

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Sustaining Community-based Conservation Area Projects: Experiences from the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP)¹.

By

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Abstract

The sustainability of conservation area projects presently supported by the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme is a major concern as the programme winds down to its termination in December 2001. The development and implementation of transition strategies is currently preoccupying the Programme. This initiative seeks to ensure a smooth transition for each project to the post-SPBCP era. The challenge is to determine the most effective ways of using remaining SPBCP resources to ensure viable and sustainable conservation area projects.

This paper draws on the experience on SPBCP over the last 7 years and proposes that seven necessary and sufficient conditions need to be satisfied if the 17 projects supported are to be sustainable. These conditions should form the basis and the conceptual framework within which Conservation Areas should be assessed for continued support, and within which resources should be allocated. Projects wherein these seven conditions are adequately provided for will be viable and sustainable into the future.

A. Background

The South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) is funded by the Global Environment Facility through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is executed by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP). The Programme started in April 1993 for a five-year period. After five years, the Programme was extended for up to the end of 2001.

The Programme covers 12 Pacific Island countries (PICs). These countries are Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Objectives:

SPBCP intends to protect biological diversity within a number of selected Pacific Islands by facilitating the establishment of a series of large, diverse 'conservation area projects or CAPs in which there is agreed criteria for development based on long term ecological sustainability. The concept of 'conservation area' is relatively new and largely untested. It reflects a significant departure from conventional *in-situ* conservation based on strictly protected areas to an approach that seeks to achieve the conservation and protection of biodiversity by way of sustainable use. The context is specific – these are communally owned and controlled areas of high biodiversity value where the option of relocating indigenous occupants who have a cultural and economic

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dependence on the sites' resources is not considered workable. In these areas, conservation is synonymous with sustainable use.

The agreed criteria for the selection of 'conservation areas' are listed in Annex I. Since its inception, SPBCP is currently supporting 17 conservation areas within the 12 participating countries. These areas are listed in Annex 2.

Current Status of SPBCP

With SPBCP less than 18 months away from the end of its life (December 2001), the priority activity for the Programme is the formulation and implementation of what it calls 'transition strategies'. These are plans for ensuring that the inevitable phasing out of SPBCP funding support will not lead to the collapse of CA Projects (CAPs). Rather, that a 'soft landing' is prepared to ensure that the Conservation Area projects will continue to be operational into the future.

The development of transition strategies for each CAP centers on an involved process of consultation with representatives of communities, national agencies and other interested stakeholders in the private business sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The intention is to identify issues and options that are critical to the future sustainability of CAPs and to map out a strategy for addressing them effectively.

The lessons learned over the years with SPBCP and during the course of the development of the transition strategies constitute the material on which this presentation is based.

B. Rationale for understanding the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustaining CAPs

The most consistent output of the consultation process for transition strategies is the extremely large amount of information generated. A lot of this information is not directly or immediately relevant to the objectives of the planning exercise and perhaps need not have been collected. However the nature and dynamics of community consultation dictates that to encourage communities to contribute to the planning of an initiative is to allow the consultations to be driven by them, at least in the initial round of discussions. Any attempt to scope and bring the discussion into focus on specific areas should be done later when communities feel they have made their views and issues known. Scoping the consultation too narrowly too early in the process can create an impression of too much agenda-setting by outsiders (planners) and runs the risk of discouraging community participation in planning and subsequent involvement in implementation.

The large amount of data generated can be intimidating and overwhelming to the planner. In some cases, the planner's view of the big picture is clouded by the details of specific issues. To avoid this complication, the planner needs to have a mental picture or a conceptual framework of what is required to sustain a CAP, within which to analyze the available information for relevance to the objectives of the exercise at hand. The critical guiding question should be "what are the basic building blocks that need to be in place to ensure CAP sustainability?" These building blocks are referred to here as the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for sustaining a conservation area Project.

Agreeing on what the necessary and sufficient conditions will then enable the planner to focus on the issues most critical to the CAP's sustainability with the resulting strategy a plan on how best to address them. In the same way, the necessary and sufficient conditions provide not only a framework for analysis but as well the basis for allocating project resources.

C. Project structure and sustainability issues

The term 'project' generally refers to a predetermined set of objectives, inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes that are agreed to, and the mechanism for delivering them to identified beneficiaries. The delivery mechanism consists of a set of institutional arrangements that defines the project inputs, the procedures and conditions governing their allocation and use, the mechanism for decision-making in the project and rules for their operation, and the responsibilities of key players involved. The delivery mechanism also includes specific formal and informal arrangements and agreements reached between key project stakeholders to ensure project continuity and the uninterrupted implementation of project activities.

This systems perspective of projects as consisting of inputs, delivery mechanism and outputs is important in this paper because the sustainability of CAPs is proposed to rest on two factors:

- availability of critical inputs, and
- the continuing viability and integrity of the delivery mechanism

Project sustainability is therefore independent of the objectives and outputs both of which can change and vary during the life of the Project. It is accepted, however, that when project outputs are produced and objectives are achieved, the credibility and integrity of the delivery mechanism is reinforced. Conversely, the lack of success can undermine and weaken its credibility.

Seven necessary and sufficient conditions for sustaining a Conservation Area Project

Seven conditions are argued and presented in this paper as comprising the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustaining a CAP.

1. Funding should be available and predictable.
2. Community commitment
3. A supportive or neutral stakeholder environment.
4. Adequate conservation capacity at the community level.
5. Effective partnership for co-management with key technical agencies
6. Transparency in Project management
7. Equitable sharing of Project benefits and costs

When the seven conditions are satisfied, it is proposed that the CA Project will be sustainable. The reverse is true when one or more of the conditions are not satisfied.

B.2 NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

B.2.1. Availability and predictability of Project Funding

- All SPBCP Conservation Area projects incur on-going costs such as wages, transportation, meeting support costs, and other operating expenses for which funding is needed. The nature of the projects also require investment in a number of areas such as information gathering, training, income generating activities, publicity drives and others. Even in the ideal of a self-managed project based on voluntary community contribution of labour and other inputs, start-up and maintenance requirements for many activities require capital investment.
- The most critical deciding factor for most projects is the timely availability of funds. Often times, community interest and commitment are reinforced by the knowledge that funds are available.

B.2.2. Community Commitment to the CA Project Objectives

- The future of the Project ultimately depends on whether or not the communities involved remain interested and committed to its continuation after the departure of the funding source,

in this case SPBCP. Simply stated no commitment, no project. This same condition constitutes one of the key prerequisites for the start of the Project in the first instance.

- This issue needs to be revisited given the changing circumstances in funding in the post 2001 period of SPBCP. The communities need to be fully informed of the funding source's impending departure and of the implications and uncertainties for the Project and for themselves in the future. The community needs to know that those activities that are now underway with external funding could very well be subsidized by them should funding from other sources cannot be found and should they wish for the activities to continue. Other management responsibilities may have to be shouldered by them in the future on a voluntary basis. Such a clarification of benefits and costs, privileges and responsibilities must form the basis for communities' consultations and deliberations.

B.2.3. A supportive or neutral stakeholder environment

- Other stakeholders with interest in the area earmarked for conservation – mostly as resource users – and usually outside of the community involved, can potentially complicate conservation efforts if they are not supportive or neutral. Shared boundaries with neighboring communities are a common source of conflict. The allocation of property rights governing access to and the use of resources in buffer zones and shared boundary areas is a critical part of a conservation area's management plan.
- For some community-based projects, there are rogue elements that go against the rule of the majority and the authority of appointed leaders. Projects really struggle under these circumstances. The experience of the Arnavon Islands Marine Conservation Project (Solomon Islands) with poaching points to the need for tough legislation as a deterrent and a willingness to prosecute. But this often only produces a temporary respite, because they normally do not address the underlying causes which often times are socio-economic in nature. In this context, the importance of having a broadly consultative process wherein all stakeholders participate and wherein a collective consensus is forged is a critical requirement for averting these potential obstacles. Many of these issues, if identified early enough, can be factored into the Project design.

B.2.4. Adequate local capacities to manage the Project

- Can the communities run the Project themselves? If no, what level and type of support is required? The ideal SPBCP CA is one driven by communities' needs and priorities and run on a day-to-day basis by the communities themselves. The reality is that many indigenous communities may have traditional knowledge of their biodiversity and may have traditional methods and mechanisms for managing natural resources, but oftentimes, communities have not had the opportunity to manage an externally funded project with accountabilities to others outside of themselves.
- These accountabilities are a necessary evil. Management structures devised to manage community based projects are created basically to ensure accountability and transparencies to local communities and other local stakeholders as well as to external donor organizations. Such is the quandary facing SPBCP CA Projects, particularly in terms of management capacities. It means that project management expertise is defined very much in terms that are alien to indigenous communities, requiring skills and know-how not traditionally available. Indigenous resource management knowledge may be applicable, but local capacities to manage projects, as defined by external donor requirements and made necessary by communities dependence on them, need to be developed. This involves not only the transfer of specific skills but as well the setting up and maintenance of local management structures.

It also imposes on communities a new culture of compliance to new rules such as procedures for multiple-stakeholders consultations, regular reporting, conditionalities for governance principles such as transparency and gender balancing, and others

- All SPBCP CA's have established local management structures or CA Coordinating Committees (CACCs) with representatives from all major stakeholders to oversee and ensure stakeholder inputs into project management. In most cases, these structures need strengthening in terms of their membership and in the scope of the work and responsibilities assigned to them. In communities such as Saanapu and Sataoa in Samoa, the same structures had tended to drift away from the parent authority which is the Council of Chiefs. There is the need to strengthen linkages with the Councils of Chiefs for better accountability, wide community support and for access to the resources of the communities at the disposal of the *Fono*, which the Project can definitely do with.

B.2.5. Partnerships with key sources of technical and business expertise

- Conservation Projects are complex undertakings. SPBCP projects even more so because of the management implications inherent in implementing the 'sustainable use' concept. Defining and regulating sustainable resource use demands a level of technical sophistication that is normally outside the capacities of communities. On another front, CAPs engaged in income generating activities need business expertise in management and marketing which are often not locally available. Expertise and skills in these areas are indispensable to CA projects.
- It may be argued that communities' capacities in these areas should be developed if they are to achieve self-reliance albeit sustainability. However, this is neither efficient nor necessary. The case in support of this conclusion is overwhelming and is only partly, for lack of space, elucidated here. Part of this case is that specialized technical knowledge in most areas of interest to CAPs already exists within government agencies, education and research institutions and non-governmental organizations. Not only do these agencies have the comparative advantage in acquiring, maintaining and improving on the expertise, many of them were set up specifically to provide technical support services at no or a nominal cost to private and communities initiatives including CAPs. For instance, in Samoa (as in all PICs for that matter), government departments dealing in agriculture, forests, fisheries and environment protection have as part of their regular functions the provision of this technical advice. Likewise, in the area of trade and business management, agencies and organizations such as the Small Business Enterprises Center (SBEC), Samoa Visitors Bureau (SVB), the Department of Trade Commerce and Industries (TCI), Women-In-Business, Chamber of Commerce and the local Bee-Keeping Association are only some of the many useful sources of expertise local CAPs can call on for assistance. For community-based conservation projects, establishing partnership relationships with these organizations to provide advice and support is the more efficient and sensible approach.

B.2.6. Transparency in project management

- The management of the entire project needs to be transparent and open. Work plans defining activities to be implemented and the corresponding financial resources allocated to them must be discussed and debated within an appropriate forum comprising of community representatives and members of the Lead agency. It fosters a sense of local ownership. In the SPBCP design, a project Coordinating Committee (CACC) is such a forum, and their most important role is to review and endorse these work plans and budgets, making sure the work proposed are acceptable and consistent with community priorities for the Project.

- ❑ It is important that the CACC does not operate in isolation from the rest of the community. The ideal CACC should derive its authority from the local authority - be these the traditional Council of Chiefs (as in Samoa) or the local Town Council in Tuvalu and Kiribati, or the Provincial Government in other countries - and should regularly report to this higher authority on progress in the project. Likewise, the rest of the community needs to be informed and be made to feel that they understand what is going on. In some SPBCP projects, a quarterly newsletter that is widely distributed is one method used for this purpose.
- ❑ The SPBCP design encourages community understanding and commitment to conservation via (1), awareness raising and community education activities, and (2), income generating activities based on the sustainable use of biological resources. Income generating activities or IGAs offer communities the opportunity to realize tangible benefits from the sustainable use of their resources, and by doing so, further reinforce their commitment to the conservation of their biodiversity.
- ❑ The management of IGAs and of income generated from them is often the source of friction and conflict in communities. Experience in many conservation projects indicates that the near failure of a number of CAPs is directly related to perceptions of misuse of project funds or the inequitable distribution of costs and benefits.

B.2.7. Equitable and transparent distribution of Project benefits and costs.

- ❑ Perceptions of misuse of project resources or of any unfair distribution of project benefits and costs can very quickly undermine community unity and, subsequently, commitment to the Project. It matters little if perceptions are unfounded, as has been the case with several SPBCP funded projects. When the project management environment is closed to only a limited group and decision-making is not adequately consultative, suspicions arise and an atmosphere of distrust exists.
- ❑ It is critical that where project income is realized through conservation-based income generating activities, such as eco-tourism, handicraft making, etc., that these are handled with transparency and distributed openly and fairly. Likewise with project costs that are borne by the communities.
- ❑ The experience of SPBCP includes proper book keeping and accounting arrangements to ensure full accounting of project revenues. As well, the project has accounts into which an agreed portion of all income is deposited for project purposes, with the remaining portion distributed to the community.
- ❑ Problems over such issues have ramifications that reverberate throughout the CA Project and the project communities. Ultimately they undermine community unity and support for the Project, and erode the commitment made to the conservation objectives.

Conclusions

The sustainability of conservation area projects that are community based and where resources are managed on a sustainable basis is considerably more complex than the case with *in-situ* conservation projects based on the strictly protected designated areas. The requirement for sustainable use is further complicated where resources are owned and managed on a communal basis.

To sustain a conservation area project set in this context, the seven conditions proposed are argued to comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions. All must exist for long term sustainability and the absence of one will result in the failure of the Project in the long term. The seven conditions are the critical inputs and the institutional arrangements that constitute the project mechanism for delivering on objectives, activities, outputs and outcomes agreed to.

Reference Used

1. SPREP. 1999. Action Strategy for Nature Conservation in the Pacific Islands region: 1999 – 2002. SPREP. Apia, Samoa. SPREP, 1999. Iv, 44 p.
2. SPREP. 1993. South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP). Project Document. SPREP. Apia, Samoa.

ANNEX 1: Criteria for the selection of Conservation Areas

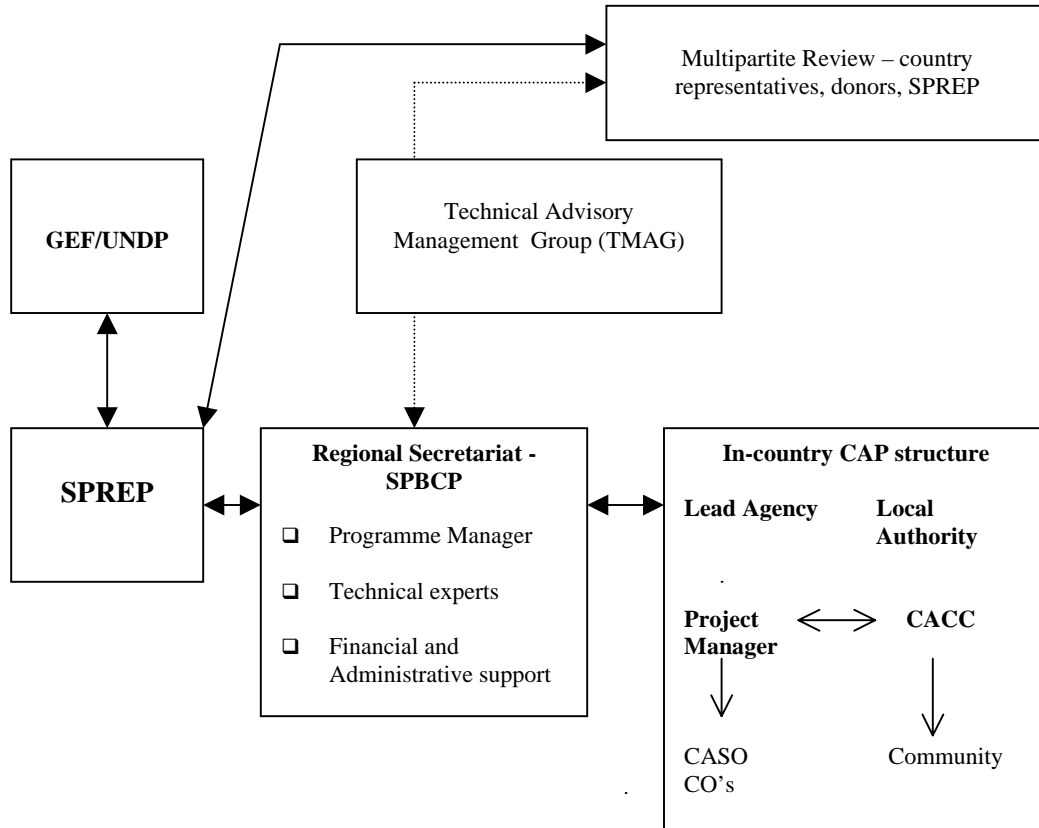
Category I: essential

- (a) The proposed area must contain nationally or regionally significant examples of one or more ecosystems of global conservation concern, such as tropical rainforest, mangroves, wetlands, lagoons and coral reefs, and must be large enough to maintain their viability.
- (b) The project must be achievable and exhibit a high degree of commitment by landowners, residents, resource users and other potential partners in the conservation area project.
- (c) The proposed area must be sufficiently large and complex to encompass a wide range of the interactions among people and natural resources prevailing in the country.

Category II

- (d) The proposed area should contain high levels of biological diversity and ecological complexity, represented by a number of major environments, diversity of ecosystems, and/or large numbers of genera and species of plants and animals;
- (e) The proposed area may be important for the survival of endemic species, or of species that are rare or threatened nationally, regionally or globally; and/or
- (f) The proposed area may be threatened by destruction, degradation or conversion.

Annex 3: Structure of the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP)



CASO = Conservation Area Support Officer
 CO = Conservation officers
 CAP = Conservation Area Project