

Feedback from IUCN

Final Report - Process oriented evaluation of the third phase of Mangroves for the Future (MFF Evaluation)

30 March 2020

Summary comments:

The report is an improvement on the first draft, including some revisions in response to comments provided by MFF/IUCN. However, it lacks a holistic view of the MFF, and there continues to be a dominant focus on negative aspects with less attention given to the positive achievements of the programme.

That said, there are important findings that MFF/IUCN should consider, including the suggestions to:

- Adopt a more targeted focus on resilience and a few specific themes in target areas;
- Support larger and longer projects, with improved sustainability and integration to local government;
- Improve governance arrangements (NCB membership, RSC membership and audience, structure of the secretariat);
- Rethink knowledge sharing approaches and the purpose of the RSC;
- Increase engagement with local government for local policy influence, scaling and sustainability;
- Engage social science specialists in the NCB and national secretariat to improve integration at national and local level projects;
- Enhance communications at the local level, and further engage media for outreach and policy influence;
- Expand and innovate for private sector investment, and bring on specialists for this;
- Expand and strengthen regional partnerships.

Where relevant, MFF/IUCN can integrate these recommendations into upcoming and existing programmes (e.g. CEPF, BoBLME). IUCN's focus moving forward is to build on the positive work of MFF, learn from what went well and what didn't, and leverage the achievements made by the programme during Phase 3.

Other comments:

At times, the structure of the report seems misguided.

For example, the main conclusions section of the Executive Summary, under Evaluation Purpose Number 2A (essentially the first substantive narrative of the report), opens with a four paragraph assessment of the NCBs. This seems like an unusual way to begin the report, without providing an assessment of the overall efficiency of the programme. There are also several important positive findings about efficiencies within the programme that aren't reflected in this part of the Executive Summary.

There are, at times, competing and contradictory narratives in the report. For example, in several places (e.g. see pg11 Executive Summary, paragraph 2), there is criticism of MFF's

effort to support learning under the programme. However, in other sections of the report, there are positive narratives about MFF's soft governance structure regarding knowledge exchange (pg13 of Executive Summary and pg10 main report), and that one of the strengths of the Regional Secretariat was how it facilitated learning between countries (pg14 main report). In addition, the Team states "MFF, with its efforts at collating successes and policy level discourse, is effective in placing knowledge relevant at regional and, thereby, at national level." (section 3.20, paragraph 1). Yes, the format of the RSC can be improved to facilitate better learning opportunities but overall, there seems to have been little appreciation of all the 'learning' that was achieved through MFF processes and activities. Note however, that the Team states that regular learning events at the RSC are one part of the "substantial contributions of MFF to knowledge sharing and institutional capacity development" (section 3.19 paragraph 1). Perhaps the criticism of MFF efforts to support learning relate to the Team's definition of 'learning'. It is difficult to understand how knowledge exchange and institutional capacity development, for which positive achievements and outcomes have been highlighted in several places, can be separated from learning. It would seem logical that these go hand-in-hand. This is just one of several examples where there appear to be competing or contradictory narratives in the report.

There is unnecessary repetition in the report, for example, Section 4 Conclusions and lessons learned, appears to be repeated, almost entirely word for word, as the Executive Summary. There are many findings and observations in the report that should have been included in the Executive Summary to provide a more complete and encompassing summary of the evaluation.

There is a significant focus in the report on cost efficiency, for example, with regard to spending on the regional components of the project. (e.g. staff expenses, which are mentioned extensively throughout the report with the same finding repeated). However, MFF/ICUN note the following statement in the TOR for the evaluation (page 5): "Efficiency. The questions under this criteria are not expected to be addressed through cost-efficiency and cost-benefit analyses but rather through analytical reasoning." It is not entirely clear how this is to be interpreted; perhaps the approach was amended as the evaluation proceeded.

There are several points in the narrative that suggest that the CTI-CFF is perhaps an alternative service provider for an MFF type programme. This seems unsubstantiated and illogical. Firstly, the 'soft governance' of MFF is praised in several sections, with some shortcomings noted; however, a shift to a more 'hard governance' structure like CTI would be at the expense of the many benefits of the soft governance approach implemented by MFF. Secondly, of the 11 MFF member countries, only one is a member of CTI-CFF (Indonesia). Thirdly, the strengths of IUCN in the MFF partnership are also noted in several sections of the report (e.g. competence on environmental issues, convening power, brand, presence in most countries in the region etc). Yes, there are learnings to be taken on board from both the CTI-CFF and SEAFDEC models regarding sustainability and 'buy in' from member countries, but it is questionable whether either could be a suitable provider of an 'MFF type' programme across Asia, or present the same added value as IUCN.

There are recommendations that need further consideration regarding the structuring and number of personnel to service MFF in the region and countries. Whilst several points made in the evaluation are important learnings, it is questionable whether the overall decentralization and expansion of the secretariat at national level (to include KM,

communications, outreach and policy influence, social and gender competence, and resilience and development expertise) would be either more efficient or effective, especially in a programme that encompasses 11 countries.

There are recommendations to increase the scope, membership and roles of the NCB that could be questioned in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Whilst there are several learnings from the NCBs in MFF, many positive, the Team recommends a more diverse representation. This can be considered, however, it should be acknowledged that there is a limit to the size of NCBs in order to keep them efficient and effective. It should also be noted that the NCBs, in part and in many countries, did serve the roles mentioned as needing improvement by the Team, e.g. having gender focal points.

At times, relatively minor findings are emphasized in the report. For example, the Regional Secretariat and its communications are described as being “top-down and included posing ad-hoc and last-minute requests for information”. This seems rather subjective and likely based on the opinion of only a few respondents rather than an observation of the majority of MFF stakeholders/partners.

The membership of the NCBs is also criticised as being only 44% civil society versus a target of 50%, and is therefore said not to “have not lived up to the agreed target”. Yes, the NCBs did not reach 50% civil society participation, but in the circumstances, 44% is a very good result and seems hardly worth criticising given the scope of the MFF Programme.

Also the statement, “A certain disinclination or inability to operate outside the IUCN scientific focus and the lack of gender/community development expertise seems to have been a challenge to MFF personnel”, pg42 of the main report, is from one country (Sri Lanka) but made as if to refer to MFF entirely.

The analysis and interpretation of data gathered during the evaluation could be improved. For example, the analysis of responses to questionnaires issued by the Team to beneficiaries in the four target countries, pg48-50. In Figure 10, it is worth noting that almost all scores are above 4 on a scale of 1-6 (1 is “not at all good” and 6 is “very good”) suggesting that the vast majority of beneficiaries thought that these aspects of the MFF Programme were well above average. The same can be said of the results presented in Figure 11 where only one data point was below the median score of 3. Similarly the results in Figure 13, where scores are summarised as “...markedly higher appreciation among male beneficiaries. It is possible that this reflects that more of the project benefits has gone to men than to women”. It is questionable whether the difference between responses by men and women would be statistically significant since all are in the range of approximately 4.2 and 5.7 out of 6. Again, these results suggest that the overwhelming majority of beneficiaries assessed MFF’s performance, and the benefits to their knowledge and livelihoods, as resoundingly positive. Furthermore, the small difference in responses between men and women could just as well be attributed to how they perceive benefits differently, and also be influenced by gender dynamics in local communities.

Despite comments/guidance provided by MFF on the first draft, there continue to be inaccuracies presented in the report. For example, on pg25 of the main report the statement, “In some member countries, for instance Bangladesh, Seychelles and Thailand, the MFF projects and initiatives have received money contributions, but the rate and amount

of cash contributions have been limited to 2.35% of the donor funding.” When referring to the source material mentioned in this paragraph (³⁶Based on figures presented in the report of RSC-15 in Bali, c.f. Table 1, Grant Implementation Status RSC-15 WP 1.1.) this statement is clearly incorrect. As presented in the table in WP1.1., the amount of donor funding contributed to MFF small grants was USD 2,366,033, and the co-financing in cash for small grants was USD 526,472. Using the method outlined by the Team to calculate the percentage, clearly the cash co-financing is 22% of donor funding, not 2.35%.

In the next paragraph (pg26) the Team states, “For almost all member countries, MFF has considered these cash and in-kind contributions as amounts leveraged by the programme.” This is also incorrect. MFF has not regarded these amounts as leveraged funds but rather exactly as they are presented, as co-finance. Leverage funds are calculated and presented separately to co-finance, and clearly shown in WP 1.1.

Furthermore, in the same section of the report the Team states, “It is reported by MFF that these investments have leveraged a total of 3.0 million USD worth of investment by others, but the leverage linkages are not evident.” This is also incorrect. In the Final Report for Phase 3, MFF has clearly indicated the source of leveraged funds, what they were used for, and how they served to build on current or previous MFF funded projects. Yes, more details could have been provided for a few cases of leveraged funds, and this is something IUCN/MFF can improve in the future, however, it is incorrect to say that the leverage linkages are not evident.

Feedback regarding financial aspects of the report

The report states that Phase 3 of the MFF programme was initially budgeted at USD 25.7m; ultimately, however, Phase 3 was implemented with expenditure totalling USD 14.75m - only 57% of the original budget. This clearly shows that a high level of financial efficiency was maintained during programme implementation.

In respect to staff costs, almost all organizations have policies to establish standards for recording and charging staff time. For IUCN, this is the Time Management Policy, which has previously been shared with Sweden. IUCN recommends the term “variance” be used in place of “mark up” throughout the report, since the latter gives a different impression.

MFF was implemented over a total period of 12 years. However, at no time did IUCN have secure funding that spanned the duration of the programme. Even when the programme had secure funding for a particular phase, there were times when this was discontinued, revised, or delayed for reasons that were beyond the control of MFF. Nonetheless, despite these fluctuations in secure funding, IUCN managed to maintain the required structures and expertise necessary to implement the programme, ensured that due processes were followed, and maintained the confidence of partners and member countries involved in the programme. It is worth noting that, on a number of occasions, IUCN also drew on its own cash reserves to maintain the programme.

Throughout its duration the MFF programme has been the subject of a series of internal and external reviews. Many of the recommendations from these reviews were implemented. Annual budgets were shared with all relevant stakeholders through decision making mechanisms such as the RSC and MC meetings. Furthermore, all expenditure by the programme was audited annually and reports from these audits were made available to donors and programme partners. Given this high degree of transparency and scrutiny, it is surprising

that so many issues related to cost efficiency have been raised by the evaluation team and that they form such a large proportion of the narrative in the evaluation report.

Whilst the report questions the financial efficiency of the programme, IUCN concludes that the outputs and objectives of the programme were successfully achieved, and with significantly less funding than initially budgeted. Nonetheless, IUCN will take on board the learnings from the report and consider how to integrate them into future programmes and projects to ensure that financial efficiency is maintained.

Additional Comments:

Upon reviewing responses from the Team to comments provided by MFF/IUCN on the first draft of the report, IUCN is disappointed that the Team has criticised the previous reviews of MFF. For example, suggesting that they were “not independent external evaluations” and there may have been “bias emanating from a conflict of interest”. IUCN strongly rejects this suggestion and notes that all previous external evaluations were completed by highly respected and qualified professionals that had no connection to IUCN.