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Description

Public participation is considered a distinguished feature of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), and the SEA literature has traditionally identified several benefits attached to it, from more open and transparent decision-making to greater acceptance of plans/programmes' output by the affected population. However, relatively little empirical evidence has been collected so far on the extent and outcomes of public engagement as it is being carried out in current SEA practice. In this article, we present the results of a study on this theme based on a direct survey of 47 SEA practitioners and scholars from different countries. Respondents were asked to report their experience about a number of items including: the frequency of SEA process featuring deep public participation; its overall influence on plan/programme-making; the identification of the main factors impeding it; the correlation of public involvement with environmental outcomes; and the increase of costs. Results indicate that public engagement in current SEA practice is still relatively limited and with limited influence on decision-making. The main impeding factors seem to be: lack of political willingness by proponents; insufficient information on the SEA process by the public; and weakness of the legal frames. However, respondents also report that when effective public engagement takes place, benefits do arise and identify a positive correlation between the degree of public involvement and the environmental performance of plans and programmes. Overall, findings suggest that public involvement has indeed the potential to positively influence both SEA and decision-making, although this should be supported from the policy side by stronger legal frames, higher requirements and improved technical guidance.

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