

# Environmental Mainstreaming in Developing Countries

A.L. Brown and Deanna Tomerini<sup>1</sup>

Urban Research Program, Griffith School of Environment  
Griffith University Nathan 4111 Brisbane, Australia

## 1. Introduction

Developing countries are being encouraged to mainstream environment into their development activities—environmental mainstreaming being proactive consideration of environmental and sustainability concepts in policy, plan and program-making. It is distinct from, and complementary to, most current environmental management such as EIA, or pollution control, which are largely reactive and can be described generically as environmental *safeguarding*. This paper is based on a thorough review of the literature that promotes environmental mainstreaming to developing countries. While this literature is reasonably consistent, we argue that the concept is not well understood in developing countries, and glosses over the difficulties in developing mainstreaming capacity, and of embedding it in the countries own development processes. Further, it tends to encourage the misplaced belief that there are “off-the-shelf” mainstreaming tools that can be readily adopted. This paper distils from the literature a framework for environmental mainstreaming in developing countries.

## 2. Guidance on Environmental Mainstreaming

The growing literature in environmental mainstreaming includes analyses of the extent to which mainstreaming of environment and natural resources has occurred in particular contexts, for example, environmental considerations in the World Bank’s Country Assistance Strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategies for developing countries (Bojö and Ekbohm, 1997; Bojö and Reddy, 2003; Kishore, 2007), and environmental mainstreaming within development assistance agencies’ own processes (Brunnström et al., 2007). There are also examples of how mainstreaming in fisheries resources (Thorpe et al., 2005), and adaptation to climate change (Klein et al., 2007). The UNDP Environmental Mainstreaming Strategy (UNDP, 2004) focussed largely on mainstreaming environment throughout the activities of its own organisation - now reinforced in the UNDP Strategic Plan 2008-2011 (UNDP, 2007).

UNDP and UNEP have provided further impetus to environmental mainstreaming through the Poverty-Environment Initiative (PEI) (UNEP and IISD, 2004; UNDP and UNEP, 2008) but variously refer to mainstreaming environment, mainstreaming poverty, and mainstreaming poverty-environment linkages. While such ambiguity may have been intentional, it does introduce

---

<sup>1</sup> [Lex.Brown@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Lex.Brown@griffith.edu.au) [D.Tomerini@griffith.edu.au](mailto:D.Tomerini@griffith.edu.au)

difficulty and confusion for those attempting to mainstream at the country level.

Notable in the PEI mainstreaming guidance note (UNDP and UNEP, 2007) is its emphasis on mainstreaming within *existing country planning activities*. National and sectoral planning and budget processes are recognised as the best target for establishing enduring institutional processes that can integrate environment into planning and decision making within government, particularly line ministries responsible for sectoral infrastructure and growth – rather than the almost exclusive focus on central planning and financial. Some critical lessons from the PEI have been identified (Waldman, 2005; UNDP-UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI), undated; UNDP-UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI), undated).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MetaMeta Management, 2006) has developed its own extensive guidelines for developing countries on *mainstreaming environment and water*. The guidelines observe that mainstreaming is largely about the search for opportunities, and noted common impediments to their realisation: token reference to environment in existing national planning documents; no champion for the environment when expenditure frameworks are being examined; environment disappearing from view in budget discussions. A further example is the Generic Guidelines for Drylands Mainstreaming (UNEP et al., 2007). It builds on the UNDP Environmental Mainstreaming Strategy and synthesises experiences from a wide range of countries. It notes that, in order to integrate environmental policy considerations into core institutional thinking, mainstreaming must be adopted as an institutional culture for doing business, permeate all types of planning frameworks and occur at each stage of the development cycle. Other examples include mainstreaming wastewater through water accounting in Botswana (Antzen and Setlhogile, 2007), and an interesting set of guidelines for environmental mainstreaming into the activities of the Ugandan Police (Ronald, 2006).

### **3. A Framework for Environmental Mainstreaming**

While this available literature does not yet represent a body of successful implementation of environmental mainstreaming, it does at least constitute current collective wisdom on approaches to doing so. These elements form the building blocks of a theory of mainstreaming on which further experience, analysis and understanding of environmental mainstreaming can be expanded and developed:

- The need for commitment to environmental mainstreaming practice at the highest level of government.
- Take up and eventual ownership of this environmental mainstreaming :
  - by authorities with central co-ordinating responsibilities; and
  - by all sectors with development responsibilities.
- Development, *within* each of these bodies/sectors, of:
  - an understanding that proactive mainstreaming of environment must complement reactive environmental safeguarding;
  - the application of environmental mainstreaming practice:
    - to all strategic planning and policy-making activities; and

- to all component studies/negotiations; together with
  - integration of environment, as a dimension of sustainability, in these at earliest planning stages.
- The need for environmental mainstreaming practice *within each sector* to be based on a systems understanding of:
  - the linkage between the sector's activities and environment; and
  - the reliance of existing development activities in that sector on environmental resources and services (ecosystem services).
- A search for environmental opportunities not just constraints.
- Translation of mainstreaming practice into action plans and budget lines to implement the outcomes of the environmental mainstreaming processes - both within the sectors and the co-ordinating authorities.

Environmental mainstreaming will have no effect if the environmental outcomes remain as mission-statements, or long-term goals. Outcomes need to be specific action items *within* the sectoral development activity, and unambiguously supported by specific budget allocations.

Two further elements that we suggest are critical are:

- That the focus be on mainstreaming environment into government's *own* structures and processes of policy and plan making.
- That mainstreaming looks to integrate environment *within* these existing structures and processes rather than invoking, in the first instance, new tools to achieve the environmental mainstreaming.

#### **4. A focus on government's own policy/plan making**

What 'stream' of planning and policy-making is it into which environment is to be integrated? Much of the mainstreaming guidance has tended to focus on planning activities and outputs that form part of a multilateral or bilateral donor's external partnership arrangement with the developing country. Their literature leans towards describing mainstreaming through the lens of development co-operation (see European Commission, 2007).

Effective environmental mainstreaming within a developing country has to involve understanding of both structure and process of policy and plan making within the country. Most of the mainstreaming literature is surprisingly silent on this—relegating the internal policy making and plan making in developing countries to little more than a black-box, rather than a complex and unique set of systems, processes, and power relationships. The critical starting point for within-country mainstreaming has to be to open this box, analysing the existing planning and decision-making systems within it, and then developing the most appropriate ways in which environmental dimensions can be integrated into the policy-making and planning.

#### **5. Mainstreaming tools**

Guidance to potential users on choice, methodology, and output of different mainstreaming tools is appropriate, but a focus in much mainstreaming literature is on tools alone is counterproductive. An undivided focus on tools raises expectations that environmental mainstreaming is simply the application of a tool, and that ready-made tools can easily be *transferred* from

developed countries. The mainstreaming framework above suggests that the matters of tool selection and use are quite secondary to more critical elements of a sustainable approach to environmental mainstreaming.

When a developing country first wishes to attempt environmental mainstreaming, much that is written about mainstreaming aids and abets the questions *which tool do we use?* or *how do we do SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment)?* Our analysis here suggests that this emphasis on tools is premature, even misplaced and diversionary. The more critical and difficult questions are, *where can we best integrate environmental considerations into our existing central and sectoral policy and plan making processes?* and *how?* Particular mainstreaming tools may eventually prove useful as part of the *how* in particular situations, but only after first analysing government's processes and structures of policy/plan making, and then identifying the potential for environmental integration within them.

In particular, SEA currently tends to be the dominant and, by some, exclusive tool promoted for environmental mainstreaming in policy and plan making in developing countries. While SEA comes with a considerable level of practitioner, and academic commentary (for example, Che et al., 2002; Briffett et al., 2003; Alshuwaikhat, 2005; OECD DAC, 2006), as yet there is little evidence supporting the sustained effectiveness of SEA in development contexts, and, where there has been application of SEA in a developing country to date, it is most likely that this will have been donor driven rather than adopted unilaterally by the country.

What appears to have escaped observation in any of the mainstreaming literature to date is that sectoral decisions to undertake environmental mainstreaming, most of the parameters of any mainstreaming activity, and the utilisation of mainstreaming outcomes, will largely be determined by professionals with no prior environmental experience. This is a key factor to be considered in mainstreaming capacity building, the preparation of mainstreaming guidelines and the adoption of mainstreaming approaches. It also suggests that highly specialised and cooperative engagement will need to be developed between the environmental sector and any sector attempting to implement mainstreaming - and environmental sectors generally have little experience with such engagement.

One might expect that strong institutional involvement in environmental safeguarding would be a sound launching pad for environmental mainstreaming, but in practice the conflict/confusion between safeguarding and mainstreaming is an impediment to moving towards mainstreaming implementation. In fact, the existence of government agencies with responsibility for environment often means that no other line ministry sees any need or potential role for them in environment and conservation.

## **5. Conclusions**

The fundamental simplicity and broad applicability of the environmental mainstreaming concept is still not well understood in developing countries. The framework for environmental mainstreaming - a set of requisites -

developed in this paper is designed to address this. It provides a foundation both for further analysis of the nature and challenges of environmental mainstreaming, and of the matters that need to be addressed in programs to build capacity to mainstream environment. The emphasis in some mainstreaming guidance on new and endogenous environmental mainstreaming tools is counterproductive, creating expectations that environmental mainstreaming is simply the application of a tool (such as SEA) that can be adapted from elsewhere. Within the context of the whole framework, the matters of tool selection and use must be seen to be quite secondary to the other critical elements. The extent and magnitude of the effort required to embed this framework within policy and planning development processes of any country should not be underestimated.

## References

Alshuwaikhat, H. M. (2005), 'Strategic environmental assessment can help solve environmental impact assessment failures in developing countries', *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 25, 307-317.

Antzen, J. W. and Setlhogile, T. (2007), 'Mainstreaming wastewater through water accounting: The example of Botswana.' *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth, Parts A/B/C*, 32, 1221-1230.

Bojö, J. and Ekblom, A. (1997), *Mainstreaming Environment in Country Assistance Strategies*, The World Bank.

Bojö, J. and Reddy, R. C. (2002), *Poverty Reduction Strategies and Environment: A Review of 40 Interim and Full Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers*, Washington, The World Bank.

Briffett, C., Obbard, J. P. and Mackee, J. (2003), 'Environmental Impact Assessment in East Asia', *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 23, 171-196.

Brunnström, K., Hargbäck, H., Lagerstedt, P. and Olsson, J. (2007), *Integrating the Environment? Environmental Considerations in Sida's Work*, Stockholm, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

Che, X., Shang, J. and Wang, J. (2002), 'Strategic environmental assessment and its development in China', *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 22, 101-109.

European Commission. (2007), *Environmental Integration Handbook for EC Development Co-operation*, Brussels, European Commission.

Kishore, S. (2007), *Mainstreaming Environment in the Implementation of PRSPs in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, The World Bank.

Klein, R., J.T, Eriksen, S., E.H, Naess, L. O., Hammill, A., Tanner, T., M, Robledo, C. and O'brien, K., L. (2007), 'Portfolio screening to support the mainstreaming of adaptation to climate change into development assistance', *Climate Change*, 84, 23-44.

MetaMeta Management. (2006), Ideas and Experiences in Mainstreaming Environment and Water, The Hague, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

OECD DAC. (2006), Applying Strategic Environmental Assessment: Good Practice guidance for development co-operation, Paris, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Ronald, K. (2006) 'Mainstreaming Environmental Concerns into the Policies, Plans and Programmes of the Uganda Police Force' (Paper presented at the Training Workshop to strengthen and enhance the capacity of Police Investigators and state prosecutors to enforce environmental laws, Seeta Mudono, 19th -21st March 2006).

Thorpe, A., Reid, C., van Anrooy, R. and Brugere, C. (2005), 'Integrating fisheries into the national development plans of Small Island Developing States (SIDS): Ten years on from Barbados', Natural Resources Forum, 29, 51-69.

UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Facility. (2007), Guidance Note on Mainstreaming Environment into National Development Planning, Nairobi, Kenya, United Nations-Gigiri.

UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Facility. (2008), Environment, Climate Change and the MDGs: Reshaping the Development Agenda, A Poverty Environment Partnership Events in support of the UN High Level Events on MDGs, Nairobi, Kenya, UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Facility.

UNDP-UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI). (undated), Poverty & Environment Initiative: Attacking Poverty While Improving the Environment: Towards Win-Win Policy Options, New York, UNDP.

UNDP-UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI). (no date), Lessons learned on the mainstreaming of poverty and environment, Retrieved 23rd September 2008, from [http://www.unep.org/poverty\\_environment/PDF\\_docs/lessons-learned-PE.pdf](http://www.unep.org/poverty_environment/PDF_docs/lessons-learned-PE.pdf).

UNDP. (2004), Environmental Mainstreaming Strategy: A strategy for enhanced environmental soundness and sustainability in UNDP policies, programmes, and operational processes, New York, United Nations Development Programme.

UNDP. (2007), UNDP strategic plan, 2008-2011: Accelerating global progress on human development, Retrieved 2nd October, 2008, from [http://www.undp.org/execbrd/word/dp07-43\\_updated.doc](http://www.undp.org/execbrd/word/dp07-43_updated.doc).

UNEP, GM and UNDP. (2007), Generic Guidelines for Mainstreaming Environment with a particular focus on Drylands into National Development Frameworks,

UNEP and IISD. (2004), Exploring the links: Human Well-being, Poverty & Ecosystem Services, Nairobi & Manitoba, United Nations Environment Programme & International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Waldman, L. (2005), Environment, Politics, and Poverty: Lessons from a Review of PRSP Stakeholder Perspectives, Institute of Development Studies.