

Project Design

Key Issues

Our review of coral reef management projects identified four areas as key issues in project design. These include:

- Participatory processes and partnering
- Capacity and infrastructure
- Funding and sustainability
- Project feasibility

Introduction

External donor funded projects, through their preconceived goals, objectives and time frames, are often inclined to fail in part or at least to not be sustainable beyond their life (White et al. 2005). The dependence on external assistance creates both the potential for and the reality of non-sustainable ICM institutions and policies as projects are terminated and staff withdrawn. The majority of community-based coastal resource management projects are not maintained after the funding and external technical assistance end (White et al. 2005).

Despite difficulties in implementation of ICM projects, investments continue to increase. In the Philippines alone, it is estimated that from 1974 to 2000, US\$230 million has been invested in coastal resource management. About 63% of this was from international donors, 36% from government appropriations and loan counterparts and 1% from local donors. Given these investments in ICM and related projects to improve the status and management of coastal resources, the question is often raised about how to make them more sustainable for the long-term improvement of social, economic and environmental parameters in coastal areas.

Problems in project design can lead to difficulties in implementation and sustainability of project. Thus, projects must be carefully designed to reach the desired outputs and outcomes. In order to overcome these threats and barriers, project design should meet the following three objectives:

1. Ensure the project goals are clearly articulated and understood by stakeholders.
2. Ensure that project is relevant and responsive to coral reef management issues.
3. Ensure project outcomes are achieved within the proposed funding and timeline.

White et al. (2005) conducted a review of 17 coastal management projects in the Philippines and Indonesia, in attempt to determine the factors that increased sustainability of these projects. The sustainability factors receiving the most attention, from the most to the least common, were:

- education and awareness level raising,
- link of management to biophysical change,
- stakeholder participation in ICM decision-making process,
- legal and policy framework development.

Those that are receiving the least attention among all the projects analyzed are:

- participation of the private sector,
- designing a successful project exit strategy,
- improving economic returns and income generation,
- building capacity for law enforcement,
- ensuring institutional capacity beyond leadership change.

The distinction between the two lists reflects their relative importance in previous research on sustainable management. Factors on the first list have long been recognized as important to successful coastal management activities. However, recent research has emphasized the importance of the second list of factors. These factors also tend to reflect weaknesses in most developing country settings such as poor law enforcement, poverty, the unpredictability of local and national politics and changes in leadership. Successful project exit strategies and increased participation by the private sector may also reflect either the project design or a combination of design and the implementing entity bias of government, in most cases.

From our review, the most common threats or barriers to effective project design include:

- Unrealistic project goals or timelines.
- Insufficient coordination between partner agencies.
- Insufficient capacity (human, financial and equipment) to perform proposed work.
- Excessive donor requirements for restrictive frameworks, reporting requirements and funding schedules that impair flexibility to complete the project.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Participation/Partnering

- Use participatory processes during design phase, make sure the project makes sense in a local context, select appropriate agencies and levels of expertise to carry out activities.
- Project framework must be logical but flexible, not too ambitious or complex, and must be clearly defined and communicated to stakeholders.
- Stakeholder and community engagement must be designed to fit in the local/regional context.
- Community engagement is the core business of coral reef management projects – we manage people, not reefs or fish.

Capacity

- Ensure capacity is available before proposing the project and in place at inception and make contingencies for the project to adapt and respond to changes in political/economic/administrative contexts or natural disasters.
- Infrastructure investments should be accompanied by budget provisions for their operations and maintenance.
- Project objectives or timeline should not be based on infrastructure or capacity that is not yet in place, as it is often delayed.
- Ensure flexibility in timelines to reflect contingencies such as delayed delivery of funds, equipment, or infrastructure.

Funding and sustainability

- Core programs establish branding and improve marketing.
- Prioritize and rationalize projects to improve marketing.
- Advocacy component can promote sustainable funding options.
- Use of charismatic species or ecosystems can be a good marketing tool but there should not be total reliance on this approach.
- Make institutional arrangements for sustaining the project and/or activities after the initial source of funds has been exhausted.
- Flexibility must be built into timeline and funding stream, especially where the disbursement of funds may be delayed.

General project issues

- Centralize project functions or establish a clear point of coordination as close as possible to project activities to avoid delays in coordination and to ensure clear lines of communication with all project participants and stakeholders.
- Peer review and data management both are essential from the design phase and throughout project.
- Avoid “blanket” approach to management and consider site-specific management, research and monitoring.
- Small-scale, pilot, and demonstration projects useful to test feasibility before attempting large, complex project (Dominican Republic, Packard EBM).

Conclusions

- Participatory processes are critical and need to be designed into the project and operationalized before the project starts.
- Project design must include a realistic assessment of the capacity and infrastructure available and future sustainability.
- Projects should be marketable not only to donors but to stakeholders and government also.

- Costs and benefits of partner involvement need to be evaluated and utilized as much as possible to build capacity and ownership of the project.
- Attempts should be made to determine the feasibility of projects through pilot or planning grants, or other feasibility studies.