of study have focused on enhancing the public's access to information and its participation in strategic decision making. However, it seems that it is challenging to encourage a meaningful public participation in decision making processes, since it is difficult to engage civil society in strategic discussions, it is complex to institutionalise participative processes, and it is demanding to include traditionally marginalised groups in current debates on development. Despite this, it appears that deciding how participative approaches should be designed and when these approaches should be applied is of crucial importance to secure appropriate forums for dialogue. To study these claims and foster participation and dialogue, a study was carried out to examine the development of flexible, adaptable and participative strategic environmental assessment processes. Even though designing the processes demanded time and constant adaptation, it is argued that adequately conceptualising and implementing flexible, adaptable and participative approaches to strategic environmental assessment can lead to inclusive, legitimate and anchored outputs that can significantly influence decision making processes.

Key words: Deliberative democracy; Collaborative communicative planning; Strategic environmental assessment; Participation; Networks; Decision making.

INTRODUCTION

International organisations, governments, the private sector and civil society have acknowledged the importance and the need to enhance the public's access to information and its involvement in decision making (Martens et al., 2010).

This need, has led to a growing tendency for *government* to be replaced by *governance*, and to the rise of various schools of thought and approaches that deal with enhancing the involvement of citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and social movements in planning and decision making processes (Lane, 2005).

For instance, in the social sciences the critical theory of deliberative democracy was developed to counterbalance the governing liberal theories of capital mobility and a free market economy (Dryzek, 2000; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). In planning, the theory of collaborative, communicative planning was conceptualised as a reaction to the dominating, centralised and top-down rational planning model (Lane, 2005; Healey,

1999; Innes and Booher, 1999). And, in the environmental field, several international declarations and environmental assessment processes, such as environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA), provide a framework that can potentially facilitate the inclusion of the public in environmental management and decision making (Wood, 2003; Therivel, 2004).

Critical theory and deliberative democracy

According to Dryzek (2000), critical theory is a school of thought that promotes citizen competences through participation and democratic politics so that a progressive understanding of and an individual and societal emancipation from oppressive status quo ideologies can be reached. Deliberative democracy theory is derived out of critical theory, and even though it is a difficult concept to define (Crowley, 2009), it is claimed that Jürgen Habermas established its normative foundations (Elstub, 2010).

Habermas conceptualised two possible sorts of reason in social life under deliberative democracy, communicative rationality (an understanding between individuals) and instrumental rationality (the capacity to devise, select and effect good means to clarified ends), where the latter dominates the former causing what Habermas calls the scientisation, commercialisation and bureaucratisation of modern society (Dryzek, 2000).

To address this problem, advocates of deliberative democracy argue that open and rational deliberations should be located in civil society so that a diversity of discourses will have the opportunity to interact and lead to a convergence of preferences and to consensus (Dryzek, 2000; Crowley, 2009).

Moreover, deliberative democrats argue that engaging the public in decision making processes will create public opinion that will influence decision making and result in just, inclusive and legitimate common outputs or well-argued development alternatives (Mouffe, 2005).

Achieving these outputs will conduct to accomplish the ultimate purpose of deliberative democracy theory, which is a revival of democracy and the improvement of policies through greater public involvement in decision making (Crowley, 2009).

Collaborative, communicative planning theory

The theory of deliberative democracy directly influenced collaborative, communicative planning theory, which links Habermas's concept of communicative rationality to the notion of space or place (Healey, 1999; Healey, 2003; Innes, 2004; Lane, 2005). The notion of space is a social construct made up of values where different social, cultural, economic and natural relationships take place and interact, and which, according to Healey (1999), should be understood to improve planning and its influence over decision making.

The main purpose of collaborative, communicative planning should then be to engage concerned actors in public debates and discourses so that intercultural dialogues for the understanding of space are developed (Healey, 1999; Innes and Booher, 1999; Lane, 2005).

Through intercultural dialogues, it will be possible to understand complex spatial relations, deal with conflict, respond to the changing conditions of an increasing networked society, and reach consensus to better plan and organise action (Innes and Booher, 1999).

Additionally, it is argued that a purpose of collaborative, communicative planning is to challenge and transform established approaches to governance that represent the interests of a few and poorly consider the impacts of decision making in multicultural contexts (Healey, 2003).

An expected output of collaborative, communicative planning would be to generate governance approaches that are inclusive, just and creative, and that encourage mutual learning, respect and advancement (Innes, 2004).

Public participation and the environment

The importance of public involvement and its access to information in environmental management and decision making is expressed to a great extent in the contents of several environmental treaties and in existing regulations and guidelines for environmental assessment instruments.

For instance, the United Nations (UN) 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, in principle ten of its declaration, calls for states to make information widely available and increase citizen participation in planning and decision making (UN, 1992).

The 1998 Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, the Aarhus Convention, also places requirements on signatory states to enhance information

availability and public participation, and increase accountability and transparency in decision making processes (UNECE, 1998).

Moreover, chapter 2.1 and 23 of Agenda 21 (UN, 1993) and goal 8 of the UN Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000), explicitly request that states involve the public in decision making and reach partnerships of collaboration and continuous dialogue to address global development challenges.

The European Union (EU) EIA Directive (OJEC, 1985), the EU SEA Directive (OJEC, 2001), the UN Economic Commission for Europe's Convention on EIA in Transboundary Contexts (the Espoo Convention) (UNECE, 1991), and the Protocol on SEA to the Espoo Convention (UNECE, 2003) also provide insight on how signatory states should guide their public participation efforts when developing environmental assessments for policies, plans, programmes and projects.

Strategic environmental assessment

Apart from serving as a potential framework to encourage the public's inclusion in planning and decision making, the main rationale of environmental assessment processes such as EIA and SEA is to reach a better environment by systematically considering environmental issues in planning and decision making processes (Wood, 2003; Fischer, 2003; Therivel, 2004).

While EIA has for more than 30 years aimed to improve projects, SEA, which is a new and developing concept, focuses on enhancing higher level strategic actions like policies, plans and programmes (Vicente and Partidário, 2006).

In practice, the novelty of SEA has led to the development of many approaches to SEA that vary with respect to their scope, nature, duration and openness (Verheem and Tonk, 2000). For instance, despite tendencies for SEA processes to increasingly consider sustainability issues in their assessment scopes (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005), SEA can exclusively focus on the environment (Fischer, 2003; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2005) or include social and

economic issues when considered necessary (Verheem and Tonk, 2000).

Moreover, SEA processes can run in parallel to planning and decision making processes, completely integrate into these processes or act as planning and decision making processes when these are missing or are inappropriate (CEA, 2006).

As to the time it takes to develop and implement an SEA process, Therivel (2004) states that SEAs can be long and complex or short and precise processes, and agrees with Rauschmayer and Risse (2005) in that even though SEA should encourage public participation in decision making, traditionally public participation through SEA has been limited.

Challenges and needs for public participation in SEA

Despite that the type of public participation that is promoted by the theories of deliberative democracy and collaborative, communicative planning can potentially be facilitated with approaches like SEA, it seems that reaching meaningful public participation in practice is very challenging, when a high degree of flexibility and adaptation is needed and when strategic issues and a diversity of opposing interests have to be addressed.

According to Lane (2005) and Crowley (2009) it is difficult to develop participative and deliberative processes when the public should not only to be consulted but engaged in deep dialogue, argumentation, negotiations, bargaining and debate.

In addition, Dryzek (2000) states that participative processes are difficult to institutionalise, that they take time and considerable efforts, and that deliberations are usually framed by individual interests that make compromise and interest reconciliation unattainable.

Moreover, it is claimed that in SEA participation has organised and constrained itself to only include the interest of powerful groups (Fischer, 2003). It is also argued that the EU SEA Directive provides minimal requirements to include the public (Therivel,

2004), and that the “*public’s ignorance*” renders citizen participation and engagement in deliberations on strategic issues difficult or impossible (Dalkmann et al., 2004; Vaughan, 2010).

Additionally, it is recognised that there is a need to assess participative and consensus building processes (Innes and Booher, 1999), and it is acknowledged that this type of processes should be applied in situations where feasible development alternatives are not emerging from traditional ways of planning (Innes, 2004). Furthermore, it is pointed out that enhanced participation requires appropriate forums where actors can be involved (Lane, 2005) and specialised arenas where public deliberations can be linked to formal decision making processes (Elstub, 2010).

From the above, it seems that if SEA is to reach its potential to engage the public and enhance planning and decision making, there is a need to develop participative SEA processes that are flexible and adaptable to different conditions (Hildén, 1999; Nitz and Brown, 2001; Jiliberto, 2007), to determine how and when these SEA processes should be developed, and to assess their outcomes.

Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to examine the development of flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes, to determine if these processes enhance the inclusion of a wide spectrum of sustainability issues in decision making, and serve as an alternative approach to traditional top-down planning.

To reach the overall objective, focus is placed on investigating how and when flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes should be designed and implemented in different contexts with varying institutional requirements, organisational setups, managerial processes, objectives and interests.

Moreover, the research aims to determine if a dialogue and networking platform of multiple stakeholders can be fostered with flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes. To achieve this aim, a

participative SEA process and a network SEA process are applied, respectively, in the contexts of a developing region and a network-based NGO, following these specific objectives:

- a) Analyse how SEA processes adapt to situations where there is an absence of data and where strategic planning objectives are unclear, in conflict or missing (Paper I)
- b) Explore how SEA processes contribute to engage actors to operationalise strategic issues and facilitate the identification of capacity assets and needs in network organisations (Paper II)

The scope of the research is set by designing and developing a participative SEA process in the developing region of the Sonso Lagoon, Colombia (Paper I) and a network SEA process in Samp Intercontinental Museum Network (Samp) (Paper II). The scope of the developed SEA process in the Sonso Lagoon covers nature conservation, socio-economical and governance issues at a regional scale. On the other hand, the scope of the developed SEA process in Samp takes place at a network scale, and focuses on issues concerning the member organisations in the network and their communities. In both contexts, a multiplicity of actors are involved in the research through interviews, field visits or workshops.

Furthermore, the scope of the research is set by linking the developed SEA approaches with sustainability management criteria and with capacity development processes for organisation performance enhancement. In the case of the Sonso Lagoon, the designed SEA links with the principles of wise use¹ of wetlands that are described by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 2004a), and in Samp’s case, the developed SEA process supports the application of the steps

¹ The term “wise use” is equivalent to good lagoon management practices that can lead to sustainable development as explained in the Ramsar Convention handbook 8 on wetland management.

contained in the UNDP process for capacity development (UNDP, 2009).

Organisation of the thesis

In the methodology section, following this introduction, focus is placed on describing the methodological strategies and approaches that were used to develop the SEA processes in the Sonso Lagoon and in Samp. In the results and discussion section, the results that were obtained, and the discussions that were derived, from the collected data and the gained experiences of developing the SEA processes are presented. As well, in this section, an analysis of possible future research directions on the development of flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes is discussed. Lastly, in the conclusions section of the thesis final remarks on the research that was carried out in the Sonso Lagoon and in Samp are presented.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out using the methodologies of a literature review and a case study strategy. The literature review method was chosen to carry out an exploratory study of several themes. With the literature review democratic and participative planning theories, environmental assessment processes such as EIA and SEA, and environmental and organisational management approaches, like Ramsar's wise use principles for wetlands and the UNDP's capacity development process, were examined. From the literature review method a state of the art for each issue was derived, allowing to identify research gaps and needs, and to formulate the objectives of the thesis.

The case study strategy method was chosen to appropriately address the objectives of the research. Moreover, the case study strategy was chosen since the method offers opportunities to reach an in depth and comprehensive understanding of specific and complex contexts (Yin, 1984), allows for flexibility in data collection, and makes predictions more careful (Sokolovsky, 1996; Easton, 2010).

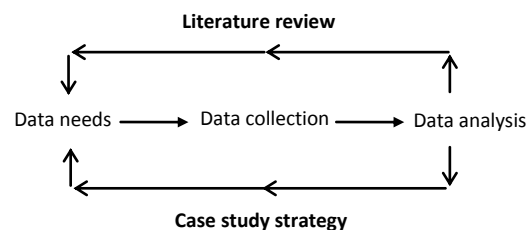


Fig. 1. Complementary research methodologies for data needs, collection and analysis

Using the case study strategy a detailed explanatory examination of two different cases was carried out. One of the case studies took place in the context of the developing region of the Sonso Lagoon, and the other in the context of Samp. As the contexts and needs of each case study varied significantly, different approaches and techniques were used to collect data and carry out analyses. For instance, in the Sonso Lagoon case study an action research approach was used by carrying out interviews, workshops and field visits, and in the Samp case study a participant observation research approach took place through workshops and field visits.

It should however be noted that the methodologies that were used in the research were complementary and ran in parallel to each other. This meant that data needs, data collection and data analysis in the exploratory literature review set the stage for data needs, data collection and data analysis in the case study explanatory examination and vice versa (Fig. 1).

Action research in the Sonso Lagoon

An action research approach was chosen for the Sonso Lagoon case study since the regional environmental authorities with jurisdiction over the management of the lagoon were not carrying out research in the lagoon, and because the focus of the case study was to examine complex regional development issues, which implied the participation of many stakeholders.

In action research approaches, researchers are immersed in the study and actively participate to create an iterative data generation and collection process

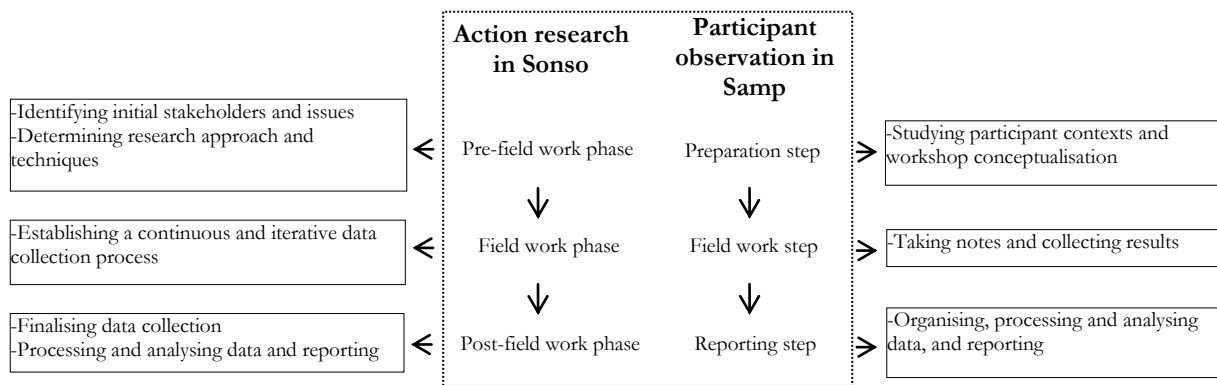


Fig. 2. Methodological steps carried out in the Sonso Lagoon and Samp case studies

(Denscombe, 2003). The action research approach that was developed in the Sonso Lagoon case study was based on interviews, workshops and field visits, and consisted of three phases: a pre-field work phase, a field work phase, and a post-field work phase (Fig. 2).

In the pre-field work phase the action research approach was started by carrying out a background literature review of the Sonso Lagoon region to identify an initial set of key stakeholders and key issues for the area. Contact was established with some of the identified stakeholders to gauge their interest in the study, and to gain support from the regional environmental authorities. Moreover, in this phase, it was assessed which research techniques should be considered and how they should be used on the field to gather and analyse data.

In the field work phase action research was applied using research techniques such as interviews, workshops and field visits. The research techniques allowed to identify additional stakeholders, issues and data needs, and led to a continuous and iterative process for data collection. The techniques were applied at local and regional scales, and included the revision of international treaties like the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 2004a; Ramsar, 2004b).

In the post-field work phase the data collection process was finalised, the collected data was analysed, and relevant literature was reviewed to produce several reports on the Sonso Lagoon (Andersson

and Azcárate, 2005; Gischler, 2005; Smith, 2005).

Participant observation in Samp

In the Samp network case study a participant observation approach was applied as the network considered that its member museums and communities should be in charge of conceptualising and developing all the activities that took place in the case study.

Participant observation is a research approach used to gain an in depth understanding of a particular setting from the perspective of an insider (Kurz, 1983; Yin, 1984). An insider’s perspective can be reached with this approach as researchers spend time with participants in their settings and describe the nature of their organisation and behaviour. With participant observation, multiple sources of data can be obtained, a set of variables can be derived and reformulated during the course of the research, and collected data may serve to enhance the scientific value of stories, descriptions or existing theories (Kurz, 1983; Black, 1983).

In the Samp case study, a researcher was invited by the network to act as an observer in workshops and field visits. The role of the researcher was that of an observer-as-participant rather than a participant-as-observer or complete participant, meaning that the researcher interacted with case study participants but was not considered to be an extra participant.

The participant observation approach used in Samp's case study consisted of a preparation step, a field work step and a reporting step (Fig. 2). In the preparation step, the observer participant studied the contexts of the network member organisations participating in the case study as well as the characteristics of their staff and communities. Moreover, attention was placed on observing how participants conceptualised workshops. In other words, how workshop objectives and activity programmes were formulated, and how workshop participants were selected.

In the field work step, data was collected as network participants implemented the programmed activities for each workshop. Data was collected in the form of notes taken by the observer participant and in the form of written material that was produced by the participants.

In the reporting step, the collected data was organised, processed and analysed to give way to a report per workshop (Samp, 2011a), and in this step, an analysis of UNDP's capacity development process framework was carried out (UNDP, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collection and objective formulation in the Sonso Lagoon (Paper I)

The regional environmental authorities with jurisdiction over the Sonso Lagoon considered that a lagoon management plan was necessary to halt its rapid deterioration, guide its future development, and facilitate a process to declare the lagoon a Ramsar site of international importance (Ramsar, 2004a).

Moreover, the environmental authorities were interested in gaining practical experiences from the application of SEA processes since the process was unfamiliar, and because the Ramsar Convention recommends that SEA processes be integrated with the management of wetlands opting to become Ramsar protected sites (Ramsar, 2004b).

To generate multi-scaled inputs for the formulation of a comprehensive management plan, and provide practical experiences in SEA application at a regional level, an SEA process was developed in the Sonso Lagoon.

The developed SEA process in the Sonso Lagoon was flexible and adaptable to the particular conditions of the region. It was an iterative and inclusive process that facilitated an active participation of local stakeholders, including the traditionally marginalised fishermen communities that depend on the lagoon for their survival, to shape a common future development of the Sonso Lagoon.

The flexible, adaptable and participative SEA process for the Sonso Lagoon consisted of three steps: a screening step, a participative context analysis step and a scenario and recommendation step (Fig. 3).

Usually in SEA a screening step is undertaken to determine the need of applying the process (García-Montero et al, 2010). For the SEA in the Sonso Lagoon, the screening step was carried out through consultations with the regional environmental authorities who, despite being positive to the application of a regional SEA process, considered that the

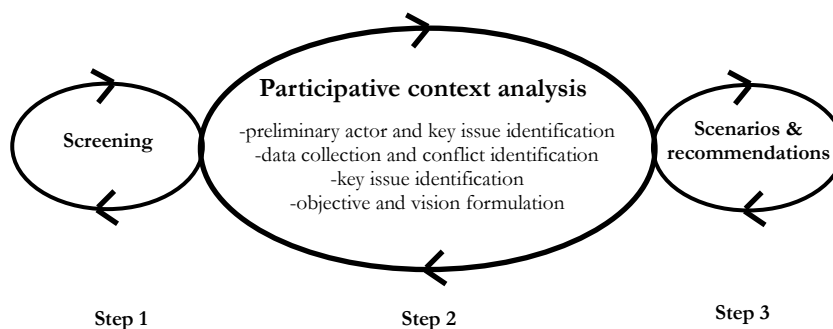


Fig. 3. Applied SEA process in the Sonso Lagoon region (Paper I)

need of the process would be determined in parallel with its application and based on obtained results. This decision was taken as the SEA concept was new to the regional environmental authorities, and practical experiences with SEA application were missing.

The participative context analysis step was the main step of in the Sonso Lagoon SEA process. This step was started by reviewing lagoon related reports that led to the identification of preliminary stakeholder and key issue categories. Using these categories, it was possible to structure field work and carry out stakeholder interviews, giving way to a participative and iterative data collection approach that facilitated the identification of conflicting issues and key issues for the lagoon. In the participative context analysis the scope and scale of the SEA process were continuously redefined, and the step was iterated until it was considered that enough stakeholders had been approached and

enough data was collected. The data was then assessed giving way to multi-scaled key issues and development objectives and visions for the lagoon (Fig. 4).

In the remaining step of the SEA process, the identified lagoon key issues, objectives and visions were illustrated using scenarios in geographical information systems (GIS). Two scenarios were designed: a “Business as Usual” scenario that depicted a deteriorated lagoon in 10 years, and an integrated “Ramsar Socio Economic” scenario that illustrated the integration of Ramsar wise use concepts for wetland management and the views and development interest of the regional stakeholders that participated in the SEA process.

The three-step Sonso Lagoon SEA process was then the main result of the first case study of the research (Paper I). It gave way to a flexible, adaptable and iterative dialogue framework that enabled a large diversity of stakeholders to provide input for the

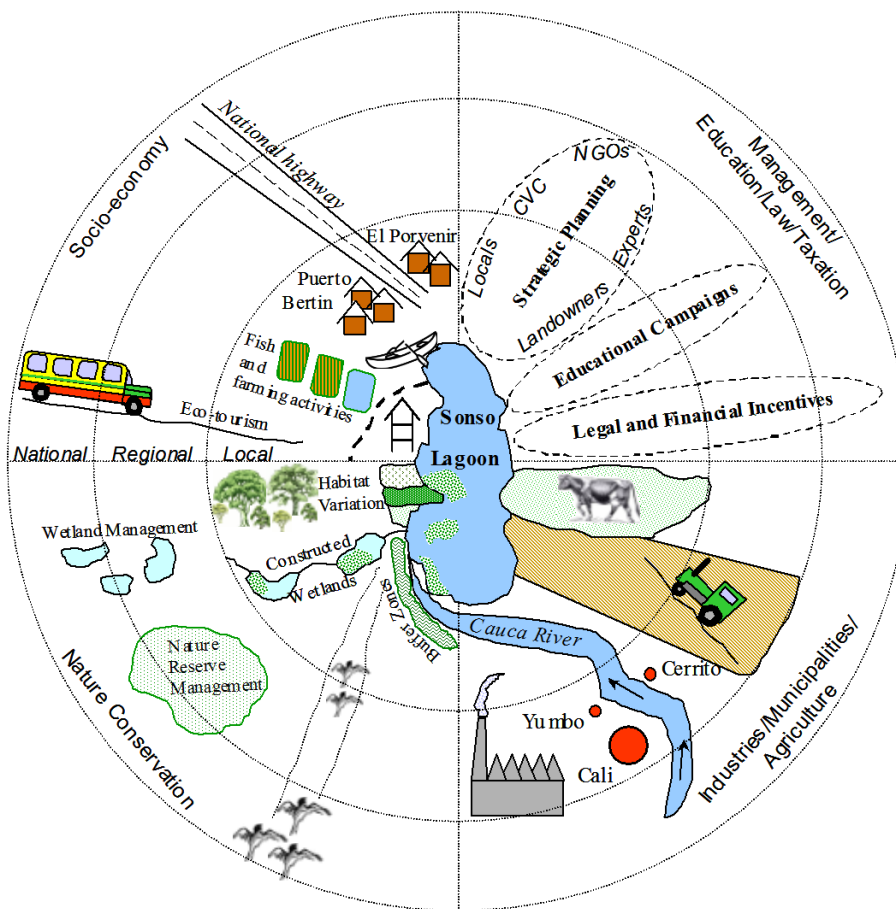


Fig. 4. Scope and scale of the Sonso Lagoon SEA process (Paper I)

formulation of accepted development objectives and visions for the Sonso Lagoon region.

Operationalisation of strategic elements and capacity development in Samp (Paper II)

Samp, a network NGO open to any museum from all countries, aiming to develop its members and communities by working together in joint projects, capacity building and research, and striving to strength dialogue across borders to reach long lasting transformations in society (Samp, 2009a; Samp, 2009b), begun to design its own network SEA process to identify its impacts and strengthen its planning processes.

As any activity developed by the network, Samp's network SEA process was conceptualised and developed by its museum members and communities, and was guided by the network's core values:

Sharing, Cross-border, Dialogue and Respect. The core values of Samp are the network's guiding principles. They were established to link the activities of the network with its vision, mission and overall objectives. Moreover, the core values provide network members and their communities with a value-based framework that facilitates their engagement in joint projects or any type of common network action. In an effort to make Samp's core values usable in the daily activities of network members and their communities, each core value has been given a definition by the network (Samp, 2009b) (Fig. 5).

Samp's network SEA process consisted of three steps: an interest and engagement gauging and SEA team establishment step, a network context analysis step, and a key issue identification and assessment step (Fig. 6).

The first step of Samp's network SEA process served as a screening test to gauge

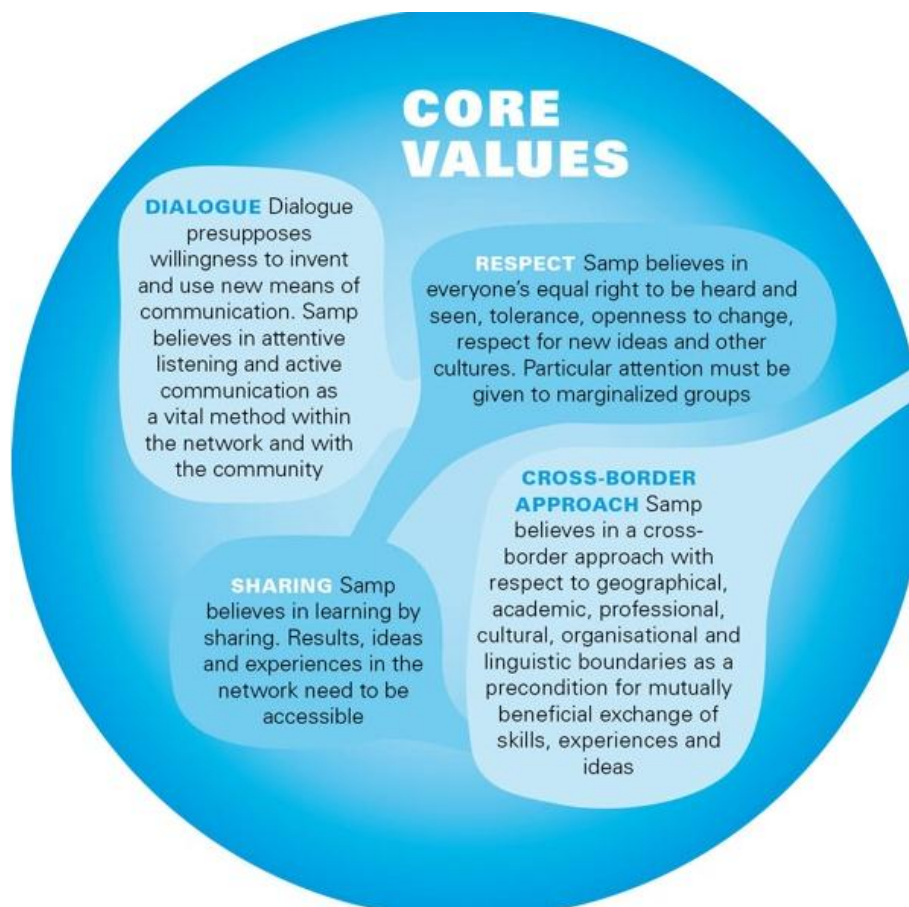


Fig. 5. Definitions of Samp's core values (Samp, 2011b)

the interest and the potential engagement and contribution of network member museums to develop their own SEA process. After consultations with all network members, Samp decided to develop its network SEA process as most of them showed interest in the process. Moreover, after gauging the potential engagement of the interested museum members in the network SEA process, and after assessing their potential contribution to address the core values of the network, a Samp SEA team was established. The selected network museum members for the Samp SEA team were from Azerbaijan, the Philippines and Tanzania, and their role was to conceptualise and develop Samp's SEA process. The Samp SEA team included the staff and communities of the three museums, and was supported by the Executive Director of the network.

In the second step of Samp's network SEA process a network context analysis took place based on the four network core values. *Sharing, Cross-border, Dialogue* and *Respect*, were used by the SEA team as SEA themes to conceptualise and drive four workshops. In each workshop the four Samp SEA themes were considered but emphasis was placed on one particular SEA theme per workshop. For instance, the *Sharing* SEA theme was specifically addressed in the first workshop, the *Cross-border* SEA theme in the second workshop, the *Dialogue* SEA theme in third workshop, and the *Respect* SEA theme in the fourth workshop. For each workshop, staff and community members of the SEA team,

as well as network partners, were selected using the SEA themes as a guide. The selection of workshop participants was based on their willingness to share, capabilities to contribute, and potentials to engage in dialogues linked to each SEA theme. In addition, the SEA team used the SEA themes to formulate workshop objectives, plan activities, and select network communication tools to enhance interaction and exchange of information. The activities that were carried out in the four workshops led to an iterative exchange of ideas, experiences and skills, which became the base of Samp's SEA process.

In the third step of the network SEA process, the data that was collected in the context analysis was assessed to derive key issues for each of Samp's SEA themes or core values. The key issues were then further processed to provide network-based meanings to Samp's core values. Additionally, in this step, collected data was used to assess how the network SEA process could be linked to the capacity development process proposed by the UNDP (UNDP, 2009). Focus was placed on studying how Samp's network SEA process engaged stakeholders on capacity development, and how the process facilitated the identification of network capacity assets and needs.

The main result of the second case study of the research project (Paper II) was then a network SEA process that acted as a framework to encourage the member museums and communities of the Samp

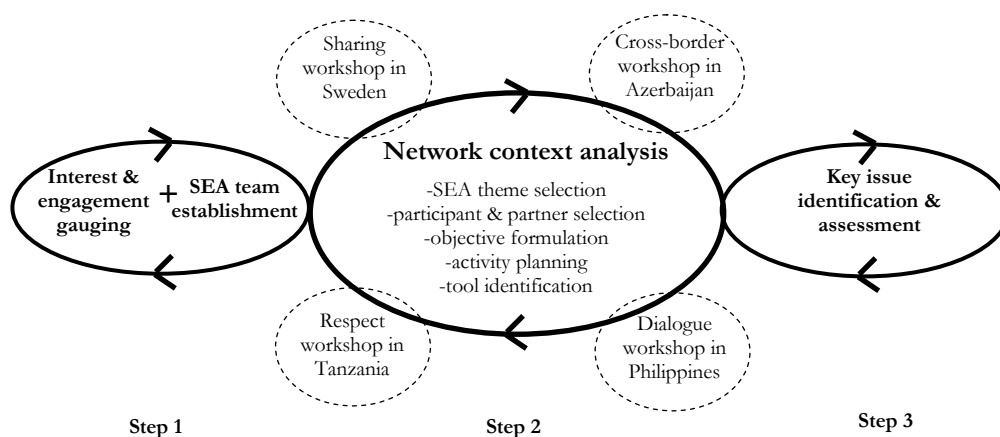


Fig. 6. Applied Samp network SEA process (Paper II)

network to engage in iterative dialogues that led to operationalised network core values and assessed network capacity assets and needs.

SEA framework for stakeholder participation and dialogue (Paper I and II)

Based on the results of the Sonso Lagoon and Samp case studies, a three step flexible, adaptable and participative SEA process framework for iterative dialogue generation, networking, data collection and assessment, and key issue identification was derived as a way to strengthen planning and decision making.

The three steps of the proposed SEA process framework are: a first step to determine the need of the SEA, a second step to carry out an iterative analysis of the context where the SEA is conceptualised and applied, and a third step where analyses are translated into outcomes that can, depending on the context of application, influence planning and decision making processes or serve as an alternative to these processes (Fig. 7).

The SEA need-determining step or screening step was chosen as the first step for the proposed SEA framework because assessing the relevance of participative SEA processes in any context is fundamental to ensure process and outcome legitimacy, and to increase the probability that the process and its outcomes will influence planning and decision making (Innes, 2004). Additionally, several environmental assessment practitioners² have claimed that despite a current lack of research on the topic, they consider that screening still plays an important role in environmental assessment as it puts forth discussions on the key issues that should be thoroughly addressed in the later stages of SEA processes. Moreover, as the results of the research case studies showed, carrying out initial consultations

with key stakeholders in the Sonso Lagoon created interest in the SEA concept and facilitated the identification of preliminary key stakeholders and issue categories (Paper I). In Samp, the screening step allowed creating acceptance and legitimacy for the network SEA process, and facilitated establishing an engaged network SEA team to conceptualise and develop the network SEA process (Paper II).

As the main step of the proposed SEA process framework, the iterative context analysis step should develop into a flexible, adaptable and open platform for dialogue generation and networking. In this step, participants can come together and engage in dialogue iterations that are driven by idea generation and data needs. In other words, in the context analysis participants share ideas that lead to questions and information needs, these in turn lead to new actor involvement and new ideas, creating new questions and data needs and so on. Once started, the iterative dialogues and networking continue until it is considered that enough information has been collected and that all identified key participants have been involved in the dialogue process. However, maintaining such an iterative, flexible, adaptable and open dialogue and networking platform is challenging (Lane, 2005; Crowley, 2009). In both the Sonso Lagoon and the Samp case studies, large amounts of time, resources and planning efforts were invested to adapt to the conditions of the studied contexts, and to create and maintain dialogues for data collection and assessment. For instance, in the case of the Sonso Lagoon where actors and context conditions were largely unknown, study strategies had to be constantly reformulated and new key participants continuously identified. Regular adaptation to the conditions in the Sonso Lagoon had to be achieved to understand and identify the interrelations and complexities surrounding the key issues of the lagoon. Moreover, in the Samp case study, it was observed that much time and coordination was needed among participants to conceptualise the four workshops that

² 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)

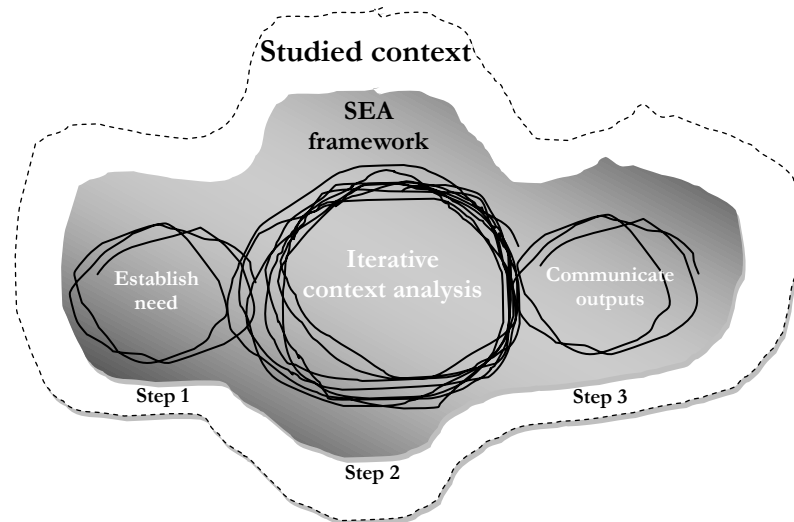


Fig. 7. Proposed three step flexible, adaptable and participative SEA process framework

drove Samp's network SEA process. In addition, when implementing the planned activities of the workshops, many adjustments had to be made to keep participants engaged in the begun dialogues and to encourage an open and creative idea exchange and networking process framed by the core values of the network.

Apart from addressing different data needs and adapting to unknown and changing conditions of the studied contexts, the iterative context analysis should also address and be flexible and adaptable to different institutional and managerial requirements and varying scales of action (João, 2002; Turnpenny et al., 2008). In the Sonso Lagoon, the developed participative SEA process adapted to a regional, centralised and weak planning system, but, at the same time, it became a parallel, inclusive and coherent planning alternative that encouraged institutional cooperation, and minimised gap and objective conflicts between planning levels (Paper I). Moreover, the Sonso Lagoon SEA process took a multi-scale approach to consider a variety of key issues that were present at local and regional scales. In spite that the multi-scale approach brought challenges, especially when addressing conflicts and prioritising key issues, it allowed to develop a clearer understanding of local-regional interrelations and to formulate actor accepted development objectives and visions for the

Sonso Lagoon region (Paper I). On the other hand, the developed Samp network SEA process was fully integrated with the institutional and process structures of Samp. This integration was reached as network participants completely conceptualised and developed the network SEA process using Samp core values as guiding principles (Paper II). An advantage of this integration was that stakeholder ownership of the network SEA process was reached. This meant that participants were motivated and encouraged to develop the process, increasing the changes that its outcomes would address key network issues. However, the main challenge with an integrated network SEA process was to effectively operationalise the network's defined but rather abstract core values, by making them more practical and usable to guide network activities. Despite this, in the context analysis step it was possible to use the data that was generated by the network participants to identify key issues for each of the core values. Identifying and linking key issues to Samp's core values clarified their definitions. In addition, by deriving network accepted meanings for each core value it was possible to render the network's core values more operable, which can support network member museums to align their activities with Samp's vision and strategic objectives and reach long lasting transformation in society (Paper II).

In the proposed SEA process framework, a third step is suggested to facilitate the communication of the outputs of the process, reinforce the acceptance of recommendations, strengthen arguments, and influence decision making processes (Innes and Booher, 1999; Innes, 2004). In this step, tools such as scenarios based on GIS can be used to communicate and illustrate the results of the SEA process to participants and decision makers (Sheate, 2010; Therivel, 2004) or mapping techniques can be used for participants to visualise their inputs and give meanings the abstract strategic concepts of their organisations.

In the Sonso Lagoon case study, for instance, the two GIS scenarios illustrated how the different interests of the participants were considered when formulating the development objectives and vision for the lagoon. This created transparency in the Sonso's SEA process, increased the acceptance of the recommendations that were made, and influenced the environmental authorities that decide over the management of the lagoon (Paper I).

In addition, in the Samp case study, the identified key issues were mapped together with the core values of the network. This mapping provided a visualisation of the linkages between network key issues and core values, and allowed participants to recognise their inputs and understand how their ideas were used in the process. Moreover, the mapping visual approach can be used by network museum members and their communities to conceptualise and apply their activities in line with the vision and strategic objectives of Samp (Paper II).

Even though it is acknowledged that the proposed flexible, adaptable and participative SEA process framework will pose several implementation challenges, which are mostly related to heavy time and planning requirements (Dryzek, 2000), it is argued that it can provide beneficial advantages in development planning (Hedo and Bina, 1999; Healey, 2003). For instance, as was observed in the research case studies, the three step SEA framework can be

designed to adapt to different institutional contexts and to varying organisational processes, which according to Hildén (1999) is of crucial importance for the success of SEA process implementation. Moreover, the SEA framework can be flexible and include the requirements of environmental management approaches like the Ramsar wise use wetland management principles as well as organisational performance improvement processes like the UNDP's capacity development process. Most importantly, as the proposed SEA process framework is a participative process, focusing on dialogue generation, networking and providing a voice to marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, it can also become an inclusive, just, transparent and creative alternative to traditional top-down planning and decision-making processes, where agreed upon outputs can be reached, contributing to reach lasting transformations in society (Healey, 1999; 2003; Innes and Booher, 1999; Innes, 2004).

For these reasons, it is suggested that the flexible, adaptable and participative SEA process framework may well be applied in situations where underdeveloped or traditional top-down planning and decision making process have failed to formulate anchored and accepted development objectives and visions (Paper I). Additionally, it is suggested that the proposed SEA process framework can be applied in cases where participants should be engaged early on in development approaches, and where there is a need to strengthen platforms for stakeholder interaction through idea exchanges across borders and mobilise individual and organisational capacities (Paper II). However, to continue learning about the benefits and limitations of the proposed SEA process framework, there is a need to continue gaining experiences on its development in different contexts.

Future research

An interesting future research prospect for flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes could be to conceptualise and

develop this type of SEAs in transboundary contexts. The research could be relevant because it seems that in transboundary contexts there are limited experiences with SEA application (Koivurova, 2008) and a lack of capacity and knowledge on how to develop SEAs (Bruch et al., 2008). In addition, SEA research in transboundary contexts could contribute to study how SEA processes should adapt to large scales and address complex issues that could have significant, long term and cross boundary effects (Bastmeijer and Koivurova, 2008). Furthermore, with the research, it could be possible to analysis how SEA processes can address the challenges that have risen with public participation in transboundary contexts due to a lack of clear regulations (Albrecht, 2008). Lastly, with this future research, an opportunity would be created to study if flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes can contribute to establish platforms for dialogue and networking in transboundary contexts to bring together opposed actors, analysis complex issues, and arrive at accepted alternatives to secure inclusive, fair and sustainable development futures.

CONCLUSIONS

In the study that was carried out in the Sonso Lagoon and Samp, it was shown that SEA processes, particularly flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes, can be conceptualised and developed to foster participation, dialogue and networking among a multiplicity of stakeholders acting in different contexts and having a plurality of interests.

Moreover, it was revealed that establishing platforms for dialogue and networking with flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes requires time and careful planning and implementation efforts. However, it is argued that the benefits brought to planning and decision making with this type of SEA processes may outweigh these efforts.

Flexible, adaptable and participative SEAs can adapt well to different institutional contexts, planning scales, and varying organisational managerial processes and

objectives. They can be conceptualised to substitute weak and inefficient planning and decision making systems at regional levels (Paper I) or they can be fully integrated with existing organisational planning and decision making processes at network levels (Paper II).

In addition, dialogue and networking generating SEA processes are a way to facilitate an early participant engagement, incorporate the views of traditionally marginalised stakeholders, provide transparency, and arrive at inclusive and legitimate outcomes that can influence planning and decision making processes.

Based on this, it is suggested that flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes could be applied in situations where development objectives are lacking, are unclear or conflicting, or in situations where there is a need to engage stakeholders to strengthen idea exchanges and mobilise individual and organisational capacities.

However, it is considered that if flexible, adaptable and participative SEA processes are to be developed to enhance the inclusion of sustainability issues in planning and decision making or to serve as an alternative to traditional top-down planning, a continued examination of such SEA processes is required.

Suggested future research could be to further develop the proposed SEA process approach in transboundary contexts where the challenge would be to engage actors in common-purposed dialogues to addresses complex issues and arrive at anchored, inclusive and creative alternatives for development.

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