

Proposed UNDP-UNECE Knowledge Exchange on Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments in East and Southeast Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia

UNDP initiative within the United Nations Inter-Agency Issue-Based Coalition on Environment and Climate Change in Europe and Central Asia region

Rationale

UNDP supports Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments (SESAs) based on the requirements of the UNDP Social and Environmental Standards¹. UNDP requirements in this field are fully aligned with the Model Approach to Environmental and Social Standards for UN programming and ensure equivalence and acceptable implementation of social and environmental safeguards used by the Global Environment Facility² and Green Climate Fund³ which aim to avert further deterioration of global environmental goods. The funding from these vertical funds which is channeled via UNDP requires strategic environmental and social assessments for a range of plans, programs, and policies that include e.g.:

- Integrated land-use planning addressing land degradation, climate change, and biodiversity protection concerns,
- Integrated water resource management and transboundary basin management,
- Marine and coastal management,
- Climate change adaptation (agriculture, irrigation, water management, etc.)
- Climate change mitigation (power production and distribution, energy efficiency, transport)

UNECE supports and facilitates – based on the decisions made at the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impacts Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) and the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) – subregional cooperation and capacity-building in the different UNECE subregions with the aim to:

- Contribute to common understanding and improved implementation of the Convention and its Protocol within the ECE subregions;
- Promote cooperation among Parties within and between the subregions and strengthen contacts with States and subregions outside the ECE region;
- Contribute to increased cooperation and synergies with relevant multilateral environmental agreements, other international instruments and organizations;
- Increase professional skills of officials at all government levels and awareness of the public, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in relation to strategic environmental assessment, transboundary environmental impact assessment and the application of the Convention and its Protocol;
- Contribute to wider application of the Convention and the Protocol within and beyond the ECE region.

Draft workplan for 2024–2026 of the Espoo Convention and its Protocol proposes various activities that aim to promote practical application of the Convention and the Protocol and increase awareness, accession, and implementation beyond the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region.

¹ https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/Pages/Homepage.aspx

² GEF safeguards can be found at <https://www.thegef.org/documents/environmental-and-social-safeguard-standards>.

³ <https://www.greenclimate.fund/projects/sustainability-inclusion/ess>

Aim of the Proposed UNDP-UNECE Knowledge Exchange

The UNECE Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment and the UNDP Social and Environmental Standards for plans, programs, and policies share the same overall aim of integrating sustainability considerations into plans and programs and, to the extent appropriate, policies. They are not identical but feature many similarities presented in Annex 1 that may be worth exploring with the aim of identifying their potential interlinkages and synergies.

The proposed UNDP-UNECE Knowledge Exchange on the strategic environmental and social assessment (SEA/SESA) in Southeast and East Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia is a flexible cooperation framework launched with the overall objective of facilitating linkages and synergies between:

- Strategic Environmental Assessments implemented by the UNECE, and other relevant partner organizations in these countries through the 2024-2026 workplan of the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, and
- Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments (SESAs) that will be implemented during the same period in the same countries based on the UNDP Social and Environmental Standards.

Cooperation modalities

This voluntary knowledge exchange initiative would enhance the close cooperation between our two agencies in the environmental area, promoted by the IBC on Environment and Climate under the auspices of the Regional Collaboration Platform, co-chaired by our two agencies.

The initiative entails cooperation by both agencies through:

1. Informal exchange of information on relevant projects between the UNDP and the UNECE Secretariat to the Espoo Convention and the SEA Protocol.
2. Information, consultation and, where relevant, engagement, of the relevant Focal Points for Administrative Matters regarding the Espoo Convention and the Protocol on SEA during the preparation and implementation of the SESA processes supported by the UNDP in the countries of interest.
3. Exchange information about planned events. Invitation (where appropriate) of relevant UNECE personnel to UNDP national and regional knowledge events held within the framework of UNDP-led initiatives.
4. Evaluation of experience resulting from the implementation of development interventions on the ground. Knowledge exchange and presentation of UNDP case-studies and lessons learned within the framework of relevant meetings held under the auspices of the SEA Protocol.

Financial implications

The entire knowledge exchange is conceived as an informal cooperative arrangement where relevant involved parties bear their own costs (unless determined otherwise through activity-specific arrangements).

Annex 1: An abbreviated comparison of the key provisions of the UNECE SEA Protocol with the UNDP SES requirements concerning plans, programs, and policies.

Key elements	UNECE SEA Protocol	UNDP Social and Environmental Standards and subsequent Guidance Note on Social and Environmental Assessment and Management
Definitions	<p>Art 2.6: Strategic environmental assessment” means the evaluation of the likely environmental, including health, effects, which comprises the determination of the scope of an environmental report and its preparation, the carrying out of public participation and consultations, and the taking into account of the environmental report and the results of the public participation and consultations in a plan or programme.</p>	<p>Strategic Social and Environmental Assessments (SESAs) refers to a range of analytical and participatory approaches that aim to integrate social and environmental considerations into policies, plans and programmes (PPPs) and evaluate their interlinkages with economic considerations.</p> <p>“SESA” builds on the principles and approaches of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) that have been widely employed. The term was expanded to emphasize the integration of social dimensions of such approaches.</p>
Field of application in plans and programmes	<p>Art 4:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plans and programmes which are required and prepared/adopted by authority through a formal procedure and are likely to have significant environmental/health, effects. • Plans and programmes which are prepared in key sectors + set the framework for future development consent for projects that require EIA 	<p>Plans and programs receiving UNDP support. Initially, those supported through global vertical funds for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land-use planning, • Integrated water resource management and transboundary basin management, • Marine and coastal management plans, • Plans and programs for climate change adaptation (agriculture, irrigation, water management, etc.) and mitigation (renewable energy, energy efficiency, transport).
Screening	<p>Art 5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • case-by-case examination or by specifying types of plans and programmes • opportunities for the participation of the public concerned in the screening of plans and programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SESA is prescribed based on case-by-case examination for High and Substantial Risk Projects but also where relevant for Moderate Risk projects that include support to upstream planning and policy reform. • 30/60/120 days disclosure is required for Moderate/Substantial/High Risk projects.
Scoping	<p>Art 6:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • environmental and health authorities are consulted when determining the relevant information to be included in the environmental report • opportunities for the participation of the public concerned to the extent appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Substantial and High-Risk projects, stakeholder consultations should be held early as part of the scoping process (e.g. on the Terms of Reference for the assessment) to ensure that the process captures issues of concern to project-affected stakeholders.
Environmental Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art 7 and Annex IV: Detailed contents, focused on env and health issues 	<p>SESA reporting format is not prescribed. UNDP SES framework only postulate requirements for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying social and environmental priorities that should be included in planning and policy processes • Assessing gaps in the institutional, policy, and legal frameworks to address these priorities • Identifying potential adverse social and environmental impacts associated with policy options • Engaging decision-makers and stakeholders to ensure a common understanding and broad support for implementation

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulating policy and institutional measures needed to close policy and legal gaps, address institutional weaknesses, and avoid adverse social and environmental impacts.
Public Participation	Art 8: early, timely and effective opportunities for public participation, when all options are open, in the strategic environmental assessment of plans and programmes.	SESA process requires rigorous stakeholder engagement as per UNDP SES Guidance on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder Engagement, Stakeholder Response Mechanism Grievance Redress Mechanisms
Consultation authorities	Art 9: ensure that the env/health authorities are given, in an early, timely and effective manner, the opportunity to express their opinion on the draft plan or programme and the environmental report	
Transboundary Consultations	Art 10: Where a Party of origin considers that the implementation of a plan or programme is likely to have significant transboundary environmental, including health, effects or where a Party likely to be significantly affected so requests, the Party of origin shall as early as possible before the adoption of the plan or programme notify the affected Party	SESA needs to consider potential transboundary and global concerns, including climate pollutants and other emissions, as they relate to project activities.
Decision-making	Art 11. Each Party shall ensure that when a plan or programme is adopted due account is taken of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The conclusions of the environmental report; (b) The measures to prevent, reduce or mitigate the adverse effects identified in the environmental report; and (c) The comments received from the public, authorities and potentially affected states. Each Party shall ensure that, when a plan or programme is adopted, the public, and the Parties consulted are informed, and that the plan or programme is made available to them together with a statement summarizing how the environmental, including health, considerations have been integrated into it.	Comprehensive stakeholder engagement as per UNDP SES Guidance on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder Engagement, Stakeholder Response Mechanism Grievance Redress Mechanisms
Monitoring	Art 12: monitor the significant environmental, including health, effects of the implementation of the plans and programmes, adopted under article 11 in order, inter alia, to identify, at an early stage, unforeseen adverse effects and to be able to undertake appropriate remedial action	If the PPP is anticipated to lead to “downstream” (e.g. physical footprint) interventions that may pose potentially significant adverse risks and impacts, the SESA process needs to include development of an Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF).
Application to Policies	Art 13: 1. Each Party shall endeavour to ensure that environmental, including health, concerns are considered and integrated to the extent appropriate in the preparation of its proposals for policies and legislation that are likely to have significant effects on the environment, including health.	SESA evaluates the effect of policy changes on a broad, cross-sectoral basis with the aim of making “upstream” development decision-making more sustainable. SESA for policies is guided by the same requirements as for SESA of plans and programmes.