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An *Ex-ante* Appraisal of the Possible Implementation of the Proposed Directive on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in England and Greece

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Introduction

Two years have passed since the publication of the latest Proposal for a Council Directive on the assessment of certain plans and programmes on the environment.¹ Current discussions at the European Council concerning its amended draft,² indicate that there is well-founded optimism for its enactment in the near future. In England, where a more limited form of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) has already been incorporated into the planning system, support for the adoption of the proposed directive would be expected. In the southern part of the European Union (EU), countries with different economic, planning and geographical characteristics, such as Greece, also have strong reasons to pursue the enactment of this type of environmental legislation: despite the current economic crisis, and according to a certain viewpoint as a result of it, the initiation of preventive environmental protection tools “*is now needed more than ever*” (V. Stogiannis, pers. comm.). What then is the rationale behind both governments’ reluctance to adopt the Proposal?

The attempt to answer the above question provided motivation for the research presented in this paper, which appraises the methodological, institutional and political consequences of the enactment of the proposed directive. This will partly explain the underlying hostility of the British and Greek governments’ stance concerning adoption of the proposed directive, and offer an insight into the difficulties likely to be encountered with its implementation. The conceptual background in terms of definition and discussion of the relevant terms used throughout this text will be discussed in the following section. The proposed Directive’s rationale and provisions follow, and details of the methodology used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data are then presented. The paper proceeds to expose the findings of the local authority survey in England, the

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TABLE 1. A definition of policies, plans and programmes (PPPs)

The 3Ps:

Policies, programmes and plans may have a national (government-wide), sectoral or spatial focus; often these terms are used in a sequential or interchangeable manner.

- Policy: a general course of action or proposed overall direction that a government is, or will be, pursuing and which guides on going decision making.
 - Programme: a coherent, organised agenda or schedule of commitments, proposals, instruments and/or activities that elaborates and implements policy.
 - Plan: a purposeful, forward-looking strategy or design, often with coordinated priorities, options and measures, that elaborates and implements policy.
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Source: Sadler & Verheem (1996, p. 28).

review of Greek planning documents and the views of actors involved in a future SEA process, initiated by the potential implementation of the proposed Directive. The final section concludes with a summary of recommendations based on the transference of experience between England and Greece.

Strategic Environmental Assessment: A Brief Discussion

SEA: A Definition

SEA is a new and rapidly developing concept and, as such, it is not surprising that considerable confusion exists regarding its definition and implementation. Participants at a recent conference on impact assessment seemed to agree that there is disagreement in relation to what SEA actually means:

The impediments to the implementation of SEA which were discussed on that occasion, did not seem related to practical reasons alone, but also to nitty-gritty fighting over definitions and terminology and the growing competition over which is the 'best approach' to SEA. (International Association Impact Assessment, 1998)

There is relative consensus, however, that SEA constitutes a systematic and preventive environmental management process that: aims at an early assessment of environmental issues at a programme, planning and policy (PPP) level of decision making (Table 1); looks at a range of possible alternatives; and ensures the integration of issues in the total environment including biophysical, economic, social and political considerations³ (Therivel *et al.*, 1994; Partidario, 1996; Therivel & Partidario, 1996).

Scope of SEA

Another area of confusion lies in the clarification of the scope of SEA. Since it is a decision-aiding process, it should be able to apply flexibly to the decision cycle, which entails projects, programmes, plans and policies. Throughout the relevant literature, however, a more linear perception of the decision-making process is quoted (Department of the Environment (DoE), 1991; Wood, 1995;

Sadler & Verheem, 1996; Therivel & Partidario, 1996). Under that view, SEA is seen to apply to a generally 'tiered' schema which

Starts with the formulation of a policy at the upper level, is followed by a plan at the second stage and by a programme at the end. (Wood, 1995, p. 266)

The final stage of the development process comprises the construction of individual projects, which implements the aforementioned decision tiers. In reality, however, the consequence of these levels can be quite fragmented (March, 1994; Seht, 1997). For example, in Greece, a specific type of plan (i.e. plan serving private purposes) is regarded by the relevant environmental impact assessment (EIA) legislation as a project. As such, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is required for this type of plan, but not for plans at a higher and lower tier of the planning system.

SEA in an International and European Context

Worldwide, many countries have developed their SEA systems or are in the process of doing so. These SEA systems, whether mandatory or voluntary, differ in scope, methodological approaches, and comprehensiveness. The most well-developed systems and guidelines can be found in the US and the Netherlands (Wood, 1995). Both Australia and New Zealand have legal provisions for more strategic forms of environmental assessment with direct links to sustainability considerations, although these are seldom put into practice (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1995).

A study has been undertaken by the EIA Centre of the University of Manchester for the European Commission (EC) which provides a review of the status of the SEA legislation and practice in the 18 EU Member States (MSs) and in Norway (Lee & Hughes, 1995). There are limitations to the information regarding Greece, as the responses from Greek representatives were incomplete in their coverage. The study revealed that there is great variability in existing formal provisions for the environmental assessment of PPPs, both between countries and between different sectors within a country. Examples of SEA practice are found in most countries reviewed and at various planning levels, although few examples occur at the level of policies.

SEA is mostly developed in the area of land-use planning, but applications can also be found in sectoral activities such as agriculture, industry, tourism, energy and transport. Major deficiencies in the application of SEA include, *inter alia*, failure in consultation and public participation opportunities, lack of integration of SEA processes within decision-making procedures and weaknesses in documentation of the SEA exercise. As far as enforcement procedures are concerned, in most countries any SEA provisions have been incorporated into existing regulatory frameworks, rather than taking the form of separate legislation. The implementation of these initiatives has been mostly through cabinet and ministerial decisions, circulars and advice notes. The countries that have made some considerable SEA provisions at a European level are Belgium, Finland, Den-

mark, Germany, the UK, France, Sweden and The Netherlands. In the Central and Eastern European countries, interest in SEA is emerging slowly.

The Proposed Directive on SEA: A Brief Presentation

According to the wording of the 5th Environmental Action Programme (Commission of the European Community (CEC), 1992), the current adopted draft for a proposed Council Directive 'on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment' (COM (96) 511 final—96/0304(SYN)), aims at promoting sustainable development at an EU level by extending the requirement for an SEA framework from the project to the plan/programme level. This 'tiering' of SEA procedures intends to integrate the environment into MSs' decision-making processes and thus provide for a high degree of environmental protection. Therefore the overriding objective of this proposal is to:

... provide for a high level of protection of the environment by ensuring that an environmental assessment is carried out and the results are taken into account during the preparation and the adoption of such environmentally significant plans and programmes. This will complement the environmental assessment of projects under the EIA Directive, which takes place at a later stage in the decision making process. (CEC, 1997, p. 1)

The plans or programmes that fall under its provisions are those which form part of the land-use decision-making process and have the purpose of setting the context for subsequent development consent decisions, including strategic plans and programmes adopted in the energy, waste, water, industry, telecommunication, tourism and transport sectors. Thus, the plan or programme has to demonstrate the following characteristics:

- it must be of a land-use nature;
- it must be subject to preparation and adoption by a designated competent authority, or preparation by an authority for adoption by legislation;
- it must be part of the land-use decision-making process for the purpose of setting a framework for subsequent development consent decisions;
- it must contain provisions on the nature, size, location or operational conditions of projects (CEC, 1997).

The proposed Directive aims to enhance decision making in MSs. This is intended by the establishment of a minimum set of methodological and communication procedures (Table 2 and Figure 1). A degree of discretion is given to MSs for the transportation of these requirements to their land-use planning system. The methodological requirements relate to the information required to be included in the 'environmental statement' (a document that publishes the results of the SEA exercise), and are specified in the relevant annex of the proposed Directive (Table 2). The procedural requirements (Figure 1) entail public involvement and the consultation of the environmental authorities/bodies concerned (designated by MSs) so that a degree of transparency is introduced into the whole SEA process. The public and the competent authorities are consulted

TABLE 2. Minimum methodological requirements specified in the proposed SEA directive

The following matters should be included in an environmental statement:

- contents of the plan and programme (PP) and its main objectives;
 - environmental characteristics of the area likely to be affected by the PP;
 - any existing environmental problems relevant to the PP;
 - the environmental protection objectives, established at international, EU, MS level and in other PPs in the same hierarchy as well as the way these objectives have been taken into account during its preparation;
 - the likely significant environmental effects of implementing the PP;
 - any alternative ways of achieving the PP and the reasons for not adopting these alternatives;
 - the measures envisaged to prevent, reduce and where possible offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the PP;
 - any difficulties encountered in compiling the required information.
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Source: Official Journal of the European Communities, No. C 129, 14–18, 25.04.1997.

after the production of the environmental statement and before the plan is adopted (CEC, 1997, article 6). In addition, the competent authorities are consulted at the ‘scoping’ stage, i.e. when deciding which environmental impacts need to be detailed in the environmental statement. After the plan’s adoption, the competent authority should inform (through the publication of a statement) both the public and environmental authorities of the way that the environmental statement and any opinions expressed were taken into account in taking the decision (CEC, 1997, article 9).

As is the case with the project-EIA Directive, the proposed SEA Directive leaves the final decision to the competent authorities’ discretion, leaving doubts about whether it actually achieves one of its objectives, i.e. the integration of environmental concerns into the decision-making process (Committee of the Regions (COR), 1997). In the case of plans and programmes likely to have significant effects in any other MS, consultation with the affected MS should be required.

Methodology

Previously published information directly or indirectly related to the compliance of the proposed Directive’s requirements is non-existent in Greece and partially (but not extensively) covered in research projects in England (Rooney, 1992; Merret, 1994; Curran, 1995; Marsh, 1997). This paper, therefore, aims at filling this research gap by investigating whether the proposed Directive’s objectives are met in current English and Greek town and country planning practice. According to the preamble of the proposed Directive’s text, these objectives are as stated in the following paragraphs.

(1) *The enforcement of the applicability of several minimum procedural requirements for environmental assessment of plans and programmes* in MSs (CEC, 1997). These requirements are represented in Table 2, Figure 2 and Table

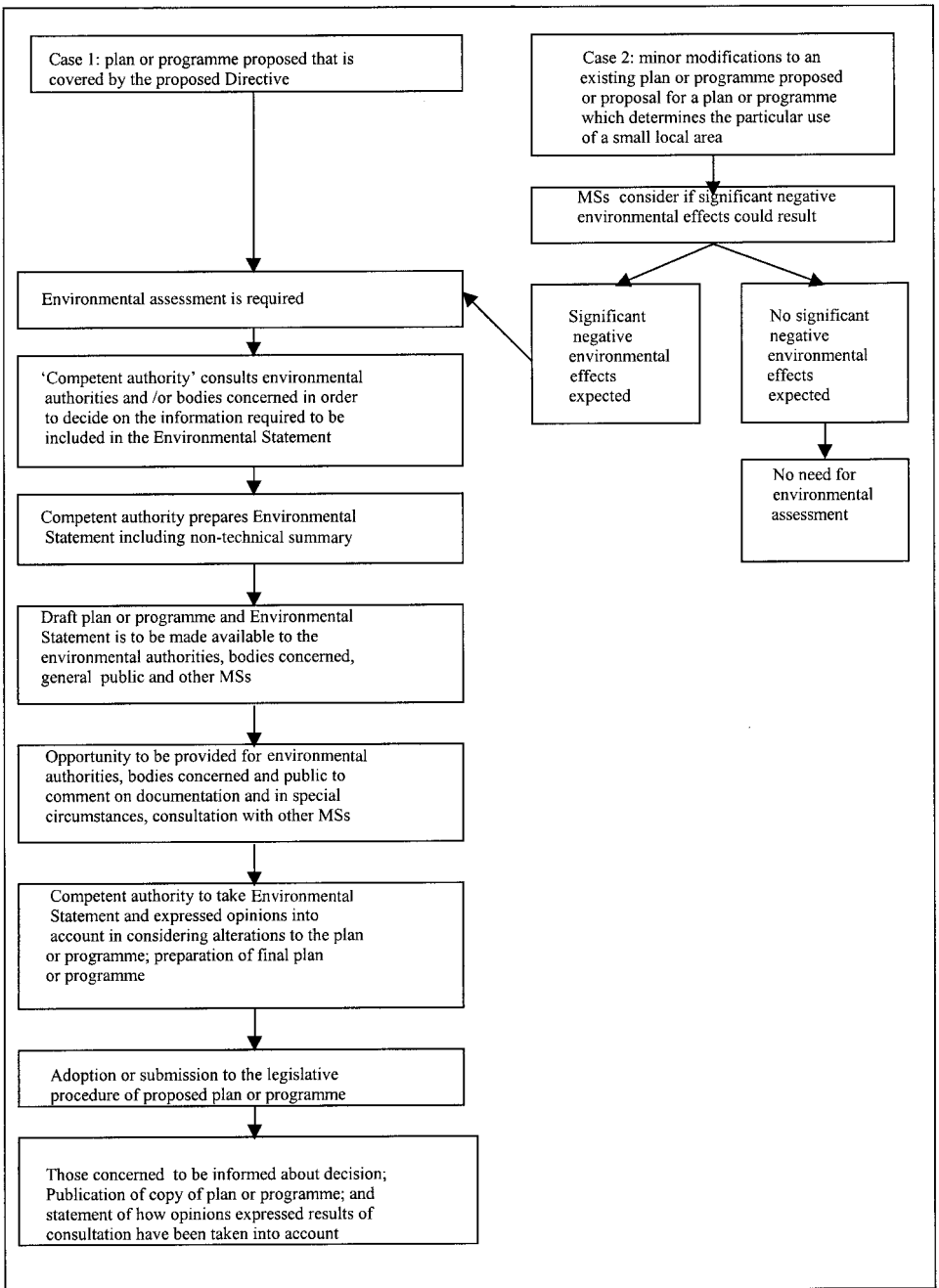


FIGURE 1. Environmental assessment procedures specified in the proposed SEA Directive. *Source:* adopted from Seht (1997).

4, by the SEA criteria numbered from 1 to 12. These elements of SEA found in current land-use and regional planning practice will be compared within and between the two European regions, as well as between other SEA and sustainability elements found throughout the review of the literature (SEA criteria 7–21 in Table 3). The collection of data was carried out through: (a) questionnaires that were sent out to all local authorities in England, and (b) document analysis of several mandatory planning specifications in Greece, at all tiers of planning, that are likely to be included in the proposed Directive's scope. The response rate of the survey in England was 46%. Data were collected for all the questions included in the questionnaire for a total of 391 local planning authorities.⁴ The questionnaires were returned by mid July 1998. The respondents had to choose between 'yes', 'no' or 'not sure'. Each of the questions receives a score: 'yes' equals (1), 'no' equals (0) and 'not sure' equals (0.5). Scores were added up and related to the total amount of completed questionnaires.

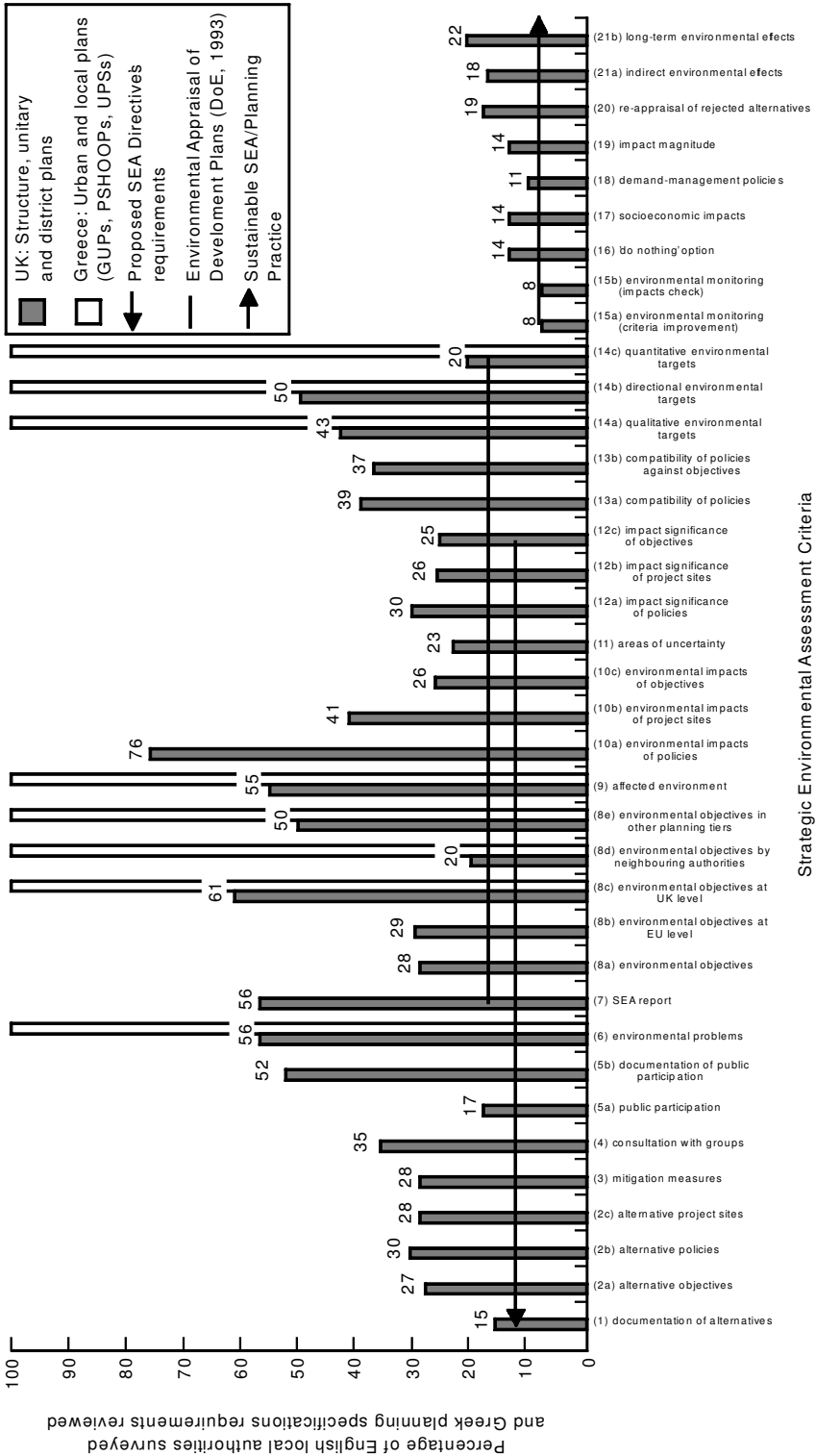
However, before the findings presented in Figure 2 are analysed, it has to be noted that while the research was conducted for the total research population in the two regions (i.e. all land-use plans in force or currently prepared), the response rate in England was 46% of the research population, whereas in the Greek case it is assumed to be 100%. The reason for this is the selection of different research methods. In England a structured questionnaire that was sent to local planning authorities was used. In Greece, a review of planning specifications for each plan category (published by the Greek Ministry of the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works (MEPPPW)) was deemed the most realistic research option for the duration and nature of the research.⁵

Therefore, two assumptions should be taken into account in the Greek case, before claiming the comparability of the research results in the two regions (Figure 2). First, that MEPPPW's planning officials are systematic when reviewing the plan's contexts based on the planning specifications. Second, that Greek planners did not generally exceed the planning specifications' requirements during plan making. The validity of the second assumption was tested by reviewing the degree of consistency of Greek land-use plans in relation to the planning specifications,⁶ i.e. whether the plans would include more (or less) environmental assessment elements other those that included in the government's specifications.

(2) *The provision of a framework by the proposed Directive, for consent decisions established at a project level.* This objective implies the creation of a 'tiered' schema of environmental legislation where an environmental assessment at a project level would be followed by a similar procedure at a plan and programme level and ultimately at government policy level.

(3) *The facilitation of an effective integration of the environment into decision making,* and (4) *the promotion of sustainable development.*

The fulfilment of the above four objectives of the proposed Directive was tested through the elaboration of 67 in-depth, open interviews with Greek and English participants who are likely to be involved throughout its future potential implementation. The participants' profile included: freelance and local authority planners; environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), project-EIA⁷ and SEA experts; government organisations



Strategic Environmental Assessment Criteria

FIGURE 2. Comparison of the Greek and British experiences in SEA of land-use development plans.

and planning associations; lawyers; statutory consultees (in England only); and MEPPPW officials and lawyers (in Greece only).

Fulfilment of the Proposed Directive's Minimum Requirements

Land-use Planning

Figure 2 compares the elements of SEA practice found in land-use plans in England and Greece. It shows that, in a strict sense, around 15% of all local authorities that responded to the questionnaire would satisfy all of the proposed Directive's minimum procedural requirements, if this was already enacted (see columns 1 to 12 in Figure 2). It can therefore be asserted that at least 27 out of 160 authorities in England fully comply with the proposed Directive's 'letter'. A closer look however, reveals that basic SEA elements are well incorporated in more than half of the land-use plans concerned. In particular, around 76% of previous plans, and also plans currently being prepared, include a prediction of the environmental impacts of their suggested policies (SEA criterion No 10a in Figure 2); in 55% of them the affected environment was described (SEA criterion 9); and 56% of planning authorities had published an SEA report (SEA criterion 7).

Columns 7 to 14 in Figure 2 represent the existence of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' (DETR) advice requirements (DoE, 1993) throughout plan making, whereas columns 1 to 12 represent the proposed Directive's requirements. Conclusions can be drawn from the degree to which the existence of government advice on the 'Environmental Appraisal of Development Plans' (EADP) in England (DoE, 1993) will influence the application of the proposed Directive's minimum procedural requirements. Five SEA elements strongly recommended in the EADP advice (i.e. columns 7, 8c, 8e, 9, 10a) have been followed by at least half of the respondent authorities (Figure 2). The remaining six (columns 8a, 8b, 10b, 11, 12a, 12b) that are indirectly referenced in the government advice have a much lower response rate (fluctuating between 23 and 41%), which is similar to the response rate of local authorities to the proposed Directive's requirements that are not covered by the DETR's advice (i.e. columns 1 to 6). These observations provide a clear indication of the strong influence of the guide on the future implementation of the proposed Directive, since lower scores occur in the absence of relevant guidelines, as well as when the reference to specific requirements is indirect. It is suggested, therefore, that future government advice should concentrate both on the incorporation of new SEA elements, and on the recommendation of the implementation of existing ones that will potentially be included in the proposed Directive.

There are a number of issues raised regarding the relationship between the proposed Directive's requirements and the EADP guide. First, only a proportion of planning authorities comply with all the requirements specified in the EADP's advice. Second, even if all authorities would comply, the provisions are not adequate to cover the proposed Directive's requirements. Therefore, further regulations or government advice would be required, if England was to be fully compliant with the potential enactment. Third, the application of SEA criteria

that are not included in the DETR advice (i.e. columns 1 to 6 in Figure 2 and Table 3) might prove to be controversial. For example, planners in England expressed worries about the protraction of the planning process—both financially and timewise—in relation to the consideration of alternative objectives, plans' policies and project locations (27, 30 and 28% in columns 2a, 2b and 2c respectively). In addition, while 52% of the authorities that responded document in some way the results of public participation as part of the statutory planning process, only 17% of them consulted the public as part of the SEA process.⁸ The application of public consultation procedures throughout the SEA process, from a regional down to land-use/development planning and ultimately to the already existing project level of environmental assessment, would require substantial resources from the British government. According to the opinion expressed by the English statutory consultees, the implications in terms of bureaucracy would be quite substantial. However there are areas where higher scores occur, such as the appraisal of impacts of revised plans' policies, which is a possible indicator of the existence of mitigation measures (28% in column 3 of Figure 2). Furthermore, around 56% described the existing environmental problems relevant to a plan, a fact that can be attributed to the common comprehensive planning practice rooted in both the English and Greek regions (see column 6 in Figure 2).

In terms of the SEA criteria that incorporate sustainability considerations (i.e. columns 15 to 21), it is shown in Figure 2 that the majority of them range between 10 and 20%. This is a quite low score, compared to both the proposed Directive and the EADP advice's results. The monitoring requirements have the lowest scores (i.e. 8%, SEA criteria 15a and 15b in Figure 2) of all SEA elements. This indicates that, in both countries, the actual monitoring of a plan's environmental impacts and the auditing of the accuracy of the predicted environmental impacts is not adequately taken into account.

In *Greece*, none of the land-use plans complied with the planning specifications, fulfilling all of the proposed Directive's requirements. The existence of four SEA elements out of 21 shows the different environmental assessment tradition in Greece which is based on land-use regulations rather than any specific SEA exercises. The SEA elements found relate closely to common land-use planning practice, such as: the description of environmental problems relevant to the plan and the components of the environment likely to be affected (SEA criteria 6 and 9 respectively); the consideration of environmental protection objectives throughout various planning levels (SEA criterion 8); and the setting of various qualitative, directional and quantitative environmental targets (SEA criterion 14).

Greece, however, has a different distribution pattern than is the case in England. Due to its mandatory character, Greek regulations regarding land-use planning and the environment are more influenced by bureaucracy. The research revealed a lack of uniformity concerning the different specifications for different types of plans. This fragmentation of normative regulations regarding Town and Country planning will make the transportation of relevant EU environmental legislation in Greece rather difficult. It has to be noted that the proposed Directive will apply in Greece through the amendment of planning regulations

and the issue of relevant legislative acts (i.e. amendment of the constitutional law 1650/90 on 'environmental protection'). It would therefore be less bureaucratic and more financially efficient if current planning specifications were amended to incorporate SEA considerations. Better integration of SEA considerations (and therefore smoother implementation of the proposed Directive) would be facilitated by the simplification of planning specifications to include a common planning framework for all categories of land-use (and possibly regional) plans, and further, more detailed specifications for the distinct needs of each plan category. This would create a less bureaucratic planning system and an easier transportation of the proposed Directive's requirements, and as such should receive full attention by the government.

Regional Planning

A SEA methodology applied in England at selected regional policies from Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) 9 (SERPLAN, 1996a, 1996b), was compared with the Greek planning specifications of Regional Spatial Plans (RSPs) and Special Spatial Studies (SSSs). Table 4 reveals that more than half of the proposed Directive's requirements were found in regional planning SEA practice in the two countries. It has been identified that as far as the proposed Directive's requirements are concerned, the *Greek* regulations focus on the consideration of alternatives⁹ in various planning stages (SEA elements 1, 2a, 2b, 2c and 16 in Table 4) and the description of environmental problems (SEA element 6 in Table 4). *England* focuses on an array of SEA elements such as mitigation measures (SEA element 3); consultation with the public and interested groups (SEA elements 4 and 5a); proper documentation (SEA element 7); and estimation of impact significance (SEA element 12). England also differs from Greece in that it incorporates components of 'good' SEA practice, such as; the estimation of impact magnitude (SEA element 19); the functionality of a plan's inner structure (13); and the consideration of demand management policies and indirect environmental effects (18 and 21a).

Common SEA elements in the two regions are those closely related to requirements inherent in current regional planning practice, such as: the setting of the aim of promoting sustainable development; the establishment of environmental objectives that reflect the connectivity of the plan with other initiatives (SEA element 8 in Table 4); the assessment of environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the plan (10a and 17); the setting of various environmental targets (14) and environmental monitoring (15).

If the regional part of the research is compared with the equivalent land-use plan part, it can be asserted that in both regions the proposed Directive will have less difficulties being implemented at a regional level, than at the land-use planning level. However, there are two issues worth mentioning, if the above statement is to be generalised. First, while the Greek part of the research refers to all current regional plans (which have a legal obligation to comply with the planning specifications), the English part refers only to one case (SERPLAN, 1996a, 1996b). It can therefore be asserted that the same principle applies in both regional and land-use planning tiers; England has had a more fruitful experience

TABLE 4. Comparison of Greek and English experience on SEA for regional and subregional plans

Proposed SEA Directive's requirements	English regional planning and SEA (SERPLAN, 1996)	Greek regional plans (RSPs and SSSS)	Requirements for 'good' SEA and planning practice	English regional planning and SEA (SERPLAN, 1996)	Greek regional plans (RSPs and SSSS)
A Sustainable development			13a Compatibility of policies		
1 Justification of alternatives			13b Compatibility of policies vs objectives		
2 Consideration of alternative 2a objectives			14 Setting of environmental targets 14a qualitative		
2b policies			14b directional		
2c project allocation			14c quantitative		
3 Mitigation measures			15 Environmental monitoring		
4 Consultation with interested groups			16 'Do nothing' option		
5a Public consultation as part of the SEA			17 Assessment of socioeconomic impacts		
5b Documentation of public consultation			18 Consideration of demand-management policies		
6 Existing environmental problems			19 Impact magnitude		
7 Publication of SEA report			20 Reappraisal of rejected alternatives		
8 Environmental objectives established at 8a international level			21a Indirect environmental effects		
8b EU level			21b Long-term environmental effects		
8c national level			21c Cumulative environmental effects		
8d by neighbouring authorities					
8e at another planning tier					
9 Likely affected environmental components					
10 Assessment of environmental effects of plan's 10a policies					
10b project allocation					
10c objectives					
11 Documentation of areas of uncertainty					
12 Impact significance					

with SEA, incorporating more SEA elements (both of the proposed Directive's and other sustainability criteria) than is the case in Greece. In Greece, however, the relevant applicability is (or is legislated to be) uniform, whereas in England, a less normative and more flexible approach is exercised, i.e. through government guidelines and pilot studies.

The Proposed Directive as a Framework for Project-EIA

Relevant actors with an interest in SEA were asked in both regions whether the potential enactment of the proposed Directive would facilitate a better 'tiering' of environmental assessments, from a plan, through to programme and project level. However, in order to answer this question, an examination of the types of plans that would come under the remit of the proposed Directive, if this was currently enacted, would be required.

In Greece, it is the government's view that it is the regional plans that are in a better position, in terms of SEA, to be included in a future enactment of the proposed Directive. The influence exercised by the EU through the elaboration of 'environmental profiles' of projects selected under Structural Funds regulations, might be reflected by the relatively good image of SEA requirements found at regional planning level in Greece (Table 4). If this is compared with the relevant exercise at a land-use planning level it can be asserted that a possible 'implementation gap' might exist if the proposed Directive's requirements finally apply only for regional plans. The little experience in SEA at that town planning level (Figure 2) would then render a rather troublesome 'tiering' of environmental assessments throughout the development planning and control process. This fear was also expressed during the interviews with the Greek SEA actors. The majority of environmental NGOs (i.e. 10 out of 11); freelance planners (8 out of 11) and EIA/SEA experts (3 out of 3) sustained that the government should include both planning tiers in a possible future enactment of the proposed Directive. Furthermore, the most radical view of all was sustained by the Council of State (CoS), which noted that, according to Parliament laws, it is the government's responsibility to take into consideration the environmental impacts at all planning tiers, regardless of the existence of any EU environmental regulations.

Another rather normative issue dominating the debate in *Greece* relates to the connectivity of 'plan' with 'project' environmental assessment. Some freelance (i.e. 5 out of 11) and local authority planners (8 out of 10), environmental NGOs (8 out of 11), academics (3 out of 4), and EIA/SEA experts (2 out of 3) suggested that in the event of the proposed Directive's enactment, Greek planning regulations should require the inclusion of a list of projects that should or should not be constructed in the area of certain categories of zones specified in land-use plans. This list, along with the SEA report, should be taken into account in decision making when a future project development is proposed. The application, however, of similar regulations in *England* was perceived by English interviewees to add bureaucratic burdens to the English—as distinct from the Greek—decision-making system, which is characterised by its flexibility with regard to planning regulations. Some planners and statutory

environmental consultees felt that the implementation of the proposed Directive at all planning tiers might be costly and time consuming. These concerns are mostly related to the initiation of public participation and consultation procedures, from a regional down to a project-EIA level, thus rendering the 'tiering' of SEA a rather cumbersome exercise. This is perceived to be another reason for the current hostility of the British government towards the proposed Directive.

Finally, the overwhelming majority of interviewees in both regions (i.e. 68 out of 70) stated that in no way should the implementation of a strategic level of environmental assessment substitute the project-EIA level. The assessment of the environmental impacts at a detailed project level was considered to be equally significant to the contribution to sustainability, compared to plan SEA.

The Integration of the Environment in Decision Making

Through the enactment of the proposed Directive, the EU Commission intends to steer MSs to a wider consideration of environmental issues. In both regions, arguments were expressed about the ability of the current proposed Directive's draft to do so, as well as the efficiency of SEA, compared with other environmental management tools. These issues, inherent in planning practice in both regions, form the core of potential problems that the proposed Directive might face.

In *Greece*, the majority of interviewees (36 out of 55) noted that the key to substantial implementation of the proposed Directive is the statutory monitoring of the environmental impacts specified in the SEA report and the utilisation of the results in future planning practice. All environmental NGOs and planning associations interviewed expressed the fear that the proposed Directive might face the same 'implementation difficulties' inherent in current planning and project-EIA practice, that is, inadequate checking of the implementation of plans' proposals, and 'environmental conditions' specified in Environmental Statements for projects. As such, it will only be—they claim—the 'letter' of the proposed Directive that will be implemented rather than its 'spirit'. The above arguments can be seen in a wider political, institutional, legislative and financial canvas, that incorporates both planning and environmental concerns. Freelance planners (9 out of 11), planning associations (3 out of 3) and academics (4 out of 4), asserted that the application of mitigation measures specified in the potential Environmental Statements might be jeopardised due to political pressures exerted by 'vested interests' throughout decision taking. An indicative example is where members of the public frequently lobby locally elected politicians for tolerance and/or continuation of illegal housing; and working professionals involved in the construction and managing of development further lobby central government.

In *Greece*, the *institutional* capacity related to land-use planning and the project-EIA process is severely weakened. A number of freelance planners (8 out of 11), EIA/SEA experts and environmental NGOs assert that since the proposed Directive will—if enacted—apply to the statutory planning system, it will also inherit the same institutional deficiencies associated with planning. As far as

planning is concerned, the major issues affecting the Proposal's implementation relate to the weakness of the administrative machinery to direct policies with spatial implications, from central to local level of government (Technical Chamber of Greece, 1997), as well as to effectively implement provisions specified in planning and environmental legislation. At a project-EIA level, even the Minister of the Environment notes the failure of government departments to coordinate the safeguarding of the quality of environmental statements (NEA, 1997).

On a legislative front, the Greek Council of State has recently played an active role in the integration of environmental considerations throughout planning, by defining sustainable development and issuing court decisions on how the concept can be implemented (Dekleris, 1996). Appeals to the CoS made by individuals regarding the implementation of the project-EIA Directive have in the past resulted in the abrogation of certain government decisions and consequent ambiguity in the interpretation of what is legal and what is not. According to lawyers, academics and EIA/SEA experts, this situation is magnified by the existence of numerous legislative acts with spatial implications, which have overlapping scope and purpose. Therefore, they argue, codification of the relevant planning and environmental legislation is urgently needed. Finally, all local government planners interviewed in Greece (i.e. 10), sustained a commonly expressed view throughout the interviews, which relates to the insufficient resources allocated to local authorities as regards planning and environmental management responsibilities. Local Agenda 21 provides an appropriate context within which the disparity of local authorities in the examined regions, as far as financial efficiency is concerned, is evident: only two (i.e. the municipalities of Halandri and Marousi) out of 143 planning authorities in Greece are involved in Local Agenda 21 exercises, whereas in Britain about two-thirds of all councils were in the process or had already established similar initiatives in 1997.¹⁰

In England, statutory consultees felt that the application of a minimum SEA process—that will be applied through the potential enactment of the proposed Directive—is only one of the planner's tools currently used to incorporate environmental concerns throughout plan making. In the case of countryside protection, for example, other approaches include the designation of green belts and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), studies on 'natural capital', landscape assessments etc. In addition, several interviewees felt that requirements similar to the Proposal's already exist in every decision-making level, i.e. policy appraisal (based on cost-benefit analysis) at a government level; a sustainability methodology at a regional government level (SERPLAN 1996a, 1996b); EADPs and project-EIAs. What is therefore needed for effective environmental protection to take place, is to start by 'fitting all the bits of the jigsaw together' rather than adding bureaucratic procedures to the already cumbersome plan-making process. As a representative of a statutory environmental consultee noted:

There are components of SEA already in this country. So, the question is if there was an SEA Directive, how many more implications will

that have for us? If that comes 5, or 10 years down the road we might already have developed the techniques and approaches anyway.

Furthermore, there is the perception amongst planners and planning associations that ‘most of the local authorities are probably doing most of the things that the proposed Directive requires’, and as such the proposed Directive’s enactment will only increase the cost of planning. As a local authority planning officer noted:

... it [EADPs] is designed to be a fairly short exercise although it has cost implications in terms of time spending ... so planners will not be concerned with doing something in addition to that.

Finally, a significant methodological problem stemming from the proposed Directive’s enactment is expected to be the assessment and justification of alternatives. This is considered to be time consuming and to add to the financial burden of the planning process. Similar arguments were quoted by professional organisations and statutory consultees (4 out of 7), local-authority planners (2 out of 3) and EIA/SEA experts (2 out of 2) for the application of public participation requirements from a regional down to land-use planning level. These implementation difficulties were considered to be one of the reasons that the existing government advice on EADP (DoE, 1993) seems to be preferred to the proposed Directive’s requirements. As one planner noted:

... Plan-making is a relatively bureaucratic process already and putting additional bureaucratic necessities brings planning to a standstill ... I think we have to be cautious about it [the SEA Directive], it might bring benefits but I think that the costs of that [i.e. the time extension of the planning process] will outweigh the [environmental] benefits quite substantially.

In *both regions*, the proposed Directive’s enactment in its current form (CEC, 1997) was considered—especially by environmental NGOs and EIA/SEA experts—to improve environmental protection in everyday planning practice. Furthermore, the view was expressed—especially in England—that the proposed Directive, or any other SEA exercise, should incorporate elements of social and economic assessment, rather than merely substitute the environmental component of the existing comprehensive planning practice. In this way, a more substantial implementation might occur, that offers more opportunities for the promotion of a sustainable planning practice.

The Promotion of Sustainable Development

The interviewees’ perception of the above concept had two contrasting facets. Some (i.e. 30 out of 55) *Greek* interviewees (mostly freelance planners (5 out of 11), staff in the Ministry of the Environment (3 out of 19), and planners in local authorities (9 out of 10)) seemed to regard the term as ‘the flavour of the moment’ in planning, denoting that implementation into ‘real planning life’ would require more of a change in planning ethos rather than the enforcement

of a set of minimum procedural requirements to be followed in any land-use plan. Furthermore, for the majority of environmental NGOs (i.e. 9 out of 11), the current use of the 'sustainability' concept as an objective of land-use plans might be proven somewhat misleading, if it is used—as is currently, they argue, the case—in an 'unsustainable' planning context. Others (such as the CoS, government officials, professional organisations, EIA/SEA experts and environmental groups) expressed their desire to see more influence being exercised in future planning practice by sustainability principles, while recognising the associated difficulties related to the implementation of the concept. For example, sustainability requires planners to consider the long-term effects of a plans' policies. However, these cannot be predicted without a degree of uncertainty, let alone presented in a quantitative manner.

In addition, freelance planners (9 out of 11) and planning associations (3 out of 3) maintained that political pressures exercised from local residents, and political leaders who support the interests of certain professions, in reality restrict the consideration of environmental effects for the opportunistic benefits of short-term development. Finally, the majority of land-use plans in *Greece*, are prepared by private consultants rather than planners working in local authorities. For the majority of local authority planning officers, the inherent weaknesses of local authorities to organise and finance planning procedures (as is the case in *England*), were seen as an obstacle in the promotion of sustainability at a local level. The resource deficiencies of local councils, in tandem with the traditional centralisation of local planning powers by the state, render 'acting locally, thinking globally' a hardly achievable, long-term target for *Greece*.

In *England*, the majority of interviewees noted that the government's commitment to sustainable development requires that relevant issues at all tiers of decision making should have an holistic approach, owing to their common socioeconomic and environmental dimension. Furthermore, statutory consultees suggested that the various impacts should be interrelated, if an informed decision is to be made. It can be concluded, however, that since both requirements are external to the scope of the proposed Directive, it therefore fails to contribute substantially towards sustainable development. In this context, the intense focus of government on sustainability appraisal, both at a development planning¹¹ and at a regional planning level (SERPLAN, 1996a, 1996b), seems to give the following message to the Commission: 'whatever you do, I can do better'. As a representative of an environmental consultee noted:

Similar provisions with the Proposal, are already in place since 1993; what we really need is to promote sustainability through SEA in a rather different way.

Throughout the interviews in *England*, there was a general perception that the forthcoming requirements for a sustainability appraisal will be more rigorous than the proposed Directive's. It remains to be seen whether the forthcoming guidance on sustainability appraisal will incorporate elements of the proposed SEA Directive, and whether it will encourage a 'holistic' and 'interrelated' approach to sustainability, as outlined above.

Conclusions

Given the existence of various SEA elements embedded in current English and Greek land-use practice on the one hand, and the lack of uniformity in their application on the other, the cautious approach of the two governments towards the proposed Directive is not surprising.

There is, however, a different rationale for this rather negative approach of the two regions to the proposed Directive. In *England*, the initial reluctance that accompanied the publication of the government advice on EADP (DoE, 1993) seems to be repeated as regards the potential application of the proposed Directive. There was a general enthusiasm amongst the interviewees concerning the development of a less bureaucratic and more cost-efficient SEA process with a sustainability focus. In that respect, suggestions were made concerning the extension of the SEA practice at a regional level (which is slowly emerging) to the development planning level. The integration of environmental with socio-economic assessment at a strategic level, the enforcement of environmental monitoring of plan's policies, and the setting of quantitative targets to guide plan making, were seen as issues that future government advice should prioritise.

In *Greece*, an array of methodological, institutional political and legislative problems rooted in environmental planning practice render a highly (compared with the situation in England) problematic implementation of the proposed Directive. The dominance of SEA elements at a regional rather than land-use planning level (where the allocation of EU Structural Funds takes place), the underdeveloped status of local authorities, the focus of environmental NGOs on the better enforcement of the present project-EIA Directive, and the pressure by the business community to relax restriction on development (especially in view of the undertaking of the Olympic games in 2004 by Greece), all point to a limited fulfilment of the proposed Directive's objectives.

Finally, in view of relevant experience on the already implemented EIA Directive for projects in both countries, relevant arguments regarding lack of adequate resources and SEA techniques seem to be overstated. Overall, the successful implementation of the proposed Directive in a way that promotes sustainable development, will depend much on the harmonious cooperation of actors directly or indirectly involved in the management of the potential SEA process, rather than on any technical or material considerations.

Notes

1. COM (96) 511 final—96/0304 (SYN).
2. In October 1998, the European Parliament finalised the first reading of the proposed SEA Directive. The Commission published an amended draft of this Proposal [COM (99) 73] in February 1999, and the negotiations at the Council level started in spring 1999. For a full text of the latest version of the proposed Directive, visit the following Internet site: <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/dg11/eia/sea-legalcontext.htm>
3. For further perceptions on SEA see Lee & Walsh (1992); United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (1992); Sadler & Verheem (1996); Feldmann (1998); Humblin (1997); Wilson (1993).
4. After the second reorganisation of local government that took place in April 1998.
5. A uniform approach to research methods was deemed impossible due to the following reasons. First, the response of Greek local authorities to the pilot questionnaire was minimal (i.e. only 3 out of 143 local

- authorities contacted returned a questionnaire). Second, local authorities in Greece have limited power as regards the preparation of land-use plans. Therefore, not all the research material needed could be extracted from the elaboration of a questionnaire survey. Third, planning documents kept at the Directorate of Urban Planning in the MEPPPW were not available to the public and, as such, document analysis was not possible. The latter reason also clearly demonstrates the research difficulties in countries like Greece with no relevant experience on SEA.
6. Around 10% of the total population of land-use plans was reviewed (i.e. 15 out of 143 plans in Greater Athens area). It was found that more than 96% of all plans strictly followed the planning specifications.
 7. Environmental Impact Assessment process as it is exercised through the implementation of the EIA Directive (CEC, 85/337).
 8. It has to be noted that the results of another research project were used in column 5b (i.e. 17%) in order that duplication of research efforts be avoided. This research included structure, local and unitary planning authorities in England and Wales. It was carried out by Riki Therivel (Therivel, 1998) in association with Simon Marsh (Marsh, 1997) and Jeremy Raemaekers (Heriot-Watt University). In England, 457 authorities contacted and a 53% response rate was elicited.
 9. It has to be noted that according to the proposed Directive's text, the description of alternatives is mandatory only if these have been considered during a plan's preparation. In this case, the reasons for not adopting these alternatives should be documented (CEC, 1997, Annex, para. (f)).
 10. This is not surprising considering that there is political commitment at a government level on relevant issues:

I want all local authorities in the UK to adopt Local Agenda 21 strategies by the year 2000. (Tony Blair, New York, UN Assembly Special Session on the Environment, 23 June 1997; quoted in DETR *et al.*, 1997, p. 1)
 11. This is intended through the forthcoming guidance entitled *Planning for Sustainable Development—Towards Better Practice*, which is expected to amend existing advice on the Environmental Appraisal of Development Plans.

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