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Linking and Enhancing Protected Areas in the Temperate  
Broadleaf Forest Ecoregions of Bhutan (LINKPA)

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## **MID-TERM EVALUATION**

### Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

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## **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

The MTR team has been impressed by the committed, competent and hard-working staff of TNP, and its visionary leadership. Unlike in many other projects, there seems to be broad consensus among all the stakeholders on the way forward and how to address current and future challenges. All this against the backdrop of difficult working conditions (terrain and climate, communication, natural dangers, etc.), serious constraints that often elude project designers. As in any finite conservation project, LINKPA might not be in a position to establish with certainty its benefits and impacts on the park's and corridor's biodiversity but the establishment of institutions and processes and changes in attitudes and behaviours can serve as proxies for the achievements. We encourage TNP and partners to use the remaining resources and time to prioritise, consolidate, analyse, document and disseminate achievements as well as failures. We hope that our recommendations, which largely reflect stakeholder ideas and suggestions, can help to facilitate this process.

## **PROJECT CONCEPT AND DESIGN**

### **Concept**

LINKPA has had a complex history, resulting in an uneasy compromise between RGoB and WWF focus on park management and ICDP, and GEF/UNDP priorities on biological corridors. While this has led to a rather ambitious MSP, the project concept is nevertheless highly relevant to Bhutan's conservation paradigms. Firstly, the emphasis on a systems approach goes hand in hand with the country's holistic approach to PA management. Secondly, the concept acknowledges that corridors without sound nodes in the form of functional parks are not effective. Thirdly, the emphasis on ICDPs takes into account Bhutan's commitment to a participatory and inclusive approach to biodiversity conservation.

### **Project Scope and Components**

As a result of the hybrid nature of the project – corridor and park – the project scope is somewhat ambitious for a MSP. It might have been more realistic to focus on either a park management plus ICDP for TNP or a corridor initiative. At the same time, the project approach allows the partners to deal in a more integrated manner and on a wider landscape level with the conservation challenges.

As far as the components are concerned, it is not clear why there are two separate components on corridor management. They can be easily consolidated into one, reflecting more adequately the two overall outcomes of a strengthened TNP and a basic management regime for the corridor.

### **Logframe**

LINKPA's logframe is not a suitable basis for results-based management as required by GEF and UNDP. Despite several revisions, it is inconsistent in terms of outcomes, outputs and activities. By way of illustration, Output 1.1 and 1.4 are outputs, whereas 1.3 is an outcome, and 1.2. an activity. In addition, many indicators are either unrealistic or inappropriate: For example, the success of Output 3.5. (Environmental education) is to be measured through awareness of "park boundaries and regulations". Not surprisingly, the project has been mainly using annual work plans for planning and budgeting purposes. Unfortunately, the AWP's are not at all consistent with the logframe, which aggravates the problems caused by the weak logframe.

***R: The project partners should as soon as possible revise the logframe in the light of past results and future priorities, and with a particular emphasis on developing a coherent set of results and measurable indicators.***

## **PROJECT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS**

### **Corridor Management (Components 1 and 2)**

This outcome has caused a lot of confusion, particularly Output 1.1, which refers to a regulatory framework for the biological corridors. While Bhutan's biological corridors do have a certain legal status following their declaration in 1999, there is still uncertainty about their relation to protected areas *per se*, and who is going to manage them. The Forest and Nature Conservation Act (and its Rules and Regulations) is most likely applicable to BCs but there is a need for an authoritative clarification on the part of MoA, whether BCs need to be gazetted as PAs, etc. This uncertainty has shaped the project's activities under this component. A Draft "Regulatory Framework" was recently completed, which provides an outline for possible management interventions and priorities for the TNP-JSWNP-RMNP corridor. The draft is, however, not a regulatory framework, as the latter is provided by the above mentioned act pending a RGoB directive to the contrary.

Apart from the framework, the project has recently completed a number of assessments (biological, socio-economic, grazing) in the corridor that will be useful for the development of a management plan or guidelines. A brief review of these surveys by the MTR team suggests that they require further analysis and follow-up to make them more relevant to management. Some of the survey results have been entered into a rudimentary database (Output 2.3), which is, however, not yet fully operational.

***R1: In light of the project's main objective, corridor work should be given priority in the remaining time of the project. To facilitate and sharpen results, the logframe revision should condense Outputs 1.1, 1.2 and 2.1 into two, one on corridor governance, the other on the management framework.***

***R2: Develop a set of governance options for biological corridors in Bhutan in the form of a policy paper, which examines alternatives for corridor management authorities and mechanisms with particular reference to the roles of local authorities and communities.***

***R3: Establishment of a management framework for the corridor. This would build on existing and future research and the draft "regulatory framework", and outline a set of priority issues and interventions.***

***R4: No extension of ICDP into corridors, as this would further dilute the already overstretched resources.***

***R5: The development, population and refinement of the database should continue with the understanding that it should include both TNP and corridor.***

### **Sustainable Finance (Output 1.4)**

The project developed a proposal for an endowment fund that would be sourced from community contributions to ICDP activities and submitted it to RGoB. The purpose of the fund was to sustain ICDP activities beyond project duration. The Ministry of Finance objected to this idea, and no follow-up took place. In light of the Ministry's desire to keep budget authority and control, it might have been advisable to explore different financing options and mechanisms in a consultative manner rather than formally submit one option.

***R: Based on background research conducted by UNDP and a series of consultations with local and national stakeholders, a small task force among***

***the project partners should develop an options paper reflecting international experiences with protected area finance and needs and realities on the ground. This paper should then be presented and discussed at a national seminar.***

### **ICDP (Outputs 3.3 and 3.4)**

Envisioning the need to integrate conservation and development programs within and around the protected areas of the Thrumshingla National Park, the park has been implementing several ICD activities based on community needs and priorities. In the process, it was expected that the dependency of residents on park resources are minimized so that the twin objective of i) conserving the eco-systems of the park and ii) sustainable and economic development of the communities is achieved.

### **Alternative natural resources**

Given that the residents within the park and outside (buffer zone) depended on park resources for various domestic uses, it was important that the demand for forest products be matched with rationale use through regulated system. Things that concerned most included pressure on wood for fuel, shingles, canes and bamboos within and outside park.

*a) CGI materials distributed:* The park management in close collaboration with local administration provided CGI roofing materials to residents within the park and in the critical buffer zones. The criteria for the selection of beneficiaries were not very clear to the evaluation team. Social benefits from CGI were immediate and for that matter a greater demand for such support. Longer term impacts in terms of contributions to conservation, labour saving, health benefits, and the opportunity cost is yet to be seen.

Most beneficiaries felt happy about swapping their traditional rights to wood shingles in exchange for CGI roofing materials received. Because farmers forfeited in favour of conservation, it has created some kind of contentious attitude which is likely. Some of them although statistically not significant also felt park rules were too stringent. All said and done, the distribution of CGI roofing materials proved to be a very successful scheme with visible economic and social benefits.

Issues, however, remain over high cost and its sustainability. The park has already spent almost half of the budget on ICDP activities alone and now have only two years to go with 30% budget remaining. Issues also remain unclear over emergence of new household units who would place similar demands on the park management in future if they are also required to forfeit extraction of shingles from park resources.

*b) Solar light distribution:* Solar lights have been provided to residents within park and in the critical buffer zones with no electricity or not expected to get connected to the main power supply grids in the next 10 years. A total of 31 households and 27 community lhakhangs, schools, RNR offices and park offices have been provided with solar lamps.

Several farmers stated that the benefit from the solar power lighting has literally made the difference between day and night for them. The use of solar lights has immensely helped to eliminate profuse smoke produced by burning resin woods. It has helped to live a healthier life and not the least to reduced dependency on park resources (resin) for lighting and labour. It has also increased working hours of yathra weavers late into the nights, thus increasing their productivity.

### **Alternative Income Generation**

*Yathra weaving at Chungphel:* Chungphel is a small community of 12 among 21 other households under Chummey geog of Bumthang Dzongkhag who received solar lights. The community falls within the buffer zone of the Thrumshingla national park. Traditionally, the community is known for yathra weaving (sheep wool yarn) from few

sheep each household reared. This pattern has unfortunately changed from producing wool on their farm to purchasing ready-made threads available in markets. The park with an objective to increase their income levels extended a grant of Nu.50,000 supporting a Yathra Weaving Association (YWA).

With only half of the yarn products sold, the association has made about Nu.30,000. Once all of the products sold, the association hopes to invest by lending to its members on payment of interest. The Tshogpa of the community handles the money collected so far.

While the members sincerely appreciated the grant from the park, it was far too small to place the association on a firm footing. Lack of ready market for its products contributed to its weakness. Further, the scale of the materials produced was so small, that the profit margin generated was not enough to meet its marketing cost.

***R1: While Chungphel case may be treated as a pilot programme, similar activities if taken up elsewhere must include stronger institutional development and marketing support. It is also important that this pilot case run successfully for others to follow in their shoes.***

### **Agriculture and Livestock Intensification**

With an objective to reduce the wide spread practices of forest grazing pressure by both the resident herds, the park has adopted strategies to i) improving the productivity of the cattle so that fewer number of cattle is retained and ii) making available improved pastures all through the year.

While both individuals and community-based pasture development is in progress, in particular at Ura and Sengor, the distribution of breeding bulls, poultry and piggery appears to have few results. The problem appeared to be from poor design where they are distributed on a peace meal basis with practically no backstopping. Most of the breeding bulls have perished. The care-takers know little about its management nor do they have access to necessary health care and feed supplements. The mortality among pullets was high as the pullets withdrawn from an indoor mineral fed feeds and placed in an environment where sheds are poorly constructed and no such feeds available.

The park's support for fencing helped to protect their pastures besides practically eliminating disputes which frequently arose among residents from encroachment. The broader objective which is to reduce herd size is yet to be realized. Farmers are still not convinced of a smaller and more productive cattle herd size. It is a delicate issue to alter a system which the farmers themselves find quite risky to accept.

***R2: Given the high mortality rate with bulls due to poor management and ineffectiveness, AI services may be considered in areas closer to road network. They are equally effective, if not better. The park has to demonstrate with clear benefits of small herd and higher productivity.***

***R3: It may be worth trying two new piggery package proposals planned by the park management in Lhuentse and Mongar, whereby the piglets are entrusted to someone genuinely interested. He will be trained well and with necessary supports provided to raise piglets to meet requirement within the community.***

### **Environmental Education (Output 3.5)**

Park residents does exhibit fair knowledge about park regulations and the importance of conservation which may be attributed to efforts made by the park management.

Small fund support to some of the schools although small, does activate school engagement in nature clubs and school greening activities. Although we failed to observe knowledge being shared by family members at home, students on their own does exhibit some interest in plants especially in orchids. Adoption of streams and

road along national highway and short treks through the parks certainly would have some benefits to greater understanding and appreciation for conservation. Rural Scholarship Support (Nu.2500 per annum) is a big help to enable genuinely deserving students to go for higher studies. The issue here is its sustainability program. What happens when the project stops? Will there be provisions at least for the continuing students to complete their schools. How far would the scholarship support continue are some unanswered questions.

**R1: It is recommended that the schools actively involve parents in activities such as greening and adoption of roads and streams.**

**R2: It is worthwhile for the park management to sometimes engage schools in re-forestation of eroded areas in the park. That way it involves students more into park activities.**

**R3: LINKPA should allocate the necessary financial resources to support the current rural scholarship beneficiaries until Class 12.**

### **Infrastructure (Output 3.1)**

Infrastructure, incl. office and field equipment, makes up quite a large portion of project expenditures (21%), maybe more than a typical GEF MSP would support. In the context of Bhutan, where the establishment and operationalisation of protected areas is a relatively recent phenomenon, this does not seem out of place, as a basic infrastructure forms the precondition for effective management. In the case of TNP, project funds helped to fund the park HQ in Ura, the range office in Autsho, and some smaller items. A planned visitor centre in Ura has faced serious problems due to a lack of bidders. There were also a number of shortcomings with regard to the quality of construction projects, which are beyond the scope of the MTR but are highlighted in the RGoB Audit Report.

**R: For the remainder of the project, procurement and contracting should be carried out in a holistic/package manner to minimize transaction costs and to attract bidders.**

### **Capacity Development (Outputs 1.3 and 3.1)**

LINKPA has implemented a number of capacity development activities for park staff as well as for external stakeholders. These include so far 2 PG diplomas in NRM, various short courses (GIS, wildlife surveys) and a number of study tours and exposure visits abroad. An estimated 14% of the project budget has been allocated so far to human resource development. LINKPA had to weigh the pros and cons of investing resources in longer-term academic courses whose benefits eventually go beyond TNP, and more focused, practical training. The MTR team generally agrees with the current mix of training and acknowledges the capacity advances of the park team, which could be further strengthened in the following ways:

**R1: Further “exposure trips” abroad should only be considered on an incentive/reward basis for particular achievements, i.e. for establishing a self-sustaining community ICDP scheme.**

**R2: Explore options for recruiting experts (such as Dr. Johnsingh) to provide hands-on training on various rapid biological assessment and socio-economic appraisal skills as well as on (statistical) data analysis techniques.**

**R3: Conduct short joint learning assignments between TNP staff, project partners, and community leaders in other protected areas of Bhutan.**

### **Research (Outputs 2.3 and 3.1?)**

This component is one of the more successful parts of LINKPA. The project has a fairly rudimentary baseline in the form of a number of assessments that list vegetation and mammal and avian species in the park as well as socio-economic and resource use patterns. These were carried out before LINKPA in preparation of the TNP management plan. Under LINKPA, research has extended to the corridor, and outputs so far include a grazing study, and socio-economic and rapid biological assessments. In addition, a couple of research activities within the park were funded from LINKPA. In general, the research approach is very relevant as it focuses on recognised threats such as grazing. It is also commendable that a major part of the research is carried out by the park staff without major external assistance. This might, however, prove a double-edged sword, as some of the required analysis would benefit from specialized guidance and capacity development.

***R1: Focus research agenda in two areas: a) Baseline analysis of critical ecosystems and species to come up with distribution and population estimates and to identify priority habitat areas for zoning and other management interventions; b) Refine threat assessments of main anthropogenic impacts (grazing, roads, timber and NTFP extraction, etc.) to inform law enforcement and ICDP activities.***

### **Law Enforcement (Output 3.2)**

Although this output is part of the project logframe, most activities are actually funded through the RGoB budget with the exception of some field equipment. While anti-poaching and other law enforcement activities are suffering from a shortage of human resources and the inaccessibility of the terrain, the MTR team feels confident that no major gap exists that the project should address in the next two years. The only exception might consist in capacity development on law enforcement techniques, which could be possibly covered through a short course.

### **Gender Dimension**

The project document has not specifically discussed about gender nor does it have any gender directed activities except for the Yathra Weaving Association in Chumphel. The park grant, together with the solar power supply did contribute to higher income and productivity of women in terms of longer working hours. Unfortunately, the money is controlled by man who decides where and how to spend it.

The supply of CGI material has also helped women, in particular women headed households. Shingle collection is in their word needed manly activity. With CGI supply, the dread of women is eliminated.

## **PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT**

### **Project Partners**

LINKPA is based on a WWF proposal and interim project, which led to the current tripartite configuration in project implementation and management between NCD, WWF and UNDP. This is the first example of a NGO-“executed” project for UNDP, and it is an anomaly, as RGoB does not approve of such a construct. While this partnership carries undoubtedly benefits that go beyond LINKPA, it puts WWF in the awkward dual role of donor and executing agency. This adds an unnecessary layer in the “chain of command.” At the same time, WWF does not receive any management

fee for its services. It is too late at this point in time to change the implementation arrangements but as a lesson learned for future projects, any partnership should be limited to co-financing a nationally executed project. On a separate note, the MTR team noted positively the good relationship between the project partners, which has helped to overcome initial communication difficulties, and bodes well for the next two years.

### **Financial Management**

The tri-partite implementation arrangements have made financial management a “long and winding road”, as so aptly described by the park manager. Financial requests (and reporting) have to go through a veritable steeplechase of approvals with inevitable delays hampering project implementation. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be an easy remedy to this ailment, as it largely reflects RGoB regulations, but the MTR team would encourage all stakeholders to jointly identify, review and address any administrative bottlenecks that might prove detrimental to the achievements of the project.

In addition, until recently there was some confusion about the status of expenditures, including the source of funding for various activities. These problems have been mostly sorted out under the new park management, and with the help of WWF.

### **Stakeholder Participation and Cooperation**

LINKPA has two sets of external partners in the field: local communities and local government authorities (dzongkhags and geogs). The former are primarily engaged in the projects as beneficiaries of ICDP activities. The project uses participatory methodologies to solicit livelihood needs and priorities as the basis for its ICDP interventions. In general, this process seems to be sufficient to develop a realistic set of activities and benefits. Given the extensive scope of ICDP activities, local communities can, however, not always remain engaged in the process, nor is there enough time and resources to foster and enhance community institutions that could sustain project activities.

With regard to the involvement of local authorities, geogs and dzongkhags are engaged as implementers of ICDP activities, as well as through the Project Coordination Committee (PCC), which is tasked to review work plans. Moreover, various measures of coordination between ICDP and geog planning exist, although it is not clear how consistent and institutionalised this cooperation is. In the meetings with district authorities, it appeared that the sector heads knew little about park activities. Perhaps it could be because some of them were new to the post and partly to non-involvement of sector heads in the PPC meeting where only the Dzongdag, the Gups and the POs participate.

Given the advanced status of ICDP activities and the findings on ICDP above, the MTR does not recommend any major changes in the current modus operandi, but offers a couple of lessons learned.

***R: It is recommended that sector heads in the Dzongkhag be included in the PPC meetings, if not at least as an observer.***

***LL1: In order to keep local authorities engaged and committed, constant dialogue is necessary that often needs to exceed the formal forums such as PCC.***

***LL2: Meaningful community participation is a long, complex and time-consuming process that requires often specialized skills, many conservation actors either do not have or cannot afford. This counsels towards a geographically limited and more holistic approach.***



## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

In light of the weak logframe, the absence of a robust baseline and the lack of appropriate indicators, monitoring and evaluation of project results have proved a daunting task. Both UNDP and WWF have been conducting regular monitoring visits, and TNP has its own review mechanism at the level of section heads (ICDP, EE, etc.). There is, however, little evidence so far that those findings have been utilised in a systematic manner to inform management. This might also be due to the activity-based, process monitoring that does not capture higher-order results and impacts.

***R1: In the logframe revision exercise, develop a set of intermediate outcome indicators that go beyond activities and outputs.***

***R2: Establish an M&E cell in the research section of TNP to monitor and analyse project results in a more independent and detached manner.***

***R3: Conduct a rapid ICDP and EE impact assessment to ascertain the conservation and livelihood benefits of those activities.***

## **Project Sustainability**

As RGoB is committed to a comprehensive and effective protected area system, the day-to-day operations of TNP are not expected to seriously suffer after LINKPA. Further needs will obviously arise in terms of infrastructure and capacity development but the MTR is confident that the government will be able to mobilise and allocate resources to this end. The crucial sustainability issue rather evolves around the continuation of ICDP activities. As discussed above, the approach taken by TNP has significantly raised community expectations that TNP is a development agent.

***R1: It is, therefore, imperative, to reduce and sharpen ICDP work to a sustainable level over the next two years (through a narrow focus, increase in community contributions, micro-credit, etc.) and in the context of the sustainable finance plan, and in close collaboration with district and geog authorities, explore longer-term options to provide conservation-relevant livelihood benefits.***

***R2: In a similar vein, it is advisable to realign some of the environmental education work towards self-sufficiency of school and nature club activities through the development of educational materials and fund-raising schemes.***