



Strategic Environmental Assessment: Rising to the SDG Challenge

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Introduction

Decision makers in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are constantly making decisions that affect the environment and wellbeing of their communities. However, the consequences of their decisions on the environment, people and economy are often overlooked. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for inclusiveness and partnerships to steer PICs closer to sustainable pathways. However, they are a set of 17 ambitious goals with trade-offs and synergies that may compromise or duplicate efforts for effectively achieving the SDG targets (Moyer and Bohl, 2019). Five years since the launch of the SDGs, Pacific Island countries (PICs) have integrated them into their national policy and planning processes to contribute to the vision for a more sustainable world. SDG 13 in particular, calling for climate action, has provided the impetus behind policies and plans for mitigating and adapting to climate change impacts. With so many policies, plans and programmes addressing the climate change agenda, is there a way that we can assess the sustainability impacts of such policies and plans and evaluate if they are in fact solving the climate problem?

Strategic environmental assessment is a process that integrates sustainability considerations into policy and planning development but has had limited application in PICs (Levett and McNally, 2003; Morgan and Onorio, 1996). It seems logical that SEA, if effectively utilized, could support more coherent planning for sustainable development. In the past, PICs have adopted new processes, such as EIA into their national planning processes without fully understanding its implications on their institutional organisations. Cumulative impacts are not well articulated and can generate delays in project development as they become apparent (Runhaar and Driessen, 2007). Consequently, some of the decisions and precautions regarding environmental and social safeguards, are not adequately addressed and, in many cases, important issues are considered too late in the process. SEA can help to identify cumulative impacts and guide project design and development to avoid irreversible impacts that may have major repercussions on the environment, social and economic aspects of sustainable planning and development.

With recognition of SEA as a useful tool to strengthen sustainability considerations in policy and plan making (Polido et al. 2018), the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP) has undertaken a series of consultations to develop SEA Guidelines and to assist PICs to adopt this process. However, an understanding of current planning and decision-making processes is important to understand how the SEA process can be



effectively adapted to suit national contexts. As such, my research looked into the current planning process of a case study, Tonga, to determine if the SEA process would be helpful in streamlining and coordinating national planning and policy making for achieving SDGs with the research question: ***“Is there a role for SEA to improve current planning and policy making processes towards achieving SDGs in Tonga?”*** (Foliaki, 2020).

SEA and Policy Planning Development in Tonga

The research comprised a literature review of SEA and SDGs and found a plethora of SEA research spanning across multiple facets of sustainable development. What originated as a mechanism to identify impacts of development from a science perspective in the planning phases, has now evolved into a more inclusive and consultative process that emphasizes the importance of social and cultural sensitivities pertaining to decision making (Bina, 2008).

An analysis of the institutional and planning and policy making processes in Tonga pertaining to SDGs 13, 14 and 15, found that one of the major challenges is fragmentation of decision-making entities and stakeholders. There is a lack of coherence and accountability towards sustainability planning processes. Short-sighted planning, limited human resources and institutional capacities are also factors that challenge sustainable development in Tonga. Culture and power relations play a big role in decision making and policy planning as they can influence and create communication barriers that may impede effective planning and stakeholder consultations. The inclusive nature of the SDGs framework suggests that SEA could be the missing puzzle that can help to ‘glue’ everything together. However, there are layers of ‘checks’ that need to be made in policy and plan making processes, if SEA can prove useful to decision making processes in Tonga or other Pacific Island countries.

Way Forward

Planning and decision-making processes in Tonga are predominantly centralized and government led. While government recognizes the importance of inclusiveness and understanding people’s values to guide development and decision-making processes, current public participatory practices are not effective and often rushed to meet deadlines for mobilizing resources and implementing activities to meet SDG targets. In particular, the involvement of the business or private sector needs to be strengthened in Tonga. There are current mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate progress and manage risks of policies, plans and programmes, but overall, these could be strengthened through a more coordinated approach that could be possible through SEA.

The SEA process has potential to help in the policy and planning processes of Pacific Island countries. Firstly, SEA could help to identify cumulative impacts at the remedial level before they reach the project level phase. Secondly, it could raise decision maker’s awareness of sustainability principles and help them consider the major impacts of their policies and plans. Finally, the strong public participatory approach of SEA should ensure that no one is left behind. Accordingly, the following recommendations are considered in support of SEA uptake:

1. Given that SEA is a relatively new process that has no mandatory application in PICs, SPREP and other international agencies such as the World Bank have an opportunity to introduce the SEA process in a context that suits the unique cultural,



political and geographical attributes of Pacific island countries and support sustainable development strategies.

2. PICs should evaluate the implications of the SEA tool based on their current policy and planning processes and how to adapt it to suit them. However, without considering the social and cultural interplays, power relations and political status in their own countries, SEA will not be effective (Bina, 2007).

Conclusion

SEA has potential to strengthen coherence and provide for more remedial planning and policy making with checks and balances for sustainability. Its connective role can assist in consolidating policies, plans and programmes as well as analysing the sustainability impacts of PPPs aimed to address the climate problem in Pacific Island Countries. The interconnections and complexities of the SDGs with synergies and trade-offs among goals provides the impetus and opportunity for SEA to live up to its potential for enhancing stakeholder engagement to 'leave no one behind' when meeting their SDG targets. Tonga and other Pacific Island countries, may want to determine their need for SEA and be willing to learn and integrate the SEA process into planning and decision making processes, as it could expedite efforts for achieving SDG targets by 2030 and beyond.

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