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Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA): will sustainability be weak enough to dilute it?

This paper will examine early experience with implementing the SEA Directive to explore its role in strengthening environmental policy integration, and the wider context of *ex ante* assessments that may be altered to dilute this effect. SEA proceeds from an overview of the state of the environment to explain how significant environmental effects may arise, while creating an open, participative framework for reasoned debate about the findings. This contrasts with many 'integrated appraisal' or 'sustainability appraisal' systems such as those used to vet European Commission policies or UK land-use plans. These typically begin with economic, social and environmental criteria for judging a proposal, and then compare the expected (rather than assessed) outcomes against the listed criteria. The legal requirements to comply with the SEA Directive (effective from July 2004) clearly will strengthen consideration of the environment in public sector planning. On the debateable premise that this could create an imbalance in favour of the environment, the UK Government is responding by making efforts to give a similar boost to the economic and social agendas in its sustainability appraisal system. By late 2004 early experience with this 're-balancing' should prove interesting: early indications are that only one side of the SEA coin will be emulated in economic and social assessment, i.e. use of more evidence-based reasoning. Transparent and formal participation procedures for advocates of economic and social agendas centred on this evidence are not expected to be part of the picture. This is not to say such advocates will be any less active in influencing plans, not least through efforts to shape national policies. By asking what is being integrated with what, and on what premises, this paper will shed light on the role of *ex ante* evaluation in the greening (or otherwise) of policies.