Internal Mission:
Preparatory Assistance to the
Northern Areas Conservation Strategy
(NACS) MTR

30 May - 1 June, 2001

Mission Report

Internal Mission: Preparatory Assistance to the NACS MTR
May 30-June 1, 2001

Mission Report

Introduction

Complementary to the Federal Government 's intention of developing regional and sub-regional conservation strategies after NCS approval in 1992, the development of the Northern Areas Conservation Strategy (NACS) was conceived at a workshop on the Central Karakoram National Park in 1994. The Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) initiated the strategy development process in 1996, by providing 'seed' funding to develop a project proposal for a NACS Support Project. The Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD) joined in supporting this phase of the Project in 1997. A full-fledged three-year strategy formulation project proposal – for an NACS Support Project – was prepared, and approved for co-funding by SDC and NORAD in early 1999.

The Northern Areas Conservation Strategy is being developed by the Northern Area Administration under the NACS Support Project (based in the P&D Department) with the technical assistance of IUCN-The World Conservation Union. One of the objectives of this phase, among others, is to assist the NAs administration in developing a Northern Areas Conservation Strategy that would be implemented by the Administration itself. The NACS projects draws upon and links with IUCN Pakistan's strategy development experience such as SPCS in the NWFP and the BCS in Balochistan. The project has various technical and cross-thematic components including awareness raising, capacity development, institutional strengthening and constituency building. The NACS Support Project, at present, is midway through its 3-year term.

The project proposal calls for a mid-term evaluation of the project. This evaluation is set to commence from June 10 to June 20, 2001, with members from SDC, IUCN, government and civil society as part of the evaluation team. SDC, IUCNP and the NACS Support Project are jointly financing the Review. The objectives of the review mission are to advise NORAD, SDC, IUCN and NAs Administration on the progress of the NACS Support Project in the Northern Areas in relation to the project objectives. The mission will also identify gaps and missing potentials, besides recommending measures that would improve the long-term effects of the project.

As with all IUCN projects, the IUCN Pakistan Country Office supported an internal preparatory mission to assist the NACS team in preparing for the MTR. A two-member IUCNP mission team comprising of Khizer Farooq Omer, M&E Officer, IUCNP and Dhunmai Cowasjee, Head of the IUCN Karachi-based thematic programmes, proceeded to Gilgit for this assistance. The objectives of the preparatory assistance mission were to:

- discuss and provide preparatory assistance to the NACS team on key assessment tasks as derived from the MTR TORs;
- discuss and follow-up on issues that may arise from the above discussions; and
- identify documentation needs to support the MTR discussions.

The Process

The 3-day preparatory assistance mission started with a courtesy briefing to the project manager, on the mission's objectives, the process to be followed to achieve the objectives, and the overall need, necessity and implications of an MTR on a project.

The mission then commenced with detailed and comprehensive discussions with the entire NACS team – Ahsan Mir, Hamid Sarfraz, M. Fiaz Joyia, Shafiullah, Tehmina Roohi, M. Ismail Khan and Ghulam Abbas. A. L. Rao joined the discussions on the second day. The deliberations with the team started with information on MTRs. As an event, what is an MTR and what do the donors look for in an MTR. What has been IUCN's experience with MTRs of other projects, and in cases, MTRs of projects supported by the same donor in other parts of the country. How do MTRs such as these provide a road map on the way forward? The significance of this particular MTR to the project and its thrust were also discussed with the team. The team provided their feedback and perceptions of the upcoming exercise. The NACS MTR focus, and the team's need to articulate outcomes rather than activities – where we feel we are headed rather than day-to-day developments - was also deliberated at length.

After discussing the above, the rest of the days 1, 2 and part of 3 were spent on deliberations and discussions on the focus of the MTR, and the 11 key assessment areas as derived from the MTR TORs. This exercise was to help the team identify what had been achieved in these areas, how far they had progressed, what were the constraints in achieving these, if any, and some documented indicators that would help milestone the process. It was also highlighted to the NACS team that any 'statements' presented for this exercise need to be substantiated with examples and articulated appropriately through documentation. Most issues identified during these deliberations were discussed and some were decided on.

The final hours of day 3 were spent discussing and agreeing on the NACS team's way forward and the activities that would need to be carried out to prepare for the MTR exercise.

Walking through the MTR

MTRs are aimed at improving the project process by looking at the overall direction of any initiative, looking at the relevant key achievements, identifying gaps and recommending changes that would assist in project impact. This MTR, generally, would look into how far the idea of environment as a part of development had spread, how all key parts of society (government, civil society and the private sector) are being involved, and the progress that had been made towards developing a strategic framework that would guide future sustainable development in the NAs.

The discussions on the tasks are summarised below.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 1. Are the various components of the project plan, as reflected in the RBM matrices reflective of the objectives of the project? To what extent the overall approach and strategies have been effective in achieving the intermediate results? Is their need for change in programme content and direction?

While most of the components are on track, IUCN also took several steps in the past to ensure that the overall focus of the project stays on track. In January 2001, a replanning workshop was held in Gilgit (with the NACS team, thematic programmes, and the Programme Directorate) to reprioritise its activities for the remaining period. The RBM component activities were rearranged to have a further integrated and coherent approach to the project and where less significant activities, taking into account external factors, were reduced in scope or dropped. (See NACS Work Plan 2001: Salient Features for further details).

There appears to be a lag in developing the NACS Strategy, as the development of background papers (one part of Component 1) is proving difficult. Approximately one-third of the papers have been commissioned; the remainder have yet to be commissioned, as finding professionals knowledgeable on issues related to the NAs is proving difficult.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 2. What have been the steps taken to develop and sustain understanding and ownership of the NACS amongst key sectors in particular the NAs administration, NGOs and other groups? How effective have these been?

The NACS has reached out to several sectors both within government and without. Within government, P&DD, the line departments and boards such as the Tourism Board have been targeted; in addition, media agencies such as radio have been drawn in. Within civil society, the umbrella NGOs, NGO networks and CBOs, the press, and private educational institutions have been interacted with. In the private sector, the largest traders group, the NACCI has been included in consultations. Work with all of them has been initiated, with some groups more enthusiastic than others.

However, ownership* of the NACS within these partners has not reached the desired level at this point in time, perhaps, because a) the strategy document itself has not been developed yet, and b) this is a process perhaps longer than the term of the project. *See explanation of ownership.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 3. What have been the role, effectiveness and potential use of the consultative process?

The consultative process - and this is more than the public consultations for it includes interest groups, round tables and focal points - has allowed, for the first time in the Northern Areas, coordination both of government agencies and civil society institutions. For many it has been the first time, that several different groups have met to discuss issues and to share information. Informally, it has also been used as a mechanism for conflict resolution. The public consultations themselves allowed a specific process (speaking of causes and consequences of environmental degradation and inviting responses) to be tested besides soliciting local level input into public planning. At the community level, environmental awareness has been raised where communities played a role in the identification of sustainable development issues. Inclusion of P&DD in the process has allowed the Department to appreciate the tangible benefits of consulting with people. Together, in the future, this could mean that the communities' are offered opportunities to input into government plans and projects, with the hope that these plans become more demand-driven rather than supply-driven.

This does not mean that the consultative process is without its woes. The public consultations were time consuming to arrange – it took an average of 15 days to organise each one – and external events often affected timing. This effort may also have taken away the time required for other activities, hence the re-orientation of the project as reflected in the 2001 workplan.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 4. What role/s have interest groups, round tables and the mechanism of focal points played in the strategy formulation process, as well as in awareness building?

The observations, as mentioned above, should be repeated here. Apart from the above, IGs and RTs have allowed a shared, collective vision to develop, invited input from people with experience, encouraged advocacy on issues e.g. the melting of glaciers for water downstream, and bolstered government support for public comment on their work (in a way making work more accountable for). It has also encouraged thought on the role of stakeholders in the implementation phase of the NACS. The experience has left the NAs' administrative departments more supportive of IGs e.g. the Gilgit municipal corporation and increased the possibility of housing the secretariat of these groups, within government.

The MTRs views on the need for IGs to become roundtables, and suitable mechanisms and process for the formalisation of such fora, if required, will be sought.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 5. Are the assumptions made during the project formulation still valid? Which external factors have affected/can affect the NACS most, and how can the changing co-ordination be utilised advantageously?

Most of the assumptions made at the time of project formulation are valid. However, several external factors have affected the project in different ways. Social tension has continued to rise – between Ghizer and Diamer, with Ghizer district being 'closed' for almost a year. The capacity of government has continued to be different from what was expected, and the number of small NGOs, with fixed capacity to integrate environment into development, have continued to grow. Though the newly formed Northern Areas Legislative Council has been given authority over subjects on the concurrent list (such as the environment) changing the operating environment, how effective this step could be in mainstreaming environment into development remains to be seen. Also as the process of devolution has not been extended to the federally administered Northern Areas as yet, it is too early to study its effect on the future implementation of the NACS.

With lesser amounts of development funds now available with the NAs administration, and more focussed priorities of a handful of donors in the Northern Areas, other sources for development funding, i.e. private sector may need to be explored.

For some, the present project co-ordination mechanisms are suitable to assist the process.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 6. How effectively has the Support Project used existing/created new partnerships for formulation and subsequent implementation of the NACS?

Contact and partnerships have been a strong feature of work in the NACS. Interestingly enough, about 70% of the public consultations were organised with the help of small organisations and CBOs. During this phase, new groups and new networks oriented to the environment have been formed e.g. the Baltistan Association of Environmental Journalists and the NGO network in Hunza. This is in addition to partnerships with existing groups e.g. Hunza Educational Resource Project (HERP) and NGOs e.g. Aga Khan Cultural and Heritage Programme.

For effective partnerships, the level of work that will need to be maintained might be difficult when the project is servicing so many groups. Thus, selection and prioritisation is necessary.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 7. How well has the NACS experience learned from the previous strategies, in particular, the SPCS?

The SPCS, BCS and NCS (from memory) experiences have influenced the NACS process. This has ranged from funding (seed funds through SPCS II), to studying specific strategy mechanisms such as IGs/RTs, PCs and demonstration projects, to training government and IUCN staff, to loaning staff for specific activities. The NACS project is in the process of studying various case studies as undertaken by the SPCS project for its various initiatives, to be applied with modification to the local context. In the same vein, three Technical Assistance missions, from the Pakistan Environment Programme (PEP), have focused on the Northern Areas.

The difficulties in transporting the lessons learned from other strategies, and the obligation to develop and document the Project's own learning needs to be looked into along with the resource requirements to facilitate such endeavours.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 8. How effective have been the Support Project's efforts in building awareness, enhancing skills and building capacities among the various stakeholders?

There has been a fair amount of success in building awareness of the environment and the NACS and enhancing skills in the partners of the project. Joint activities and training programmes have been organised for both the government and the civil society sector. These capacity building initiatives are however confined to a sectoral approach at the moment. The NACS project is studying the SPCS capacity development framework as a mechanism to develop a cohesive capacity development intervention in the Northern Areas context.

Building capacity within institutions is a longer-term effort, which needs to be looked at holistically. Institution building comes much after that! An example of capacity building as a long term process is the environment education related capacity building in the Northern Areas that was initiated before the start of the present NACS project, and is coming to fruition just now.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 9. What has been the role and significance of the pilot projects that have been initiated under the NACS, and what is their potential in future?

Pilot projects were meant to demonstrate that environment could become part of development planning. They were part of the 'two-track' approach adopted for strategy development, that while a strategy was being developed, its essential principles (of integrating environment and development) could be demonstrated through pilot projects. Of the three projects initially chosen, two are operational. In hindsight, it could be said that these pilot projects could have been initiated almost from the start of the project, as delay (foreseeable and unforeseeable) heavily affects such small-scale demonstrations.

It is however too early to comment upon the collective role or significance of the pilot projects, and of the three, only one has been completed to date and an environmental assessment report of this project is awaited. Of the other two, one is ongoing, and the other is still to be initiated because of external factors.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 10. Which parts of the project are on track and which ones are lagging? What have been main issues and constraints? Is there a need to extend the project beyond June 2002, or to revisit the scope of the project?

Except for the development of the Strategy, most of the project tasks are generally on track and the mid-term results that were expected to have been achieved by this point are consistent with the previous one and a half year's plans. (This has been addressed as part of task 1.) There are mixed feelings about whether the strategy development task could be achieved within the stipulated time frame of the present project, given that the writer for the strategy has still to join. Some staff feel that the strategy and the document itself will not be completed by that date, for the reasons and constraints identified above (writers for sectoral papers, capacity constraints, etc). Others feel that if the time frame for the project has to be extended to accommodate unfinished tasks, this time should be spent on preparing partners for the implementation of the Strategy, with the strategy itself ready by the end of this period.

The MTR team's guidance would be sought on this issue.

KEY ASSESSMENT AREA 11. How effectively has the project been managed? Is there a need for any adjustment in structure?

The project has been reasonably managed, given that it is in a remote area of Pakistan where travel from Islamabad takes at least a day by road, telecommunications (till the advent of satellite-linked email) was unreliable and post could take up to one week. Local expertise has been difficult to find hindering staffing and decision-making slow. Coherence within and without the team can be further improved through regular discussions on concepts and various experiences.

Co-ordination with the rest of IUCNP has improved over recent months and institutional arrangements have been put into place to enhance coordination. The Project's management has been less than optimal because of the constraints accompanying dual responsibilities of the Project manager, who was also the head of IUCN's Northern Areas Office. The two posts have now been separated, and a deputy project manager is in place to maintain the project's monitoring systems.

This is one project within IUCN's portfolio of projects in Pakistan. This, together with slow communications, has led to delayed decision-making. Efforts have been underway to improve upon such difficulties.

Next Steps

The NACS team agreed that some time needed to be sent preparing for the MTR. The project team agreed on the following steps:

- To collect all reference material in one place, as much of it in soft copy as possible (action: June 4).
- To ensure that facts and figures when presented were corroborated e.g. number of skills building workshops (action: June 4).
- Each Co-ordinator/ Focal Point to document instances that illustrate the statements as discussed under various key task, e.g. effect of consultations, partnerships, awareness building, capacity building, linkages, partnerships and so on (action: June 6).
- The NACS team to develop a collated version (5-6) pages of individual lists, to develop a comprehensive project document (action: June 7).
- To prepare the presentation to the MTR. This would provide an overview of the project, with a focus on project outcomes as they relate to various sectoral/ thematic inputs and tasks, highlighting achievements, constraints, and the possible way forward. (action: June 9).

Agreed-to definitions of key terms

Objectives
For the NACS Support project only, objectives have been taken as the 10 result areas in the project proposal that have to be delivered on.

Ownership
Active participation in process, internalisation, implementation within one's own sector e.g. private sector educators, through visualisation of NACS in future work.

Partnerships
Partnerships are with those institutions with whom the project may have formal or information agreements, and with whom the project has some sustained level of work over time.

Two-track approach
The 'two-track' approach has been adopted for most strategy development. The idea is that while a strategy is being developed, its essential principles (of integrating environment and development) can be demonstrated through pilot projects.

Khizer Farooq Omer
Dhunmai Cowasjee