Measuring the impact of livelihoods initiatives in a conservation context

Summary of a multi-sectoral workshop held at Clare College, Cambridge, UK

18-19 July 2007

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Workshop

The social context of biodiversity conservation is an increasingly important facet of conservation policy and practice, with ever greater emphasis placed on the role of biodiversity, and the responsibility of conservation organisations, in alleviating poverty. Yet the debate over the linkages between conservation and poverty reduction is hampered by a lack of empirical evidence. Many conservation organizations are engaging with livelihoods and human needs at a local level in an attempt to provide social benefits (and offset social costs) as a means to improve conservation outcomes. However, these organizations often struggle to demonstrate the impact of their interventions and of biodiversity conservation in general on people because of inadequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E), a lack of capacity to undertake social/livelihoods monitoring, and/or a lack of appreciation of the range of applicable tools and processes. M&E also suffers from being under resourced.

Three international conservation organisations (Fauna & Flora International, Birdlife International and the African Wildlife Foundation), coming together at the UK-based Poverty and Conservation Working Group, decided to organise a workshop to explore the challenges and solutions to monitoring and evaluating socio-economic/livelihoods impacts. With generous financial support from Swedbio, a two day workshop was held on 18-19 July 2007 in Cambridge, UK, at which representatives from a range of conservation and development organisations and academia gathered to share experiences of the application of socio-economic/livelihoods M&E. Focused around a series of presentations and discussion sessions, the goal of the workshop was to identify pragmatic recommendations and guidelines for conservation practitioners, that balance technical rigour with field realities.

Some 40 delegates spanning 20 nationalities participated in the workshop. These included conservation field practitioners from 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as those working in organisational headquarters on organisation-wide processes for M&E, reporting and lesson-learning. The involvement of selected representatives from the development sector, which has a longer history and experience of using and developing socio-economic/livelihoods M&E tools and processes, provided a valuable counterpoint to the discussion. The first day focused on comparing field level M&E tools and frameworks, whilst the second day focused on organisational process for M&E and reporting, and the challenges of reconciling field level, organisational and donor information requirements in a unified M&E system. Both days included presentations from conservation and development practitioners, and breakout discussion groups to explore key issues.

The most important elements for improved M&E were considered to be the following:

- Having good planning systems, conceptual frameworks etc, which incorporate M&E at the outset.

- Using different types of complimentary monitoring tool.

- Having appropriate skills and expertise, either in-house or bought in.

- Building an institutional culture of learning, and maximising feedback between the field level and headquarters.

- Making opportunities to learn from other organisations dealing with the same issues, including development organisations.

It was also noted that one of the most valuable next steps would be to organise national/regional workshops in The South that build on this workshop, explore specific tools in more detail and help to develop local networks of conservation and development organisations that can learn from each other and collaborate.

The remainder of this document briefly summarises the key conclusions from the workshop as a series of bullet points. A more complete proceedings document is in preparation.

1.2 A note on definitions

Monitoring and Evaluation – Although not discussed explicitly at the workshop, it is worth noting that monitoring and evaluation are different, distinct and complementary activities, with different roles, occurring over different timeframes and at different points in the project management cycle. The former is a continuous or repeated exercise of data gathering designed to track changes in target conditions or indicators. The latter, whilst often relying on monitoring data, is less about measurement and more about understanding. It is a process of review and reflection, usually undertaken towards or after the end of a project.

Impact – in this context impacts are changes to some element or elements of livelihoods and wellbeing, or the enabling environment in which people live, that arise from the actions of an organisation or project.

Conservation vs. development organisations – it is acknowledged that the ‘boundary’ between conservation and development organisations is blurred. Although conservation organisations primarily aim to conserve wildlife and its habitat, while development organisations primarily aim to reduce poverty, both types of organisation undertake initiatives focused on improving the livelihoods and wellbeing of the poor, and both are therefore concerned with assessing the impact of these initiatives.

2. Conclusions from the Workshop

These are divided into six sections: (1) conclusions regarding conservation organisations; (2) conclusions regarding development organisations; (3) conclusions regarding the development of organisations processes; (4) recommendations for field practitioners; (5) recommendations for organisation-wide processes; and (6) recommendations for next steps following this workshop.

2.1 Conservation Organisations

- Conservation organisations are relatively new to livelihoods and socio-economic impact monitoring and evaluation.
- The approach used by many is characterised by quantitative indicators, often based primarily on economic (rather than social) measures, and often using sample household surveys to generate aggregate data about a population or community.
- They also use donor-driven frameworks for considering outcomes and impacts, and M&E is often seen as a means to facilitate donor reporting and meet donor expectations, rather than for project management or organisational learning.
- Trained local enumerators and local participation in data gathering for M&E is relatively widespread.

- Quantitative, indicator-based approaches that use survey methodologies have a range of limitations and challenges:
    - As rigorous ‘scientific’ methods they are technically difficult to do.
    - Unless baseline data are available (which is often not the case) it is difficult to measure change.
    - They only measure relationships that have already been anticipated / included in the conceptual model, but do not catch ‘the unexpected’.
    - They generally do not address causal linkages between variables, since there are rarely any ‘control’ sites or subjects.
    - They do not enable the target group to provide their own rationale and explanation for changes.
    - Surveys often produce a lot of data that are never used.

- Traditional household livelihoods surveys are not always sufficient, and more participatory and group-focused methods, although often more time consuming, are very valuable. However, staff with a biophysical sciences background might require specific training in using such social sciences methods.
- Qualitative approaches are rarely used – most people were unfamiliar with non-indicator-based methods such as Most Significant Change that focus on stories of change instead of measuring pre-determined indicators. This offers an additional range of benefits but also brings with it challenges, particularly understanding how to analyse, interpret and use the data, and the time and resources needed to develop a system and train people to use it. There were also concerns regarding the validity of subjective data.
- There was a general feeling that monitoring should be primarily for the purpose of project learning and adaptive management, and for communicating with local stakeholders and communities, but in reality the demand for monitoring is driven by donors or NGO headquarters staff.

2.2 Development organisations

- In general, development organisations are more progressive than the conservation NGOs and incorporate a wider spectrum of approaches, from pure indicator-based/log frame approaches to much more qualitative, subjective and contextual methods.
- Some organisations appear to be driven less by donor/project reporting requirements and more by a desire for organisational learning.
- They tend to be more process-oriented, focusing on the principles behind the organisation and its approach to M&E (as an integral part of project management) rather than defining the ‘how to’ of M&E.
- Some of the methods used appear more evaluative, and embrace varied perceptions of change rather than absolute measures.
- However, development organisations also struggle with many of the same challenges as the conservation NGOs, in terms of mainstreaming M&E organisationally and doing it well. They also deal with similar issues in the field, and so there should be potential for greater partnerships, collaboration and mutual learning
- Common issues / difficulties include:
    - Causality and attribution: How to determine the causal link between different events / observations. How to know how much of an event / observation / impact can be attributed to a particular action / intervention, considering the multi-causal linkages between the external environment (global / national events and processes), project interventions and impact.

- Capacity: How to ensure there are sufficiently skilled individuals with adequate time and resources at hand to undertake M&E.
- Organisational learning: How to feed learning from the project / programme level up to the organisation to support organisational learning and sharing.
- Disaggregation: How to effectively differentiate impact on different gender, age and wealth categories (or other socio-economic categories).

2.3 From project impacts to organisational frameworks

- Organisations need to be able to say something about what they are achieving, which requires some effort to scale up from individual project-level M&E and synthesise information from an entire portfolio.
- Some organisations are attempting to develop common tools, processes, indicators or methods for common use in all projects. This brings with it certain challenges, not least the problem of defining comparative 'global' indicators that are relevant in every local context.
- Other organisations are attempting to synthesise from diverse, locally-defined indicators and approaches to M&E. This also brings challenges of scaling up and non-comparability between projects, but may be a more appropriate approach.
- A combination of these two might be best – gathering information about common indicators (common to an organisation / programme) and some that are location-specific.
- There is a benefit in having a flexible, easy to use 'tracking tool' or reporting framework (whether from a donor like Big Lottery, or from a NGO headquarters) that helps project managers think through their impacts and why (or why not) they are achieving them. This must respect the local context and recognise the value of different types of information.
- Although there is often an organisational need for simple and comparative tracking/reporting across all projects, an alternative is more in-depth reviews of fewer, selected projects (referred to at the meeting as 'cherry-picking'). There are pros and cons to each approach, and they are likely to respond to different needs (e.g. accounting to donors/public/trustees vs. institutional learning).

2.4 Recommendations for projects and project management

- Make efforts to understand the local livelihoods/conservation linkages at the outset. Good programme planning and analysis prior to implementation is critical. Many projects do not appear to have a clear understanding from the start what the expected linkages are, and therefore do not know when to judge a project or intervention to have been successful.
- Establish a conceptual framework based on a threat analysis that can be used to shape a project and identify relevant indicators/measures of change. M&E must be planned at the outset, not added on half way through or at the end. It needs to be adequately resourced, in particular in relation to staff time requirements.
- Define indicators locally, that are locally relevant. Participatory approaches to planning and implementing M&E are best to achieve this.
- Learn from challenges as well as from successes, and ensure methods are able to capture challenges and failures.
- Analysis is vital. It is only worth undertaking monitoring if the data are going to be used.

- Less is more: concentrate on collecting a few good bits of information regularly rather than lots of information infrequently. This way it will be more likely that the exercise is cost-effective and that the data are useful, and used.
- Use different methods that complement each other and lead to learning:
  - Qualitative vs. quantitative.
  - Aggregate measures versus individual experiences.
  - Subjective vs. Objective; recording perceptions is as important as measuring indicators.
  - Methods to measure unexpected as well as expected change.
  - Means to identify/understand the causes of change.
- Scale the M&E effort to the size and scope of the projects. Smaller projects cannot be expected to do the same as larger ones and should not need to.
- Be participatory (with partners, development agencies, local stakeholders and beneficiaries), but recognise the potential barriers and limitations to this.
- Encourage and solicit participation wherever possible but be practical about the challenges and cost-effectiveness.
- Ensure that M&E costs (and time) are built in to project operational plans and budgets.

2.5 Recommendations for organisations and organisational learning

- There is a need to build an organisational culture around the importance of M&E and learning and to foster understanding so that everyone buys in to the concept and the process and the value as well as the obligations that it brings. This culture must encourage reflection and acknowledge that failure, as well as success, is a part of learning. In order for individual projects to embrace a learning culture, headquarters needs to lead the way.
- Providing feedback to the field level on the results of the reporting process, and eliciting feedback from the field level on the process, can help improve buy-in and create this learning culture.
- There is a need for appropriate expertise for monitoring and evaluating socio-economic/livelihoods impacts, whether bought in (though consultants) or built in (through training and appropriate recruitment).
- A flexible tracking tool (with appropriate guidance and training) that allows projects to determine their own locally relevant M&E in ways that can contribute to institutional learning and scaling up, is better than a rigid methodological framework with predefined indicators.
- In-depth evaluations of specially selected projects over longer time intervals are useful. In this context, finding opportunities to revisit older, closed projects to assess longer-term, sustained change, may be particularly valuable.
- Using synthesised project M&E data for organisational strategic planning will help in monitoring progress towards the goals of the organisation as a whole, and for re-planning and adaptive management.
- Working in partnership with the development sector on these issues needs more attention.

2.6 Next Steps

The group identified two principal ways to move forward beyond this workshop:

- Make the information discussed at this workshop available both to participants and a wider audience. This could be done by feeding in to existing learning processes and groups, which could also be used to share ideas, tools, experiences and lessons:

- The Poverty and Conservation Learning Group (PCLG) - http://www.povertyandconservation.info/ - an initiative coordinated by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The goal of the Learning Group is to facilitate learning on conservation-poverty linkages between practitioners in the North and South. The PCLG has a space for downloading of the workshop outputs; a tools and methodologies section and an on-line discussion facility.
- REMAPP - http://groups.yahoo.com/group/REMAPP/ - a UK-based network of professionals concerned with planning, appraisal, monitoring, evaluation, research and policy issues in aid agencies. REMAPP is coordinated with very little administrative burden through a web-based 'group' and meets on an ad-hoc basis.

- Repeat this workshop at the regional level, building on the results from this meeting and exploring relevant tools and frameworks in more details. Such regional meetings could be used to promote M&E champions in-region and to facilitate more inter-organisational communication, particularly between conservation and development organisations working in the same areas. Outputs from this and any regional meetings could be used to develop a tool-kit for practitioners.

3. Acknowledgements

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This report has been prepared by Matt Walpole, Lizzie Wilder (FFI), David Thomas (Birdlife International) and Joanna Elliott (AWF). For further information on any of the contact, or for a full report of the meeting, contact lizzie.wilder@fauna-flora.org.

Annex 1 – Agenda

Measuring the impact of livelihoods initiatives in the conservation context ***Africa Wildlife Foundation, BirdLife International and Fauna & Flora International*** **18th – 19th July 2007, Clare College Cambridge**		
Tuesday 17th July Arrival; check in to accommodation at Clare College; dinner for those arriving in time		
Day 1 - Wednesday 18th July - Focus on field methodologies		
0830	Registration - Bennett Room, Memorial Court	
0900	Welcome and keynote presentation	
Session 1: Experience and lessons from conservation organisations in the field		
0945	Case Study 1	**Richard Hatfield** – *AWF*
1010	Case Study 2	**Bruno Paladines** – *Cultura y Naturaleza*
1035	Case Study 3	**Lizzie Wilder** – *FFI*
1100	*Tea & Coffee*	
1130	Facilitated Discussion	
1300	*Lunch – The Great Hall*	
Session 2: Experience and lessons from development organisations in the field		
1400	Case Study 4	**Sarah Milne** – *University of Cambridge, Geography Department*
1430	Case Study 5	**Kate Carroll** – *ActionAid*
1500	Facilitated Discussion	
1530	*Tea & Coffee*	
1600	Break-out groups	*Various topics*
1700	Plenary Discussion & Conclusions	
1730	Wrap-up	Summary of day 1 and introduction in to Day 2
1830	*Punting on the River Cam*	
1930	*Dinner – The Great Hall*	
Day 2 – Thursday 19th July – The organisational perspective		
0830	Registration in Bennett Room, Memorial Court	
0900	Review of Day 1 and introduction to Day 2	
Session 1: Experience and lessons from conservation organisations		
0930	Case Study 1	**Joanna Elliott** – *AWF*
0950	Case Study 2	**David Thomas** – *BL*
1010	Case Study 3	**Matt Walpole** – *FFI*
1030	Informal presentations: **David Wilkie** – WCS; **Kate Studd** – WWF UK; **Edgard Herrera** – TNC	
1100	*Tea & Coffee*	
Session 2: Experience and lessons from development organisations		
1130	Case Study 4	**Bhaskar Vira** – *University of Cambridge, Geography Department*
1200	Case Study 5	**Ann Koontz** – *Enterprise Works/VITA*
1230	Informal presentations: **Alison Griffith** – Practical Action; **Rick Davies** – MandE	
1240	Facilitated Discussion	
1300	*Lunch – The Great Hall*	
1400	Break-out Groups	*Various topics*
1530	*Tea & Coffee*	
1600	Plenary Discussion: What next?	
1700	Wrap up	
1800	*Drinks and dinner in college for those staying overnight – The Great Hall*	

Annex 2 – List of Participants

Name	Affiliation
Bruno Paladines	Cultura y Naturaleza
Jane Gaithuma	BirdLife Secretariat Nairobi
Jacob Machekele	Nature Kenya
Patricia Ruggiero	Save Brazil
Tuan Anh Pham	BirdLife Vietnam
Abisha Mapendembe	BirdLife International
David Thomas	BirdLife International
John Fanshawe	BirdLife International
Jo Elliott	African Wildlife Foundation
Richard Hatfield	African Wildlife Foundation
Daudi Sumba	African Wildlife Foundation
Steven Kiruswa	African Wildlife Foundation
Jimmiel Mandima	African Wildlife Foundation
Jeremiah Machavi	African Wildlife Foundation
Joss Swennenhuis	African Wildlife Foundation
Nyika Munodawafa	African Wildlife Foundation
Matt Walpole	Fauna & Flora International
Lizzie Wilder	Fauna & Flora International
Helen Anthem	Fauna & Flora International
Shelly Shao Yang	Fauna & Flora International
Jarkyn Samanchina	Bashat – Community Business Forum
Richard Sambolah	Fauna & Flora International
Cynthia Machado	Fauna & Flora International
Joy Juma	Fauna & Flora International
Arianna Granziera	Fauna & Flora International
Bhaskar Vira	University of Cambridge, Geography Department
Dilys Roe	International Institute of Environment and Development
Kate Studd	World Wildlife Fund UK
Edgard Herrera	The Nature Conservancy
David Wilkie	Wildlife Conservation Society
Sarah Milne	University of Cambridge, Geography Department
Ann Koontz	Enterprise Works/VITA
Kate Carroll	ActionAid
Rick Davies	MandE
Alison Griffith	Practical Action
Barbara Adolph	Tripleline Consulting
Karin Gerhardt	Swedbio
Katie Bolt	UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre
Jean Baptiste Eken	Action pour le Développement
Lydia Richardson	Tripleline Consulting