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## Voyages of Discovery: Four Lessons from the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio

by Thomas O. McShane



With the introduction in 1996 of the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio, efforts at understanding what works, and perhaps more importantly what does not, in the implementation of integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) in tropical forests was formalised by WWF. In this *arborvitæ* supplement ICDPs are defined as attempts to conserve biological diversity by reconciling natural resource management (usually in the form of protected areas) with the social, economic and cultural needs of rural people. Experience is showing that many of the assumptions behind ICDPs are in fact incorrect.

By monitoring field actions, and through review of other integrated project interventions, four issues are identified as being critical to, but either weak or omitted from many conservation and development projects. Field-based interventions must improve rigor in process learning, better link field actions to policy advocacy, strengthen institutional capacity, and communicate messages more effectively. In this *arborvitæ* supplement Thomas McShane discusses the four early lessons derived from field project monitoring, and describes responses to the weaknesses identified. It is argued that the learning process is little more than a voyage of discovery, and that only through doing can solutions be found.

*Women weaving nito vines to earn cash income on Sibuyan Island, Philippines*

Gaston Dorren,  
DGIS-WWF Portfolio





## The Portfolio

The DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio was initiated in 1996 in response to recognition by WWF that the sustainability of efforts by local peoples and communities to manage and conserve their tropical forest resources was often constrained by a set of common circumstances. These include:

- Weaknesses in institutional capacity and human resources are major constraints to effective and sustainable resource management.
- Whilst conservation efforts are often addressed at the local project level, the root causes of forest destruction are due to non-local factors at the national and international level (e.g., national land use policies, international agreements, foreign investments, international market forces). These must be addressed if local efforts are to succeed in the long term.
- Individual projects, because of their discrete task-in-time nature, often have difficulty in ensuring continuity of conservation and development activities beyond the life of the project.

Through the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio, WWF is attempting to mitigate the above constraints by putting in place resources to address these issues through rigorous monitoring and evaluation, learning lessons, technical expertise, training and capacity building, improved information exchange and communications, and lobbying support.

The testing of such an approach is important to WWF for the following reasons:

**First**, it represents a significant investment by an aid agency (DGIS - Netherlands Development Assistance) in WWF's conservation programme.

**Second**, it is the first time that an effort has been made to link a collection of projects worldwide to a specific approach (integrated conservation and development) and biome (forests).

**Third**, it is the first time WWF has set up a coordinating unit (an Interregional Project) to manage a specific set of projects, provide various types of support (both technical and administrative), and act as the contact and broker with the aid agency.

**Fourth**, it is one of the few times within WWF that such a unit has been set up and tasked with better understanding the dynamics at work in implementing ICDPs in tropical forests, drawing out lessons learned from experience in the field, and communicating these back to interested parties. As a result, this approach could serve as a model for monitoring and understanding future conservation efforts, especially at greater scales such as ecoregions.

The aim of the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio is to provide interregional guidance and support to seven integrated conservation and development projects in Honduras, Ecuador, Gabon (2), Ethiopia, Pakistan and Philippines through identification, synthesis and reintegration of factors which are identified as contributing significantly to the success of the ICDP-approach. Special emphasis is being given to the active role of local people in linking their development with conservation measures. Two broad goals have been identified:

**Goal (interregional):** Demonstration of how lessons learned from implementing Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) can be used to positively influence national/international policies and local actions.

**Goal (field projects):** Local communities and national bodies - with special emphasis on women and indigenous peoples - have the skills necessary to carry out sustainable forest management activities that continue beyond the life of donor funding.

The objectives of the Portfolio address five broad areas of action.

- To support and assist the seven field projects in developing and implementing the ICDP-approach through training, building capacity, and exchanging experience and information (training and capacity building).
- To provide technical support and facilitation to local communities via the seven field projects so that they can use their skills to develop sustainable forest management practices in line with the ICDP-approach (technical support for implementation).
- To assist the seven field projects in development and implementation of operational management, monitoring and reporting (effective project management).
- To synthesise lessons learned that will inform and benefit projects, integrate into broader policy initiatives, and raise awareness amongst the private and governmental sectors (linking lessons learned to policy development).
- To improve the capacity of the individual projects to achieve effective local resource management continuing beyond the envisaged period of DGIS support (project sustainability).

Through an iterative process of monitoring and reviewing project experiences to date, as well as through review of experiences from other integrated project approaches, four basic issues, often weak or omitted in project implementation, have been identified as critical to ICDP success. These areas of weakness include adaptive management processes, linking field and policy activities, institutionalising training and capacity building, and communicating lessons learned. These factors have become the driving force for interventions by the interregional component of the Portfolio.

## Portfolio Field Projects

Ecuador: Conservación de la Biodiversidad y Manejo Participativo del Parque Nacional Sangay

Ethiopia: Forest Conservation in High Priority Areas

Gabon: (1) Complexe d'Aires Protégées de Gamba  
(2) Projet de Conservation Intégrée dans la Région de Minkébé

Honduras: Conservacion y Manejo Integrado de Recursos Naturales en la Reserva Biosfera Río Platano y Mocerón, La Mosquita

Pakistan: Conservation of Mangrove Forests at the Coastal Areas of Singh and Balochistan

Philippines: Biodiversity Conservation on Mt. Guiting-Guiting

### Lesson 1: Learn from Doing.

Plan, monitor, learn and adapt. Know the questions to which you want to discover the answer early in the project. Know who needs what information to be able to make decisions beyond the life of the project. Practice adaptive management.

The realities of implementing ICDPs are not always straightforward. Conservation and development are based on a set of disciplines, ecology, sociology and economics, which are exceedingly complex and poorly understood. Therefore, implementers characteristically operate in situations where the outcomes of their actions are uncertain. Whenever something is attempted, one cannot be certain that the results will be as expected, and one can be confident that there will be some unexpected side effects. As a result, the process of implementing ICDPs must be consciously structured to cater for these uncertainties, as well as for changes in value systems, policies, and technical capabilities. To address this, the Portfolio has attempted to organise itself as a self-testing and self-evaluating system operating by negative feedback in relation to clearly defined objectives. In particular, each intervention must be designed to serve as a test of the theory on which it is based. It must have a clearly defined objective, a definite procedure preferably including controls, a means of recording and reporting progress in relation to the objective, and a means of evaluating the procedure on the basis of which to continue, improve or discontinue it as appropriate. This then becomes the process of learning lessons, defining what works and making information available to others.

The Portfolio has developed a monitoring system to aid in synthesising lessons and progress, and serve as a control on progress and problems as measured against conservation goals and objectives. This process has resulted in two projects, Philippines and Pakistan, reviewing and revising their project goals. It has also been the process whereby the interregional component has identified these four lessons as specific areas of intervention in terms of addressing factors critical to ICDP intervention.

This system of adaptive management is no more than a formalisation of the time-honoured method of trial and error. It is idealistic in that it requires a re-programming of how projects go about the business of implementation, but it is realistic in that it assumes the need to correct mistakes, modify judgements, and learn directly from doing.

### Lesson 2: Policy Environment and Natural Environment.

Supportive laws, policies and regulations must be in place if interventions are ultimately to be successful and sustainable. Projects cannot simply address field-based issues. They must take a vertically integrated view towards project implementation meaning policy advocacy and change is as critical to project success as is infrastructure on the ground. After having been virtually unknown until a few decades ago, ICDPs are now the dominate approach to tropical conservation supported by NGOs, international development agencies and developing country government departments. However, amongst conservation organisations little is known about the ingredients for ICDP success, and there remain a limited number of examples of successful and convincing cases where local peoples' development needs have been effectively reconciled with natural resources management. It is in the development sector, particularly in the area of agriculture and natural resources management, where the most positive experiences to date can be found. Unfortunately, most of these lessons have not been passed to conservation groups attempting the same general approaches. Two particular problems have limited the effectiveness of many ICDPs: first, the failure to establish coherent linkages between project conservation objectives and their investments in local development, and second, project inability to appreciate and confront national policy and institutional factors which often pose barriers to project success.



The experience of the portfolio to date has demonstrated that often the “root causes” of the problems field projects are attempting to address are not, in fact, in the field, but in the policy environment in which they operate. For example in Pakistan, while the field project is primarily focusing its efforts on replanting mangroves and bringing these forested areas under sustainable management, the greatest threats, or “root causes”, are related to factors “upstream” from where the project is working. Pollution, the diminishing supply of freshwater, overexploitation of fish stocks; these are the constraints to a sustainable future for the coastal areas. Currently, efforts to conserve the mangrove forests of Balochistan are being impacted by these factors which are currently out of the control of the WWF project. The intense pressure on mangrove resources beyond sustainable limits, coupled with the lack of knowledge about them, calls for the development and the implementation of national policies and commitments to mangrove conservation by local and national authorities. Being locally based, and the most influential environmental organisation in the country, WWF-Pakistan is well-placed as an advocate for the establishment of sound policies. It is clear that until these issues are addressed by the project or others, no amount of replanting of mangroves is going to make a difference.

In Gabon, the main threats to the forest ecosystem are from extractive industries such as mining, oil and timber. These industries are sensitive to world markets and trade and investment policies. Unless these issues are addressed as an integral part of the Portfolio projects in the country, the goals of these projects are unlikely to be realised. The long-term conservation of Gabon's forests requires not only that reserves be created, but also that selective logging practices be improved with a view towards ensuring sustainability. The future of the forests surrounding the Minkébé region of north-east Gabon - and indirectly of the Minkébé reserve itself - will be decided in the coming years.



That there will be logging is certain. What is not clear is if this will be done sustainably. There is a tendency within the project to focus exclusively on local issues of biological inventory, and not addressing these real threats to conservation of the region. How to lobby central government, as well as local authorities, on logging issues and other decisions crucial to the future of Minkébé forest requires greater attention.

At the Gamba Protected Area Complex in south-west Gabon, oil production is carried out at three oil fields, all located within the complex. The impact of production at the oil fields is probably as minimal as possible due to the isolation of the areas which effectively allow the sites to be treated as off-shore platforms (islands in the forest). Despite this, there can be no doubt that the Shell operations present the biggest constraint to this conservation area. The presence of Shell has attracted thousands of people to this sensitive area. These people have money to spend, and one of the things they want to spend it on is bushmeat. Per capita, the inhabitants of Gamba, the only city in the protected area, consume more bushmeat than anywhere else in the country. Poachers and traders make big profits here, and already hunters have moved further and further afield to satisfy their needs. The linkages from oil extraction to increased demand for local resources is clear.

For forest conservation to be truly successful, problems cannot be approached from simply a policy perspective or through field implementation. Decisions and policies at the national or international level impact actions at the local level, and vice-versa. To effectively address these issues, approaches must be a “vertically integrated” mix of field programmes, policy initiatives and campaign action. Solving problems in integrated forest management must:

- Recognise the linkages between national and international policies and local actions, and vice-versa, before setting out to implement field actions or affect policy change.
- Develop approaches that attack issues simultaneously at all levels (i.e. field programmes demonstrating what works and what does not; policy initiatives influencing and changing factors across broader constituencies; and campaigns encouraging action to achieve change).
- Use the lessons derived at the various levels (local, national, international) to adapt approaches so that the ability to respond remains flexible and creative.

Only by addressing both the policy environment and the natural environment will initiatives that have traditionally been limited to field-based actions be effective and sustainable in the longer-term.

***Gold mining activities in the Minkebe region of northeast Gabon.***

Hans van de Veen, DGIS-WWF Portfolio



### Lesson 3: Leave something behind.

Ensure that the capacity and confidence to make decisions is in place by the end of the project. This is an important sustainability indicator. Build institutional capacity to train and develop skills and devolve management to institutions who will be ultimately responsible (communities, NGOs, government, etc.).

Capacity building is a concept that is increasingly talked about among organisations, institutions and donors involved in externally funded initiatives. While much remains to be done in terms of translating the talk into action, there is no doubt about the growing recognition that external interventions are unlikely to be successful (or sustainable) unless local partners have the capacity (and willingness) to continue these efforts beyond the life of donor support. It can be argued that building capacity at all stages, particularly of local stakeholders and institutions, should be a fundamental aspect of any initiative.

ICDPs are complex, multi-faceted initiatives that must involve stakeholders in all stages of project implementation. This means that these groups (including NGO participants, government staff, local community groups, and others) need the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary at all stages of the initiative - and beyond. Recent shifts from project and activity based approaches to more process-oriented approaches has meant that many new and unconventional skills (such as mediation, negotiation, facilitation, etc.) are required among different stakeholders to manage these processes.

### ***Workshop exploring the root causes of biodiversity loss in mangrove ecosystems in Pakistan***

Hans van de Veen, DGIS-WWF Portfolio



The Portfolio field projects recognise the need to focus on capacity building, and are starting to address some of the gaps in capacity. Currently, this is largely being done through training of project staff and government counterparts. However, there is a need to expand capacity building initiatives both in terms of target groups and issues addressed. There is also a need to develop more sustained capacity building strategies, and to ensure that these are integrated in all aspects of planning and implementation. The ultimate goal of this process should be to ensure that the capacity and confidence to make decisions is left in place, or at least catered for, by the end of the project's life. It is important to recognise that there are many different approaches to attaining this goal in addition to simple training (e.g., through the development of strategic partnerships).

MOPAWI (from the Miskito Indian words "Mosquitia Pawisa") was founded in 1985 as a private, non-profit Honduran organisation dedicated to the sustainable development of the Honduran Mosquitia and its indigenous inhabitants. MOPAWI's main objective is to improve the quality of life of the local populations in the Mosquitia through income-generating community development activities that are compatible with the environmental and cultural realities of the Mosquitia. The Portfolio in Honduras is working through MOPAWI, which has significant outreach, credibility, and experience in the Mosquitia, to address the institutional and structural issues that impinge on the long-term effectiveness of the Biosphere Reserve. Specifically targeted in this respect is greater coordination and leadership among local and national NGOs and community organisations and strengthened links to decision makers.

On Sibuyan Island in the Philippines, community organisers are the links between alternative livelihoods and thousands of disgruntled islanders literally cornered by a protected area. The ultimate goal of community organising is empowerment, enabling people to analyse and do something about their present situation. It is clear from initial experiences that successful alternative livelihoods requires organised, and before that, interested groups. Experience from a range of ICDPs indicates that efforts built on already existing local institutions with strong economic motives to improve livelihoods are more effective than efforts requiring the development of local institutions. When the impetus for change comes from the outside the process becomes slower and less certain.

In the end it should be those who have to live with the actions of the project who have the responsibility and confidence to continue. The respective roles of different actors, their expectations and ultimately the goals of what is being undertaken must be clear and agreed. Without long-term capacity in place, it is not possible to leave something behind.

#### Lesson 4: Tell the story.

Communicate messages in an interesting and visual way. If projects and programmes are to have an impact well beyond their area of immediate operations, then they must be able to capture the attention of those who do not have a direct or technical interest in the activities being undertaken.

The object of this approach is to promote sharing and learning amongst various target groups in the following ways:

- regular information and documentation about what each Portfolio project is doing based on adaptive management approaches to project monitoring;
- regular input from target groups to specific Portfolio projects concerning project success, direction and approach, etc.;
- sharing of information between different target groups.

The Portfolio is employing professional writers to visit all the Portfolio projects and write stories upon which all Living Documents are based. Such documentation includes, but is not limited to, information on biological diversity, people and resources, threats, incentives, opinions, activities and lessons learned, drawing on local knowledge, prospects, further reading and facts for visitors. Photographs are available to illustrate the documents. Additionally, separate smaller stories are being developed around issues of human interest. The stories are being further developed over the next three years by regular updates building on the existing information and by developing new stories as the projects progress. Towards the end of the project, professional writers will again visit with the primary task of taking the original work and looking at how the project progressed over four or so years, what has changed, what are the lessons that have been learned, and how effectively did the project accomplish what it set out to do? In this way, the Living Document not only tells the project's story over time in a popular form, but provides a popular evaluation of what has happened.

Base documents are complete for the two Gabon projects, and drafts are available for Philippines and Pakistan. The Ecuador project has been visited and the paper is currently being written. Only Honduras and Ethiopia remain to be visited. The same process is being used to produce an overview document of the entire Portfolio by identifying commonality in the approaches as well as differences. This should provide a popular review of the Portfolio, the approach to efforts of this type, and some guidance to WWF and DGIS regarding future actions. These documents are being used in a variety of forms ranging from written to posting on the web.

One of the best ways to involve people in project implementation, and more importantly learning, is to make what's happening more real to everyday situations or "alive". Experience has shown that more traditional methods of communication (e.g., technical reports, case studies, etc.) tend to end up on shelves collecting dust - rarely read, and almost never used. It may be more effective to just tell the story.

## Conclusion

This paper does not attempt to address the issue of whether ICDPs are the most effective way to conserve biodiversity. They are, however, perhaps the most popular approach among NGOs, government departments and development agencies, and as a result, need to be better understood. Questions about the effectiveness of ICDPs have been raised regularly over the last five to ten years, interestingly by both the conservation and development communities, though usually for different reasons. Barrett and Arcese (1995) argue that while ICDPs excite the interest and imaginations of conservation groups and international development agencies, they are not yet analytically or empirically sound approaches. In fact, they usually proceed from untested biological and economic assumptions, many of which are likely false.

The rather two-dimensional approach of linking natural resources only to those users living in direct contact with them that ICDPs have traditionally taken has been part of the problem. It is necessary for all involved in ICDP implementation to look at broader issues (rural development, poverty alleviation, and natural resource conservation) operating concurrently within the same environment. The greater scope offered by the Portfolio looking across its different component projects work to integrate these into broader policy, capacity and understanding frameworks.

Clearly, the four areas of intervention presented in this paper are not the only issues that have been identified as weaknesses in ICDP implementation. Larson, Freudenberger and Wyckoff-Baird (1998) identified ten lessons covering a wide range of approaches based on almost twenty years of experience by WWF. The scale within which integrated conservation and development is taking place is increasing as well. The use of landscapes and ecoregions as base-planning units for integrated interventions means that ecological, economic, social and policy factors must be more broadly applied. Whether or not the lessons learned to date are acted upon remains to be seen. It is clear, however, that unless the application of these lessons are demonstrated to be successful, they will continue to collect dust on the bookshelves of so-called experts working far from where the action is.

Using the four issues identified in this paper as the basic objectives of the Portfolio's interregional component, methodologies to address them in concrete ways are now being tested at a variety of scales (e.g., from local to national to international). These are little more than "voyages of discovery", the goal, being to find solutions by doing.

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