

Environmental Management and Planning System in Thailand: The Theory and Practice of Using Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in Decision Making Process

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Introduction

That environmental management should be an integral part of economic development has now world-wide recognition. The problem is how to apply this principle effectively in practice. The incorporation of environmental concerns into the planning process is a relatively new procedure for developing countries. An important step which has been taken is that most developing countries now have ministries and agencies which are responsible for environmental protection (Biswas, 1992). In addition, various methodologies and tools have been introduced and aimed at integrating a full consideration of environmental impacts into development activities. Whilst the tools may be similar or common, the practice is made more difficult by the different contexts of each country. Developing countries such as Thailand had themselves undergoing major and significant changes in their socio-economic systems which are different from the Western industrialised countries. Many developing countries are rapidly modernising by acquiring advanced technology. They therefore have jumped some stages of development, and this often presents a strange combination of old and new technologies operating side by side. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is an instrument widely used internationally and has become a standard tool in decision-making process associated with large scale development projects. The EIA process is often based on procedures transferred from the Western industrialised countries to the developing countries. The question is how appropriate and effective are such procedures in helping to deliver the new objective of sustainable development.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore the actual practice of EIA, as a tool for environmental management as part of the planning processes of Thailand. Much research attention has focus on the quality of the resultant, Environmental Statement (EIS), rather than EIA as a process. In theory, EIA can be perceived as a rational tool to take into account the environmental consequences of development projects (Lichfield, 1992). EIA should affect planning decisions and act as the decision-maker's assistant. In an attempt to manage the environment and control rapid urban growth, Thailand introduced an EIA procedure in 1977. It was designed and intended to minimise the adverse environmental effects of new large development projects. This research examines what influence EIA in Thailand has had on decision-making in the granting of permission for large projects. This study assesses the trends of EIA practice in Thailand and evaluates its impact upon the planning process in Thailand. The results of this work seek to develop recommendations designed to improve in practical terms the EIA process in Thailand.

Research Study

There are many attempts to define EIA in ways which express the full extent of its role and purpose in environmental management. This research framework is based on the most comprehensive definition of EIA which was prepared by the United Nation in 1991:

«..., EIA is considered a necessary tool in order to give the environment its proper place in the decision-making process by improving the quality of information provided to decision makers, so that environmentally sensitive decisions can be made paying careful attention to minimising impacts, improving the planning of activities and protecting the environment».

My research study was launched in Autumn 1996. The major tasks are divided into two parts:

1. *Understanding the situation of EIA world-wide.* The literature review was conducted for constructive the idea of EIA and understanding the history and current situation of EIA. Attention paid to the theory and concepts, the world-wide practices and focused on their situations and obstacles of EIA from theory to practice in many developing and developed countries. Finally, the prominent practices of each stages of EIA processes in many countries were drawn together to build an ideal «best practice» EIA process which could/should be an integral part of planning process.

2. *Understanding the situation of EIA in Thailand.* Examining the overview information of the EIA process in Thailand was carried out and based on the outcome from the literature review. Evaluating the current situation of the EIA process in Thailand by selected case studies. The variation between the ideal EIA process and the actual EIA process in Thailand will be explored. Finally, the discussion and recommendation for the effectiveness EIA in planning system and the contexts of Thailand will be exemplified.

The major goals of this part of studying are 1). understanding EIA procedures in Thailand and compare them with the theoretical model, 2). evaluating the nature scale and scope of EIA in Thailand over time, and 3). using these two stages as a context and framework, identify a number of case studies to explore the actual EIA process and evaluate it's impact on decision making. The key questions for the EIA process reviewing and exploring are *How far the legislative EIA framework has varied from the ideal EIA framework? To what extent the actual EIA process varied from the legislative framework? and What influence does the EIA (process) have on the decision makers when they authorised or rejected the projects?*

Research to fulfil these objectives were undertaken by two field study visits to Thailand. The first visit was carried out in Autumn 1997. The research focused on fully understanding the process and procedures involved in EIA in Thailand and reviewing in general the current practice of EIA in Thailand. The current situation of administrative processes of EIA are examined and compared with the theoretical and ideal framework from the first part of research. The outcome of this analysis are paved the way for the second field-working in Thailand in Autumn 1998. During this time detailed case study analysis of particular projects were undertaken. Six case studies from industries and housing projects that had been subject to the EIA process were selected for analysis. The choice of the projects reflected different procedures and processes before EIA consent was finally achieved and the project selection enabled a systematic analysis of Environmental Statements (EISs), case files, and interviewing the interest groups, were analysed and used to provide insight into Thailand's practicality of EIA both technical and administrative processes.

Preliminary Research Findings

EIA is a cyclical and combining process between *Science and Art*, (Curi, 1983; Wood, 1995) and between *Technical and Administrative Processes* (Brown, 1990). The preliminary evaluation attempts to differentiate between a technical and administrative processes. The technical process refers to the way that statements are produced whilst the administrative process examines the role and value of the statements in the decision-making process. Clearly the two perspectives need to be distinguished though it is recognised and accepted that they are complementary and not mutually exclusive. These factors have significant influence on EIA implementation, both successful and failure in practices, in many countries. These processes are incorporated and difficult to identify and analyse separately. A quality technical process could produce quality EIA product, Environmental Statement (EIS), which in turn could provide quality assistance for a decision-maker. Alternatively a statement that is expertly produced and of high quality may not have any significant impact when it comes to decision making. The prime objective of EIA system is to integrate environmental consideration into the planning and decision-making process of a development project along with social and economic factors, but the question is how?

Thailand intended to use EIA to minimise the environmental impacts resulting from both the implementation and operation of development projects. EIA was introduced for new large development projects in 1977. The using of EIA as an assistant for decision-making in planning is ineffective. Development planning in Thailand, as many developing countries, environmental concerns have been a second priority, after economic growth. Environmental sustainable seem to be overshadowed by the over-riding priority of economic development. This leads to a lack of awareness amongst both decision-makers and administrators, both project proponents and permitting agencies of the potential benefits of an EIA process. This is can compounded by a lack of political will, where by projects are approved before the EIA process is completed. Therefore unless these administrative processes are improved any further focus on the technical aspects will have few impact. EIA's role as a decision-maker assistant in Thailand is some what limited.

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