Preface

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) practice and conceptual thinking has come a long way since I completed my PhD on SEA in Spatial and Transport Planning in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany over 20 years ago. Over 95% of all papers in refereed journals have been published since then (see Chapter 1 of this book) and there is good reason to believe that in terms of practical experiences the equivalent number is even higher. The last decade alone has produced over half of all SEA publications and SEA is now a legal requirement in over 60 countries and literally all nations worldwide have had some experiences with its application. Whilst there is a limited number of dedicated SEA books available (fewer than 15), most of them are dated and the last book on international SEA refers back to experiences and practices from a decade ago, as discussed at the International Association for Impact Assessment's (IAIA's) SEA symposium in Prague in 2011. Considering that early publications focused mainly on pilot studies and theoretical aspects, not reflecting the extensive practical experiences now available, there is a dearth of material for both practitioners and researchers. It is therefore high time for a state-of-the-art Handbook on SEA by an authoritative authorship, providing an up-to-date overview of practice and conceptual thinking of this important decision support instrument. For many years, those involved in SEA were told by politicians, policymakers and administrators that it was too early to introduce comprehensive SEA requirements, in particular for strategies and policies, as existing knowledge was insufficient and pilot studies were all that was required for the time being. As this Handbook on SEA proves, by 2021, statements like these are clearly outdated. Considering the value that SEA can add to strategy formation, as well as to policy, plan and programme making and in view of the numerous serious global environmental and social challenges, we hope that this book can lead to a true SEA change in the way decisions are made, helping to produce sustainable outcomes.

–Thomas B. Fischer

I was introduced to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) theory and practice over two decades ago, by chance and fortune, and I immediately became fascinated by the breadth of issues it covers and tackles and, more so, by its potential to make more environmentally sound decisions. Many years of SEA practice and research experience, as well as an SEA-related PhD, have enabled me to confirm the opportunity it presents to enhance the environmental awareness of all involved, make more sustainable choices, and lessen the effects resulting from the inevitable imprint we are leaving on this precious world. SEA (and Environmental Impact Assessment – EIA) brings the environment to the forefront – where it belongs. It is the only socio-scientific tool we have to consider the environment as a whole, and to advocate its true and irreplaceable value when making economic, social and other developmental decisions. SEA is now routinely applied across planning hierarchies and sectors, and is increasingly embraced by those drafting and making decisions, as captured in this Handbook on SEA. The many experiences narrated throughout the 27 chapters are a statement to the contribution of SEA to evidence-based planning and decision-making, and to ensuring that the environment

is protected on the ground. Broadly speaking, this book illustrates the willingness to make SEA better – be it by fostering SEA knowledge exchange across jurisdictions, developing and implementing regulatory frameworks, advancing analytical methods and participatory approaches, or addressing existing practical shortcomings and mounting legal challenges. I hope that you, the reader, find the range of practical case studies and contemporary thinking in this book enriching and beneficial to your own research and/or practice. Perhaps you may already realise that SEA provides the space to reflect on the consequences of our decisions; when done well, it can make a meaningful difference to our thinking and place sustainable resource use and environmental protection at the centre of our actions.

–Ainhoa González