

Actors in the spotlight: Scrutinising how actors affect Strategic Environmental Assessment towards sustainability in Municipal Master Plans

Written by Maria da Luz Fernandes, Sara Moreno Pires, Tomás B. Ramos, Carlos Rodrigues, Filipe Teles & Alexandra Polido. GOVCOPP, DCSPT, University of Aveiro

Synopsis

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a critical tool for integrating sustainability into Municipal Master Planning (MMP). However, findings from the SEA processes in Portugal reveal significant gaps in public participation.

This policy brief highlights the significance of initiating actors' involvement at the beginning of the assessment process and improving the knowledge exchange between the actors. These strategies can foster collaboration, transparency, and a more integrated approach to SEA.

Problem

It remains unclear what are the impacts of public participation and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) are on Municipal Master Plans (MMP). Explanations of the changes made to SEA based on public participation and consultation with public entities are frequently unsatisfactory.

Context

SEA is a systematic and comprehensive process for evaluating the consequences of Policies, Plans, and Programs (PPPs). It promotes sustainability by ensuring the inclusion of environmental and sustainability considerations and alternatives at the proper stage of the decision-making process through a participatory approach and by promoting an adaptive and holistic management approach by monitoring and evaluating over time.



Despite its importance, public participation in SEA has generally been limited and is mainly a tool for informing the public. It has been shown that the public enters late in the decision-making process when all decisions have been made, undermining well-informed and effective decisions.

A qualitative case study using content analysis was developed. The study focuses on public participation and consultation with public entities of SEA processes and analyses the relationship between the comments and results in the SEA's practitioner feedback.

12 SEA processes of MMP from territories classified as City by the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA¹) were analysed.

12 SEA processes of MMP from territories classified as City by the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA¹) were analysed.

Figure 1. Location of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) used for the analysis of Municipal Master Plans (MMPs) and identification of the Portuguese NUTS II: Algarve, Alentejo, Lisbon Metropolitan Area (AML), Centro and Norte

¹ Degree of urbanisation (Eurostat, 2023): Classification that divides local administrative units (local government) by population density. In Portugal, there are 16 local governments classified as “City”. Lisbon and Porto are part of the list but comprise, respectively, nine (Almada, Amadora, Barreiro, Cascais, Lisboa, Loures, Odivelas, Oeiras and Seixal) and five (Gondomar, Matosinhos, Porto, Valongo and Vila Nova de Gaia). These local governments attached to Lisbon and Porto classification develop different MMP and, therefore were also considered individually in our selection criteria.

Key Findings

1. Low Public Involvement: Out of over 5,000 public participations across the MMPs, only two directly addressed SEA issues, with one leading to a minor change.
2. SEA practitioners appear late in the process: SEA teams often enter when planning is already well-advanced, reducing their ability to propose meaningful alternatives.
3. Excessive bureaucracy and time lag: Excessive administrative burden and long intervals between replies between the actors in the process result in inaccuracies and omissions between the different phases of the process.
4. Poor team Integration: Limited collaboration between SEA practitioners and MMP planners prevents effective knowledge exchange and holistic planning.
5. Transparency deficits: Public participation reports often summarise rather than fully disclose contributions, leading to diminished stakeholder trust.

Policy recommendations

To address these issues and enhance SEA's contribution to sustainable urban development, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Early and Improved Public Participation

Involve the public in the scoping phase when the limits and scope of the SEA are being defined.

Provide training on participatory techniques to planners to improve the methodologies uses to involve the public and provide training on SEA to the members of the public to overcome the difficulties in understanding complex and technical language

Recommendation 2: Integrate planning and SEA teams

Increase the SEA team's ownership of the MMP process by creating integrated project workflows to enhance collaboration, develop joint training sessions and share objectives for MMP and SEA teams.

Recommendation 3: Increase transparency

Publish all public contributions and SEA feedback in full.

Develop a centralised online repository for plan-making and SEA-related documents.

Policy brief #1

21 March 2025



Acknowledgements

This work was funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the project PTDC/GES-URB/0804/2020 (doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/GES-URB/0804/2020). GOVCOPP is funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020). CENSE is funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT (strategic project UIDB/04085/2020). Alexandra Polido is funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT (Ref. CEECINST/00013/2021/CP2779/CT0021; doi:10.54499/CEECINST/00013/2021/CP2779/CT0021).

More information can be found in our website <http://envision.web.ua.pt/>

Publication details:

Fernandes, M. L., Moreno Pires, S., Ramos, T. B., Rodrigues, C., Teles, F., & Polido, A. (2024). Actors in the spotlight: scrutinising how actors affect strategic environmental assessment towards sustainability in municipal master plans. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2024.2392680>