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Brief statement (Vicente, G. and Partidário, M.R.)

ROLE OF SEA – FOSTERING BETTER DECISION-MAKING

The ultimate role of SEA is to foster better environmental decision-making. This means that affecting decision-makers perception on environmental problems should be at the forefront of environmental assessors' priorities.

I will address three key points that can help SEA deliver such mission:

1st PROBLEM PERCEPTION

EA associated instruments are normally problem-solving oriented, neglecting the previous identification of those same problems – they rely on the 'objectivity' of facts and not on the subjectivity of perceptions.

This situation doesn't raise the veil over the most important question decision-makers want to be answered beforehand: Why is that important? Because if something is not seen as a problem, then there is no reason to take action over it.

It is then fundamental for the success of SEA that environmental assessors start by clarify the variety of perceptions and values at stake in any given case.

2nd TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT

The practice of impact assessment is mainly driven by a quite common mistake: that 'facts' speak for themselves rather than being open to interpretation, and that decisions about environmental issues are scientific rather than political judgements (Nelkin, 1995¹).

Technical expertise plays a non-disputed role in SEA but it is not convincing and compelling on its own. It should be tailored towards the fundamental values and worldviews that shape and influence people's approaches to strategic decision-making. Which lead us to the third point.

3rd DECISIONAL VALUES

The plain fact is that decision-makers need to be convinced on the relevance of environmental issues for effective integration in decision-making. So in order to be more effective environmental assessors must operate as 'bridge' builders, or

¹ Nelkin, D. (1995). "Selling Science: how the press covers science and technology" (revised edition), W.H. Freeman, New York.

mediators, between decision-makers predominant values and the technical proposals for solution that will eventually unfold.

In this perspective communication plays an important role for SEA since it is through dialogue about different problem interpretations and value judgements that the common meanings arise and strategic decision-making can be readjusted to better environmental decisions.

CONCLUSION

It is not only through rules and regulations that SEA's goals will be reached. Even less by rigid and limited forms of assessment, that is dominated by only one-sided view of an ideal world. There are other forms of changing people's minds if we accept that learning is a human capacity and that communication is still a much unexplored field in environmental assessment.

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