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META-EVALUATION OF PREVIOUSLY EVALUATED ITTO PROJECTS

Lessons learned & good practices towards sustainable management of tropical forests

Summary Report

13. Project design and implementation

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THEMATIC SUMMARY REPORT No. 13
PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

1. INTRODUCTION

Good project design is a critical factor for achieving objectives, achieving desired impacts which are sustainable over time, with lowest possible cost. Efficient implementation involving partners and relevant stakeholders is the other critical element of good projects. Executing agencies are on different levels with regard to their capacity to design and implement projects; some are relatively experienced with well-established management systems, others are weaker still in the early phases of their learning curve. The ex-post evaluations of ITTO projects have shown that both have scope for improvement independently from which particular problem needs to be solved through a project intervention.

This document summarizes the key issues, lessons learned and some good practices which tend to be common to projects on reforestation and forest management, forest industry and economic information and market intelligence. Some of the comments, observations and conclusions may seem very specific because they were drawn from a variety of projects. They are included however, because of their potential value for projects under preparation or being executed.

The ultimate objective of this summary is to help project formulators and implementers in designing and executing future ITTO projects. The summary is based on the review of 92 ex-post evaluation reports on projects implemented in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The reports of the Expert Panel on Project Appraisal have been also drawn on.

ITTO's Manual for project formulation (2007) remains the main guidance for how projects should be designed and proposals should be presented. This document provides valuable information which can be used for additional reference, as appropriate.

2. ISSUES

Project design

- In spite of improvements over time, the quality of project proposals remains a key issue. Weak proposals have long approval process with several revisions. They also tend to lead to problems in implementation due to inadequate planning.
- While ITTO projects are usually satisfactory with regard to their relevance and their implementation has been fairly effective, areas which especially need improvements include enhancing project impacts and sustainability. In particular, attention is needed to improve economic impacts, to address gender issues, to enhance social capital, and to empower forest communities.
- The contents of project proposals may meet the formal ITTO requirements but they often lack clarity on the problems to be solved, how objectives are related to them, and the project strategy for feasible solutions. This is particularly typical in field-level projects on community forestry and enterprises, restoration, plantations, and projects which involve several stakeholders.
- Project beneficiaries are not always clearly identified. Due consideration has not sometimes been given to the needs of ultimate beneficiaries while executing agencies have been presented as the primary beneficiaries of projects.
- Stakeholder involvement is often inadequate which results in weaknesses in project design, limited or no ownership of project activities and results, and limitations in project impacts and sustainability.
- In some areas related to field implementation, institutional strengthening and capacity building, projects may best contribute by providing low level support over the medium term rather than a one-time intensive heavy dose of support.

- Possibilities for creating effective partnerships have not always been taken into account during the planning stage.
- Gender aspects are neither always sufficiently recognized in the project design phase, nor subsequently during project implementation. This is a critical area in which improvements are required.
- Economic and social sustainability appear to be the most problematic areas after the completion of projects.
- Exit strategies are generally weak and often focus on the continuation of the intervention through a follow-up second phase or another project which may not be forthcoming.
- The project development process is often neither transparent nor adequately documented.
- A project is sometimes designed or presented in a vacuum without considering or informing on other interventions in the same area or theme in the country.

Project implementation

- Pro-active tools to improve project implementation such as mid-term review and evaluation have been rarely used.
- Project impacts often remain limited due to inadequate dissemination of results and lessons learned undermining the viability of the investment made.
- It has been difficult to adapt the project activities to changing conditions on the ground.
- Steering Committees have focused their work on the review of the progress in relation to the project work plan but many of them have not played an active role in foreseeing risks and mitigating them as well as removing other obstacles in project implementation.
- Frequent delays in project implementation are due to external and internal reasons often reducing the project's efficiency.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

Project design

- The problem to be solved is not always clearly defined. As the projects are time and resource-bound interventions, they need to be focused and their strategic contribution has remained unclear. Causes and effects are not often correctly identified, and therefore the project is unlikely to be successful in solving the core problem(s).
- Projects that have been closely targeted at specific substantive themes and achieving tangible results within the available resources and time period have good chances to succeed. Such projects are often technically oriented and can deliver the targeted verifiable impacts.
- Projects that have focused on problems in which a narrow project strategy is not deemed adequate easily become complex. Simultaneous interventions in more than one impact areas tend to increase risks and other problems during implementation. In these situations project design should be particularly carefully carried out based on adequate information and stakeholder consultations.
- The development objective to be contributed is often defined on such a general level (e.g. sustainable development or sustainable forest management) that assessment of to what extent the project will contribute to its achievement is not feasible.
- The project development process is often not transparent and inadequately documented. It may be unclear if the instigator was an external body, a stakeholder group which is experiencing specific problems, or other targeted direct beneficiaries.

- Matters which determine the strategic value of a project are not always explicitly addressed in project proposals. This has hampered efficient implementation and weakened the projects to effectively contribute to their respective objectives.
- Relevant development objectives, precise formulation of specific objectives and use of consistent terminology are important prerequisites for an unambiguous well understood project proposal.
- Use of a logical framework matrix (LFM) facilitates project design and contributes to coherence and transparency but is no guarantee for the consistency between activities, anticipated outputs and objectives.
- LFM appears to be considered more as a formal requirement for project proposals than a useful tool for ensuring consistency in the project design between objectives, outcomes, outputs, activities and inputs. LFM has sometimes been interpreted as a straightjacket without recognizing flexibility which is necessary for successful project implementation in changing conditions.
- Stakeholder consultation is needed for project design but it is often understood only as a formal requirement and applied in a top-down manner. The purpose is not only to provide inputs to project design but also to start building up ownership among stakeholders right from the formulation phase. In particular, supply-driven projects (e.g. institutional strengthening and science oriented projects) tend to overlook the importance of seriously involving stakeholders with the formulation of the project.
- Adequate identification of beneficiaries and their needs in the regional and international level projects may be missing, particularly if it is based on secondary information or stakeholder perceptions. The resulting project design tends to suffer from weak relevance to country situations, limited impacts and sustainability.
- Project design has not always considered other interventions in the same area or theme in the country and building up effective links for sharing of lessons learned and information generated.

Project implementation

- Inconsistencies in the use of terminology for key concepts and terms can lead to problems in project implementation.
- Mobilizing the participation of local communities has allowed for dissemination of the importance of forests to the communities and enhanced their commitment to SFM.
- Project effectiveness can benefit from the involvement of several partners in implementation but it can increase complexity and there may be lack of clarity of responsibilities and allocation of resources. Expectations among partners from the design phase do not always correspond to the reality of the implementation phase.
- In field projects, site selection is often not optimal as related to accessibility, spatial linking of SFM and income generation activities, and using the project sites for demonstration and dissemination purposes.
- The limited achievements in community development are often due to lack of detailed prior project identification with the beneficiaries and lack of assessment of institutional capacity and needs in implementing such activities.
- Project implementation and effectiveness benefit from a combination of implementing agencies and organizations, which cover responsibility for national/regional policy formulation and implementation, research and science, and on the ground implementation.
- Developing and maintaining partnerships is an excellent concept to build up collaboration among stakeholders towards SFM. Operational partnerships tend to take time to establish which often needs a phased process. Transparency and effective communication between partners through a project is a key for smooth joint implementation and reduce unnecessary frictions. An NGO member is often a necessary partner for witnessing and providing international credibility, as well as specialist technical know-how.

- Due to changing operating conditions and accumulating experience during implementation, the adopted project strategy may have to be modified at the request of target beneficiaries. This can be crucial for efficiency, effectiveness and impacts of the project. Any modification of the strategy should be accompanied by necessary adjustments in the logical framework.
- Many projects have not developed or implemented a communication strategy representing a serious limitation for project impacts.
- Project staff turnover is a significant risk for implementation and needs to be minimized.
- Excessive reliance on use of external consultants hampers the uptake of their recommendations and this may affect the project's sustainability.
- Projects with duration longer than 3 to 4 years may benefit from a phased approach (division into two or more phases, which are separately submitted for approval and funding). Phased approach tends to minimize risks and builds up knowledge and capacity gradually while allowing for necessary adjustments in the proposal and budget for each follow-up phase.
- Exit strategy is essential for ensuring project sustainability but feasible options have not always been thought out before the completion of activities.

4. GOOD PRACTICES

Project design

- Natural forests represent an important resource for present and future generations especially when properly and sustainably managed. Forestland use needs to be guided by long-term objectives based on careful land use planning. Methods adopted should be environmentally sound, economically viable and socially acceptable.
- As part of the project development process preliminary surveys can help identify actors, their expectations and willingness to participate, as well as to explain the project's challenges and the rights and duties of everyone.
- When projects are aimed at addressing problems which require simultaneous interventions in several areas, project design needs adequate background information and stakeholder consultations. Pre-projects or preliminary studies are often needed.
- The design of complex projects often require institutional strengthening for ensuring sustainability. Tight, clearly defined and realistic objectives are helpful in such situations.
- The design of ITTO projects can benefit from the practical lessons learned in previous projects. Demonstrating this strengthens the proposal.
- Integration and spatial linkage of activities and outputs among relevant other projects strengthen project proposals.
- Description of the design and implementation processes benefits from details on the involvement of stakeholders and the degree to which their ownership is perceived.
- Complex projects often require an adequate analysis of the institutional set-up of the Executing Agency.
- Dividing the project into successive phases can be made when it is deemed necessary. For phased projects, there should be a clearly articulated end of each phase and an evaluation before starting a new phase.
- Relevant monitoring criteria can be derived from the Logical Framework Matrix ensuring consistency between the set objectives and the expected outputs and outcomes.
- The purpose of LFM is not only to assure consistency of the project design but also to serve as an interactive planning tool.

- Good project design is based on full commitment and proactive participation from those actors who should play indispensable roles during later stages of the project or even after project completion.
- Realistic cost estimates of facilities and activities and the time required to achieve planned outputs contribute to good project design.
- Realistic exit strategies are needed already at the planning stage but they are often further revised when experience is accumulated during the implementation process.

Project implementation

- Project start-up workshops/meetings with the participation of all stakeholders are a good tool for launching the implementation process.
- Project field sites selection based on representativeness and facilitated access would allow generalization of results and effective demonstration.
- For successful partnerships, clarity needs to be established on the roles and responsibilities of each partner prior to embarking on project implementation, including accountability and expected benefits.
- Establishing a conflict resolution mechanism in advance is a good practice to prevent and handle conflicts. A possibility to organize extraordinary project meetings is helpful when problems arise.
- Technical studies, manuals and lessons learned need effective dissemination both internally within the Executing Agency and externally to relevant government agencies, the private sector, forest communities and NGOs. The information is also useful for education and training institutions.
- Disseminating key information of the project's results through newspapers, journal articles and electronic and social media can be highly effective for generating broader awareness and impacts. A specific strategy for information dissemination to potential users can ensure systematic sharing of knowledge.
- Modern means of communication are useful for regularly keeping partners informed on the project progress. Overcoming eventual language barriers needs a due attention.
- Competence of project coordinators/leaders, consultants and national experts is important. Their Terms-of-Reference and contracts should be specific in terms of the products and outcomes required, the duration of service, and the time frame for delivery of the products.
- The project strategy needs swift modification if there are important changes in operating conditions. Respective changes should be made in the LFM.
- Project Steering Committees (PSC) is primarily a decision-making body while serving as an information platform. PSCs should continuously assess the relevance of the project strategy for necessary adjustments, and actively participate in removing constraints in project implementation.
- Donors' attendance in PSC meetings contributes to good communication, not only on project implementation but also for sharing of the lessons learned. Their participation can also ensure that the lessons are communicated to policy levels, including ITTO itself.
- In addition to regular audits, occasional more complete financial assessments would facilitate implementation, including justification of budget items, improving accuracy of budget estimates, and promoting strong accountability.
- Competent project management teams built up at the start of the project enable smooth implementation. Managerial staff rotation should be minimized while other staff can be rotated in order to make use of their role in disseminating the knowledge and lessons learned in the project.
- Swift assignment of government staff to a project can ensure smooth project start-up.
- To mitigate the risks related to key staff turnover, the knowledge generated should be properly documented, key documents filed and secured, and other information on project implementation safely transferred in case there is a change in responsible personnel.

- Consultancies in the implementation of project's activities should not be conducted at the cost of institutional capacity building.
- A mid-term review is necessary whenever the project's implementation shows clear signs of weakness.
- Project monitoring and evaluation are an integrated part of the project activities. Impact indicators are needed for the objectives and performance indicators for the outputs. The means of verification need to be clearly identified. Recording of project activities and outputs need to consider information needs of monitoring and evaluation.
- The planned exit strategy may have to be adjusted to cater for changes in the project environment and the expected post-project situation.