

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA) IN VIETNAM – LESSONS LEARNED

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ABSTRACT:

In order to integrate environmental consideration into socio-economic development planning process since 1980s of 20th Century in the World concepts and approach on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) have been created. However, at present, while environmental impact assessment (EIA) in many countries is commonly executed and its effectiveness in environmental management is clearly evaluated, SEA is still new issue, application and effectiveness of which are still debated. In Vietnam, SEA for development policies and regional, sectional development plans has started to be executed from Mid 2006 based on the requirements of the Law on Environmental Protection (2005). Various technical guidelines for SEA execution were issued by Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) and other ministries. Until Mid 2012 over 50 SEA reports have been reviewed by MONRE and over 20 SEA reports - by other ministries. Actually, at present, in Vietnam SEA is playing an important role in decisions of the Government on provincial and sectional socio-economic master plans for the period to 2020 and vision on 2030. Many studies in SEA with high quality greatly contributed in integration of environmental consideration into economic development decision. However, SEA is a new concept, its approach and methodology are new, therefore, at present various limits may be found in SEA process. This paper introduces some achievements and problems to be concerned in SEA in Vietnam. With introduction of a good practice in SEA for the Tonkin Gulf Coastal Region Socio-Economic Development Master Plan this paper briefly describes the region, included Quangninh Province and Haiphong City, main issues of the plan, core environmental issues, potential impacts caused by plan implementation and proposed mitigation measures. From the results of SEA practice for this Master Plan this paper gives various lessons in information collection to set up database, SEA methodology, public consultation, time and budget for SEA. These lessons are useful to improve SEA to be a reliable tool to integrate environmental protection into economic growth towards sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Development of SEA in Asia

Although there are differences in definitions and scopes of SEA between the countries and /or international organizations, however, almost definitions on SEA identify that “SEA is a process of analysis to assess environmental concerns at strategic levels to policies, plans and/or programs (P/P/P) and their alternatives”. SEA is conducted at the beginning phase and lasted throughout all precess of P/P/P. SEA is a process of systematic approach with participation of stakeholders to analyse and assess the environmental issues related to P/P/P setting and implementation. A good SEA can (i) support environmental-based evidence to decision-making; (2) identify new opportunities and win-win options; (3) prevent costly mistakes;

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(4) build public engagement in decision-making and (5) facilitate trans-boundary co-operation. Therefore, SEA is considered as a tool to orient sustainable development.

The Vietnamese concept and approach in SEA are not differ with the common concepts in the World. However, in Vietnam Law on Environmental Protection (2005) ^[1] SEA is required only for Strategy and Plans but not for Programs. In fact, at present, SEA is mainly executed for socio-economic development *Plans*, included “*Quy hoach*” and “*Ke hoach*” in Vietnamese or “*Guihua*” and “*Jihua*” in Chinese).

According to a report of the WB (April 2006) ^[2] EIA was applied since 1970s in the Philippines, Japan, since 1980s in Korea, Indonesia, China, Hong Kong and since 1990s in Thailand, Vietnam but SEA was officially required in some countries in Asia only since 1990s. Hong Kong, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam are the first countries introduced SEA in their legal documents.

1.2. When SEA is executed?

According to the Vietnam Law on Environmental Protection ^[1] and guidelines of various countries and international organizations ^[2-6] SEA is conducted simultaneously with the P/P/P preparation process. With integration of SEA into P/P/P preparation from the beginning stage the SEA consulting team (SEA Team) may provide for the P/P/P preparation team (P/P/P Team) important data, information on the environmental and socio-economic conditions at the region where the P/P/P is prepared. These data and information will support the P/P/P Team to identify where are sensitive ecological, cultural areas to be strictly protected, what are critical social issues to be considered during P/P/P study. On the contrary, the P/P/P Team may provide for the SEA Team main issues and orientations of the P/P/P to obtain comments on potential environmental impacts from the SEA Team to avoid the projects what may creat major adverse impacts on the natural and/or social environment. SEA may have high effeciences in integration of environmental consideratin into economic development only when it is executed together with P/P/P preparation process.

1.3. How to execute a SEA?

SEA is not an one-way process, it needs engagement of various stakeholders. Participation of stakeholders may help the P/P/P preparers to clarify potential environmental and social impacts caused by the implementation of P/P/P and identify measures needed to be applied during P/P/P implementation. SEA process is differ from country to country, however, to achieve a good SEA the following steps are required.

1. *Screening*: based on the legal regulations to identify whether the P/P/P needs a SEA. According to the Vietnamese guideline (*Decree 29:2011/ND-CP issued by the Vietnam' Government*) ^[7] some types of P/P/P are required in separated SEA reports, some of them are not required in separated SEA report but only a part of the P/P/P, some types of P/P/P are not required in SEA reports)
2. *Scoping*: This step identifies what are main issues of a SEA to be studied in direct, indirect, cumulative impacts ans scales of SEA.
3. *Identification of environmental indicators*. This step identifies what are indicators and/or indexes to be used for impact assessment in SEA. Comparision of environmental parameters with the

4. *Identification, prediction and assessment of potential impacts.* In this step SEA clearly determines negative and positive, direct and indirect, and cumulative impacts of the P/P/P. Identification of mutual impacts to environment, economy and society is required to assess indirect impacts caused by P/P/P implementation.

5. *Proposal of mitigation measures and environmental monitoring.* In this step SEA proposes measures for minimize or mitigate adverse impacts caused by P/P/P implementation. Various environmental monitoring programs are required to be set up to assure the mitigation measures are properly implemented.

6. *Independent Evaluation.* Various countries and international organizations (as ADB) require this step in the SEA process. Results of independent evaluation created by independent consultants on SEA quality are used in adjustment of a final SEA report. To well evaluate SEA quality it is necessary to set up a set of evaluation criteria.

7. *Introduction of SEA results into P/P/P decision:* Results of SEA on impact assessment on the alternatives of P/P/P are needed to immediately transfer to the P/P/P decision makers.

8. *Environmental monitoring during P/P/P implementation:* This is an important task of Governmental environmental management agencies to assure that mitigation measures for environmental and social impacts are properly implemented complying with the requirements in the approved SEA report.

Public consultation. This activity is required in all steps of SEA study to clarify the main issues and potential impacts of the P/P/P and obtain comments and suggestions on the P/P/P and SEA from relevant agencies, organizations, companies and individuals. The obtained comments/suggestions shall be carefully considered to adjust the P/P/P and SEA report.

2. PRESENT SEA IN VIETNAM

SEA is compulsory for strategies and plans in socio-economic development at regional and/or sectional levels. This is guided in Clauses 14,15,16 and 17 in the Law on Environmental Protection (2005) ^[1] and Clauses 3,4,5,6 and 7 in Decree N29:2011/ND-CP issued by the Government (2011) ^[6]. To enhance quality of SEA study and SEA report preparation in 2009, National Environmental Agency (or General Department of Environment within MONRE) has issued a Technical Guideline for SEA, included definitions, approach, methodologies and procedures in SEA implementation. At present, MONRE and other ministries (MPI, MOT, MOC...) carrying out studies to set up technical guidelines for SEA of sectional and regional economic master plans and or/ strategies. Only in a short duration of 6 years (Mid 2006 - Mid 2012) over 10 SEA training programs have been organized by the Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), Planning and Investment (MPI), Construction (MOC) with supports from international organizations (DANIDA, Sida, GTZ etc); almost 70 SEA reports were prepared for regional/provincial and sectional socio-economic master plans, in which over 50 SEA reports were reviewed by MONRE ^[7]. This good results greatly contribute into

Governmental decisions on socio-economic development master plans of over 30 provinces and over many economic sectors.

However, at present, various problems to be solved to improve SEA ^[8]:

- *Low quality of SEA study*: Because of in a P/P/P study area are quite wide and a P/P/P consists of many development sectors and projects a number of SEA reports can not detailly predict, assess potential impacts, especially cumulative and indirect impacts and can not propose detailed measures for impact mitigation and monitoring.

- *Limited integration of environmental consideration into P/P/P preparation*: Because many SEA studies are executed after P/P/P preparation, therefore, various sensitive environmental and social issues are not sufficiently considered during P/P/P studies.

- *Difficulty in environmental monitoring during P/P/P implementation*: Environmental monitoring is commonly conducted during project implementation following the approved EIA reports. However, conduction of the environmental monitoring plans during implementation of a P/P/P following the approved SEA reports is difficult, because of the P/P/P covers a wide area, in which many projects, activities are operated simultaneously.

3. GOOD PRACTICE IN SEA IN VIETNAM AND LESSONS LEARNED

At present, in Vietnam there are some problems in SEA implementation, however a number of SEA studies were properly executed and obtain high evaluation from international organizations. One of them is SEA for the Master Plan for the Tonkin Gulf Coastal Economic Belt (TGCEB), conducted by Vietnam Environment and Sustainable Development Institute (VESDI) in cooperation with Development Strategy Institute (DSI) of MPI with a support from SEMLA project of Sida in 2007-2008 ^[9]. Information on this SEA is briefed as follows.

3.1. Introduction on the Master Plan and SEA

3.1.1. Master Plan

The TGCEB) includes Quangninh province and Haiphong city. The Master Plan for development of the TGCEB consists of 2 main components:

- (i) Development plan for “driving force areas”.
- (ii) Development plan for economic sectors

The aim of the Plan is to establish the TGCEB to be a dynamic economic region, a “vigorous growth pole” attracting a large territory in the Northern Vietnam; it is also a primary integration area of Vietnam and China with ASEAN countries, at the same time it connects to other coastal areas to make a economic belt along the coast from Mongcai in the Northern Vietnam to Hatien in the Southern Vietnam.

A number of *development objectives* are set out, which are as follows:

1. Establishing a transport system in the economic belt especially main coastal axis routes from Mongcai (Quangninh Province) to Doson (Haiphong City) in order to link with the Vietnam-China Economic Corridors and the Southern China, creating conditions to widen trade and development cooperation with China and ASEAN countries effectively and actively.
2. Focusing on developing driving force areas, central urban areas to make a breakthrough acceleration for the whole Economic Belt to develop fast as well as to make a counterpoising side with the coastal Southern China.

3. Forming and developing a number of main sectors including: marine transport, shipbuilding, thermo-electricity, mining, mechanics, construction materials production, oil and gas processing, aquaculture processing...to reach advanced level in the region.
4. Economic growth rate is 1.4-1.5 times higher than the average national GDP growth rate; total good circulation through the Economic Belt increases more than 20%/year. By 2020, the TGCEB will contribute to the whole country GDP about 6.5%-7%; GDP per capita achieves USD 3,500-4000.

In the recent years, economy of the TGCEB has been fast developed, which brought more and more contribution to the Northern Economic Focal Zone (NEFZ) and the whole country. In many years, GDP of the Economic Belt always reaches high and sustainable growth rate, average of the period 2001-2007 achieved 12.1% /year, 1.6 times higher than nationwide GDP growth rate and nearly 1.2 times higher than growth rate in the NEFZ. Among them, industry-construction sector increases as 14.9%/year, 1.5 times higher than nationwide average; agriculture, forestry and fishery increases as 4.5%/year, 1.2 times higher than nationwide average and service sector increases as 11.4 %/year, 1.6 times higher than nationwide average.

3.1.2. SEA Organization

In order to integrate the Master Plan into environmental protection toward sustainable development, it is necessary to conduct Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the Master Plan. The SEA is carried out by the Vietnam Environment and Sustainable Development Institute (VESDI) in collaboration with the Development Strategy Institute (DSI) - Ministry of Plan and Investment (MPI) with the support of the Department of Appraisal and Environmental Impact Assessment - Ministry of Natural Resource and Environment (MONRE) and Swedish SEMLA Programme.

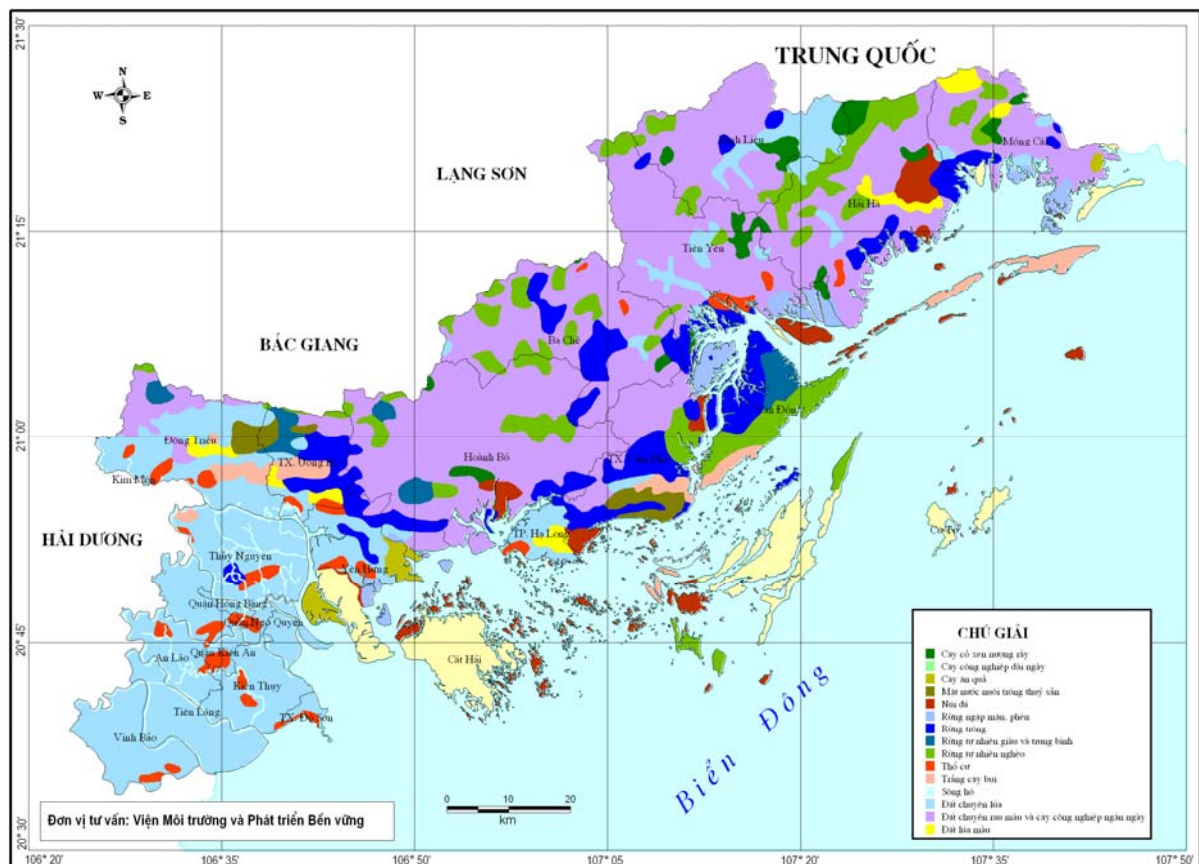


Figure 1. Map of Present Forest Areas in the Study Region

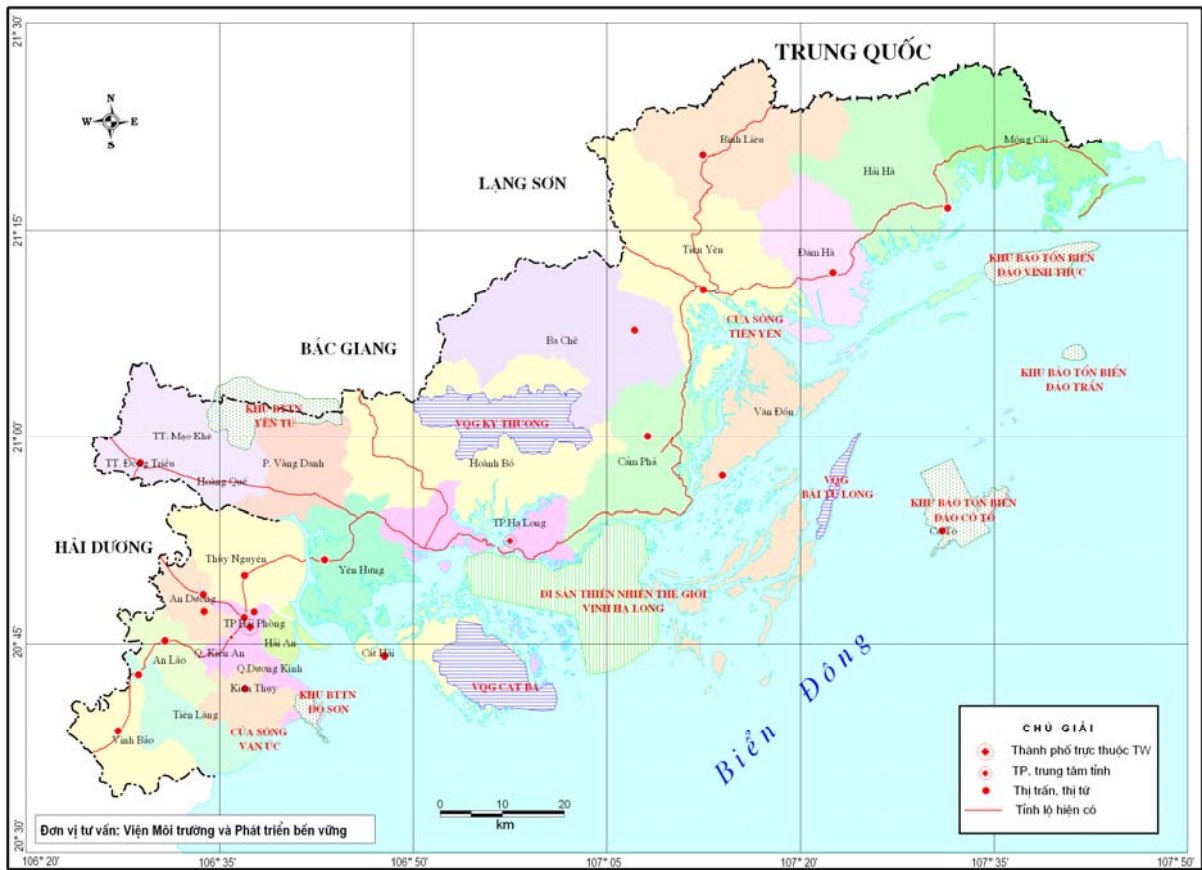


Figure 2. Map of Natural Reserve Sites and Natural Parks in the Study Region

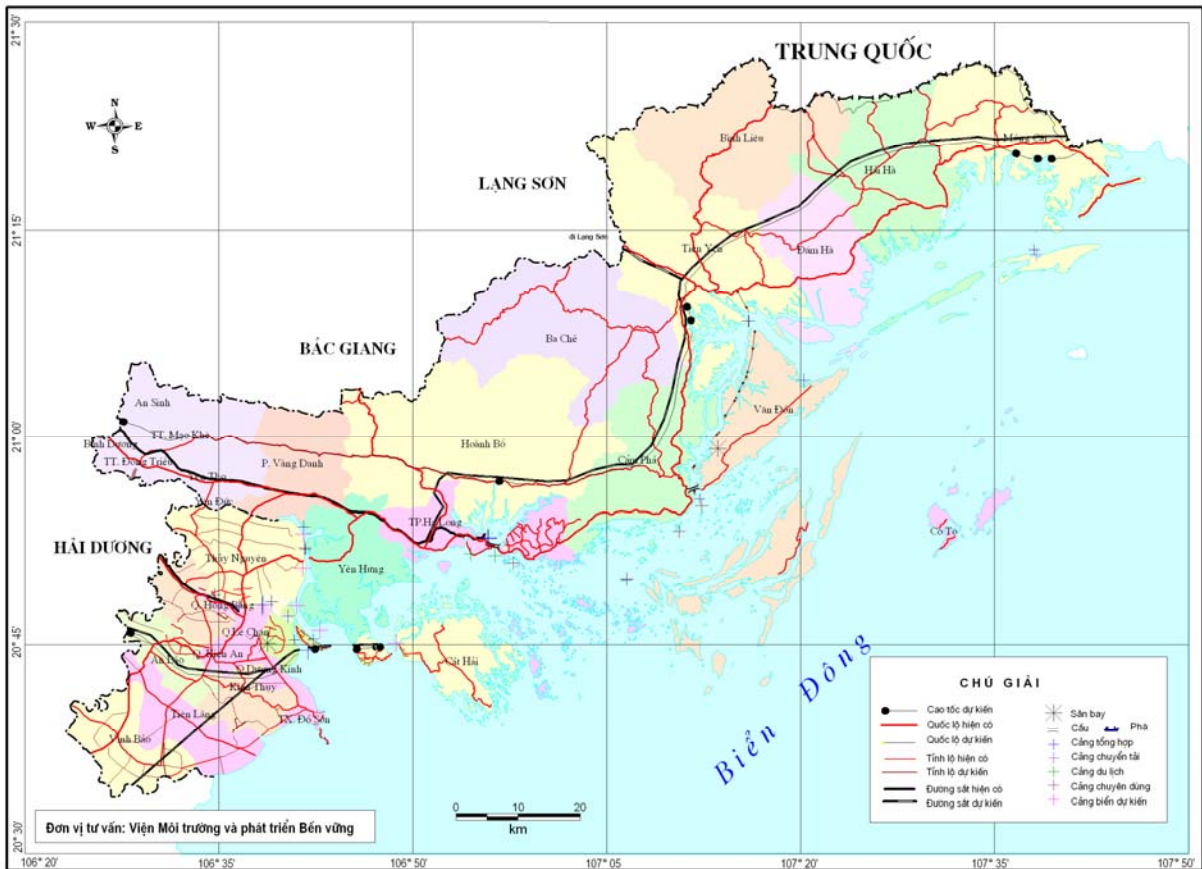


Figure 3. Map of Planned Transport Systems

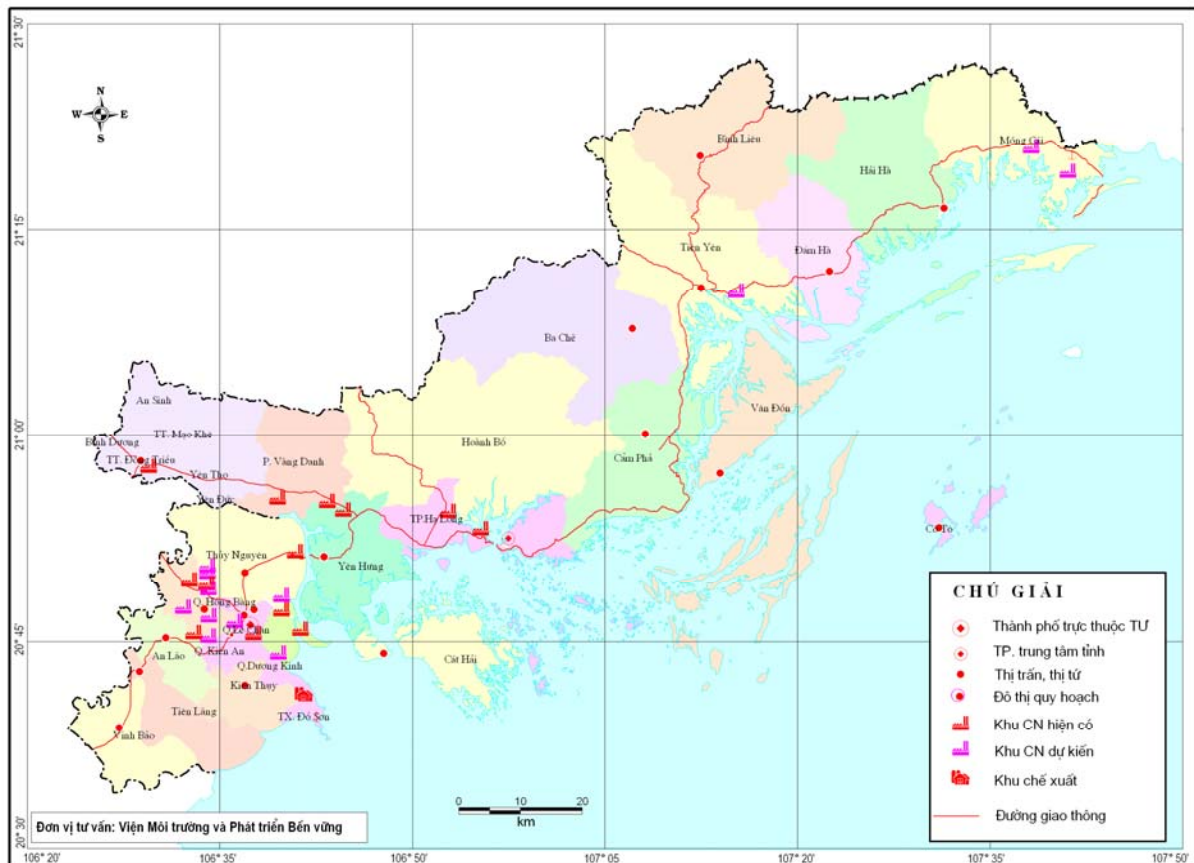


Figure 4. Map of Planned Industrial and Urban areas

3.1.3. Main conclusions of the SEA

The obtained results in the SEA report gave some following conclusions and suggestions.

Suitable level in terms of sustainable development of the Master Plan

- (i) In general, 6 decisive viewpoints and ideas of the Master Plan for the TGCEB are suitable for sustainable development orientation (*“Combining closely economic development with social development, reinforcing security, protecting resources and environment toward sustainable development”*).
- (ii) Mentioned planning named “Orientation of environmental protection, sustainable development” includes 3 general principles and 5 main solutions. General principles are in accordance with the Governmental policies on environmental protection, sustainable development in the period of promoting industrialization and modernization.
- (iii) Main solutions to environmental protection toward sustainable development are:
 - (a) Environmental protection for the Halong Bay
 - (b) Suitable usage and protection of natural resources
 - (c) Environmental protection for urban areas and industrial zones
 - (d) Environmental protection for the seas and coastal line
 - (e) Solutions in development and environmental policies.

The above solutions mention key issues need to be carried out in the plan implementation process.

- (iv) However, the large scale of the Plan may create various social and environmental problems but some problems are not properly considered in the plans for regional and sectoral development. Therefore, some planned activities do not well focus on the ecological features and environmental protection targets in the specific regions.

Level of adverse impacts on the environment

From the results of the assessment of environmental impacts, *in cases of lack of effective measures in environmental management* it is possible to give some predictions:

- (i) The level of environmental pollution, especially coastal sea, river and air, would be risen during the plan implementation. The increased polluted environment will affect fishery resources, tourism sector, natural reserves and public health. The main affected areas include Halong city, Campha town, district of Damha, Haiha, Yenhung, Thuynguyen, Haian, Doson , coastal and industrial parks areas.
- (ii) Biological resources would be reduced because of the extension of industrial parks, urban areas and tourism zones. The natural forest areas will be decreased.
This impacts are expected as significant and large-scale but they are mitigatable by proper management and technological measures.
- (iii) A large number of households in rural area would be adversely affected due to loss of their land for the projects, consequently various economic and social problems may be arisen.

It is considered to be significant, but may be mitigated if the Governmental authorities and investors will conduct proper policies in compensation, resettlement and support the projected affected peoples in restoration of their economic and cultural activities.

- (iv) For minimizing the negative impacts on the natural environment and society, MPI, Provincial People's Committees, relevant ministries, agencies and investors are required to reconsider and adjust some contents of the Plan, particularly number, location, area of industrial parks, types of industrial projects, location of ports, airport etc. Some planned projects may be rejected, if they may not have high economic benefits but cause major environmental impacts.
- (v) For mitigating the impacts (partly ,not all), the SEA report outlines basic orientations on environment management and environmental technology which may serve as reference for MPI and relevant ministries and agencies.

The main negative impacts and solutions to mitigate the adverse impacts caused by the development actions of the Master Plan for the Coastal Tonkin Gulf Economic Belt is clearly mentioned in this SEA report.

3.2. Lessons Learned

3.2.1. Relationship between SEA and the planning process

During conduction of this SEA cooperation between the Planning Team (DSI) and SEA Team (VESDI) was good. The following table shows the steps in SEA during the Master Plan process.

Date	Planning Team (DSI)	Environmental Team (VESDI)
October – Dec/2007	<p>Step 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Set out development strategies (ii) Line ministries/sectors proposed specifies sector development plan (Industry, Transport, Agriculture, Tourism, Trade, etc.) (iii) Received comments from the Environmental Team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Collected data/information on the environment of the region (ii) Sent environmental data to the Planning Team (iii) Reviewed the proposed sector plans based on pointview of sustainable development (iv) Prepared thematic reports of environment examination for each sector plan (10 thematic reports) (v) Sent back to the Planning Team

Jan – Mar 2007	Step 2: (i) Reviewed and accepted various comments from the Environment Team (ii) Revised the proposed Sector development plans (iii) Prepared Initial Master Plan (iv) Sent to the Environmental Team for environmental consideration.	(i) Reviewed the revised sector development plans and Initial Master Plan (ii) Sent back various environmental comments to the Planning Team
Apr– Jun 2008	Step 3: (i) Prepared Draft Master Plan, combining: - Regional development - Sector development	(i) Prepared Draft SEA Report (ii) Sent the Draft SEA Report to the Planning Team for comments and review the Draft Master Plan.
From July – December 2008	Step 4: (i) Organized public consultation meetings for review and comment on the Master Plan and SEA reports (ii) Reviewed and finalized Master Plan report and SEA report (iii) Submit SEA report to MONRE for review (iv) Revise SEA report with consideration of the comments from the Appraisal Committee.	

3.2.2. Main problems and lessons

The main problems in linking the SEA to Master Plan (*in a case of the Tonkin Gulf Economic Belt*) are identified as follows.

No involvement of SEA team in the preparation of sector development plans

Lesson:

Involvement of environmental team (environmental teams of the Ministries or inviting environmental teams from research institutes) in preparation of sector development should be made from the beginning stage of the Master Plan formulation.

Information and data on the environment and social, cultural, historical sites, particularly, ecological zones, protected areas were not adequate in the stage of regional and sector development planning

When the sector ministries prepared these parts of the Master Plan (MP), the SEA team could not participate in their planning process since the mandate of the SEA team was limited to providing only recommendations to the DSI planning team.

Lessons:

SEA should formulate specific request for actually preparing their contribution to SEA of the Master Plan as part of elaboration of their planning proposals. This request may include:

- *Selection of the most important environment/sustainable development issues for the specific proposals that should be considered by the key sectors when developing their proposals for the Master Plan*
- *Specific tips (or templates) for providing information on baseline trends for these sector-specific environment/sustainable development issues*
- *Specific tips (or templates) for preliminary consideration of impacts of sector proposals on these sector-specific environment/sustainable development issues*

This request should be then formally sent by the DSI team to all sector teams. This would facilitate early integration of environmental issues (at least partly) into planning proposals submitted to DSI and submission of relevant environmental information to the SEA team for the MP. It may actually resemble a small SEAs – thus building capacities in the key sectors for conducting full-fledged SEAs for their formal plans that will follow the Master Plan.

Discussions between the Planning and Environmental Teams on the possible conflicts between economic development and environmental protection was conducted but not detailed enough

Lesson:

Team work and discussions should be better implemented. Planning team should explicitly consider proposals from SEA within certain deadlines and it should clearly explain which of these proposals were accepted or had to be rejected. Then discussion between both teams should follow. The concluding SEA report should clearly explain any major outstanding recommendations which could not be integrated into the Master Plan. It should be noted that it is perfectly legitimate not to integrate certain recommendations from the SEA and that SEA should influence the thinking of the planning teams (may be more important than the report)

Focus of SEA (for all SEA studies but not only for the Tonkin Gulf)

A good SEA study should focus on assessment both environment and socio – economic issues and consequences of the potential impacts on the natural environment and socio – economic conditions. However, international and national references (the SEA reports obtained from internet) and guidelines, SEA reports seem more deeply concentrate on the natural environment, while less on the socio – economic aspects.

The main reasons are:

- (i) Prediction and assessment on the socio – economic impacts may be difficult, due to the impacts on socio – economic conditions may not be quantified, particularly social indirect impacts (consequences of the direct impacts).
- (ii) Data/information on the plan's affected households (PAHs) are not available in the planning stage
- (iii) Time duration and fees for SEA is too small. With this fee the SEA Team may not invite a number of experienced specialists in sectors of economy, culture, history, demography etc...to be members of the SEA Study Team.

Lesson:

The specific focus of the SEA needs to be determined on case by case basis. It is not necessary to restrict the SEA upfront. Depending on the nature of each specific Master Plan, SEA may focus on environment, sometimes more on social or economic issues. It would make sense to make the SEA circular more flexible and allow scoping of each particular SEA based on consultations between MONRE and MPI.

Approach, methodology for SEA in regional development plan

The most suitable methods for SEA are:

- Network
- Check – list
- Map overlaying
- Matrix
- Public consultation

Environmental modeling (for prediction of air/or water pollution, noise dispersion) may be used but it may not precise due to lack of detailed technical data of the projects proposed in the Master Plan.

This pilot SEA for the Tonkin Gulf Belt used emission and waste calculations based on emission and waste coefficients, proposed by international organizations and/ or by the projects. These are commonly used tools in SEAs in Vietnam for e.g. EIA of industrial and urban sites. Such calculations can be sufficient for forecasting waste and emissions based on known and stable factors population projections. They are, however, less precise for forecasting impacts of the whole industrial development in a region since composition of industries may quickly change due to rapid economic development in the country.

Data issues in SEA

Availability of data on all components of the natural and social environment is vital condition for a SEA study. Without sufficient data on the natural environment (topography, hydrology, soil, environmental quality, climate, and particularly ecological zoning) and social and economic issues prediction of potential impacts, trends in environmental changes and proposal of mitigation are not be detailed and precise.

In case of insufficient data and information in SEA study use of international and/or national references for the similar cases may be a suitable method. For instance, impacts on the mangrove forest in the coastal wetland of the Tonkin Gulf may be initially predicted using the published papers

on the mangrove forest in other regions of Vietnam, impacts by industrial parks in this region may be evaluated using pollution ratios and evidences of impacts from other industrial in parks Vietnam etc.

Stakeholder engagement

There were no specific constraints in organizing public hearing on the draft SEA report but participation of stakeholders was limited because:

- Most of relevant representatives of stakeholders are busy with their own tasks in ministries, institutes, provinces. Time for reading Plan and SEA reports and participating in meeting is not available.
- The Plan and SEA reports are not widely distributed to the relevant participants in a convenient time (some days, weeks before meetings).
- Small fees for organization of public consultation meetings (in most of SEA studies).

Lessons:

Distribute the plan and SEA reports to well identified representatives of relevant ministries, provinces and institutes for at least 1 week.

The best participants in SEA for regional development plans would be:

- *Representatives of Central line ministries: MPI, MARD, MOIT, MONRE, MOF, MOD*
- *Representatives of the involved provincial line departments (ditto).*
- *Representatives of the Government, party at central levels and provincial levels.*
- *Specialists in environment, economy, culture, social study in research institutes, universities*
- *Some NGOs related to environmental protection social associations.*

In difference with EIA, participation of representatives of district, commune levels and PAHs may not be ideal in SEA study.

Institutional dimension

The mitigation measures proposed by the SEA are realistic but they should be prioritized. A good SEA should include institutional consideration to assure that the proposed measures in the SEA will be well implemented by a proper institutional arrangement and adequate manpower. Analysis of institutional capacity could be done similarly with the WB guideline in Environmental Assessment.

Lesson:

SEA team should make 'soft recommendations' on institutional roles and responsibilities for their implementation but does not have mandate to assign responsibilities for mitigation measures – this should be done by MPI and MONRE.

Results of the SEA for the Master Plan of the Tonkin Gulf Economic Belt

The most important element of assessment was the analysis of overall strategic impacts (key trends and their changes through cumulative impacts of proposed developments). Based on this, the Planning Team accepted many proposals from the SEA Team, e.g.

- Reducing number of oils refineries from initially proposed 3 to 1 in the best location.
- Scaling down of industrial areas.
- Planning for centralized solid waste land fill areas
- Mitigation measures (not only waste treatment but also more macro-level measures such as better locations of industrial zones, etc.), consideration of climate change adaption measures.

Lessons and proposal for future development of SEA system in Vietnam

- DSI suggested to widely disseminate good experience in collaboration between SEA and planning team within DSI and MPI structures.
- More detailed regulations on SEA which specify even a closer cooperation between SEA and planning is needed – these should ideally drawn by MPI in collaboration of MONRE.
- Wider uptake of SEA will require more detailed awareness raising about SEA among the planning teams and detailed training for SEA experts in the key planning institutions.

- It is generally important to increase budget for SEA: the initial proposal from MPI that SEA should be exceed 3% of the total costs of the MP elaboration, is too low and unrealistic. This is too small to conduct a good quality SEA, including public consultation and all activities in SEA process. Just to compare this with EIA - the present fee for an EIA for a large – sized energy, water resource or transport project is USD 30,000 – 200,000 (for National Team) or over 200,000 – 1,000,000 USD (for International Consulting Firm). The minimum fee for a SEA should be over USD 20,000 (for nationally executed SEAs) or USD 50,000 (SEAs with participation of an international specialist). This fee includes data collection, field surveys, mapping, desk- study, meetings, etc and report preparation.

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