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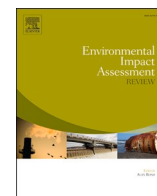
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Motivating a change in environmental assessment practice: Consultant perspectives on SDG integration

Emilia Ravn Boess^{a,b,*}, Ainhoa González Del Campo^c

^a DCEA, Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment, Department of Planning, Aalborg University, Rendsburggade 14, Aalborg 9000, Denmark

^b COWI A/S, Parallelvej 2, Kongens Lyngby 2800, Denmark

^c School of Geography, University College of Dublin, Co., Dublin, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The responsive nature of environmental assessment (EA) subjects it to the political conversations that drive future planning and development, one of the most relevant being the increased attention given to a sustainable transition. This political attention has catalyzed an interest amongst practitioners to urge traditional EA practice towards one with an increased regard for sustainability objectives, understood, in this case, to be guided and driven by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a theoretical framework of a practitioner's 'spaces for practice' and interviews with environmental consultants in Denmark and the Republic of Ireland, this paper unfolds the motivation that consultants have for integrating SDGs in their practice. This includes both outlining the overarching opportunities that enable the adoption of new practices and the perceived capacities that demotivate integration attempts. The results are then compared and correlated across both countries, showing an emerging motivation from consultants for integrating SDGs and shifting EA practice towards aligning with the strategic goals, but also identifying challenges hindering the implementation of this motivation in practice. These range from being intrinsic conditions of the individual practitioner to extrinsic conditions of the relations between practitioners and stakeholder groups. The study suggests directing attention towards theory on how practitioners construct practice to better address the divide between SDG integration in theory and in practice.

1. Introduction

Within academia on environmental assessment (EA), there is a circulating expectation that the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can guide practice towards one with a higher regard for sustainability objectives (González Del Campo et al., 2020; Kørnøv et al., 2020; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2019; Hacking, 2019; Partidário and Verheem, 2019). Whether this be through the adaptation of new innovative tools that establish the SDGs within the procedural execution of the practice itself or through a different understanding of what constitutes sustainable planning and development, the SDGs are expected to solidify more objective-led tendencies within EA practice and provide decision-support throughout the process (González Del Campo et al., 2020; Kørnøv et al., 2020; Hacking, 2019; Partidário and Verheem, 2019). When discussing SDGs in the context of EA, their commonality of purpose is often emphasized, referring to their common ambition to guide and promote a sustainable development. Although with a focus on strategic environmental assessment (SEA), González Del Campo et al.

(2020: 2) recognize that EA and SDGs are independent processes that can operate without one another, but that there is “a strong case to be made for a mutual gain... where SDGs define the ‘ends’ and SEA can provide the ‘means’”.

Depending on how they are embedded, this may constitute a shift in the way that EA-practitioners conduct future assessments. Research has highlighted that there are different ways of integrating SDGs and that the influence on EA differs accordingly. Kørnøv et al. (2020) describe three overarching levels for using the SDGs: ‘non-integration’ which implies mentioning the SDGs without an inherent influence on the EA nor the decisions being made; ‘conservative’ integration in which the SDGs are integrated in traditional EA processes; and ‘radical’ integration implying that decisions throughout the EA are made in accordance with the SDGs. Just as with González Del Campo et al. (2020), the integration framework articulates a range of possible relations between the SDGs and EA, highlighting their mutualism while bringing into question which framework ought to be the more prominent and determinant one. Kørnøv et al. (2020) and González Del Campo et al. (2020) demonstrate

* Corresponding author at: Department of Planning, Aalborg University, Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark.

E-mail address: emiliarb@plan.aau.dk (E. Ravn Boess).

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that the EA can utilize SDGs to ensure the consideration of strategic goals in its processes, preserving their essence in EA's traditional framework. But EA can also be viewed as a process that is subservient to globally defined, strategic frameworks, and one of many tools used to ensure that on-the-ground development supports the politically determined goals. In this way, the SDGs become influential determinants of the way that EA is conducted and how assessments and decisions within EA are being made.

Moreover, SDGs reflect a wide array of the topics addressed in EA, its corresponding EU directives (EC 2001; EC 2014) and guidance documents (González Del Campo et al., 2020; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2019; Hacking, 2019). This overlap is with particular relevance to the biophysical SDGs, such as SDG 7, SDG 12, SDG 14, and SDG 15 (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2019) bringing into question the extent to which EAs should in practice adhere to the broader social and economic parameters also. Despite debates concerning the process' inherent environmental focus, Kørnøv et al. (2005) comments on the wavering tendency for EA to remain holistic in its assessment, Hacking (2019) identifies 'stretching' EA, i.e. expanding its scope, as one way to strengthen the comprehensiveness (and other sustainability features) of impact assessment, and Ravn Boess et al. (2021a) argues using the SDGs to fill context-dependent gaps in EA practice, improving the ability for EA to address particularly social and economic parameters. Cashmore et al. (2007) and Cashmore et al. (2004) articulate the need to strengthen the prominence of sustainable development in EA and Pope et al. (2013: 15) accentuate the "lack of integrated consideration of broader sustainability issues" as an inherent weakness of the process. This research therefore builds on the literary inference that a broader approach to sustainability could strengthen the practice and attempts also to uncover the prominence of these perspectives from the practitioners themselves.

With such speculations, it can be questioned how these changes in practice are to commence – are significant changes to practice subject to new legislative demands, or can we instead turn to the drive of individuals conducting the practice? Some theoretical work addresses how practitioners can influence their own practice and shape the normative and procedural elements of practice through their discretionary freedom (Ravn Boess, 2023; Zhang et al., 2018; Kågström, 2016; Kågström and Richardson, 2015). Practitioners are in this context considered to be EA authorities, planners, developers, and consultants, while the term stakeholders is used to also include external collaborators, such as the public or NGOs. Morrison-Saunders and Bailey (2009: 285) have addressed consultants as having roles that make them especially adept at guiding EA practice and as individuals that can "... make a difference to EIA outcomes through pushing the boundaries ever outward towards sustainable development expectations and needs". This research explores how the individual consultant interprets this potential in terms of integrating SDGs and how the potential unfolds in practice. It thereby juxtaposes the evolving theory in the field of EA with the persisting perspectives from those expected to solidify the changes in practice. In this way, this research is a form of empirical test and validation of pre-existing theories in environmental assessment and its regard for sustainable development, that Cashmore et al. (2007) argue so fervently for. Similarly, it lays a foundation for bridging the theoretical hypotheses and the practical execution, deeply encouraged by researchers (Cashmore et al., 2004; Cashmore et al., 2007; Pope et al., 2013; Kørnøv, 2015).

In the context above, this paper focuses on examining consultants' approaches to straying from norms of practice and introducing new methods for driving innovation, rooted in Danish and Irish EA contexts. It explores the composition of EA consultants' individual motivations, as well as how they perceive the motivation of other stakeholder groups, in terms of opportunities and capacities in the pursuit of integrating the SDGs. The paper first addresses the initial research question: *What perspectives constitute consultants' motivation to enable an integration of SDGs in EA practice in Denmark and Ireland?* It then goes on to address a second research question: *How do these perspectives align with existing debates on SDG integration in EA?* The paper answers these questions by

interviewing active practitioners and using their thinking and insights as an empirical basis, with the objective of understanding most recent developments and revealing insights that can support and guide the advancement of EA and sustainability integration. The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, it positions the research within the theoretical context. Secondly, it describes the methodological approach of interviewing consultants in the two countries. Thereafter, an analysis of the interviews through the theoretical framework is undertaken, shedding light on how a consultant perceives the practice of integrating SDGs, before comparing and correlating the two country contexts. The paper concludes by making final remarks on contributions to evolving debates and knowledge in EA theory and practice and makes recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical approach: constituting motivation through 'spaces for practice'

It is expected that an integration of SDGs in EA will require new interpretations of practice, whether it be through the adoption of new methods or rethinking the strategic purpose for which an EA is conducted. Therefore, this research is interested in a theoretical approach that explains how a practice is constituted and how those constituents are influenced and changed to allow for a reinterpretation of practitioners' roles. This research draws upon the theoretical ideas that throughout an EA process, certain perceptions are 'filtered out' (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Lukes, 1974) because of apparent and experienced capacities, just as perceptions are 'filtered in' as new observed and experienced possibilities enrich a practitioner's understandings of what their practice could entail (Lyhne et al., 2021a; Stoecklechner et al., 2009). It is also positioned within theories suggesting the autonomy that practitioners have to supplement strict legislative frames with interpretative methods (Zhang et al., 2018), blurring the separation between objective knowledge and values (Kørnøv and Thissen, 2000) and formal and informal processes (Zhang et al., 2018; Martin and Morrison-Saunders, 2015; Christensen et al., 2005). The analysis in this paper is rooted in the theoretical framework of 'spaces for practice', presented in Ravn Boess (2023), which is a conglomeration of the aforementioned theoretical stances. The framework is used to contextualize the consultant's role in establishing and adapting their own practice, understanding that it is interpretive and informal just as much as it is formally structured by regulatory and statutory frames. 'Spaces for practice' claims that an EA practitioner's practice consists of 'spaces for motivation' and 'spaces for action', in which the former unfolds a practitioner's motivation for conducting what they consider to be appropriate practice and the latter addresses the actions performed that constitute the practice. The focus of this paper is on the motivation of consultants to change their practice in pursuit of the SDGs, as well as understandings of what this might entail and is therefore rooted in a consultant's 'spaces for motivation'. It does not make further comment on 'spaces for action'.

Motivation gives rise to the individual's perceptions of practice that guide the actions they go on to take. As such, it presents a critical foundation for any advancements in EA practice. However, motivation is shaped and influenced by internal and external sources (Ravn Boess, 2023). An EA process engages a variety of stakeholder groups (e.g. consultants, developers, planners, authorities, the public) and often several individuals within each of these groups (Lyhne et al., 2021b). The number of perspectives that feed into a practice is therefore plentiful and diverse, at times resulting in conflicting objectives, priorities, and motivations for conducting EA (Lyhne et al., 2021a). For this reason, 'spaces for motivation' can differ between practitioners, either within the same or from different stakeholder groups. *Intrinsic* understandings of an individual practitioner are surrounded by, embedded within, and often conditioned by several *extrinsic* understandings of practice. Motivation of an individual is restricted by *perceived* capacities and expanded by new *perceived* opportunities, both of which are determined in large part

by the values and norms that the individual brings into their practice (Zhang et al., 2018; Kornov and Thissen, 2000). In this research, perceived is thereby understood to be that which is unconfirmed by practice; the ideas, motivations, and ambitions that the consultant believes to be the appropriate way to conduct their practice. Inspired by Ravn Boess (2023), Fig. 1 demonstrates these capacities and opportunities in relation to intrinsic and extrinsic ‘spaces for motivation’, which are interrelated in the sense that “perceived capacities/opportunities of other stakeholders’ motivations influence a practitioner’s own motivation” (Ravn Boess, 2023: 7). In this way, an individual consultant’s motivation is influenced by inferences made about the motivation of extrinsic others (e.g. authorities, other consultants) before these have been either confirmed or disconfirmed in practice.

Based on the analytical framework, *intrinsic motivation* is about the individual consultant’s own perceptions of what constitutes appropriate practice, and what is at the very least perceived to be possible in their practice. *Extrinsic motivation* is about the motivation of the external others. This research addresses only the perceptions of consultants, therefore, the analysis of extrinsic motivation is limited to the assumptions the individual consultants draw about the motivation of others. These perceptions can in theory range from being mere speculation, and thereby unconfirmed in practice, to resulting in a readjustment of motivation and perceptions of practice in response to interactions with others or in attempted integration in practice.

3. Methods: gathering perspectives from practice

If turning to Lynham (2002) stages of theory development, this research concerns itself with the (dis)confirmation and application stages, operationalizing the theory and confirming or disconfirming parts of the theory’s postulations through empirical data directly from the context the theory attempts to explain. Adopting SDGs as an integrated part of EA practice entails altering not only the way that consultants perceive their practice, but also aligning the actions they take with these new perceptions. In other words, it requires the SDGs to be perceived as new opportunities within a consultant’s motivations, and that these new opportunities are not ‘filtered out’ along the way.

The empirical data used in this research is informed by interviews with 26 consultants conducting EAs in Denmark and the Republic of Ireland (Ireland from hereon). The interviews attempt to map out and explore the consultants’ perspective in the integration of SDGs as sustainability objectives within the EA process, given their significant role in influencing EA processes (Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009; Kågström, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018; Ravn Boess, 2023). The interviews contribute a better understanding of factors motivating their ambition to navigate towards what they perceive to be appropriate EA practice, as well as factors perceived to restrict their ability to act accordingly.

Interview participants have been selected on the basis of their extensive experience and expertise with Danish or Irish EA processes and familiarity with the SDGs. Most of the interviewees are from some of the prominent EA consultancies in the respective countries – both countries are of similar size and EA practice is largely conducted by a handful of large consultancies. Due to the wishes of the interviewees, their

respective consultancies are anonymous, and because the focus of this research is on the individual practitioner’s perspectives, assuming a certain autonomy over their own practice and their motivations – rather than on organizational cultures and strategies – the authors determined that the responses can be analyzed independent of the respective consultancy context. Finding Danish interviewees started with semi-structured interviews at a consultancy with which the first author has affiliation and continued with other relevant practitioners as their EA expertise and involvement in SDG-integration was revealed. Contact with Irish consultants was established through the second author, complying with the same criteria. While the number of selected interviewees is limited, they represent the most active EA consultancies in each country and each interviewee has been directly involved in the preparation of many SEAs and/or EIAs. Their opinions and experiences are therefore illustrative of the current state-of-the-art in SDG integration into SEA/EIA. Additionally, the number of interviews were selected to be comparable between the two countries while also reaching empirical saturation. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015), meaning that they were accompanied by a malleable set of questions, meant to inspire conversation, rather than to predetermine it. The interview details for the two countries are outlined in Table 1.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded using NVIVO according to whether the statement was a perceived opportunity or capacity in line with the ‘space for motivation’ framework (1. Intrinsic motivation, perceived opportunities; 2. Intrinsic motivation, perceived capacities; 3. Extrinsic motivation, perceived opportunities; and 4. Extrinsic motivation, perceived capacities). Following the initial coding exercise, the statements were then grouped into themes representing similar perceived opportunities/capacities.

4. Results from interviews: perspectives on motivation

The following describes the main findings from the interviews with Danish and Irish interviewees. A more detailed description of the contents of the interviews can be accessed in Supplementary Material. Table 2 provides a condensed overview of intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives from Denmark and Ireland as well as demonstrating the differences (in italics) of these opinions.

4.1. Intrinsic motivation

4.1.1. Perceived opportunities for the individual consultant

4.1.1.1. Danish consultants. Danish consultants were intrinsically

Table 1
Interview details from Denmark and the Republic of Ireland.

Country	Total nr. of interviewees	Time span
Denmark	15	03/2021–02/2022
Republic of Ireland	11	10/2022–11/2022

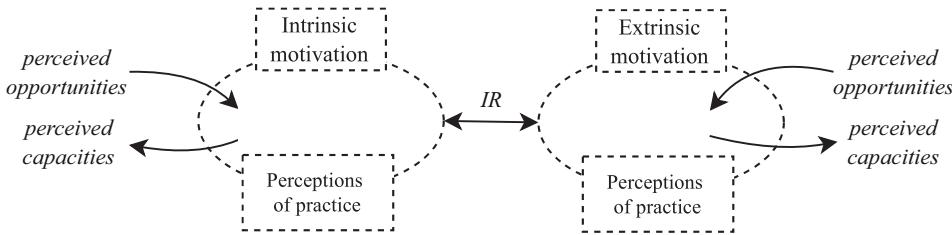


Fig. 1. The ‘spaces for motivation’ show how perceived opportunities and capacities influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to become a practitioner’s perceptions of how to conduct their practice. Intrinsic and extrinsic spaces are interrelated (IR) through inferences of the other’s perceptions of practice that influences a practitioner’s own motivation.

Table 2

A summary of results for intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The differences between perspectives from Denmark and the Republic of Ireland are italicized.

	Denmark	The Republic of Ireland
Intrinsic motivation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizational and individual interest 2. A curiosity for exploring synergies 3. Aligning EA with strategic objectives 4. EA as a process for design 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizational and individual interest 2. A curiosity for exploring synergies 3. Aligning EA with strategic objectives 4. EA as a process for design
Perceived opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Improving EA quality and transparency 6. Communicating sustainability 7. Complying with legislation 8. Expanding EA scope 9. <i>Methodologies and know-how</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Improving EA quality and transparency 6. Communicating sustainability 7. Complying with legislation 8. Expanding EA scope 9. <i>Available resources</i>
Perceived capacities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Influence of other practitioners 2. Procedural incompatibilities 3. EA not as a process for design 4. Legislative incompatibilities 5. Lacking resources and know-how 6. <i>Varying consultant interest</i> 7. <i>Unestablished methodologies</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Influence of other practitioners 2. Procedural incompatibilities 3. EA not as a process for design 4. Legislative incompatibilities 5. Lacking resources and know-how 6. <i>Uncertain added benefits</i> 7. <i>Consultant unawareness</i> 8. <i>Organizational and cultural change</i>
Extrinsic motivation		
Perceived opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicating sustainability 2. <i>SDGs as a business model</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicating sustainability
Perceived capacities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lacking demand and/or interest 2. Consequences for approval 3. Legislative concerns 4. <i>EA not as a process for design</i> 5. <i>Lacking know-how</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lacking demand and/or interest 2. Consequences for approval 3. Legislative concerns 4. <i>Influence of other practitioners on clients</i> 5. <i>Client unawareness</i> 6. <i>Uncertain added benefits</i>

motivated, both on the individual level, but six consultants also recognizing that there are organizational interests in remaining competitive. Ten Danish consultants pointed to being motivated by wanting to make assessments more strategic and better aligned with sustainability, seven of which referred to this as a societal obligation. Three of the ten expressed an interest in using the SDGs as guidelines or parameters for determining what future plans and projects to pursue, such that future planning and development is directed at reaching the sustainability the SDGs advocate for. Four also predicted that the SDGs can be used to bring new ambitions to plans and projects, while three commented that bringing SDGs into EA may be a convenient way of monitoring whether plans and projects live up to the goals they are claiming to fulfill. Five consultants had an understanding that addressing the SDGs will strengthen the quality of the EA in terms of addressing a more comprehensive set of environmental objectives.

There was a reoccurring emphasis on method development and how such methods are utilized, challenging the way EA is traditionally conducted and making the process far more proactive than reactive in its role in planning and development. Four expressed a general interest in being actively involved in the innovation of new methods. With this came an expectation that the methods required for introducing SDGs in

EA practice transform the way in which EA is being procedurally interpreted and used. One consultant said,

“The danger is that we, in integrating the SDGs, keep doing as we have always done, if we only use a few fixed sustainability targets, as they use EA as a reactive tool rather than proactively (...) We have a strong tradition for ensuring that a threshold won’t be exceeded or that something won’t be destroyed. Much more than we have a tradition for looking at where we can improve the project positively beyond legislation. And only occasionally, there is room to be a little bit creative. But that space is too small.”

This reflects an interest in expanding the space for creative thinking in the Danish practice, recognizing also that SDGs and the objectives presented there are novel to EA. One consultant identified the ability for the SDGs to provide a better understanding of the content of the existing EA topics, while three others claimed they are an opportunity to revisit and perhaps expand upon the traditional scope of EA practice and supplement with new perspectives granted by the SDGs. Integrating the SDGs in EA could, in the eyes of two Danish consultants, work to improve the transparency of the impacts assessed, which could be a benefit for better public engagement. Two consultants expected an assessment of SDGs to highlight negative impacts otherwise not detected in traditional EA practice, which is a combination of the expectation that SDGs can supplement with new and previously unexplored topics for assessment, and that comparing impacts against SDGs will present a new way of assessing impact.

4.1.1.2. Irish consultants. Similar to Danish perspectives, a general interest in working with the SDGs (mentioned by eight Irish consultants) stemmed from wanting better alignment of EA with strategic objectives, using goals and targets in EA that are streamlined across the United Nations (UN). Two consultants wished the SDGs to be a part of decision-making, another as a way of changing the cultural society and increasing the regard for sustainability in plans and projects. The interviews also revealed a consultant-perceived benefit to using the SDGs to be the increased visibility over the implications of a plan/project, and a framework for monitoring both negative and positive impacts. Five of eleven consultants wanted SDGs to inform EA objectives (called strategic environmental objectives or SEOs in Irish practice) in which the SDGs could be a criterion for target compliance. Another two advocated for identifying the overlap between the objectives, policies and targets from other directives already referenced in EA practice to the SDGs.

Besides the one Irish consultant that said, *“I always tell the guys that are working for me to think outside the box. Don’t just stick to (...) legislation. Look at the bigger picture because, ultimately, that’s what we need to be doing”*, Irish consultants were more conservative than Danish when it came to revolutionizing practice. Three consultants expressed a curiosity for using the SDGs to expand the scope of EA, but about half (5 of 11 consultants) emphasized that they already to a large extent implicitly work with the SDGs by addressing other objectives and directives that cover similar topics and ambitions (e.g. the Water Framework Directive). This was translated to a perception for it to be easy for consultants to work with the SDGs, where the topics already align with other planning objectives or EA topics and would thereby not require additional resources, and while needing better understandings of how to operationalize the SDGs, working with them would not stray drastically from the traditional methods of practice.

4.1.2. Perceived capacities for the individual consultant

4.1.2.1. Danish consultants. Danish consultants perceived the absence of the SDGs in EA legislation to hinder their integration, four claiming that this caused them to feel incapable of arguing for SDG integration to clients. Three of these four, including an additional three consultants felt entirely reliant on the maturity of the client in order to work with the SDGs. Consultants (five) recognized the inherent differences between the individual consultants being a challenge for implementation, both in

terms of their own motivation to integrate SDGs, but also in terms of how the term ‘sustainability’ is understood.

More than half of the interviewees (eight) revealed a general understanding that EA comes too late in the planning process to have an influence, one claiming that plan/project design is often set before conducting an EA. EA is thereby perceived to be too concrete a process to allow for abstract thinking and creative changes, despite the perceived opportunities. Several consultants (three) suggested that SDG integration was perhaps most effective in the processes that lie before EA, rather than integrated into the EA itself. Three Danish consultants claimed there to be an inherent incompatibility between EA and the SDGs: One consultant claimed that the sustainability addressed by the SDGs is considered too broad for EA, and another claimed that addressing the SDGs could nuance the details of the EA parameters from legislation but would not expand the scope of EA with new topics, while a third consultant expressed concern that relying solely on SDG targets to define the scope of EA could instead narrow the understanding of the EA topics.

An ambiguity of methodologies also meant that five consultants mentioned an uncertainty on how to go about integrating SDGs. Current methodologies for working with SDGs were seen by four consultants to result in hollow integration attempts, and there is a necessity for more resources, such as additional budget and time, from clients to develop more influential means for SDG integration. Establishing proper methodologies was observed as difficult because SDGs are challenging to operationalize and would require new, innovative ways of approaching EA practice.

4.1.2.2. Irish consultants. EA in Ireland is understood as an already well-established practice with predetermined methodologies and traditions and Irish EA practice is generally perceived as slow to adapt to new changes. Adopting SDGs therefore requires a cultural change, at both organizational (highlighted by two consultants) and individual levels. Because Irish consultants to a large degree felt they already address an extensive number of objectives (especially in SEA) and reference many directives, a prominent question from three consultants was whether there is a benefit to addressing the SDGs as yet another set of objectives. One consultant said,

“I’m picturing it as another layer of assessments (...) And so it’s it feels like more groundwork for me to do that’s covered by what I’m already doing.”

Another consultant called this an additional “administrative burden”, saying,

“It’s another document that they [clients] would have to (...) comply with and comment on. And what is the advantage? That has not been made clear yet.”

Irish consultants too felt an inherent reliance on client willingness to change practice beyond legislation, one referring to SDGs integration as “an extra service”. Another three mentioned that their role as a consultant is to deliver the work that they are commissioned to do and to make sure a client complies with legislation. SDGs were perceived by three as a “buy-in” by the client, as long as the SDGs are not a more direct and integrated part of the EA legislation. This perspective was often coupled with the opinion that since no statutory body enforces SDG integration, there is no formal added benefit to using them. A top-down encouragement of the SDGs (through legislation or EA guidance documents) was seen by five consultants as necessary in order for the SDGs to have an influence on decision-making processes, and for consultants to begin arguing for their integration.

Although three consultants recognized that the uncertainty of how to address them would require additional resources, this was more so in terms of human resources and a lacking awareness of SDGs amongst consultants, contrasting Danish consultants’ interest in concrete method development. Three Irish consultants also emphasized incompatibilities between EA and the SDGs, such as the fact that SDGs are too strategic

and high-level and must therefore be operationalized in local contexts relevant for EA for them to be applicable. Lastly, another two consultants claimed that using the SDGs to shape plan/project design is beyond the scope of assessments, as design processes often precede the EA, a process that mainly focuses on impact mitigation.

4.2. Extrinsic motivation

4.2.1. Perceived opportunities for external others

4.2.1.1. Danish consultants. Most Danish consultants (eleven) perceived a general increasing societal interest in addressing the SDGs resulting in a piqued interest by clients. Three had observed clients increasingly using SDGs in their own plans and projects and five consultants observed a growing interest from clients to communicate sustainability and hold their plans/projects accountable. Three consultants related this to the SDGs becoming a competitive parameter and potential business case. Several interviewees argued that the increasing interest may be because clients are being forced to accommodate a demand from citizens and investors. There was also a belief that a client would be interested and open, as long as a consultant could show them the benefit of working with the SDGs in EA and as long as it does not halt the plan/project approval.

4.2.1.2. Irish consultants. Just as Danish consultants, seven Irish consultants perceived there to be an increasing interest from other practitioners in seeing the SDGs integrated in EA. Two observed this in terms of their clients being open to new ideas and wanting to communicate sustainability of their plans/projects. Two others related it to an interest from NGOs and the public. One consultant claimed that having this transparency is a way for the public to regain confidence in plan-makers and regulators. However, just under half (5) observed that perhaps the greatest interest is from official government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who have, in some cases, encouraged addressing SDGs, particularly in SEAs.

4.2.2. Perceived capacities for external others

4.2.2.1. Danish consultants. While it was identified that there is a general increase in interest from external others in working with the SDGs, interviewees noted significant differences in clients and, perhaps more importantly, that increasing interest is not necessarily translated into a corresponding demand for SDGs integration. Five related this absent demand to a client’s concern for the consequences that using SDGs might have for the plan/project approval. According to two consultants, clients view EA as a formal process for plan/project approval, one observing that this means that they prioritize having an uncontroversial EA process that stays clear of content that could potentially end as a court case. This same consultant related it to “(...) wanting control over the process and especially the terms and demands concerning principal project design and alternatives. They [the clients] want to know from the start where it [the EA] will end”. A similar point was made by four consultants who perceived clients to be concerned about the compliance with legislation, and whether addressing the SDGs would compromise the legislative validity of the assessment.

Interviewees perceived that clients consider EA not to be a part of planning or project design and that the SDGs are more relevant for the planning and design phases that precede EA. Additionally, four consultants highlighted that lack of clients’ understanding on how to work with the SDGs in their own plan/project means a lack of understanding for the role of the SDGs in EA. Three consultants recognized that SDGs might reveal otherwise unidentified negative impacts, one of which claimed that clients would “... find it difficult to reveal to the public that they are not contributing to an SDG”.

4.2.2.2. Irish consultants. Like their Danish counterparts, Irish consultants recognized an increasing interest in SDGs from external practitioners, but four also commented that demands for working with the SDGs in EA remains limited. Two reasoned that it stemmed largely from an absent pressure from the public to center decision-making around the SDGs; an increasing demand through the public was identified as an efficient way of granting the SDGs greater attention in planning and development.

“I think a lot of people think that it’s not relevant or that it’s just a bit of a soft initiative with no real teeth to it. (...) we’re not seeing decisions being made or refusals of things using the SDGs as a reason (...) We’re not seeing members of the public (...) coming back and saying, that’s conflicting with the SDGs so you shouldn’t be given permission (...) Now if we did start to see that, that forces changes.”

Three consultants noted that another explanation is simply client unawareness; as one consultant put it, clients would be far more aware of the Water Framework Directive than the SDGs. Furthermore, two consultants observed that clients may choose not to integrate SDGs, out of a concern for how other stakeholder groups may respond. This relates to a concern regarding the consequences that working with SDGs might have on the plan/project approval – some of these concerns resonated also with Danish perceptions. Three consultants claimed that their clients may be interested in addressing SDGs in EA, under the condition that permission for the corresponding plan/project is not impacted, prioritizing an uncomplicated and quick EA process, that is not challenged in court. One consultant perceived that using SDGs may highlight negative impacts, bringing unwanted assessments that are more inclined to be objected by the public and NGOs and thereby, potential grounds for a court case. Three consultants claimed that clients would deem addressing SDGs unnecessary if it is not mandated by legislation especially in terms of addressing topics that are supplementary to traditional practice.

5. Discussion

This section explores the correlations and contrasts between Danish and Irish consultant perspectives to give a better indication of dominating motivations, and the perspectives that may still render SDG integration a challenging pursuit. It positions the interview perspectives in the context of other literature demonstrating how they align with and build upon current understandings, supporting prior research on SDG integration and changing EA practice.

5.1. A comparison of perspectives

Although recognizing the need for new methodologies was mentioned in both countries, it was far more dominant for Danish consultants, who focused on the need for innovative methods that challenge traditional practice. There was a perception that consultants have the competencies to work with SDGs, as well as the right know-how for developing these methods. The largest challenge was instead that the methods are unestablished and still disconnected from current EA practice, due to lacking resources from clients for consultants to experiment with approaches to SDG integration, mirroring concerns outlined in research. The focus on methods in the Danish context may also reflect the fact that working with the SDGs has been a more prominent part of EA practice, as suggested in the geographic mapping of SDG integration by [Ravn Boess et al. \(2021b\)](#), and has allowed to mature more than in Irish EA. Thus, Danish consultants may be more inclined to have considered the practicalities of *how* to use the SDGs than their Irish counterparts, whose primary focus remains *whether* SDGs should be integrated in the first place.

While both country contexts recognized the overlap between their current work and the SDGs, amongst Danish consultants, this was used to argue for a more thorough integration, deeming the entwining of the two to be an obvious pursuit. In Ireland, this brought into question

the benefit of addressing SDGs as yet another layer of assessments and objectives to an already long and complex assessment process, coupled with the notion that consultants already work implicitly with the SDGs, especially in their description of environmental objectives in SEAs. This inherent overlap was, nevertheless, also used in Ireland to argue that addressing SDGs would be an easy pursuit, in which the methods needed for integration would significantly resemble those already being used in their traditional practice. This may be explained by dominant perception from Irish consultants that the primary role for SDGs in EA practice would be as objectives, as opposed to a more integrated part of the assessment of EA topics or their implementation in design processes. This complies with the authors’ observations that Irish EA practice, as compared to Danish, consists of more established methods for correlating assessments with objectives.

Although not enough to shift the paradigms of practice, consultants from both countries recognized an emerging extrinsic interest in communicating and holding plans and projects accountable for contributing to a sustainable transition. Danish consultants related this interest primarily to clients, while a recognition of increased clientele interest was almost entirely absent from the Irish interviews. Instead, government officials, such as the EPA, were, in the Irish context, recognized to drive external pressures for integration. Irish consultants thereby identified a significant obstacle to be an unawareness of the SDGs amongst their clients, while Danish consultants, recognizing increasing client interest, again placed more emphasis on the unestablished methodologies and a lacking understanding of the influence of SDGs, than their Irish counterparts did. This may likewise be explained by the fact that discussions surrounding SDG integration in EA have persisted longer in the Danish context than in the Irish. Both countries, however, did recognize the extrinsic concern for consequences on plan/project consent that placing EA in the context of the SDGs may have.

5.2. Relating to and furthering debates on SDG integration

The academic debates most prominently address the overlap between SDGs and EA, the potentials that the global goals have in bringing normative directions to EA and the need for being mindful when developing methodologies for SDG integration. As far as intrinsic motivation goes, consultants from both Denmark and Ireland do not deviate far from these understandings, viewing them as an opportunity to redirect the way practice is being conducted today and better align EA with the objectives and goals governing future sustainable development. In both countries, there are already lingering curiosities for methods for guiding how the SDGs can be integrated, and where in the EA process they belong; are they a new layer of objectives to consider, can they be factors in the assessment of significance, or can they influence plan/project design if integrated early enough?

Although inherent disagreements on whether SDGs should expand the scope of EA beyond bio-physical parameters, a majority perceive that societal and political trajectories require strengthening the commitment of projects and plans to a broad sustainability. This aligns with the prediction by [Hacking \(2019\)](#) that SDGs can improve the comprehensiveness and ‘stretch’ EA on a variety of topics in order to “(...) *progress from traditional EIA to sustainability assessment*” (6), which is also supported by [Ravn Boess et al. \(2021a\)](#), in which the SDGs were used to reveal gaps in EIA scoping practices, particularly in terms of socio-economic parameters. The interviewees also recognized the relevance of the SDGs at SEA level of planning, legitimizing also the suggestion by [Hacking \(2019\)](#) to ‘combine’ techniques (such as SEA, EIA, social impact assessment (SIA), etc.) as an alternative to ‘stretching’ EA, and to enhance what would otherwise be more locally focused and reactive EA with aspirations gained from considering the strategic context. Furthermore, the interviewees revealed an interest in strengthening EA practice in terms of its strategicness, concerning the way it relates and responds to political goals. This mirrors [Hacking \(2019\)](#) and [Morrison-Saunders et al. \(2019\)](#) claims that SDGs can help

direct focus towards sustainability as an assessment goal, but also the objective-driven orientation of EA encouraged by Partidário and Verheem (2019) and González Del Campo et al. (2020) as well as the paradigm shift argued for by Partidário (2020).

If referring to Kørnøv et al. (2020) framework for SDG integration, most of the functions of SDGs perceived by both Danish and Irish consultants align with conservative integration in the sense that SDGs remain fixed to a traditional practice. In some cases, consultants wanted SDGs to expand the scope of the EA topics and in others, use them as objectives. These forms of integration may provide new perspectives and valuable inputs to an EA process that inherently stretches practice, but it still places traditional practice at the foreground and uses SDGs as supplemental elements to EA, rather than dominant and determining factors. With that said, Danish consultants seemed more prepared than Irish consultants (with a few exceptions) to view SDGs as an opportunity for rethinking practice, hinting perhaps at a willingness to – or at the very least a curiosity for – implementation resembling ‘radical’ integration. Danish consultants placed more emphasis on developing innovative methodologies, while Irish consultants were keener to adopt SDGs as additional objectives, but within the frame of their traditional and existing methodologies. Radical integration would place SDGs at the forefront of EA and allow for a more proactive adherence to objectives, as also argued by González Del Campo et al. (2020).

Other research on SDGs in EA is more directly concentrated on method development, Morrison-Saunders et al. (2019) wishing to “gear up” impact assessment as a vehicle for SDGs, Kørnøv et al. (2020) warning against the risk of green-washing and ignoring unexploited potentials for better decision-making, and Ravn Boess et al. (2021b) arguing the need to experiment with new methods to better understand the consequences of SDG integration. The interviews revealed common understandings that methods are difficult to conjure often in terms of the in-operationalizability of the SDGs, but also in terms of the broad sustainability that is perceived unnecessary to address in the more environmental focus that EA is seen to have. These points suggest that while absent methodological approaches may remain a dominating challenge, then using SDGs is just as much about how the individual practitioner understands their role and whether they feel capable of adapting their practice accordingly to adopt new methodologies, which is addressed in the next section.

5.3. Elaborating the practitioner's role in adapting practice

Another commonly expressed capacity in both countries was the influence that other practitioners have on consultants, revealing that consultants still, to a large extent, see their role as executing a client demand. In general, an understanding that extrinsic perspectives are dominant in preventing, or at the very least challenging, SDG integration persists throughout the interviews. Morrison-Saunders and Bailey (2009) point to how authorities can benefit from the interdisciplinary competencies of consultants to improve the effectiveness of EA. Yet, many of these interviews reveal that effectively using these competencies relies heavily on the willingness of the authority or developer, where interests rarely seem to digress from conventional EA practice. Consultants in both countries frequently addressed the presumed incompatibility between SDGs and legislation, demonstrating that a prominent perception of a consultant's role in EA is inherently synonymous with ensuring compliance with the EU Directive. These considerations highlight the importance of interrelation (IR in Fig. 1) between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation referenced in the theory (Ravn Boess, 2023), claiming that the opportunities and capacities that an individual assigns others also influences that individual's motivation. It is apparent from the interviews that consultants believe that SDG integration would not be positively received by clients and authorities, due to the uncertain consequences and to unwillingness to supply additional resources to facilitate such integration. Yet, these perspectives, while inspired by experienced tendencies in traditional practice, are unconfirmed in the

context of SDG integration and remain as inferences reinforcing the infeasibility of SDG integration. This places further emphasis, firstly, on the reliance of practitioners on one another, and secondly, on the autonomy (Zhang et al., 2018) that consultants struggle to associate with their practice.

The perceived reliance on others, whether it be stakeholders or legislation, may reinforce a form of self-disempowerment, where consultants underestimate their autonomy. The freedom for a consultant to bring in new approaches not rooted in formal legislation, as suggested by Zhang et al. (2018) and Ravn Boess (2023), is thereby contradicted – at least to the extent that new approaches to practice also remain absent from client demand. Having solidified an individual's role as dependent on the interests of other practitioners and on compliance with traditional means of practice, consultants effectively displace the responsibility of adapting practice to other practitioners and legislation. This may help to explain the absent mobilization of a consultant's motivation, despite a clear opinion that SDGs have the potential to benefit EA practice. If a consultant does not feel empowered to adapt their own role according to their motivation, they may opt out of attempting to redirect a traditional practice, even if it means conducting a practice that does not align with their motivations. It can only be assumed that such a hesitancy is augmented through an uncertainty as to how to integrate the SDGs and operationalize them that seems to plague both countries' EA practice.

Blicharska et al. (2011: 349) claim that “norms held by practitioners play a decisive role for what actually happens in planning practice” yet reveal the discrepancies that often occur between ideals and an implemented practice, which may resemble how the expressed desire to alter an EA practice is contradicted by consultants' disempowerment to carry these changes out in practice. They use this to argue for “a sharpened sensitivity to context” (Blicharska et al., 2011: 351) and increased stakeholder involvement that is open and unbiased. Similarly, Weaver et al. (2008) claim that influencing sustainable decision-making in EA processes can happen independently of legislative reform, but that this requires a strong and effective collaboration between practitioners. They also emphasize the importance of the individual in these reforms.

The research presented in this paper further nuances these claims by suggesting that crucial stages determining EA practice lie prior to a collaborative engagement, namely in the spaces shaping the individual practitioner's motivation. It is not merely enough for a practitioner to be in possession of norms that may challenge traditional methods. These norms must be strong enough and granted the necessary support to be solidified as an individual pursuit of meaningful practice, but also persist as motivation long enough to become a focal point in dialogues between an array of practitioners. This calls for granting particular attention to the preconceived influence of other practitioners on the individual perceptions motivating actions, thereby including inherent dependencies that remain assumed and unconfirmed. It is no wonder that practice is slow to adapt if a practitioner's motivation is already subject to favoring traditional approaches and effectively subdues the potential for influencing the external pressures critical for catalyzing change.

The interviews thereby suggest the dominant presence of opportunities perceived by EA consultant, yet also that there are barriers that must be granted attention as not to restrict the realization of the opportunities in practice. Doing so would allow for better harvesting the benefits of SDG integration or, at the very least, better understanding how SDG integration unfolds in action and how new and innovative motivations become sedimented elements in EA practice, thereby adapting its more conventional and reactive methods. EA practice would thereby be better aligned with the opportunities hypothesized in Partidário and Verheem (2019), Hacking (2019), Morrison-Saunders et al. (2019), Kørnøv et al. (2020), and González Del Campo et al. (2020) and perhaps one step closer to a more sustainability-oriented EA.

6. Conclusion

This research explores representative Danish and Irish consultant perspectives regarding the integration of SDGs in their EA practice and captures the opportunities and capacities that help to respectively enable or restrict their motivation for doing so. In both Denmark and Ireland, a consultant's motivation for working with the SDGs in EA practice was strong and gaining even more prominence as the societal and political discussion on the urgency of sustainable transition escalates. However, there are also many perceived capacities that hinder further exploration of its real impact on practice, such as consultant and client unawareness of SDGs, the need for the development of new methods for effective SDG integration, and an inherent reliance of the consultant on other stakeholders to enact a change in EA practice. This emphasizes that the interrelations between practitioners in an EA process are critical in shaping motivation for practice, especially in terms of what a consultant perceives is possible to implement. Danish consultants generally focused more on the need for new methods for integration that, in some cases, radically alter the way that EA is conducted. Irish consultants have a greater focus on the need for creating awareness of SDGs amongst all practitioners and question the added value of integrating SDGs as these are seen to overlap with many of the EA topics and objectives. This may reflect the maturity of SDGs in EA in the respective countries, being more prominent in Danish practice, and relatively unripe still in the context of Irish EA. It may also reflect the well-established procedures for Irish consultants to address environmental and sustainability objectives in their current practice.

The findings of this research confirm theoretical assumptions in ongoing academic debates, but they also suggest that a practitioner's motivation to work with SDGs is not enough to change a practice. The research calls for a strengthened dialogue between practitioners to discuss the potentials of SDG integration and to support a space for experimentation and method development. While it encourages a consultant's pursuit to drive an EA practice that better aligns with their motivations, it also calls for extending discussions of SDGs beyond consultants, cultivating a motivation and demand for more strategic and objective-led EA amongst other practitioners as well. It also calls for resolving barriers that restrict SDG integration in order to harvest SDG and EA synergies. Further research should address how motivation is being translated into practice and in doing so, delve deeper into the negotiations of practice that take place between different stakeholder groups. It could also unfold the motivations of these other practitioners in attempts of aligning ambitions for changing EA practice. This research has shown that practicing consultants from both Denmark and Ireland see advantages to integrating the SDGs yet recognize the efforts needed for advancing implementation – it is now time for addressing capacities, realizing the potential benefits in practice, and legitimizing them in the context of EA.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emilia Ravn Boess: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Ainhoa González Del Campo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data for this research has been shared as Supplementary Material.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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