

The involvement of the public in environmental assessment of plans and projects in Greece

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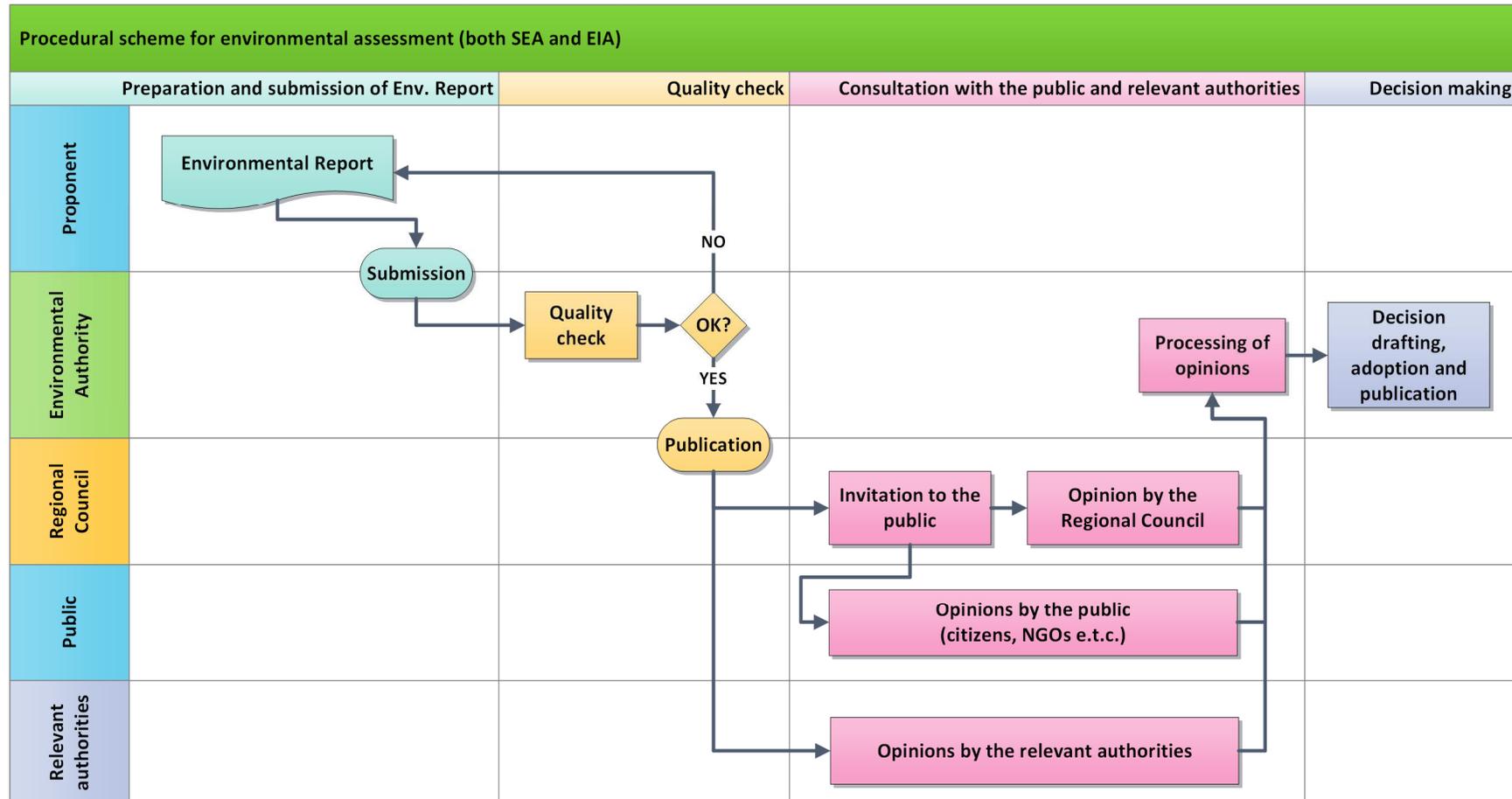
Environmental assessment of plans and projects in Greece

- Deriving from EU *acquis*, Greece has implemented, since decades now, a thorough and transparent system of environmental assessment of plans and projects.
- The system has two pillars:
 - Strategic Environmental Assessment (**SEA**), applied for plans or programmes.
 - Environmental Impact Assessment (**EIA**), applied for projects and activities.
- Following the complete separation of SEA and EIA Directives at EU level, Greece applies two discrete legal and procedural frameworks.
So, the SEA for plans/programmes is completely separated by the EIA for projects/activities.
- The first level (SEA) produces guidance and requirements for the second level (EIA).
- Although the procedures are independent, there are a lot of similarities both at the administrative and at the consultation level.



Environmental assessment of plans and projects in Greece

The procedural approach is similar between EIA and SEA



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Engagement of the public during the environmental assessments

- Public consultation is a key component of both SEA and EIA processes.
- What is “public consultation” according to Greek law?
 - **Publication of the environmental impact assessment report, which includes a non technical summary.**
 - **Invitation to the public to access the above info on a nearby location or via the internet.**
 - **Allow for a proper time-frame for consulting the public concerned (e.g. 45 working days for EIA, that is almost two months, twice the minimum requirement of EIA Directive).**
 - **Instructions on how to send in opinions and comments.**
- Is it possible to skip public consultation in environmental assessments?
No! In practice, every EIA or SEA includes public consultation.
There were rare cases, less than 5 during the last 10 years, when immediate action was necessary and there was not enough time to consult with the public. These cases were treated as exemptions, including the notification of European Committee.



Engagement of the public during the environmental assessments

There are two additional forms of public engagement during EIA procedures:

- In addition to public consultation, which is obligatory for new projects or major modifications, Greek law provides for another form of public engagement, when screening of modifications is performed. In such cases, competent authority updates the public, by publishing the environmental screening report, but it is not obliged to enter into consultation (by waiting for incoming opinions by the public).
- When a preliminary assessment is carried out, as a scoping exercise, the public is informed about the content of the decision, at the end of the procedure. This ensures timely information of the public, in view of the upcoming full EIA procedure.



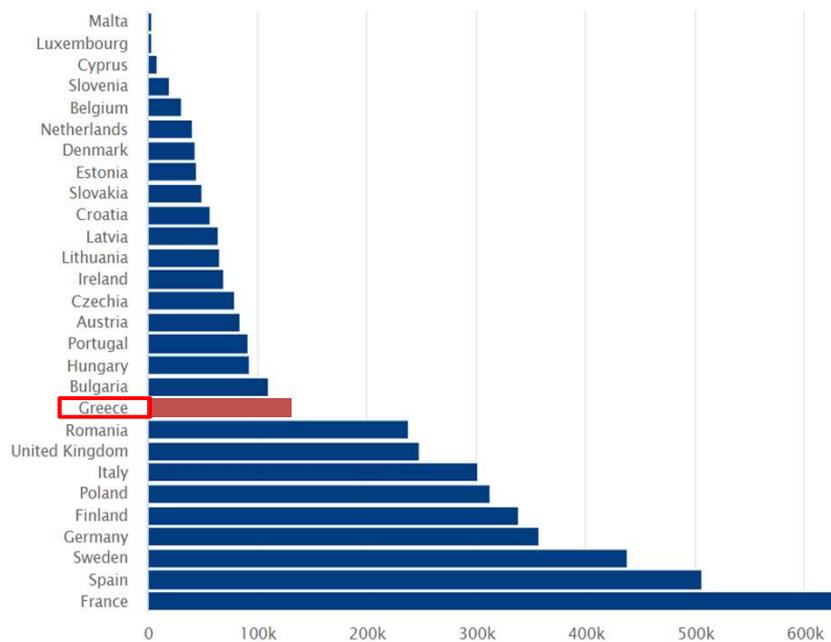
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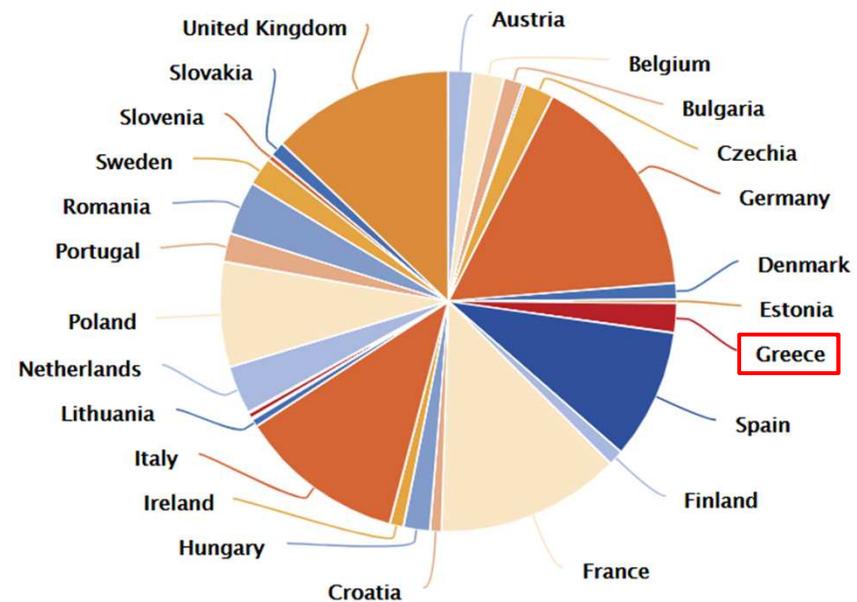
Basic data on public engagement during the environmental assessments

Greece is a rather small country, with a population of 10,8 million (10th in EU-28) and a surface area of 132.049 km² (also 10th between EU MS).

Surface area in thousands of square kilometres



Population by country



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Basic data on public engagement during the environmental assessments

The administrative structure of Greece comprises of:

- One central level of Ministries.
- A level of seven Decentralized Administrations.
- A regional level of thirteen Regions.

Internet use is widespread, but there are some population groups with limited acquaintance. A number of digital web-based public services are already in place, more are coming.

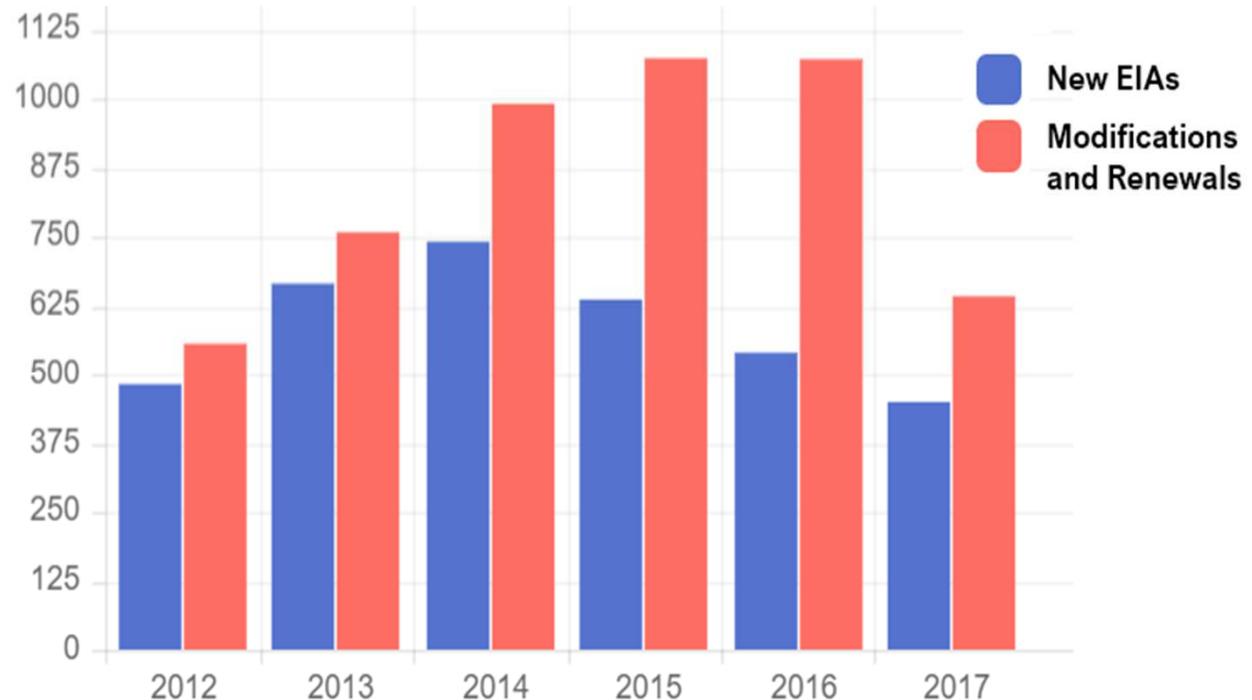


EIA and SEA procedures for big-scale projects/plans are carried out at the central level, while medium scale projects/plans have been assigned to the decentralized level.

Basic data on public engagement during the environmental assessments

A number between **400 and 750 EIAs** for new projects (i.e. after a full public consultation) are carried out every year in Greece.

The number of screening decisions (after public update but without consultation) is even larger, between **550 and 1050 cases**.



Concerning SEAs, although there are no accurate statistics, a figure between **50 and 100 cases** per year is a fair estimate.

How actively is the public involved?

- Previous figures show that there is plenty of opportunities for the public to be involved during EIA and SEA procedures.
- Experience shows that:
 - There is little interest for **individuals** to get engaged by sending in their opinions (except when they feel that their property is threatened!). Roughly, less than 1 in 10 EIAs includes interventions of individuals of local groups.
 - **NGOs** are involved more actively, but mainly in cases concerning biodiversity impacts or projects of significant importance. Most of the times, their opinions are well documented.



How seriously are the opinions of the public taken into account?

- Opinions of the public (individuals or organizations) are taken really seriously into account by the environmental competent authority:
 - Any opinion containing objections or recommendations is transmitted to the developer, with a request for specific relevant action.
 - The developer usually proposes improvements or adaptations of the initial design, to meet (at least some of) the requirements related to this opinion. Alternatively, extra documentation is prepared by the developer to examine in more detail the issues raised by the opinion.
 - The environmental authority evaluates both views, scrutinizing facts and estimations, and finally makes a determination which has to be justified and transparently documented.
- All this processing must be reflected in the rationale of the decision and will be scrutinized if the decision is taken to court.
- Note: access to justice for appealing environmental decisions is completely open in Greece. Anyone can challenge such decisions by providing very little evidence on his interest.



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Is this level of public engagement adequate?

- From a legal point of view, all provisions are in place and all procedures are followed minutely. A number of decisions of the Supreme Court verify that the framework for the involvement of the public in environmental decision-making is adequate.
- In practice, participation is rather low. Here are some personal views on why is that:
 - EIA reports are big, technical studies, hardly comprehensible by the average citizen. Although a non technical summary is included, this barely makes things easier. Most of the times people do not feel they have the capacity to deal with such an extended scientific report. On the other hand, the challenges that the EIA report will face by the administration experts or in court, lead inevitably in exhaustive documentations for every issue, ending up in a several hundred pages report.



Is this level of public engagement adequate?

(Cont'd)

- People don't have the time to get actively engaged in environmental consultations, when their motivation is plain sensitivity. Only in particular cases of personal interest (not necessarily environmental), individuals or local groups enter the process of digging in the environmental report and express their views and/or objections.
- The methods of invitation of the public and the availability of the environmental information may not be as efficient as necessary. Some years ago, it was rather difficult to access the environmental report, but now it's readily available on the internet. The announcement procedure was also inefficient, but now is significantly improved, mainly with the availability of personal notification to the registered users of the EIA web platform (citizens included).



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Are there ways to enhance public involvement in environmental assessments?

- Is it really necessary to enhance public involvement in environmental assessments? The latest amendment of EU EIA Directive has taken only a small step, by setting a minimum time-frame of 30 days for public consultation
- In Greece, public involvement in environmental assessments is considered useful not only for the protection of environment, but also as a mean to achieve **social** engagement in the decision-making process concerning the plan or the project itself.
- Are there ways to get the public to be more frequently and extensively involved in environmental decision making? Will such engagement contradict some development goals? The answers are not predefined, so let's just think and talk about it.



Thank you!



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