

Addressing Health in SEA for Healthy Public Policy: A Contribution from SEA Development in Thailand



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Since the national health system reform has started in 2000, Thai society increasingly perceives health as an ultimate goal for development. Consequently, the concept of Healthy Public Policy (HPP) has been articulated to public policy processes. Healthy Public Policy does not mean only integrating health dimension in the policy content, but also the 'healthy' policy process that includes transparency, accountability, and participation.

This paper is a contribution toward Healthy Public Policy by supporting the effort to address health at strategic level. It will analyze how various SEA approaches that are evolving in Thai society can address various concepts of health.

The paper will start with the problems of strategic decision-making in Thai society to reflect the need for SEA. Then, the national health system reform will be explained with the emphasis on the Healthy Public Policy. After that, various approaches of SEA that are perceived and recently evolved in Thai society will be described, followed by introducing the health concepts that should be potentially related to strategic impact assessment. The final part will be on the analysis of addressing various health concepts in each SEA approaches and the conclusion on the implications to SEA development in Thai society.

1. The needs for SEA in Thai society

The government has initiated various development projects, without the understanding of the public on the initiation and rational of the projects, consideration of alternatives, and the lack of meaningful people participation in the decision-making process. Some main examples of these mega-projects are industrial, energy, national water grid, transportation, etc. These cause many impacts in several aspects, leading to conflicts in the society.

At the core of the conflict, the two sides hold different development paradigms. The government and private sector seems to believe in free-market

economy, focusing on GDP growth, while the local communities and the civil society quest for sufficient economy focusing on sustainable development. There are rarely process and opportunity for both side to share and deliberate for social learning and collective decision-making process.

But the existing Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) system in Thailand, which was initiated in 1992, cannot cope with the severe environmental impacts of the projects. More importantly, the environmental consideration in the decision-making process is not able to address diverse value and perspectives of different stakeholders, various alternatives to the projects and development directions, indigenous knowledge on the environment and eco-system, as well as the transparency and accountability of the whole process. One important consequence resulting from the existing EIA system is that the terminology 'Environment' has been perceived limited to physical environment and pollution only.

Consequently, the reform of the EIA system was launched in 2002 by the Minister of Natural Resources and the Environment. The reform was going on with the participation by all stakeholders until the proposal of the new EIA system was finalized. However, with the change of the minister, the whole process was stopped, even though some main proponents and scholars had been trying to push forward the reform.

2. Health system reform and SEA development

The national health system reform had been formally launched in 2000. The reform is not only about health services but has gone much further to the whole health system. The meaning of 'Health' has been expanded to 'Well-being' and from the limited 'physical health' perception to the holistic health that covers physical, mental, social, and spiritual health.

The principle of 'Build (Health) not Cure' has been echoed in the society and Healthy Public Policy became both the goal and the concept of the reform. Healthy Public Policy emphasizes that all stakeholders in the society, particularly the civil society, has to mutually determine and push forward the development direction that will lead to healthy society.

Health Impact Assessment has been developed as the social learning process for influencing public policy. On the one hand, HIA development has effectively contributed to democratic decision-making and local empowerment. But on the other hand, the HIA cannot adequately deal with strategic issues of the problems and cannot provide strong policy alternatives.

Therefore, SEA has been evolved and applied to achieve Healthy Public Policy. But how SEA will contribute toward HPP depends on how SEA can drive 'health' at the strategic level. So we will look at various SEA approaches that are evolving in Thai society and the different health concepts will be explored.

3. The SEA approaches in Thailand

The concept of SEA has been applied in Thai society for only a few years. But SEA has been evolved not as a single approach. Different actors have developed SEA differently. Some SEA approach is more conventional, while some others are new concept for the society.

With the aim to contribute to better understanding of SEA concept and also to facilitate the evolution of SEA in Thai society, the preliminary synthesis of SEA approaches that are evolving in Thai society is performed. The details of each approach are as follow.

3.1 SEA EIA School

The first SEA approach is mainly expanded from the EIA concept to perform above the project level, such as program, or sometime, mega-project. The main aims are still to minimize environmental impacts by identifying mitigation measures. The main process of this SEA approach is still follow the EIA process of Screening, Scoping, Impact Analysis, Reporting, and Monitoring. Also, its impact analysis is mainly limited to scientific and quantitative data with less or no qualitative data, indigenous knowledge, and value judgement.

Generally, it tends to address the development direction, program, or mega-project that is already decided or preliminary determined by the government or decision-makers, for example, industrial estate development, oil and gas exploration, mining, inter-countries power grid or gas pipeline connection, etc.

The main limitations of the SEA- EIA School is that it has less or no effects on changing the direction or the policy, since it still try to 'fine-tuning' but just the larger scale than EIA project. Therefore, some SEA experts do not consider this approach of SEA as a SEA because it is an EIA, not SEA. (Partidario, 2004)

The recent experience in Thailand includes the Development of a strategic environmental assessment platform for the regional power sector integration in the Lower Mekong countries by a consortium coordinated by Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

3.2 SEA Area Base

The second SEA approach focuses on an area as the basis for considering strategic issues. It is the analysis on various aspects of an area to provide the scope and detail data for initiating or planning any development. An area for this SEA can be community and district to province and region.

The main analysis is on natural resources and environment, for example, forest area, conservative and other ecological sensitive area, water and ground water resources, pollution sources, etc. Moreover, the analysis may include other aspects, such as cultural heritage sites, ethnic group, health services, etc.

Therefore, SEA Area base will provide the context of the area on various aspects. It may be use for considering the overall development potential of the area and initiating development project, or for the more specific purpose, selecting the appropriate site for program or project development.

The main limitations of SEA Area base are that it has less or no effects on sectoral or national policy, since these policies do not limit only to the area-base context and factors. For example, the power policy may decide to use coal or nuclear even though the country does not have those fuel resources.

There are experiences of different SEA Area base in Thai society. Some studies are focused mainly on physical environment of the area, while some others are more comprehensive in the scope. Base on some experiences in Thailand, this may depend on the Good Governance principle of the SEA process, which are transparency, accountability, participation, and capacity building.

If the ‘outsider’ such as consultant or academic is hired by some departments or organizations, it usually has the development agenda for the area and the scope of the study will be set accordingly.

A recent example is the SEA of the Special Border Economic Zone in Chiang Rai province commissioned by the Natural Resources and Environment Policy and Planning Office (NREP). This study is initiated follow the Government plan to develop the area for industrial estate as well as the international trade. So the

study try to provide the information and analysis of the area for the site selection for the industrial estate and also the environmental monitoring plan of the area.

But if it is the local's initiatives, like the Community-base Development Master Plan, it tends to lead to more comprehensive scope, which responds to the needs of the community or the stakeholders in the area. (Seri Phongpit, 2003)

In addition, there has been a clear case study of a sectoral development over area context. There is an oil refinery project in Ban Laem, Phetburi Province, which is inconsistent with the area development plans of the local community, the province, and even the Regional Development Plan of the National Economics and Social Development Board. But the project is still going on at present, since the investment in this project is several billion Baht.

3.3 SEA Policy Options

The main aims of the SEA Policy Options are to support and influence the public decision-making process by providing information and analysis on the impacts of various policy options as well as the trade-off in each option. It will identify various policy alternatives and options and analyze the impacts on various aspects for the comparison of each option.

Concerning the scope of impacts in different aspects, it is set according to the development goals, which are deem important by stakeholders to the issue in focus. The SEA process must not be predetermined or adhere to one option before, so it can actually open to numerous alternatives and options.

The result of the analysis or output of this approach of SEA may not be the absolute answer of the 'best' option for the society. But it tries to clarify the trade-off in each policy option and the public decision-making process will decide which policy option and trade-off to be chosen. Nevertheless, with the open and flexible process in each step, it hope to support the broad participation of all stakeholders and facilitate the deliberative decision-making of the society.

The recent experience in Thai society, for example, is the Future of Thai Power Sector: An analysis of alternatives on the Power Development Plan by Health System Research Institute. (Decharut Sukkumnoed and Suphakij Nuntavorakarn, 2005)

3.4 SEA Development Direction

Lastly, the forth SEA approach is following the concept and tool of Strategic Environmental Analysis (SEAN), which has been developed by the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) and AIDEnvironment. (Jan Kessler et. al., 1999) SEAN has been developed to integrate environmental issues into strategic planning. It is a systematic and comprehensive analysis of context, value, factors, problems, and opportunities to synthesize the best strategic direction and/or option.

SEAN can be applied to broad issues, for instance development direction of watershed, a city, a sector, etc. where there are numerous issues and it is not clear how to start and find out the appropriate strategic direction and option. Moreover, some strategic issues have never been raised in the public so the understanding of the issue is very little and there is no policy option. SEAN should be applied for creating a process of learning between stakeholder and also communication to the public. Therefore, stakeholder and the public will have more competence to take part in developing policy options and in decision-making process.

The example of the recent experiences in Thai society is the initiative on the Strategic Salt Resources Management of the Northeastern region of Thailand.

Table 1 The Four SEA Approaches in Thaiian

	SEA EIA School	SEA Area Base	SEA Policy options	SEA Development Direction
Main characteristics	Analysis of impacts on program, mega-project	Analysis on various aspects of an area to provide the scope and data for initiating or planning any development	Analysis on the impacts of various policy options as well as the trade-off in each option.	Analysis of context, value, factors, problems, and opportunities to synthesize the best strategic direction and/or option.
Core research questions	What are the significant environmental impacts and what are the mitigation measures?	What are the factors, conditions and opportunity of an area that should be concerned for development?	What are the policy options and what are the impacts and the trade-off in each option?	What is the best strategic direction or option according to the context, value, factors, problems and opportunities of the development issue?
Zero Alternative	Not developing the program or mega-project	Not developing any projects in the area	Doing the same policy option as previous	Doing the same direction as previous
Monitoring	Monitoring plan of environmental impacts of the program or mega-project	Changing of the area and impacts on various aspects in the area	Impacts of the chosen policy option for the next SEA	Monitoring and surveillance system for the chosen development direction
Expected outcome	To mitigation the environmental impacts of the decided program or mega-project	The development that is appropriate and consistent with the context of the area	Deliberative public decision-making on various policy options	The appropriate strategic development direction for policy and planning

Source: By the author

4. The health concepts for strategic impact assessment

When considering at strategic level, health can be deal with in various ways. Therefore, different health concepts are synthesized with the aim to leading to the analysis of how to addressing health in different SEA approaches.

4.1 EIA approach to health

This approach is base on the concept of EIA, which has the main focus on the environmental impacts. The scope of the environment covers the four tiers of physical environment, biological environment, human use, and quality of life. Health is considered as the consequences of environment impacts in these four tiers. If the environmental impacts, especially pollution, are under standard, there will be no significant problem to health.

Even though, several factors affecting or relating to health are included in the analysis, such as occupational health and health services, but these components are not linked together for the more complete picture of health.

4.2 Ecosystem approach to health

This approach to health has its root from the concept of environment. However, the basis concept is that environment and human health is directly linked. 'Can people remain healthy in a world that is sick?' is the starting question and the way to look at the environment is not fragmented but instead, it should be considered in the holistic manner to include social and economic aspects as well.

To emphasize the linkages of the three aspects, the concept of ecosystem has been the basis of the approach. According to this approach, the ecosystem comprises of three components, which are biophysical environment, social environment, and economic environment.

All of the three components determine health or human being. Thus, this approach considers that human health is equal to ecosystem health and to achieve good health, we must aims to protect and improve all three environments. If there are threats or problems with the eco-system, human health will be definitely affected.

4.3 Healthy Public Policy approach to health

The concept of Healthy Public Policy had been introduced by the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion since 1986. It emphasized that all aspects, either

social, economics, environment, technology, human rights, or else, links to health in one way or another. Thus, health impacts are resulted from all of these aspects.

The main aims of Healthy Public Policy are to work on any public policy to incorporate health consideration in the process and also to support healthy policy alternatives. Moreover, the word ‘Healthy’ also reflects the importance of the Good Governance principle in public policy process, which are transparency, accountability, participation, and capacity building.

Accordingly, health must be considered in a holistic way as comprehensive impact and consequently, it would lead to integrated impact assessment to address health in this approach.

4.4 Health Inequalities Approach to health

Health Inequalities is another approach to health that has different basis to the previous three approaches. The basic concept is that health or well-being is not only the matter of individual, which generally focus on health risk factors. But this approach goes further that there are social factors, which determine individual health risks and health opportunities. Some examples of these factors are poverty, gender, resource allocation, and education system, which can be considered as ‘cause of the causes’ of health problems or the so-called social determinants of health. The social inequalities on these factors must be tackled with in order to improve health. Therefore, health in this approach is seen as a way of living healthy together.

5. Addressing health in the four SEA approaches

This part will analyze the main question of ‘how each SEA approach addresses health according to each health concept?’ in order to contribute to the development of SEA for Healthy Public Policy.

5.1 SEA EIA School

Generally, the SEA-EIA School addresses health following the EIA approach since it normally put the main focus on the details of environmental impacts. For the Ecosystem approach, it may be able to address the economic and social environment to a certain extent of scientific and quantitative data only. But for the Healthy Public Policy and Health Inequalities approach, this SEA approach is not compatible for comprehensive impacts, public policy process, and various health inequality factors.

5.2 SEA Area Base

Concerning the EIA approach for SEA Area base, a SEA Area Base may follow this approach if it chooses to focus only on physical environment. But actually, the scope of developing strategic road-map for an area should includes

economics and social aspects as well, and if so, the SEA Area Base is already gone further to the more comprehensive health as in the Ecosystem approach. But for the HPP and Health Inequalities approach, this SEA approach will have limitation in addressing those health concepts adequately.

Since the unit of analysis is always an area, it can address the comprehensive impacts, the public policy process, and the health inequalities only within the area. The other issues outside the area, particularly the national or international or the general public issues, seem to be 'beyond the scope' or become 'external factors' of the area. But within the centralized and powerful system of the government like Thai society, these outside factors can play important role to the area, and sometime much more crucial than the factors within the area. The case study of the oil refinery project in the heading 3.2 SEA Area Base is a clear example of this issue.

As emphasized in this paper that the four SEA approaches and the four health concepts are not mutual exclusive and should be link to the others, a solution is that SEA Area Base has to link with the other SEA approach, namely SEA Policy Option and SEA Development Direction to be able to address Healthy Public Policy and Health Inequalities effectively.

5.3 SEA Policy Options

The SEA Policy Options, generally has the scope of analysis in several aspects, so it has gone further in addressing health than the EIA approach. For the Ecosystem and HPP approach, it surely able to address the two concepts because the approach is rather open for the three aspects of the Ecosystem approach and also the comprehensive impacts following the HPP approach.

For the Health Inequalities approach, SEA Policy Options will address this aspect by comparing the impacts or consequences of each policy option on the issue. So the better knowledge on health inequalities in the society, the clearer impacts comparison of the policy options.

5.4 SEA Development Directions or SEAN

Lastly, the principle of SEA Development Directions that it always consider three pillars of sustainable development; environment, social, and economics, make it already compatible with the Ecosystem approach. Moreover, since it has been decided rather open to address all important aspects and issues, SEA Development Directions can definitely address both the comprehensive impacts (HPP approach)

and health inequality factors (Health Inequalities approach).

But how comprehensive impacts and health inequalities will be addressed is mainly depend on the common value, the understanding, and the competence of the core group of stakeholders, which is the ‘back bone’ of the whole process, in addressing holistic health, public policy process, and health inequality factors. Otherwise, there is high risk that the two concepts of health may not be addressed adequately.

Table 2 Addressing the health concepts in the four SEA approaches

	EIA approach to health	Eco-system approach	Healthy Public Policy approach	Health Inequalities
SEA -EIA School	Compatible and directly address	May compatible only for the scientific and quantitative economics and social data	Not compatible/ Cannot address	Not compatible/ Cannot address
SEA Area Base	May follow this approach if having narrow scope of the environment only	Compatible	Can address only factors in the area Need to link with other SEA approaches	Can address only factors in the area Need to link with other SEA approaches
SEA Policy Options	Address health beyond this approach already	Compatible	Compatible and directly address	Address in comparing policy options
SEA Development Directions	Address health beyond this approach already	Compatible	Compatible but depend on the core group to decide	Compatible but depend on the core group to decide

Source: By the author

6. Conclusion: implications for SEA development in Thai society

As mentioned earlier, the four SEA approaches are not mutual exclusive. They can be applied in different ways to policy issue, depend on the specific policy situation, the strategic issue in focus, and the purpose of applying SEA.

In pursuing the goal of Healthy Public Policy, these SEA approaches can be applied to address health in different contents at different levels. SEA Development Direction should be adopted at the broad levels of policy-making e.g. the development direction, the national and sectoral policy, to address health inequality factors as well as the comprehensive impacts of the Health Public Policy approach.

If the policy options are clear to the society or the conflict situation is emerging, SEA Policy Options may be more effective to provide the alternatives and the impact comparison for social discussion process. It will contribute to the integration of health consideration on various aspects into public decision-making process.

Following the first two SEA approaches, which have the core focus on the broad picture of the society, the SEA Area Base can provide the specific information and analysis for strategic decision-making from the perspective of the area. This will help to address several aspects of health, according to the four health concepts, more concrete in term of the apparent evidence-base of the area.

Lastly, the SEA EIA School can provide the specific information and analysis for the detail design and implementation of the program, project, or activity. However, the scope of the analysis must be expanded according to the Ecosystem approach to cover the social and economic environment as well.

It is important to point out that the SEA development in Thai society is still in the initiating period. Several SEA approaches have been applied by different stakeholders as the social learning process. Therefore, this analysis of addressing health in SEA should not be treated as the concrete proposal for SEA system in Thailand. But instead, it is meant to contribute to better understanding on health and SEA, and help the SEA development in Thai society as the initial mapping of addressing health at strategic level.

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