Draft Letter to the editor of Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal

**Can Tour de France inspire SEA effectiveness? An analogy to encourage a broader system thinking**

Effectiveness is intensely debated in this journal (e.g. the 2019 special issue made by Therivel and Gonzales 2019 and Cashmore et al. 2020). SEA effectiveness is often understood as ‘how well [SEA] works or whether it works as intended and meets the purposes for which it is designed’ (Sadler 1996). The debates centers around a series of elements related to SEA, e.g. competences, guidance and legislation. At the same time, a strong discourse on SEA and its contribution to UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is evolving with the aim of changing society to become more sustainable (UNECE 2017, Kørnøv et al. 2000, González Del Campo et al. 2020). As we will argue in this letter, these ambitions require us to reconsider our approach to SEA effectiveness, as it usually has too narrow a focus for these ambitions. Rather, we need to employ a wider system perspective on change and effectiveness. For that purpose, we use the analogy of Tour de France. This may at first seem odd or even obscure, but unconventional analogies have previously shown to bring thoughts and viewpoints out of the comfort zone and thereby allow new insight (see e.g. Weick’s (2001) use of jazz music as an analogy for how we make sense of our surroundings).

We will compare the “instrument” SEA with the bicycle as an instrument and the Tour competition with the effort of contributing to the SDGs through SEA. The actors involved in the Tour are equaled to actors involved making change through SEA, as processes involves the use of an instrument to go through a (often demanding) process to achieve the goals. Comparing SEA with a bicycle makes sense as to the fact that SEA is an international well-defined “instrument” that is highly depending on how human uses it. Many resources are invested in optimizing both instruments, hereunder its design and how user-friendly it is.

However, although the optimization of the bicycle is important, it is only one among many parameters that is decisive for the success of the cyclist. A superb bicycle cannot make everyone win a stage. So we need to go beyond the instrument to understand what makes a difference to the success of a cyclist. The Tour de France analogy may inspire our thinking about, what elements of the wider system may be interesting to consider when debating effectiveness.

**A system of actors**

The outline of actors relevant for achieving ambitions starts with the cyclist. She needs to be in a good shape, have the right mindset, and have the experience and intuition to know, when to be attentive and when to attack. Comparing the cyclist to the SEA practitioner, it is well described in EA literature that the practitioner is important for EA effectiveness (e.g. Arts et al. 2013, Runhaar et al. 2013, Zhang et al. 2018, Kørnøv et al. 2015, Stoeglehner et al. 2009).

Secondly, the cyclist needs good at good team of cyclists to support her in the process, e.g. by taking leads from time to time, inform about the situation, and discuss strategies. Whereas composition of competences in SEA teams are acknowledged (e.g. Zhang et al. 2013, Thérivel and Minas 2002), the importance of their cooperation and performance as a team seems underexplored in EA literature on effectiveness.

Thirdly, the manager of the team placed in the car behind the peloton must be a good strategist, when assessing the situation and the work by the cyclists, when making decisions among alternative strategies. Quite appropriately for our analogy, the character and relevance of the alternative strategies changes as time passes in the race. The manager may compare to the SEA project leader, who has the overall responsibility of the team’s performance. In terms of SEA effectiveness, the SEA project leader is e.g. found to have an important role in terms of communicating with decision-makers (Van Buuren and Nooteboom 2009).

Fourthly, the sponsors of the team of cyclists are critical for the success. Without a sponsor, no cyclist or a cycle. The sponsor may not directly interfere with the race, but she has clear expectations to the results. For SEA effectiveness, this may compare to the decision-makers among the developer and authorities. Their commitment is well known to be crucial for SEA effectiveness (e.g. Runhaar and Driessen, 2007; Sheate and Partidário, 2010).

Fifthly, we have the audience, who can play an important role for the cyclist’s ambitions, either by encouraging her in difficult moments or being so engaged that it is difficult for the cyclist to see a way forward. The audience may compare with public and stakeholders in the planning process, although the level of encouragement and worth shipping of SEA practitioners are not comparable. Furthermore, like the sponsors in the Tour, developers are also often highly occupied with reactions among the public. In SEA effectiveness literature, the importance of the public is documented by e.g. Lyhne et al. (2017).

Sixthly, we have the general director of the Tour de France. She decides on a range of rules, e.g. on the technical requirements of the bike and the communication between the cyclist and the manager. For SEA effectiveness, this may equal the regulators and guidance providers that set legislative standards for SEA (see Retief et al. 2007, Noble 2008).

Seventhly, we have the tour officials who makes sure that everything is in accordance with the rules. These may translate to quality assurance institutions and mechanisms governing SEA implementation. SEA literature has e.g. outlined the importance of the Netherland’s Commission for Environmental Assessment (Lyhne et al. 2015).

Until now, the described actors are at least somewhat recognized in debates on SEA effectiveness. But our system of actors is not completed. We must not forget the bicycle mechanics and the masseurs. The masseurs are highly important for keeping the cyclist fit for the race, and the bicycle mechanics for keeping the cycle fit for purpose. Who are they, when comparing with SEA effectiveness? The masseurs may be the family and friends of the SEA practitioners; those that make the practitioner relax after a hard day of work and brings energy into the life of the practitioners. The bicycle mechanics may be the team of specialists, who makes sure the SEA (the cycle) is ready for the next stage. That may entail programmers refining the software we use, data experts providing data for the SEA analyses, etc. If they do a sloppy job, it is much more difficult to make a change as SEA practitioner.

Furthermore, journalists and communication play an important role in the Tour. They ensure communication of the progression of the tour and cyclists, and they ensure transparency in terms of team composition, rules of the game, performance, etc., so that everyone is informed. SEA effectiveness literature emphasize communicative capacities among the SEA practitioners (Sheate and Partidário, 2010), but the importance of journalists and other communicators seems underexplored in terms of SEA effectiveness.

**Learning from the analogy**

The analogy of Tour de France shed lights on the ‘hidden’ actors that are important for achieving a goal. It shows that it is relevant to discuss effectiveness of one element to optimize it (e.g. the instruments of the bicycle or the SEA), but a far broader focus is needed to be successful in achieving goals that is depending on a broader range of actors. We argue, based on the analogy, that our efforts on SEA effectiveness in itself will have a minor role in efforts of achieving sustainability and SDGs. SEA itself cannot make ‘substantive outcomes’, as often called for (e.g. Bond and Dusik 2020). This becomes clear, when looking at different forms of effectiveness (Cashmore et al. 2004):

* Low substantive effect of SEA may be perfectly fine, if it means that planners and decision-makers already make decisions that promote SDGs.
* Low procedural effectiveness of SEA may be perfectly fine, if it means that the process already and more flexible takes place in collaborative governance processes with involvement and commitment.
* Low transformative effectiveness may be perfectly fine, if the role of supporting transformation is better rooted through other processes or arenas.

Similarly, high effectiveness of SEA may not necessarily mean much unless we now the ‘starting point’ of the system’s performance. As an example, findings in SEA effectiveness literature such as SEA leading “to fine-tuning of plan policy wording and a more robust choice of development sites, but to only limited wider influence on the plan” (Thérivel 2019, p. 266), does not say much about efforts of making societal change, unless a broader system thinking is applied.

Worst case is that we as a SEA community focus so much on a narrow SEA effectiveness that we suboptimise the contribution of the system towards the SDGs! Second worst is that we invest our resources on the part of the system that has less potential for improvement. Are we aware if our narrow focus on SEA effectiveness has already led to such unwanted consequences?

The Tour analogy may also inspire us to have attention to how many actors needs to be aligned to win the Tour and changing society to become more sustainable. The many actors must have a common interest and motivation for contributing to the same overall goal of change.

If we, as a SEA community, wants to make a change, we need to go beyond our well-established focus on the optimization of SEA and have a broader system perspective – recognizing that many things goes on ‘outside’ the SEA. We need to think out of the box to explore ways to improve our engagement with a series of actors as outlined in the analogy. Some would perhaps argue that practice has always been broader than SEA effectiveness, and that SEA effectiveness is somewhat isolated theoretical and perhaps self-centered concept. Perhaps this critique reflects a shift in mindset and literature from a time in which the SEA community was building identity and therefore had a need to look inwards, to a time in which the SEA community is sufficiently strong to go beyond the narrow focus on SEA effectiveness to enhance the contribution to sustainability.

Of course, SEA is not about winning a race, and luckily making a SEA is normally a less demanding task than completing a Tour de France stage (or at least the full Tour). Although the analogy is not perfect, it is sufficient for our purpose: To inspire the SEA community, and especially people concerned with SDGs, to go beyond SEA effectiveness and employ a broader system perspective on SEA effectiveness.

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