

Regional Development Cooperation for Sustainable Development

Case Studies

Overview

This paper summarises three different regional development cooperation examples that aim to achieve sustainable development outcomes. Two of the examples describe how regional development cooperation has evolved around the management of a defined ecosystemⁱ area. The third outlines how countries within a similar geographical area, with similar challenges and constraints can work together to achieve common goals and objectives. Through the evolution of regional development cooperation mechanisms for sustainable development, good practice lessons can be drawn to inform discussions on sustainable development in the post-2015 development framework.

Key points

- Ecosystems do not stop at administrative or political boundaries. Cooperation between all the countries within the ecosystem unit is needed to ensure all interests are considered and balanced in its joint and sustainable management.
- All stakeholders, whether formally or informally, need to be engaged in the dialogue around management of the ecosystem. Building up of trust between states and across countries can take many years, but is vital to ensuring effective implementation of decisions.
- Sustainably managing large marine ecosystems is complex and requires decision makers to make tough choices around balancing human use with the maintenance of the area's natural and cultural integrity.
- Regional cooperation can involve significant amounts of time. Cooperation and collaboration need to be promoted with an eye toward efficient use of time, yet recognize that the development of relationships, understanding, and trust takes time that does not produce outputs that are measurable in traditional terms.

Regional development cooperation for sustainable development

Since the Brundtland Reportⁱⁱ introduced the concept of sustainable development in 1987, the world has gained a far deeper understanding of the interconnected challenges we face and the realization that these challenges cannot be overcome by countries working in isolation. Nowhere is this more acutely understood than by countries whose people and prosperity depend intimately on ecosystems that span across their national borders. Protection and sustainable management of ecosystems is critical to poverty reduction as it helps maintain or enhance the delivery of water, food and other ecosystem services that poor people rely on. It is equally important to ensuring long-term economic development opportunities, such as in tourism and agriculture.

The recent report by the Global Panel on Sustainability highlighted that sustainable development is not a destination in itself, but rather a dynamic process of adaptation, learning and action that recognises and understands the need to act on interconnections between the economy, society and the natural environmentⁱⁱⁱ. The Panel stated that in order to achieve sustainable development, we need to build an effective framework of institutions and decision making processes at the local, national, regional and global levels. The case studies below draw lessons from experiences at the regional level on how to build effective institutions for sustainable development.

Case study 1: The Mekong River Commission

Water resources lie at the heart of development in the Mekong region. More than 56 million people live in the lower Mekong Basin and depend on the river either directly or indirectly for their livelihood. Quality of life in the region depends on wise choices about sharing, developing and managing water to produce food and energy and to maintain vital ecosystems. With six riparian nations – China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam – all having an influence over how these water resources are managed this is no small task.

There are multiple levels of governance in the management of Mekong water resources, with engagement by governments, communities, civil society actors, research organisations and private sector interests. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), of which Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are members, represents the peak of this governance structure for the Lower Mekong Basin.

The 1995 Agreement signed by the four countries saw 'sustainable development and management of natural resources' rise to become the explicit goal of the organisation^{iv}. The Agreement was viewed by development partners as an important step towards balancing sustainable development objectives in the Mekong region – most

notably between the quality of the environment and its ability to support the people whose livelihoods depend on it.

Shared resources create challenges and opportunities. The current debate among Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam as to whether to dam the mainstream of the Mekong River to produce hydropower is an example of the opposed interests that can arise with a shared resource, and the transboundary impacts that be caused by major infrastructure developments. With Australian funding and support, the MRC is fulfilling a crucial role in providing a forum for informed negotiations and a structured deliberation process. This dialogue, and the MRC, is supported by innumerable external actors contributing technical analyses, spurring community engagement, and opening the debate to broader questions about energy and economic growth in the Mekong Region.

With a history spanning 50 years and current support from 13 different bilateral partners, seven regional partner organisations and two country dialogue partners^v, the MRC is one of the most advanced examples of regional development cooperation focused on achieving sustainable development.

Case study 2: The Coral Triangle Initiative

Covering only 1.6 per cent of the world's ocean, the Coral Triangle contains 76 per cent of all known coral species, 37 per cent of all coral reef fish, the greatest extent of mangrove forests in the world, and spawning and juvenile growth areas for tuna and other globally-significant commercial fish species^{vi}. The health and livelihoods of approximately 240 million people in the region are currently sustained by the significant biodiversity and ecosystems of the Coral Triangle. It is a source of food, income, and protection from severe weather events. The ongoing health of these ecosystems is critical for the people of the region.

Recognising the need to safeguard the region's marine and coastal biological resources, the *Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security* (CTI) was formed in 2007. The CTI is a regional development partnership between the Governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands and Timor Leste. It is supported by formal Development Partners who have been tasked to help mobilise resources for the CTI and bring greater coordination and effectiveness to the financial and technical support they are providing^{vii}. A range of other organisations and NGOs also provide support to CTI activities.

Through the CTI, the Coral Triangle countries have agreed to support people-centred biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, poverty reduction and equitable benefit-sharing. The *CTI Regional Plan of Action* sets goals, targets and actions at the regional level, which either require or would benefit from collaborative action amongst the Coral Triangle countries. This is complemented at the national level by National Plans of Action (NPOA), which specify domestic priorities and actions for the CTI.

Managing large-scale marine ecosystems such as the Coral Triangle requires strong co-ordination and harmonization between partner countries' development planning systems. Given Australia's own experience and expertise in marine and coastal ecosystem policy, planning, management and research, and its long history in supporting institutional strengthening for sustainable development in the Pacific, Australia is well positioned to make an important and significant contribution to the CTI. Australia has committed to a phased multi-year program of support to the CTI that will evolve and respond as the Initiative grows. The first phase of support has focused on establishing the foundations and momentum for the CTI. Establishing the institutional, governance and planning arrangements required to secure the Initiative as a strong, effective and representational forum, which balances the political, economic and cultural diversity across the region, is fundamental for the CTI to achieve sustainable development.

Sustainably managing large marine ecosystems is complex and requires balancing human use with the maintenance of the area's natural and cultural integrity. This is a key lesson Australia has shared from its own experience in managing marine and coastal ecosystems, where a high level of protection is balanced with allowing a variety of other sustainable uses, including fishing in certain areas^{viii}.

The Australian Government is also promoting and supporting effective coordination among donors to the Initiative. Continuous improvement in this area is key in maximizing the value of support and reducing administrative burdens on these six countries. It is also consistent with Australia's commitments under the Pairs Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Accra Agenda for Action and the Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Cooperation.

Case study 3: Sustainable development in the Pacific^{ix}

In 2005, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Leaders adopted the Pacific Plan. The plan responded to the many challenges facing Pacific small island developing states including the need to strengthen

regional cooperation and integration. Sustainable development was one of the four pillars of the Pacific Plan and the accompanying Leaders' vision statement highlights the vital role that it plays in the future of the region.

"We seek a Pacific region that is respected for the quality of its governance, the sustainable management of its resources, the full observance of democratic values and for its defence and promotion of human rights. We seek partnerships with our neighbours and beyond to develop our knowledge, to improve our communications and to ensure a sustainable economic existence for all"

Implementation of the Pacific Plan is aimed at creating the enabling environment needed for achieving sustainable development. It includes initiatives for better access to markets and goods, trade in services including labour, trade facilitation, enhanced transportation and communication and private sector development. It promotes the development and implementation of national sustainable development strategies and commits to regional support for good governance, particularly in areas such as leadership, human rights, ombudsman functions, audit, transparent administration systems, and participatory decision making mechanisms. Whilst the Plan aims to put in place the necessary foundations and regional commitment to achieving sustainable development, one of the key challenges that remained was the lack of donor coordination. Multiple initiatives in country and across the region were undermining, rather than strengthening, efforts to achieve the Leaders' vision.

While regional cooperation can bring significant benefits and commitment towards achieving sustainable development outcomes, the Pacific case exemplifies how it can also involve significant amounts of time, something that resource-constrained small island developing states often have little of. Cooperation and collaboration need to be promoted with an eye towards efficient use of time for all parties, yet recognize that the development of relationships, understanding, and trust takes time that does not produce outputs that are measurable in traditional terms.

It is for this reason that in 2009, the Australian Government helped to spearhead the Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific. The Compact sets out actions to improve the coordination and use of development resources in the Pacific in line with international best-practice as expressed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and Accra Agenda for Action. Development partners provide annual reports on their work under the Cairns Compact, including efforts to reduce aid fragmentation, ease the burden of aid administration and improve aid effectiveness, through measures such as increased use of country partner systems, multi-year funding commitments and pooled funding. Australia is strongly committed to the Cairns Compact and through funding to the Forum Secretariat is ensuring aid effectiveness and renewed focus on achieving sustainable development outcomes in the region^x.

Conclusion

As approaches to regional development cooperation evolve, there is much benefit in ensuring lessons from case studies such as these feed into design and review processes. Some of the lessons from the three case studies are inherent dilemmas of trying to function at a scale, such as in the Pacific, which does not fall within administrative or political boundaries. Others are inherent in the form of governance that exists across nation states, such as in the Mekong and the Coral Triangle. All can be illuminated through a continuous process of experimentation, monitoring and evaluation as regional-scale efforts move forward in post-2015 development frameworks.

ⁱ An ecosystem is a dynamic interconnected complex of plants, animals, microorganisms and their nonliving environment, of which people are an integral part

ⁱⁱ *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (1987) <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm#1.2>

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012). *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A future worth choosing*. New York: United Nations

^{iv} 1995 Mekong Agreement <http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-the-mrc/history/>

^v Technical and financial contributions currently come from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, The United States. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia Development Bank (ADB), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Economic and Social Commissions for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), World Bank and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) are regional partner organisations invited to attend the MRC Council and Joint Committee meetings in observer status. China and Myanmar are formerly recognised as two important dialogue partners in the MRC governance structure.

^{vi} Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security (CTI) Regional Plan of Action (RPOA)

^{vii} Asian Development Bank (ADB), Australian Government, Conservation International (CI), Global Environment Facility (GEF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), United States Government and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

^{viii} United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012). *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A future worth choosing*. New York: United Nations

^{ix} Sustainable Development in the Pacific: Progress and challenges. Pacific Regional Report for the five year review of the Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Program for Action for Sustainable Development of SIDS (MSI +5) http://www.sidsnet.org/msi_5/docs/regional/pacific/Pacific_Regional_Synthesis-MSI5-Final.pdf

^x <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/country/pacific/cairncompact.cfm>