

NECESSITY AND METHOD OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT: Public participation has been one of important problems in the strategic environmental assessment (SEA). In this paper, the origin and the present research-conditions of public participation in SEA were analyzed. And the necessity of public participation was illuminated from following three aspects: 1) the public participation in China's SEA is a key method of gaining the public support; 2) the public participation is one important source of gaining information; 3) the public participation is a good way to overcome the obstruction in the traditional mechanism of making strategy decision. Effective public participation should be involved in the whole process of SEA, and the public participators should include the public representatives of the groups affected by environmental change, the specialists in SEA and relevant fields, persons who are interested in the strategy and media, and so on. Various methods of public participation in SEA, including the methods of obtaining information and information feedback or consultation, were discussed. Further, the function, the advantages and the disadvantages of each method were discussed in detail, too.

KEY WORDS: strategic environmental assessment; public participation; China

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1 INTRODUCTION

For recent years, many countries have increasingly paid attention to the research on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and taken it as one of key supporting tools for pursuing sustainable development (BROWN and THERIVEL, 2000; PRARTIDARIO and CLARK, 2000; THERIVEL and PARTIDARIO, 1996; NOBLE, 2002; FISCHER, 1999). *Environmental Impact Assessment Law* was passed by Chinese government in 2002, and the SEA for plan has been written into this law as an important component. However, study on SEA has still been on start-up in China, both theories and methods of SEA have not been perfect yet (ZHANG *et al.*, 2002; CHE and SHANG, 2004). The public participation, as a key component of SEA, has not been paid enough attention to and the mode of the public participation is too simple in China now (BAO and SHANG, 2000; NOBLE, 2000; WANG *et al.*, 2003; GAO and GU, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the necessity

of public participation in strategic environmental assessment in China, to put forward various public participation methods and to compare the advantages or disadvantages of each method of SEA that can be used in practice in China. It is significant to heighten the working quality of SEA and assure the smooth performance. Therefore, it will help assessors to select an optimum method in the public participation process.

2 IMPLICATION OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The public participation is a process that all of the relevant enterprises, the experts and the citizens participate in the activity of environmental impact assessment, which is related to their environmental rights, based on definite procedure, and make the activity of strategy-decision consistent with the benefits of public repressed. The key of the public participation is "contact" and "supervision".

Only the public has a timely and accurately understanding of the contents of strategies and SEA, can they

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more vigorously express their demands on their own environmental benefits (BAO and SHANG, 2000). Public participation can integrate individual environmental benefits into the social environmental benefits, and the social environmental benefits can be better reflected in strategies by public participation.

Public supervision can make the public not only participate in strategy-making but also supervise the situations of social environmental benefits after the strategy was implemented. The strategy-making department could find probable negative environmental impact caused by the follow-up environmental impact assessment and put in some suggestions to rectify strategy, to bring about the strategic comprehensive benefits and long-term benefits to greater extent.

The relationship between the public, the strategy-maker and the assessor in SEA was shown in Fig. 1.

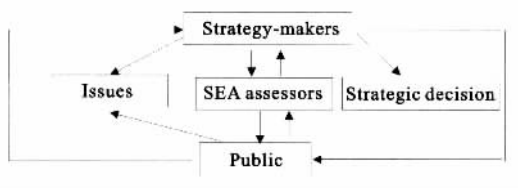


Fig. 1 Relationship among the public, assessors and strategy-makers

Hence, the public participation is not only the compulsory part of SEA but also one of bases of forecasting and assessing the final environmental impact and the countermeasures of environmental protection proposed.

3 RESEARCH AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The public participation as a key component of environmental protection came into being in the 1970s. Firstly, America has started to pay attention to listening to the opinions of persons who were affected by environment in the process of EIA when it brought EIA into line with "National Environmental Policy Act" (NEPA). United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) definitely pointed out that "The local communities or their representatives need know how the negative impacts caused by development and construction actions impact the quality of their life.", "The statesmen also need know who will be impacted and which issues will be put forward in which channel." in the basic procedure of environmental impact assessment, which was put forward in 1978.

Public participation as a policy from October 1981 and definitely pointed out that "The World Bank expects that the debtors can fully consider the opinion of the group and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) affected by environment during the design and performance of projects, especially during the EIA process" in the OD4.00 Appendix A "Working Operational Instruction" of "Environmental Assessment". In March 1993, Asian Development Bank (ADB) prescribed that "In the phase of drafting environmental impact report, the debtors should understand the willing of the group and NGOs affected by environment to make the investors, groups with different benefits, governors and the group affected by environment all achieve the best results from the development projects."

The public participation in China's EIA originated from the EIA training project sponsored by ADB in 1991. The State Planning Committee, the State Environmental Protection Administration, the Ministry of Finance and the People's Bank of China firstly formally put forward the requirement in "Circular on Intensifying EIA Management Working for Construction Projects Supported by the International Financial Organizations' Loan" in 1993 that the public participation is a key component part of EIA, and as the special chapter should be written in the environmental impact report to make the benefits of the public or community probably be considered and compensated; meanwhile, the public participation working can be performed in the phase of drafting and reviewing "EIA Outline" or "Environmental Impact Report". There were also some definite stipulations on the public participation in the present EIA Law, which are "The nation encourages relevant enterprises, experts and citizens to participate in EIA with suitable methods. The planning organization for specific project plans, which has the potential negative impact on the environment, and direct impact on the environmental rights of the general public, must hold public hearings for demonstration and opinion gathering, or adopt similar measures to solicit the opinions of relevant enterprises, experts and citizens in the environmental impact report of the plan outline". But on the whole, the public participation is very limited on the grounds of the limitation of SEA procedure. It is lack for an authoritative and available technical standard of public participation in SEA in present China and is paid little attention to the public participation. The intensity and scope of public participation is limited, and the methods of public participation are too simple. Hence, the public participation does not play the role that ought to do in SEA of China (WANG *et al.*, 2003).

4 NECESSITY OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

4.1 To Be Key Measure of Gaining Public Support

Whether or not any strategy can be smoothly performed and achieve planning goal depends on the degree approved by the public to great extent (BAO and SHANG, 2000). Only the strategy decisions reflect the belief and orientation of the public value, can the public support the strategy decision. To make the public have a comprehensive and objective understanding about the environmental impacts caused by the strategy is a key method of acquiring the understanding and supporting, and even initiative participation from the public, especially the public affected by the environment.

4.2 To Be Source of Gaining More Information

SEA concerns a broad scope and has a complicated effect, so SEA needs more information and materials than the project EIA. A successful SEA should be based on a great deal of acquired information. However, SEA is facing a large challenge of limited source of information and unavoidable indefiniteness. To collect the environmental information on strategic execution regions and affected regions through the public participation can not only offer a more comprehensive objective method to understand the environmental situations but also accurately and promptly grasp the environmental information and increase the availability and suitability of environmental prevention measure through the intimate understanding of the people affected by the environment.

4.3 To Overcome Obstruction of Traditional Strategy Decision-making Mechanism

Unlike the project EIA, the target of SEA is strategy-making organizations with the largest rights in China. In the past, the governments had little experience in the public participation and they always resisted the people to assess their strategy. It is more difficult for governments to support and develop SEA on their own initiative. Although the EIA law from September 1, 2003 requires that SEA must be implemented for all relevant plans of governments, the obstruction from the traditional strategy decision-making mechanism still is unavoidable in the process of execution. The procedural, legal and regular public participation in SEA can intensify the supervision of the public to the governments, and increase the transparency of the governments' strategy-decision. Public participation is of great realistic significance to overcome the traditional strategy decision-making system, and further to ensure the smooth

performance and the quality of SEA in China (HAO and ZHENG, 2002).

5 METHODS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

As for the public participation, the public participators should be firstly defined according to the characteristics of strategies and objective conditions. Generally, the public participators in SEA include the persons affected by environmental change, the specialists of the research field and the relevant fields, the groups that are interested in the strategy and media, etc. The public participation should run through the whole process of SEA, i.e. from formulating SEA outline to reviewing SEA report, and even following assessment and supervising of SEA. The method of the public participation in SEA mainly includes the method of obtaining the information and the method of information feedback and consultation (GLASSON and THERIVEL, 2003).

5.1 Methods of Obtaining Information

The public must firstly understand the proposed strategy and obtain the necessary information related to the proposed strategy so as to get good results of the public participation in SEA. The methods of obtaining information are mainly shown in Table 1.

5.2 Methods of Information Feedback and Consultation

The base of the public participation is to transmit information to the public, and the key of public participation in SEA is to receive the consultation and information feedback of the public and to make effective communication with the public.

Handling feedback information is not only the important segment of the public participation in SEA but also the key of whether the public participation working is successful and beneficial for increasing the quality of SEA working, or not. The following principles should be adhered to in handling information feedback:

(1) To eliminate the false information and retain the true information, and to eliminate the unrefined information and pursue the refined information in the prerequisite of ensuring integrity. In general, the feedback information of the public participation in SEA is characterized by great difference, greater amount of information and unsystematic information. Thus, as for handling feedback information, we must eliminate the false and unrefined information, and to retain the true information and to pursue the refined information in the pre-

Table 1 Methods of obtaining information in public participation

Method	Function	Advantage	Disadvantage
Handbills or brochures	Transmitting simple and non-technical information to more persons; providing clear instructions on how to obtain more information	Transmitting information directly to the public; imparting detailed information; contacting with more public	The information could not be understood or be misunderstood
News bulletin	Transmitting information by a series of publications to more persons	Contacting with the public continuously in flexible ways	News bulletin would not be read by all people
Exhibition	Transmitting information in the public site	Being visited in convenient and spare time; helping the public understand the information through diagrams and tables	Some information could not be understood or be misunderstood
Local newspaper	Transmitting information on proposed strategy	Imparting detailed information to local public	Information exchange would be limited; illiterates and the poor would be excluded
National newspaper	Transmitting information on proposed strategy	Imparting detailed information to more public	Unless the proposed strategy concerns larger scope, the public would not be interested in it; illiterates and the poor would be excluded
Radio and TV	Transmitting information on proposed strategy	Promoting public participation	Information feedback could not be systematic; costs could be high
Site visit	Offering firsthand material and perceptual knowledge	Bringing issues into daily life through true examples	Larger scope of strategy makes it difficult to determine the sites for visit

requisite of ensuring integrity. The first step is to eliminate the contradictory feedback information or that contrary to the convention or that finished obviously in careless attitude. The second step is to eliminate the information that is not closely associated with the SEA or the information that has no apparent significance to SEA. By so doing, the integrity of feedback information can be ensured, and the working load of handling information can also be cut down. Meantime, the authenticity and accuracy of information would not be affected.

(2) To treat public participators without discrimination. For the assessors and strategy-makers, the public participators (either the specialists and authorities or general persons) are all equal in moral quality; therefore, their feedback information is also the same important.

(3) To deal with different feedback information with different ways. There is large difference among the public participator's feedback information to the same environmental issue and their opinions usually change with time due to SEA complexity, great differences in the knowledge level, experience, environmental consciousness, and attitude and review of value of all public participators, the characters of environmental impact on the public participators (negative or positive), and their impact degrees. Therefore, the feedback information

from the public should be handled distinctively and given different weights.

(4) To handle feedback information promptly. The feedback information from the public should be promptly handled and the result of handling feedback information should be promptly embodied in SEA (GAO and GU, 2003).

The methods of information feedback and consultation in public participation are shown in Table 2.

6 CONCLUSIONS

At present, we lack the authoritative and available technical standard for the public participation in SEA in China, the public participation was paid little attention to, and the modes of public participation are also too simple. Along with the development of economy and advancement of life level, the environmental consciousness of the public would be further heightened and the public would take part in the process of SEA by more initiative positive attitude. Meantime, the government should also apply more methods to make the public acquire the related information and fully play an active role of the public participation, which is of great significance for making each strategy decision in China and ensuring the smooth development of SEA.

Table 2 Methods of information feedback and consultation in public participation

Method	Function	Advantage	Disadvantage
Exhibition(with staff)	Transmitting information in public places	Being visited in convenient and spare time; obtaining perceptual knowledge from diagrams and tables	It would be limited by the work and rest time of staff
Opening hot lines for consultation	Acquiring information and asking questions or comment on suggestions or questions	Being convenient for the public to take part in and comment; promoting cordial communication	It is not as good as face-to-face discussion and participators could not have enough knowledge to answer all the questions
Network	Offering information or receiving feedback in the way of online symposium	Facing toward global public; being convenient for the public to use network online	Not every community can have access to network
Public meeting	Selecting the public representatives in different levels to take part in SEA in the way of meeting	Meeingt more people with same interests; being easy for assessors, strategy-makers and the public to make directly information exchange and obtain same opinion	It is complex to organize and run, with high cost
Survey and interview	Acquiring information and opinions by self-travel, face-to-face, e-mail or telephone	Obtaining more correct answers through secret investigation; distinguishing present knowledge and attention of public	It may be characterized by low rate of answering, changing public view, and unrepresentative answers
Questionnaire	Making questionnaire investigation through interview or letter, etc.	Contacting with more different public in low cost; being convenient to exchange information on two-sides	It may have low rate of information feedback
Hearing	Listening to the opinions of the representatives of relative institutions and social groups	Selecting representatives as visitors to attend a meeting	Little visitors could be invited to a meeting usually
Complaint visit	Receiving and handling various letters from the masses	Being a key method of contacting the masses	The process of handling letters is troublesome, and public scope is narrow
Open house	Offering sites to permit people to acquire information through interview and offer feedback opinions	Making interview in convenient and spare time	It would be take quite much time and money to prepare open sites and provide the corresponding employees
Contact with group of community	Representing special interests and regions	Discussing problems in detail and pushing the process of discussion on the problems forward	All interests could not be represented and the participators must make promise on the site

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