

WWF and civil society organizations in the framework of the SEE SEP project have today published a new report: EIA/SEA of hydropower projects in Southeast Europe - Meeting the EU standards. The report, prepared in collaboration with a team of international independent experts, looks at the quality of 25 environmental impact assessments (EIA) and 2 strategic environmental assessments (SEA) done for hydropower projects in seven countries in the last five years and examines how the mistakes made in these cases could be avoided in the future.

The report concludes that the main shortcomings come from the fact that transposition of EU directives has not been followed up by specific rules, regulations and guidelines to fully implement the requirements of the directives. The most serious failures relate to a widespread lack of application of standard procedures by competent authorities i.e. lack of public consultation and transparent decision-making, but there are also serious setbacks in terms of content specific issues i.e. very limited field research and use of outdated scientific data.

“The general standard of the EIA and SEA studies in the region is very low. Study developers often ignore their professional responsibility and produce bad assessments without making fundamental research and analysis. Many studies rely on hydrological and ecological data from 20-30 years ago and do not include data on land use or climate change. Alternatives and cumulative impacts are rarely assessed, and the same goes for the preservation of ecological flows in rivers to protect biodiversity and other water users downstream,” said Peter J. Nelson, editor of the report.

These shortcomings arise in part due to inadequate financial and technical capacity in ministries and agencies, but they also reflect the reluctance of the competent authorities to fully engage local communities and the non-governmental sector. According to the report, this resistance stems from deep-rooted traditional practices, political influence of private interests, and in some cases corruption and illegal activities.

The main findings of the report were presented on 28th October 2015 at the Energy Community Environmental Task Force meeting in Vienna, Austria.

“EIA is of particular importance in the energy sector, where decisions may have long term effects on the energy structure and consumption, as well as on the general environmental situation. In the case of hydropower projects, sound EIA is particularly important to ensure that the impact on river ecosystems is as small as possible. The provision of early and effective public participation is one of the key elements of sound EIAs, which increases the legitimacy of any project,” commented Janez Kopač, director of the Energy Community Secretariat.

“The adverse environmental and social impacts of large hydropower plants are well known. The report also highlights the serious consequences of a multitude of small power plants that are now actively promoted across the Balkans in some of the most valuable Natura 2000 sites without adequate measures for the protection of nature,” said Petra Remeta, Freshwater program manager in WWF Adria.

Evidently, action is urgently needed at all levels, from the EU and major investment banks, to the individual governments, regulators, experts, investors and consultants, for whom the report lists 25 recommendations, including a regional study on energy and protected areas and the development of guidelines for the preparation of EIA/SEA studies. The report also provides detailed recommendations to individual governments in order to help improve EIA/SEA procedure and content in the future.