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Accreditation of EA experts as a means to enhance EIA quality – Experiences from Estonia

Abstract

The role of experts and accreditation for ensuring quality and efficiency has been discussed over many years in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). An interesting example of this is Estonia; a country with a long history of accreditation of experts for Environmental Assessment (EA). Accreditation of EA experts was introduced already in the early 1990s with the establishment of the first Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations. In the Estonian EIA system, experts had an explicit and regulated role to review design documents in the later stages of the planning/design process and had quite strong role in decision-making. The EA system relied on a strong position of independent expert opinions. To this end, practitioners – usually mostly EIA consultants – were accredited as experts by Environmental Ministry at which substantive knowledge, education and experience were important elements in the accreditation.

Since then, stepwise development of Estonian EA legislation has strengthened the role of other parties in the process – such as proponents, interest groups and regulators – thereby making the system more interactive and stressing the importance of cooperation between different players in the process. Since the introduction of the first EA Law in Estonia, EA has also been applied to the early, strategic stages of the planning and decision-making process. As a consequence, the role of the expert has gradually transformed into one of an active agent maintaining the links between EAs and plans in both vertically – between different levels of plans and projects (SEA, EIA) – as well as horizontally - between sector EAs, plans/projects, social networks (“silos”). In relation to this the criteria for being accredited as EA expert have changed over time, from project-plan control function of 90-ies to the management of contemporary public process and teamwork of EA.

An important question is whether Estonia by these strong procedural requirements (procedural effectiveness) has higher quality EA and planning due to this? This relates to good quality products (EA reports), to the quality of the EA and planning process, interaction with interest groups, to better use of environmental information in the overall planning system and to better environmental outcomes of planning and decision-making. The practice shows, that good EA is not always enough to ensure good environmental quality of decisions.

With a changing role of the expert – having not only a technical-substantive but also a process role – there are several emerging challenges how to further develop the system. For a long time, the EA system seems to have been rather dependent for knowledge input (planning intelligence) and quality assurance on experts. However, other parties such as proponents and regulators play / have to play a more important role in the process. Is accreditation of experts (as a means of ensuring capacity building and/or quality assurance method) enough? Or should we widen the scope to the capacity of other players as well? Also, what is the critical knowhow/role of expert as well as others such as regulator/proponent that has to form the basis of excellence in EA conduct?

Using Estonia as a case, this paper addresses these and other questions regarding of EA quality assurance development, together with more fundamental questions on the role of EA in planning to ensuring sustainable development of society.