

SHORT-TERM CONSULTANCY REPORT

**REVIEW & EVALUATION OF NATIONAL CAPACITY
SELF-ASSESSMENT (NCSA) PROJECT OF COOK
ISLANDS**

&

ASSISTANCE TO COMPLETE NCSA ACTION PLAN

July 2009
(Edited late 2009 after comments received)

Introduction:

This consultancy was undertaken over 15 working days in March, April and May 2009 including a 5 working day visit to Rarotonga (19-26 March) and subsequent home-based work. A similar amount of time was put into the two activities, the review and evaluation – a backwards-looking exercise – and the completion of the Action Plan – forward looking. The Terms of Reference is attached as Annex 1.

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A. Review & Evaluation

This review has been put together based on meetings and phone/email discussions (annex 2) and a review of project documents (Annex 3) in March and April 2009. A rough first draft was submitted at the end of April and comments received back by the end of May.

1. Project summary

The NCSA project arguably began with the development of the Project Document (Prodoc) in 2003, including a series of stakeholder meetings and is to be completed shortly with the printing of the Action Plan (mid-2009).

It proved a long and demanding project that faced a series of challenges and setbacks and its completion is a tribute to the tenacity and dedication of those involved. The project was extended twice and formally finished in 2008 though there are outstanding activities still being completed. This experience of the project taking longer than expected was not particular to the Cook Islands but a common feature of the programme globally.

This review identifies issues with project design, international and regional support, and in-country capacity that all contributed to project difficulties and delays. It was also hampered by a changing environment within the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which led to questioning of the project's value.

The project has produced a valuable series of documents that provide a very thorough assessment of the capacity of the country to manage its environment and a comprehensive list of actions to enhance this. This consultancy has provided a brief opportunity to assist the project team in putting the finishing touches to the key output, the Action Plan, to help maximise the chances of its implementation.

Global, regional and national agencies are strongly encouraged to work together to begin implementation of the Action Plan as soon as possible. Only if this occurs will all the efforts of many people prove fully worthwhile and they are owed this reward.

1.1 Process

1.1.1 Phase 1: Project Initiation

The following were the key steps in this phase:

- Project Document developed in 2003 assisted by an international consultant and signed in October 2004.
- Project Coordinator appointed in late October 2004
- Project Inception Report completed in July 2005

The process of developing the Project Document included two NCSA introductory workshops involving many stakeholders in September 2003 – noted because this represented the first of five years of such consultations which understandably experienced some stakeholder fatigue.

There was a significant interval between compilation work on the Project Document in 2003 and project initiation in late 2004. The Inception Report (July 2005) was presumably intended to bridge this gap, requiring the project team to revisit the Project Document and finalise arrangements (e.g. project management and personnel, Steering Committee representation). However the project coordinator was not apparently advised that this was an opportunity to change the work plan and budget so neither happened, even though by this point the project was already well behind the stated schedule. Some of the budget figures later proved problematical. In particular the US\$5000 allocated to Assessments including the running of stakeholder meetings proved inadequate. When attempts were made to recruit international consultants to do this one point but all quotes were well above this. The Inception Report is quite a substantial document and it seems that with more guidance it could have been simpler and thus quicker to produce.

No applicants for the Project Coordinator role were familiar with the field of environmental management or capacity building. The person appointed clearly brought key skills to the role and should receive considerable credit for completing the project. However she and other staff faced an initial challenge to come up to speed with the topic and to grasp what the concept of assessing capacity under the three conventions that were the basis of the NCSA meant. The coordinator also found that few stakeholders were familiar with the conventions so considerable awareness raising was needed at the outset.

Recommendations:

The process of project inception needs to be looked at. In this case, as in other projects that I am aware of, Project Document development was led by an international consultant but there was then quite a gap until the project started.

- ***It is recommended that this gap, however long it is, is bridged in two possible ways:***
 1. ***The consultant involved in developing the Prodoc could be retained (as an addition to his/her contract) to spend a few days with the Project Coordinator soon after his/her appointment. They would go through the Project Document and the thinking behind the project, re-define the work plan and review budget lines.***
 2. ***The Coordinator should visit the UNDP Multi-Country Office (MCO) soon after taking up the role and undertake a similar review with staff there.***

Indeed, UNDP staff have suggested that all GEF/UNDP funded Project Coordinators should undertake a mandatory training at the UNDP MCO on the project document and its logical framework of results, including the type of support available from the MCO and the GEF Regional Coordination Unit in Bangkok and New York. They could also learn about UNDP's own programmatic rules and reporting requirements.

A further possibility suggested to the reviewer is to identify good mentors or coaches at the national level and provide some incentives for them to assist coordinators.

1.1.2 Phase 2: National Stocktake

A local consultant was recruited in March 2005 to prepare this report (dated August 2005). The report begins by reviewing the obligations of the Cook Islands under the three conventions, other related international agreements, and agreements under consideration – a very long list over ten pages. This was followed by a comprehensive analysis of the country's policy frameworks, organisations and their responsibilities and existing strategies and plans. It represents a thorough, conscientious effort by the consultant and the team that provides a resource that will be very valuable for anyone interested in environmental management in the Cook Islands. However, as will be discussed below, the approach adopted was later revised and much of this effort proved misguided.

The NCSA team had trouble organising this initial consultancy finding it hard to explain what was needed from a technical viewpoint. The Project Document does contain a brief TOR for NCSA Consultants but this apparently did not provide sufficient detail on the technical skills required. What further clarification was sought is unclear.

The project experienced significant delays in 2005 due to the first of several issues outside its control. The Coordinator had significant health issues and the country experienced a series of damaging cyclones. During this year the project started receiving feedback from stakeholders that they were fed up with being consulted and were looking for some action – a theme that will be discussed later. It is worth noting that in the Cook Islands the National Environment Service (NES) manages country responsibilities for all three conventions whereas in other countries these may be shared among different departments. Thus there was no other agency to share the load. The National Steering Committee appears not to have been of much assistance in this regard, arguing that the expertise needed to run the project lay within the NES.

Recommendation:

Steering Committees have been almost universally adopted in such projects as a means of engaging different agencies and stakeholders by providing them with representation. In my experience these have never proved fully effective and this project is no exception. Various suggestions have been put forward to improve the working of such committees, including Departments confirming their involvement and commitment to a project by signing MOU's, or funds being dispersed to more of the different agencies involved.

- ***I recommend that UNDP conduct a review of the Steering Committee approach across a variety of projects and countries looking for examples in which this has worked well and applying lessons learned from how these have been organised.***

1.1.3 Phase 3: Thematic Assessment

The development of the Thematic Assessment and the Cross-Cutting Assessment that followed proved major challenges for the project and led to it falling much further behind schedule. The Thematic Assessment was scheduled for completion in the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2005 (Project Document) and was finalised in September 2007 though final editing and printing were not completed until Q1 2008.

A key problem was the different guidance received from the programme regionally and globally on the approach to adopt. Quarterly reports initially refer to delays in receiving Thematic Assessment Guidelines from UNDP or the Pacific Regional Support Mechanism¹. Then the advice from the UNDP Multi-Country Office in Samoa, based on the project document and previous correspondences with UNDP GEF during PDF A formulation, was that the NCSA should be based closely on the conventions and the country's obligations. This was the approach initially taken in the Cook Islands from the Stocktake analysis onwards. This resulted in a long list of gaps and capacity needs.

It was only during the first NCSA Regional Workshop in Samoa in May 2006 that UNDP GEF Global Support Programme (GSP) Manager, Peter Hunnam suggested that this approach might not work. As he said, the conventions provide rather superficial guidance on capacity building – e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity refers to the need for a national strategy, to be able to write a national report, etc. Whereas the key question for a country is how it is going to run an effective programme to conserve biodiversity or address climate change and what capacity it needs to be able to do this? While the differences between his advice and that from the UNDP MCO were largely ones of emphasis, they were significant and caused some dismay and required the Cook Islands team to do a lot of re-working. The team had however already started to look at the issue from the country viewpoint, recording what was happening on the ground and matching this to conventions, so they were ready to adopt this changed approach.²

Around this same time the project's local consultant resigned after obtaining an appointment within the Office of the Prime Minister. The consultancy was re-advertised but all quotes received were above the budget available so the National Environment Service team decide to take on the re-write themselves forming a 'Synergy Working Group'. It proved a lot of work beyond the members' own programmes so they often worked in the evenings and weekends. They tried a variety of approaches including retreats, brainstorming sessions with key staff and thematic working groups. Eventually, with the Director's approval, all the staff involved were assigned hours to work on the task within the agency's business plan so it could be completed in normal hours. While completing this work internally proved very challenging and led to significant further delays, it did lead to building capacity and understanding within the team and assisted with report writing and analytical skills.

¹ The Pacific Regional Support Mechanism which became operational in 2004 comprised several partner organizations - SPREP, UNDP, United Nations University and the Australian Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) - as well as the Pacific island countries undergoing the NCSA. Its aim was to provide countries with support, resources and guidance available from a wide range of partners that have experience with capacity assessment and capacity development issues.

² Recommendations on this topic are included within section 1.2.2. when the issue of global and regional support is addressed.

Delays compounded a series of other issues. One was political support and engagement as there were five different Ministers of Environment over the course of the project. Another was financial – the longer the time elapsed the greater the chance that currency cross-rates would change significantly from those in the project document. This occurred in 2007 when the New Zealand dollar increased significantly in value against the United States dollar reducing the funds available.³ A third was stakeholder support and changes in representation of participating agencies which will be discussed later. Finally it was a challenge for the project team to maintain their energy and commitment.

Recommendations:

Delays in project implementation are common in the Pacific, particularly in smaller countries where a limited number of staff are trying to cope with too many demands on their time. Granting extensions of time to complete projects is the norm.

- ***It is recommended that more careful attention is paid to duration when projects are formulated. One approach is to draft a work plan with a timeframe based on a best estimate of how long it is expected to take to complete its activities. Then either the timeframe should be extended by one third or the activities reduced by one third to account for the unexpected!***

This project has simply gone on for too long so that it has lost some support and is rather less likely to achieve the beneficial outcomes expected.

- ***While projects should be granted extensions when appropriate, it should be clear at the outset that these will be limited. If several extensions appear to be needed it is recommended that efforts are made to downsize the project to bring it to a timelier conclusion.***

1.1.4 Phase 4: Cross Cutting Capacity Assessment Report

This work was largely carried out in parallel with the Thematic assessment. The team initially found it difficult to agree which issues were crosscutting and received the assistance of Frank Wickham at SPREP with defining these during a visit to Rarotonga.

1.1.5 Phase 5: Action Plan & Final Report

By June 2007 the Coordinator's salary was now coming out of NES's core budget. This coincided with staff shortages within the service due to delays in the appointment of a Director and rules that mean that an Acting Director is unable to fill positions. The Coordinator thus had to do a share of other work reducing both the focus on and time available for the NCSA project.

³ UNDP have questioned the correctness of this interpretation and further feedback was not received from the Cook Islands team. However I consider that delivering funds in US\$ rather than local currencies which seems to be the case for many donors does cause problems.

A local consultancy firm willing to work within the available funds was recruited to work on this final phase of the project. This process did not go smoothly. The consultants were acknowledged as a strong team but as they had not been involved from the start of the project they took some time to come up to speed. There was some confusion over the format to follow and work had to be re-done. The key part of the Plan was the matrices of goals, outcomes, outputs and actions under the different themes: biodiversity, climate change, etc. The consultants first split the actions into the three capacities: systemic, institutional and individual. While this approach did have merit it also had some problems with some issues cutting across all three. The consultants were then asked to re-work the matrices using a report framework put together and partly completed by Wickham.

Workshops held to review the draft matrices were also problematical with poor attendance of some of the working groups. Some of the stakeholders were unhappy with the indicators and mean of verification for some thematic areas and the consultants re-did these based on workshop feedback. It still proved challenging to devise measurable indicators and the team and Wickham ended up finalising them and even then they were not fully satisfied with the result.

I think one of the problems was that indicators were being sought for Environmental Outcomes which were much larger issues beyond capacity building. A number of these were very difficult to measure and lacked baseline data. It would have proved a simpler process if indicators had been devised only for the Capacity Development Outputs the key outputs of the NCSA. Environmental Outcome indicators have now been removed from the report.

The Action Plan appeared to languish close to completion for several months, in part because of difficulties with indicators but also due to questions about how it might be implemented and how this implementation would be monitored. The second part of this report summarises inputs from this consultancy to assist its completion.

Recommendations relating to these problems are addressed under specific issues such as stakeholder consultation in section 1.2 below.

1.1.6 Additional work: Review of National Environmental Strategic Action Framework

It was agreed that NCSA funding could be used for a review of the National Environmental Strategic Action Framework (NESAF) to allow capacity building requirements identified during the NCSA project to be included in that. This was a good initiative to help ensure that NCSA's findings were translated into actions.

Following a similar pattern however, the local consultant recruited to undertake the review obtained a job part way through the process. One report with a discussion of indicators was delivered but a draft review has yet to be completed.

Recommendation:

- *A decision needs to be made now about the support of the NCSA project for the review of the NESAF. Either a plan to complete this needs to be agreed on defining the funds to be provided by UNDP and who will undertake this work by when. Or alternatively this needs to be abandoned as an output of the NCSA project at this point and the work done to date tabled.*

1.2 Issues

1.2.1 Project purpose – global direction

The Cook Islands joined the NCSA project relatively late (as did most Pacific Island countries) based largely on an understanding that the project would be a requirement for any subsequent GEF funding for environmental capacity building.

It is worth examining this understanding briefly. The Capacity Development News a newsletter produced by the Global Support Programme in December 2005 contains the statements: *‘The NCSA Action Plan is intended to lead on to a programme of capacity development actions in each country.... The GEF will provide an additional programme of support for capacity development through the three linked pathways ... outlined in the Strategic Approach.’* The Cook Islands Project Document contains a statement that begins *‘The outputs and future projects based on NCSA to be funded by GEF and other donors...’* The resource kit developed to assist countries to produce their NCSA’s states: *‘It (the NCSA action Plan) also provides a strong basis for seeking support for capacity development projects from the GEF and other partners’.* In addition, the NBSAP Coordinators meeting in July 2005 at Alotau was informed by SPREP staff that completion of NCSA could increase scope for future GEF funding. It was recorded in the minutes that the NCSA process would produce reports and action plans to guide the work of the GEF in building capacity in the future.

It is not apparent where the statement of the NCSA being a requirement for future GEF funding in this area came from, but it seems possible that this was used by UNPD in encouraging countries to join the programme⁴. It was suggested that if a capacity building project was not identified by the NCSA it would not get funded, rather than making the direct link that projects that were identified would get funding - hence the value of providing a comprehensive list.

Requirement or not, it is clear that the understanding was that completing the project would lead to subsequent GEF funding to support its priority actions. The changing of the GEF’s approach since NSCA inception has certainly undermined support for the process and some have suggested that as a result the project was a waste of time.

It appears that GEF’s changed approach relates to several factors. There was recognition that the Enabling Activities approach had not worked properly across many programmes, and a new Chief Executive Officer was appointed who required a

⁴ UNDP Samoa have indicated that they did not convey this message.

re-evaluation of all projects in the pipeline. One result was the launching of the GEF-PAS (GEF-Pacific Alliance for Sustainability) and at the same time a GEF Support Adviser was appointed at SPREP at the request of Pacific Island Countries. While the GEF is not directly allocating funds to implement priorities identified in the NCSA Action Plans, there are several opportunities for future funding some of which depend on countries placing a priority on this. The first opportunity is in the GEF-PAS within which countries will soon be developing prodocs with components addressing country priorities that could include capacity building. A second opportunity will be the next replenishment of the GEF, GEF 5. Thirdly and more indirectly, Uli Piest (formerly with the NCSA Global Support Programme) is currently developing an overall framework for GEF for capacity building based on previous policies and including some lessons from the NCSA. It is also expected that GEF will look at how future proposals from countries address NCSA Action Plans even though the requirement idea has gone.

It should be noted that GEF/UNDP have always stressed that the NCSA process should be country-driven and the NCSA should have significant value to a country whether or not it leads to capacity building support from GEF. It provides the country, and the NES in particular, with a comprehensive list of capacity needs to meet the Multilateral Environmental Agreements that are administered by the NES and national environmental priorities.

Recommendations:

- ***Donors should aim for consistency in their approach. If a change is necessary this should be advised along with the reasons behind it as soon as possible, ensuring that this information reaches those delivering projects in country.***
- ***The GEF should ensure that NCSA Action Plans are utilised in formulating further assistance to countries. Pacific Island Countries are clearly looking for support to take action to address environmental issues. Projects formulated to do this should use NCSA Plans to ensure that they also build the capacity required.***
- ***The Government of the Cook Islands should use the NCSA Action Plan in its discussions with GEF on GEF-PAS projects and the replenishment of GEF5 as a listing of its capacity needs.***

1.2.2 International & Regional Support

Two support mechanisms were established for NCSA at the global and regional level but both appeared to fall short on delivering what they originally intended. It proved hard to find a balance between providing countries with clear prescriptions and allowing them to fully drive the process themselves. The Cooks did benefit from the global tool-kit and received some plan templates from the regional programme, but more in the way of examples to follow could have speeded up the process.

UNDP/GEF Global Support Programme (GSP)

The Global NCSA Support Programme was established relatively late in August 2005 when the first country projects were approved in 2002 as it took three years to reach agreement on its formulation. The original concept seems to have been an

UNDP/United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/GEF partnership. Both UNDP and UNEP had a senior staff person whose responsibility was to administer and it was suggested that they should be part of the GSP to provide seamless support to countries. However this was not agreed to, apparently due to inter-agency rivalry, and countries obtained their grant and financial advice/reporting from either UNEP or UNDP and their technical advice from the GSP.

The GSP also had a relatively short period of effectiveness as much of its influence ceased when Hunnam left in early 2007. This departure was largely due to frustration over differences of approach, inter-agency conflicts and the difficulties caused by line management of NCSA projects and the GSP being separate. He describes a system in which there was no clear strategy for environmental management and for how the NCSA fitted into this at the highest level.

The GSP finalised and circulated the toolkit, ran a series of workshops in different regions including the one in Samoa referred to earlier, developed a website summarising the progress of different countries, presenting case studies and lessons learned, and circulated newsletters. Maintenance of the web site was the key activity maintained from 2007 onwards.

The GSP has itself been subject to a review by Professor John Hay that is critical of the way that it was set up but this was not available at the time of writing.

Pacific Regional Support Mechanism (PRSM)

Participating Pacific Island countries endorsed the idea of the PRSM at its first workshop in 2005 and SPREP was encouraged by UNDP to coordinate the formation of this mechanism (its composition and purpose was defined in an earlier footnote) but no funds were forthcoming from UNDP or GEF for SPREP or the other partner agencies to participate. The initial concept presented to countries was that each would provide up to 15% of their NCSA budget to support the PRSM but this did not happen with countries instead opting to pay for support services as and when needed. Thus whereas the PRSM was a sound concept with the potential to help countries develop their NCSA's much more quickly and effectively, it appeared doomed to play a limited role from the outset.

In the event, the PRSM facilitated three sub-regional workshops. The SPREP coordinator, Wickham had to use his own operational budgets to assist with the first, but subsequently some countries including the Cook Islands did use some of their funds to cover his travel to assist with in-country work. The first NCSA Polynesia sub-regional workshop was held in Niue in March 2005. The focus of the workshop was on the initial NCSA steps, i.e. inception, stocktaking and thematic assessments but in some ways it was too early as few countries had received funding and not all coordinators were in place.

There were some initial exchanges of information between coordinators and an e-discussion forum was set up, but without any resources the PRSM was unable to maintain its coordination. Some limited contact between coordinators continued.

Wickham noted that NCSA was a difficult concept and the PRSM had trouble agreeing what to recommend of the many tools on offer. The MEA Secretariats could have been involved and assisted UNDP to develop a few user-friendly tools that the PRSM could then have assisted countries to use.

Recommendations:

- ***Donors should carefully assess the need for global or regional support mechanisms during programme development. Such mechanisms need to be set up in a timely manner and properly resourced.***
- ***It should not be assumed that existing regional organisations can take on support roles without specific additional resources.***

1.2.3 Project Management

In projects like this it is usual to hear about some shortcomings in management of the project in both the in-country agency and the support office, in this case the NES and the UNDP MCO Office in Samoa respectively. Government agencies tend not to have very vigorous project and staff management systems based on detailed weekly and monthly work plans and deliverables that people are held accountable for.

Supervisory staff are usually very busy and travel frequently. The same may also be true of support agencies. Their staff are unlikely to have technical expertise in the project area and thus largely have to pass on the instructions and guidance provided to them from regional or global offices.

Coordination

The significant absences of the Project Coordinator with health issues and other commitments were identified as one factor behind project delays. As an example of the latter the Coordinator attended a long series of workshops in Oct/Nov 2006 (Cook Islands National Youth Policy Workshop; EDF 9 GeoCMS MapServer Workshop; Communicating for Change: Using communications to promote sustainable livelihoods in the Pacific Workshop; EDF 9 MapInfo and Microsoft Access Workshop; Auckland University of Technology Project Management Course). These do not appear directly relevant to the NCSA task though they do represent significant capacity building in themselves. The commitment issue clearly became more significant in 2008 once the Coordinator position was absorbed within NES using the local budget and she had other responsibilities beyond the NCSA.

There were also issues about the availability of the Project Manager at times as she travelled frequently with particular responsibilities as one of two bureau members for the CBD from Asia-Pacific.

Such issues are inevitable in a small country in the field of environmental management when there is so much work to do and so many international commitments to meet. Better systems could be put in place and project supervision delegated to others if the Project manager is away for significant periods. The UNDP Multi-Country Office in Samoa has indicated that they might also be able to play a

project management as a last resort at such times and how this might work is worth discussion.

There was provision for a Project Administrative Assistant within the Project Document but the Cook Islands did not consider that this was necessary. In hindsight it could have been better if this position had been filled, particularly if the incumbent had had the skills needed to be able to look after many of the coordinator's tasks when she was away.

A further solution may be about sizing projects appropriately and allowing a realistic time-frame for their completion. Eighteen months was hardly a realistic time within the Pacific given the way this programme was designed.

Recommendations:

- ***The coordination issue needs to be addressed in more detail at project inception. Two suggestions are:***
- ***Once a coordinator is selected UNDP should work with them to prepare a training and support plan. This would match the person specifications in the TOR with the CV of the coordinator, identifying the specific areas in which he/she would require training or backstopping and defining a programme to provide this. (This recognises that in small countries like the Cook Islands it is difficult to recruit a coordinator who has the ideal skills and experience to do the job as set out in TOR's.)***
- ***In a situation when the coordinator takes on other roles, such as here once the NES picked up the salary, a clear work plan specifying how the original project is to be completed.***
- ***It needs to be specified at the outset who will be able to make key decisions, sign funding requisitions, etc if the Project Manager is away for a week or more. Travel plans of the Project manager and other key staff should be shared with UNDP. A possible role for UNDP MCO staff will need to be identified for occasions when these specified people are also away.***

Communication

My assessment is that communication could have been improved both ways. Problems could have been advised earlier by the project team but at the same time UNDP staff are busy and travelling and not always immediately available. However, friendly relations between staff in the Cook Islands and UNDP MCO seemed to have been maintained throughout.

Recommendation:

- ***Further efforts should be made to have in-country and UNDP staff feeling part of the one team to facilitate the best possible communication. The two should discuss means to achieve this.***
- ***The country team should raise problems as soon as they are identified and share the things that are going well.***

Financial management and reporting

Financial reporting proved very time consuming for the coordinator. Up to two weeks were needed to go through all the records and almost every quarterly report received from Aid Management (the Government agency that manages aid project finance) had discrepancies, probably related to having four different staff looking after the NCSA project during its duration. The coordinator kept her own records which proved a good discipline which I would always recommend. The budget was stopped at one point due to a delay in reporting which may have been related to the Coordinator's absences.

The project continually had a 'low delivery rate' in UNDP terms – i.e. the rate that funds were actually utilised against what was planned for in the Project Document. There were several reasons for this. Clearly the major reason was that project activities soon fell behind schedule and it was unable to catch up. There were some delays due to financial management and financial reports to UNDP being delayed, for reasons such as the NES not giving Aid Management enough time to process payments, etc. However quite a lot of work was done by NES at no cost to the project due partly to problems obtaining or retaining consultants, and there was significant sharing of resources, so there were often funds left over each quarter.

The work plan changed frequently which always meant more time was required to prepare reports and reconcile budgets. Some changes resulted from delays and activities being re-scheduled later. However there were also positive reasons such as UNDP showing helpful flexibility in approving new activities which linked into the overall objectives of the NCSA project.

Recommendations:

Project reporting requirements are always an issue in the region in my experience, not just for projects involving UNDP and GEF. A quarterly system seems firmly embedded but I feel strongly that this needs revisiting. Typically, few activities can be completed in the Pacific in a 3-month period and coordinators are usually busy reporting and sorting out financial discrepancies and often don't get the funds for the quarter in till part way through it. There would be considerable savings in administrative effort in both countries and donor agencies if reports were produced every third instead of every quarter – there would then only be 9 reporting periods not 12 in a three-year project.

- ***UNDP should take the lead in moving to requiring reports each third rather than each quarter and persuade other donors to follow. (If I was asked for the one recommendation that would make the most contribution to the management of the environment in the Pacific this would be it.)***
- ***An administrative support position should be set up and filled alongside the coordinator for complex, multi-year projects like this. This person should undergo induction at UNDP MCO along with the coordinator (as 1.1.1 above) so that they can take on many of the financial management and reporting tasks freeing up the coordinator's time to focus on outputs.***

1.2.4 Use of Consultants

The project team sought to use local consultants to retain the capacity built during the process in-country. Clearly there are good reasons for doing this as locals will have a better understanding of the local situation and an in-country network that may be useful to the project. However the limited supply of local consultants presented problems throughout the project, either through individuals not completing work through changes in their circumstances or their replacements requiring time to come up to speed.

While international consultants may lack the local knowledge, their livelihood depends on the satisfactory completion of contracts. They may also be more experienced in working with donor agencies and project documents and thus be better able to help adapt projects for a country's situation.

An international consultant could have been recruited once the project was falling significantly behind schedule as a means to help get it back on track. However it appears that the relatively small sums allocated to consultancies in each phase (typically US\$5000) prevented this. When one advertisement was placed regionally all quotes greatly exceeded the available budget.

Recommendation:

- ***I would advocate retaining an international consultant in a mentoring role for a project like this when a country proposes to use local consultants for the deliverables. This could be the same person that assisted with the Project Document as discussed earlier and provision made within his/her contract or a later role identified in the Document. The mentor could undertake the following:***
 - ***Support and advise the Coordinator***
 - ***Support and advise local Consultants***
 - ***Provide continuity across the whole project.***
- ***Alternatively UNDP could consider the pro-active recruitment of outside consultants should local consultants be unable to deliver their full assignments.***

1.2.5 Size of Project

It was suggested that for a small country conducting an effective NCSA was not a major task as a lot of the work had already been done – e.g. through NBSAP and Add-on Enabling Activities (Biodiversity), National Communications on Climate Change, etc. However providing a budget of US\$200,000K immediately turns it into a major project requiring major commitments of staff and time. While smaller countries may be reluctant to accept smaller sums for common global projects like the NCSA or NBSAP development than larger countries it may actually be in their interest to do so.

It appears that there were difficulties at times spending the budget. However it is good to see that UNDP were flexible in allowing the introduction of an activity not in the

Project Document: the review of the NESAF which would help ensure NSAF findings were acted on. It has been suggested that countries do not need to spend all of the budget provided but in my experience there is pressure to do this as disbursement of funds is one measure that UNDP uses for project success.

There may be some issues with small countries absorbing the large amounts of funds provided for assessment projects like this with little visible on the ground action. However this should not be taken to imply that similar issues would arise for projects that are taking conservation action. There is a very large amount of such work needed and countries like the Cook Islands require as much funding as possible in this area like many other countries.

Recommendation:

- ***Thoroughly review the appropriate funding required to undertake the project at the time it is being developed. While recognising the important principle of every country being treated equally, provide the opportunity for a country to agree to receive a lesser sum than others if appropriate.***

1.2.6 Stakeholder consultation

The project design emphasised the need for stakeholder participation and this became a huge task. It was hard to organise meetings as people in Government agencies or NGO's all had many commitments and tended to wear many hats, and there were frequent changes of these representatives over the duration of the project. It was found that unless people had been to a meeting of one of the conventions they had little idea how things linked up, whereas those exposed in this way were more engaged in the process.

Over 30 hours of stakeholder consultations were carried out over a 2-month period for the Stocktake Assessment and over 100 hours for the Thematic Assessment. Everyone was enthusiastic at the start but support dwindled when they realised that the project was assessing capacity only. People no longer wanted to do workshops and continue assessing but see some action. The project team ended up doing a lot of work for the Working Groups (convened to look at different areas) rather than receiving detailed information from them, and developed material and sent it back to them asking 'is this what you were thinking?'

Stakeholders seem to have been well engaged during the development of Thematic and Cross-Cutting Assessments which has resulted in these being very comprehensive and valuable. However it appears that engagement tailed off by the time the Action Plan was developed. For example when the local consultants came to present their initial draft of this there was minimal participation from the Land Degradation working group. Four key representatives in Fisheries, Waste Management, Water Resources and the Works Department had all moved on from their positions. Thus it is considered likely that stakeholder ownership of the Action Plan is not so strong and this will need to be addressed in its implementation.

Overall there was not consistent support from other agencies and a further reason for this was that all the resources just went to one, the NES. It was suggested to me that this project could have been located in the Prime Minister's office where much of the Government's business is undertaken. This might have made it easier to obtain the full engagement of different departments, however only the NES had the experience of dealing with the three conventions behind the project.

Recommendations:

- ***Donors should recognise likely resistance in the Cook Islands to any more reviews or assessments in the field of environmental management. Or ensure that any such activities are a small part of a programme or project that at the same time carries funds for implementation.***
- ***Multi-agency projects should be designed so that all key agencies receive some funding to support their involvement as a means of increasing their ownership.***

1.2.7 Involvement of Outer Islands

Involving the Outer Islands (beyond Rarotonga) is a key challenge for any project in the Cook Islands. Two of these islands were involved in early consultations but the limited travel budget meant that from then on reports were used where available. This was not an important issue for this project as it was relatively easy to identify gaps that were common across all islands. However a particular focus may be needed on the outer islands when it comes to implementing the Action Plan as their capacity is less than Rarotonga's but their issues often the same. Also capacity built in these islands may be more likely to stay there.

Recommendation:

- ***Pay particular attention to the Outer Islands in implementing the NCSA Action Plan.***

1.2.8 Awareness-raising

The Project Document does not prescribe any awareness-raising beyond a task to 'conduct media activities'. However it was found that very few people were aware of the three conventions and their links to environmental issues. UNCCD in particular had had little promotion within the Cook Islands (as it had had the least amount of money put into projects) and many did not understand that the way they used land was part of the bigger problem of 'land degradation'.

Significant unplanned effort thus had to be put into project advocacy. An initial brochure briefly explaining the three conventions and the NCSA project and its planned outcomes was disseminated to all Ministries and organisations and had some public distribution. This information was also placed on the website. A few newsletters were circulated that further expanded on the project and its phases in a bilingual format as well as current events related to biodiversity, climate change and

land degradation. A short documentary was also produced. The need to undertake this work will also have contributed to delays in other planned activities.

2 Lessons Learned

Detailed lessons learned can be derived from the previous section for each recommendation is based on some understanding learned from the project. A few overall lessons are provided in this section.

Donors should spend more time reviewing and building on past environmental initiatives when designing new programmes and undertake more assessment of the likely impact of their programmes on a small country. For example, several years of work on the NCSA may actually have had a negative impact on the environment by taking National Environment Service staff away from other work. Donors should also consider the need for global and regional support for new programmes and establish this support at the outset if required.

In small country like the Cook Islands there will be a shortage of trained personnel so there may be a need to provide specific project training and/or back-up for coordinators and local consultants. While the concept of a steering committee to bring different stakeholders together to support a project seems a strong one, the reality typically falls short and the onus comes back on the one implementing agencies.

‘Capacity assessment’ has now been described to me as a rude word in the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the region. Stakeholder fatigue following years of consultations and workshops has reached a very high level and donors need to recognise this. An environmental project that is not focussed on delivering tangible outcomes in the field will struggle.

3 Concluding Comments

This project was not identified as a priority by the Cook Islands but initiated by a donor who initially ‘sold’ it as a pre-requisite for further support⁵. As a result it was slightly on the back-foot from the outset and the project team struggled to get all the support and inputs they needed. It was also a complex project and the level of global and regional support provided was less than ideal despite the best efforts of the individuals involved. The project was undermined in its later stages when the GEF did not follow through on requiring NCSA findings to be used to inform the design of new GEF projects. It also suffered from the fact that no simple mechanism of follow-up funding to implement its recommendations was provided.

Despite these underlying issues the Cook Islands team, with good support from the UNDP MCO in Samoa and SPREP, has produced a very comprehensive assessment. It has shown commendable dedication to see the project through to the end in the face

⁵ UNDP Samoa do not accept this statement but I maintain that it was the message I received during my consultations in the Cook Islands.

of many challenges. This assessment should be of significant value to future environmental management in the country.

There is a feeling in the Cook Islands that everyone is great at turning out reports but they are now asking ‘what next?’ Even the country’s higher level strategic documents the NESAF and the National Sustainable Development Plan seem to fall into the same category with lists of planned activities but little monitoring or follow up. Such documents also tended to lose their relevance amid the current global economic situation with cuts in departmental budgets making it harder for agencies to accept responsibilities and achieve planned outcomes.

Ensuring implementation of the NCSA Action Plan is going to be a challenge. There appear to be no specific staff resources or funds that can be allocated to promoting it and monitoring progress. The onus is on many people to make use of it. Donors should use it to design programmes and ensure that capacity needs are addressed alongside taking action to address environmental issues. The Government should use it during its conversations with donors and its own funding allocations. Ministries or Department’s should use it in developing their business plans. It includes a list of priorities for implementation over the next three years which should provide a starting point for these various users.

B. Finalisation of Action Plan

Almost half the scheduled working days were spent reviewing the Action Plan and working with the Coordinator⁶ to finalise this with the assistance of staff with responsibility for biodiversity and climate change issues.

The draft Action Plan contained a very comprehensive list of capacity building activities which was considered very valuable as there was no previous baseline for this. This list could be used by donors and those working in a particular thematic area to identify what needed doing in the Cook Islands and to see where they may be able to help. But it presented difficulties in taking a more proactive approach, i.e. in the NES and the other stakeholders identifying for the Government what the key needs were so that Government in turn could go out and seek specific assistance to address these. While some prioritisation had been undertaken this still left too long a list of priority activities: 317 out of 577 activities including 38 for biodiversity, 92 for climate change and 22 for land degradation. Work was undertaken to reduce these to a list of 66 priorities to be addressed within the 3-year timeframe of the country’s medium-term budgeting framework 2010-13, with 12 for biodiversity, 17 for climate change and 9 for land degradation.

Project profiles were drafted to address some of the revised priorities. Emphasis was placed on those where an opportunity for funding could be identified and where

⁶ The NCSA Coordinator has recently taken on the role of coordinating a GEF/UNDP medium-sized project: Capacity Building For Sustainable Land Management in the Cook Islands so she was able to provide input on the land degradation thematic area.

commonalties existed. Adaptation to climate change and capacity building for sustainable land management are two areas where funding should be available.

The process to bring the findings of the Action Plan through to decision makers in Cabinet and Government Departments and to obtain support for its priority actions was discussed. The NES will endeavour to promote the Plan through Government agencies to seek them to endorse it and take responsibility for actions that align with their core functions. Each action in the plan's matrices has a 'lead agency' and 'partner agencies' identified and these agencies will need to agree to accept these roles.

The NCSA Action Plan is then expected to go to Cabinet. The NES does not intend to promote it as a separate document but as part of NESAF so that completing the review of the latter remains important.

One of the challenges in having the findings of the Action Plan adopted may lie in the way that the Government is currently structured. This is divided into five sectors in the current Budget Policy Statement:

- Economic (includes Tourism, Marine, Agriculture)
- Social (includes Education, Health)
- Governance
- Law & Order (legislation etc)
- Infrastructure (includes Environment)

Environment is thus in a separate sector under a separate Minister from those agencies with key roles in land and resource use. It seems unlikely that the NCSA will be used to guide national budgets so capacity building will need to be built into all projects addressing environmental issues.

The way that the Plan's adoption might be monitored and the indicators proposed to do this were reviewed. Monitoring will be a challenge as there are no resources identified for this, difficulties in developing indicators and little training in their use, and little commitment to this after the long, demanding NCSA project.

As mentioned earlier in the evaluation, one set of performance indicators was removed from the Action Plan, namely those referring to environmental outcomes. To take an example from biodiversity, it was felt that the Plan should contain monitoring to measure progress at building the capacity to manage threatened species but it could not be expected to have targets related to the status of those species. This removed a lot of problematical indicators many of which were un-measurable as baseline information was lacking.

Without any specific resources available to NES to monitor the Plan's implementation it will be up to staff in the individual lead agencies to take on this role. The extent that this happens may depend on the extent that the plan's actions line up with those agencies' priorities and funded programmes. The detail in the plan should allow an external review of its implementation at some point in the future and the donors who established the NCSA could consider resourcing this. Priority actions are listed for a 3-year timeframe so the end of this period would be a logical time for an initial review.

In reviewing the draft plan I suggested several other minor changes:

- Including ex-situ conservation as just one technique within species conservation rather than make it a separate theme
- Combining actions on invasive species and biosecurity within the same goal
- Modifying some capacity development indicators and clarifying some actions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support and hospitality of the National Environment Service team particularly Louisa Karika and Tania Temata and the contribution of Meapelo Maiai of the UNDP Multi-Country Office in Samoa. All those interviewed gave very freely of their time and ideas. I hope that this evaluation proves useful and contributes in some way to the conservation of the natural resources of this beautiful country.

Acronyms

CBD – Convention on Biological Diversity
EDF – Environment Defence Fund
GEF – Global Environment Facility
GEF-PAS – GEF Pacific Alliance for Sustainability
GSP – Global Support Programme
MCO – Multi-Country Office
MEA – Multilateral Environment Agreement
NBSAP – National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan
NCSA – National Capacity Self Assessment
NES – National Environment Service
NESAF - National Environmental Strategic Action Framework
PRSM – Pacific Regional Support Mechanism
SPREP – South Pacific Regional Environment Programme
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme

Annex 1: Terms of reference

Short Term Consultancy – NCSA Action Plan and Evaluation

The Government of the Cook Islands has received funds through the UNDP/GEF to assist with the assessment of the country's capacity to meet its commitments and obligations under the CBD, UNFCCC and the CCD. As part of the closing phase of the National Capacity Needs Assessment Project (NCSA), the National Environment Service is preparing to finalise the NCSA Action Plan and undertake a Final Impact Evaluation to provide an overall assessment of the NCSA process and implementation of the Action Plan

This TOR is therefore in two parts; the NCSA Action Plan and the NCSA Evaluation.

NCSA Action Plan

The NCSA project has previously engaged local consultants to complete the NCSA Final Report and Capacity Development Action Plan based on the information gathered and synthesised in the NCSA Thematic Assessment Report and Cross Cutting Report and the original Action Plan framework devised in collaboration with SPREP. This report was not completed to a satisfactory standard and this consultancy is expected to fill in the gaps left in this report – particularly the sections on indicators, means of verification and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

NCSA Review and Evaluation

The purpose of the review of the Cook Islands National Capacity self-Assessment project is to assess the performance of the project from the start of the project implementation up to the time when it was operationally closed. The assessment will include both evaluation of the progress in project implementation, measured against planned outputs set forth in the Project Document, and an assessment of the impacts of the project.

The evaluation will also identify lessons learned and best practices from the NCSA project, which could be applied to implementation of the Action Plan and future and other on-going environment projects.

Scope of the Work

The consultant will be under the overall guidance of the NCSA Project Management Unit (PMU), and the direct supervision of the NCSA Project Manager (PM).

Pending the finalisation of Terms of Reference, the scope of work is likely to comprise of:

Part A:

Completion of the NCSA Capacity Development Action Plan and Final Report which could include;

- Completion of remaining log frame matrices for prioritised capacity actions under thematic areas through review and revision of indicators and means of verification
- Resource mobilization and implementation strategies, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
- Draft project concept profiles
- Assist the PM and PC review and identify lessons learned from implementation of the NCSA and incorporate this information into the report

Part B:

Preparation of a Final Evaluation Report for the Cook Islands NCSA project which could include;

- Assessment of project outputs, implementation and impact to determine if the **goal, aims, objectives, outcomes & proposed benefits** of the project were achieved, whether the **process** worked well and look at the timely delivery and quality of the **outputs**.
- Comment on how important the NCSA deliverables were to the process of assessing capacity
- Highlight challenges that the project faced during its development and implementation
- Highlight the challenges to future progress and how these might be overcome

- Report on lessons learned
- Recommendations to help NES and project partners improve its operational and support activities for capacity building related to environment management in the Cook Islands especially in terms of effective implementation of the Action Plan and onwards for future project prospect/s.
- Consider whether the programme was well designed by the donors or how this could be improved for future programmes
- Comment on whether the action plan can be implemented in current environment (economic situation, priorities of Government, etc)

Overall,

1. Advise the Project Manager and Project Coordinator of any problems affecting the implementation of this consultancy and suggest possible solutions for resolving such problems.

Budget and Workplan

The Consultant is required to present an ‘Expressions of Interest’ document outlining:

1. A work programme to undertake the tasks
2. A budget to coincide with the activities of the work programme including all costs involved
3. Curriculum Vitae

The costs of any stakeholder consultation meetings should be considered separate. All other costs should be included in the budget and workplan.

Annex 2: Schedule and list of people consulted

Met with in Rarotonga:

Tania Temata, NCSA Project Manager, NES
 Louisa Karika, NCSA Project Coordinator, NES
 Liz Munro, Biodiversity Officer, NES
 Imogen Ingram, Island Sustainability Alliance C.I. Inc
 Ngamau Wichman-Tou, Oceana Global
 Liz Wright-Koteka, Prime Minister’s Office
 Ngatoko Ngakoto, Agriculture Department
 Pavai Taramai, Quarantine Officer

(A steering committee meeting was organised but only Ingram, Ngakoto, Taramai and NES staff were available to attend).

Consulted by phone or email:

Pasha Carruthers, Climate Technical Officer, NES
 Professor John Hay, Consultant reviewing Global Support Programme for NCSA (GSP)

Peter Hunnam, former Manager, GSP
Uli Piest, formerly GSP
Gerald McCormack, Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project
Meapelo Mai'ai, UNDP Multi Country Office, Samoa
Joe Stanley, GEF Support Adviser, SPREP
Frank Wickham, SPREP

Annex 3: Documents reviewed

NCSA Project Document
Inception Report – July 2005
National Stocktake Report – August 2005
Thematic Assessment Report – September 2007
Cross Cutting Capacity Assessment Report – November 2007
Tripartite Review Report (TPR) for NCSA or Terminal Report – November 2008
TPR Meeting Discussion (Audio recording)
Quarterly Reports to UNDP – Oct-Dec 2004 to Jan-Mar 2008
NCSA Capacity Development Action Plan & Final Report (draft)
National Environment Strategic Action Framework – Implementation Review Report
(draft) – September 2008