

THE MONITORING TEAM APPROACH TO PROJECT FOLLOW-UP AND EVALUATION: EXPERIENCES FROM TWO SIDA-FUNDED PROGRAMMES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

This account deals with a relatively unknown but, nevertheless, important aspect of international development cooperation; namely, the continuous follow-up, or *monitoring*, of activities supported.

Most bilateral and multilateral donor organisations have some kind of system/routines for keeping informed about the progress of the projects or programmes they support in recipient countries. In general, at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) follow-up is the responsibility of the resident Sida programme officer. There are also specific annual or semi-annual reviews where representatives of the donor agency and the recipient executing agency meet to analyse performance up to that point, agree on any modifications in the organisation of the project, approve the work plan for the coming year, etc. Finally, at the end of the stipulated programme period there is usually a more comprehensive and systematic external evaluation.

One problem in this context is that the local resident programme officer often has a large portfolio of projects to administer and consequently has little time to follow-up any single project in depth. This is especially

problematic in the case of large and geographically dispersed projects in the rural areas where in-depth follow-up would require extensive field visits. The problem is compounded by the fact that these officials may lack previous experience or particular technical expertise in the subject area in question and, moreover, they are usually rotated rather frequently.

As for the annual review, it takes place during a hectic week when all matters relating to the programme, including administrative and financial aspects, have to be dealt with. Most of the background information for the review of actual project activities comes from progress reports prepared by the executing agency, affording little opportunity for donor representatives to check the findings against direct observations in the field.

Other cooperation agencies have different models for project monitoring. The intensity of the follow-up often depends on the presence of expatriate senior staff within the project. If such a person is present, monitoring is usually limited to appraisals near the end of each project phase, generally every three years, while the project officer at the head office who is ultimately responsible may only visit the project a couple of times during the same period. In some cases an additional intermediary mission

(mid-term review, “Verlaufskontrolle”, etc.) is conducted at some point during the phase.

Whatever the frequency of the missions, what they all have in common is that they are conducted as “external evaluations”. Very often they are undertaken by teams of experts recruited just for the occasion: experts who lack previous knowledge or experience of the particular project/programme to be evaluated. It may, therefore, be quite difficult for them to assess the project’s development over time, to grasp the effect of the various internal and contextual factors, etc. Also, the members of the team may not have worked together before so that interaction may not be optimal. Moreover, evaluations are nearly always made at the end of the project period, which comes a bit too late to allow for making adjustments to the project.

These various shortcomings have led the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency to experiment with Monitoring Teams (MTs) as a means of strengthening donor follow-up of larger and more complex programmes. This approach has been used on two Sida-funded natural resource management programmes in Costa Rica and Nicaragua respectively. This paper describes how the work was carried out and analyses some of the experiences of the Monitoring Team.

BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE PROGRAMMES

The Natural Resources Programme in Costa Rica

Initiated in 1990, the Natural Resources Programme supported by Sida in Costa Rica consisted of four components. The largest was

the Peasant Forestry Development Programme (PDF), a nation-wide programme providing incentives and technical assistance for reforestation and forest management to small- and medium-sized landholders. DECAFOR, within the General Forestry Directorate, had overall responsibility for executing this but delegated the actual administration of the incentives and the technical assistance to local and regional farmers’ organisations.

Sida support also went to two Conservation Areas in the southern part of Costa Rica, La Amistad and Península de Osa. The Conservation Area *La Amistad* (ACLA) is located in the mountain range of Talamanca and includes a number of protected areas of different categories; i.e., national parks, biological reserves, forest reserves, and Indian reserves of which the largest is the International Park *La Amistad*.¹

The Conservation Area Osa is located on the *Península de Osa* in southwestern Costa Rica and consists of a conglomerate of protected areas including the famous Corcovado National Park with surrounding agricultural hinterlands and coastal zones.

This support was given to strengthen the areas’ capacity to control the fully protected core zones, as well as for different kinds of development activities among the resident populations in the surrounding buffer zones. In addition, the programme provided the initial capital for special trust funds for each area to

¹ACLA was eventually divided into two separate conservation areas, each with its own administration: ACLA-Caribbean and ACLA-Pacific.

provide long-term financing of their operating costs. While at first the National Park Service, and later on the National System of Conservation Areas (Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservación; SINAC), was responsible for planning and coordination of these areas, they were in practice managed as decentralised units, each with its own staff and administrative structure.

The fourth component consisted of budgetary support to the Central Office of the National Park Service for various studies, logistical equipment and material, training, etc.

Sida’s contribution to the programme was purely financial. Execution of the programme was in the hands of the national institutions. The programme was originally planned to last only 3 years; however, due to unforeseen circumstances the execution period was prolonged, first to the end of 1995, then to the end of 1998 although with no additional funding. The second extension was to allow more time for finalising some pending issues and to allow for monitoring of the activities that had earlier received support through the programme. Since Sida does not have representation in Costa Rica, the programme was administered from Sida headquarters in Stockholm.

The Forestry and Environmental Programme in Nicaragua

Sweden has been supporting forestry development in Nicaragua since the early 1980s. The Forestry and Environmental Programme initiated in 1995 for a three-year period comprised four components. The first was continued support to the Forestry Technicians Training Centre at Estelí in northwestern Nicaragua (INTECFOR). This project dated

back to the mid-1980s and was now receiving out-phasing support for its final period. Sida’s counterpart in this cooperation was INATEC, the government agency responsible for vocational training in Nicaragua.

The other three components were all related to activities within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MARENA). The first of the activities supported was FONDOSILVA; a small fund set up for experimenting with incentives for reforestation and forest management among small and medium-sized landholders. This was considered a pilot project that would eventually be expanded into a national programme. The second component was support to the National Forestry Service (SFN), the department within MARENA responsible for the control, regulation and promotion of sustainable forestry management on privately-owned land. Finally, the programme included support to ADFOREST, the unit in MARENA for the administration of state-owned forests.

It is worth explaining in a bit more detail what the latter two components consisted of. Most of Nicaragua’s remaining natural forests are located on the Atlantic coast. These forests are threatened by the expanding agricultural frontier from the west, as well as by the irregular logging operations of timber companies and small-scale private lumber dealers. The situation is complicated by the fact that there are several indigenous groups living in the area, for example, the Misquito and the Mayangna, who claim ancestral rights to large areas of forestland.

The Atlantic coast is today divided into two autonomous regions, RAAN and RAAS, each

with its respective ethnically-based governmental structure and authorities. According to the Autonomy Law of 1987, the natural resources of the regions belong to the people, although it has not yet been determined how these rights should be exercised.

The objective of the support to the National Forestry Service was principally to allow it to strengthen its presence in RAAN and RAAS through the establishment of regional and municipal delegations. These delegations were to develop a system for the regulation, control and promotion of sustainable forestry management in an integrated and participatory manner with the rural communities in their respective areas of influence in conjunction with municipal and regional authorities, as well as with other agents and projects. Support was administered by the SFN central office at MARENA in Managua.

Regarding ADFOREST, the principal objective of the support was to enable it to initiate work with delimitation and registration of what supposedly constituted the state-owned forestland in RAAN and RAAS with the intention of later leasing this land as long-term concessions to foreign timber companies. The first step, however, was to determine which land belonged to private owners, especially to the indigenous communities. ADFOREST was, therefore, also to work with this aspect through, for instance, the organisation of 'forestry committees' at the community and regional level. The Sida programme covered part of the operating cost for this work.

It should be pointed out that, whereas the support to INTECFOR within the three-year programme represented the continuation of a

project that had been initiated long before, the support to SFN and ADFOREST on the Atlantic coast represented new activities begun in 1995. Finally, unlike with Costa Rica where Sida in Stockholm administered the cooperation, in this case it was administered by one of the programme officers at the Swedish Embassy in Managua coordinating with the Natural Resources Division at Sida in Stockholm.

THE MONITORING CYCLE

The intent of the Monitoring Team approach is to establish a system where projects are reviewed regularly during their implementation by the same team of external consultants over a relatively long period of time. Although the focus of the reviews may vary from time to time, they usually include a systematic analysis of progress reports in relation to previously established work plans followed up by visits in the field. The results of such reviews then serve as input to the annual or semi-annual discussions between the donor and the implementing agency.

In the case of the two Sida-funded programmes referred to herein, the MT consisted of two core members who served both programmes: Lasse Krantz, a social anthropologist, and Rolain Borel, an agronomist. In Costa Rica they were complemented by a forester, and in Nicaragua the core team was complemented by another forester who had the additional assignment of monitoring forest management and who, therefore, worked partly on his own.

The missions to Costa Rica, which normally lasted three to four weeks, were undertaken once a year, supplemented by occasional shorter visits together with the Sida desk officer to

check on specific issues. Between 1990 and 1997 the team conducted six such annual monitoring missions. In Nicaragua, the Monitoring Team made three-week visits to the programme twice a year in both 1996 and 1997.

The MT's working procedure was basically the same for both programmes and followed a certain cyclical pattern. The stages of this 'monitoring cycle' are described below in greater detail.

Setting up the method

Fairly comprehensive, though concise, annual operational plans and progress reports are one of the main tools of this kind of external monitoring. Their usefulness obviously depends in part on their mutual coherence in order to facilitate follow-up. During the first visit of the MT, the format of the annual operational plans and progress reports was defined in discussions with the staff of the national implementing agency. During subsequent visits the effectiveness of the reporting system was evaluated and some improvements were introduced.

Most plans and reports include the following four chapters:

- A general introduction sets the project in the context of recent developments in the country and in the relevant institution and identifies the main changes that have occurred during the year.
- A similar introduction precedes the description of each project component.
- A description of activities according to the objective's structure (frequently some sort of LFA) is provided.
- Budget implications for each component are included. An attempt was made to assign

budget estimates to each activity, aiming at, but never reaching, the level of 'activity costing'.

The format for budget planning and execution was simplified over time and consisted basically of a series of three double-entry tables with project components (park protection, community development, environmental education, etc.) in one dimension and budget items (salaries, travel, materials, investments, etc.) in the other dimension. The three columns were budgeted amount, actual amount and difference.

The aim was to have a direct correlation between the format of the plans and reports to facilitate comparison, which, however, at times was difficult to achieve. Some of the difficulties arose from changes in staff on the projects, the bringing in of new ideas without referring to previous commitments, and changes to the planning/reporting system by the implementing agencies. While some of these changes added valuable input to the monitoring of the execution of the project, others lacked coherence and complicated the task not only for the external MT, but also for the implementers of the projects themselves.

Although the formats for annual plans and their corresponding progress reports of the different components were fairly similar in both programmes, the end results varied considerably with respect to comprehensiveness, organisation, level of detail, etc., depending on the skill of the national executing agency. Some plans and reports were too detailed, others too concise and, further, there were imbalances between broad overviews of the context and project changes and the description of specific activities. Therefore,

while the MT never tried to edit the plans or reports, comments and suggestions for improvement were offered. On several occasions the national implementer was asked to rewrite the plans in order to incorporate conceptual changes to the projects from one year to the other or as a result of modifications resulting from the MT visit. In general terms, however, as the programmes advanced in implementation, significant improvement was observed in the quality of the plans and reports.

Scrutiny of the plans and reports

Prior to a field visit, the MT reviewed the reports of the preceding period and the plans of operation for the next year which had been submitted to the donor agency in advance by the national programme office. Congruity between plans and executed activities and the relevance of activities to project goals were important analysis criteria. The agreement signed between the donor and the national executing agency after each annual review was also used as a reference. The budget execution was analysed, not as an administrative procedure, which was not within the mandate of the MT, but as a way of identifying over- or under-execution and of defining changes in the relative weight of the project components.

According to the findings of this desk analysis, the team then defined its focus for the upcoming field visit and identified some of the contacts to be made. Based upon suggestions from the MT, the implementing agency then proposed a working schedule for the visit.

Follow-up in the field

On arrival of the MT in the country a final working schedule was agreed upon with the national staff. Since both programmes included

several regions within each country, the MT visited them in turn during subsequent field trips so as to keep a balanced view of the different situations. Typically some two-thirds of the time was spent in the field where the MT visited the executing agency's field office, the local authorities (especially important in Nicaragua, where the programme was implemented in the Autonomous Regions with their own government structure), as well as other institutions and projects. The MT also talked to especially knowledgeable people who could give their opinions on the programme and/or the general situation in the region. Special effort was made to obtain a balanced view of the current situation by interviewing different stakeholders closely or remotely related to the programme. As an example, in the Autonomous Regions in Nicaragua care was taken to meet people from different political groups in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the politically-sensitive land ownership issue.

The core of the review, however, was carried out at the beneficiary level. In addition to visiting plantations, managed forests and other 'physical' achievements of the programmes, the MT devoted considerable time to meeting with local people in the communities. It became nearly routine to ask the executing agency to organise meetings with 2-3 communities involved in the programme. The same communities were never visited on subsequent missions.

Between 20 to 50 would gather at a meeting place such as the local school for these meetings, which lasted a couple of hours or so. The group usually included some elders, the pastor or priest, the local representative of the respective programme, as well as of other institutions,

beneficiaries, women and young people. A community representative handled most of the formal agenda. After a brief introduction by the MT, community members were asked about their perception of the progress of the project or for their assessment of the current situation, as well as for their view on future developments, in particular for their opinion on the possibility of the project activities continuing after the project was terminated. This relatively close contact at the village level was essential for the MT to be able to provide the necessary guidance to the programme and to propose some of the changes that are described below.

Depending on the circumstances, the MT either carried out these community meetings together with field staff of the implementing agency or requested to be left alone in order to give people more 'freedom' to express their opinions on sensitive issues. In general the MT did not get the impression that important information was being withheld in the presence of field staff. On the contrary, in one meeting the community representatives reacted strongly to the absence of government representatives with whom they wanted a long needed discussion.

Upon returning to San José or Managua, follow-up meetings with various authorities and other projects were held to gather additional information and to verify findings from the field. In addition, informal 'debriefing sessions' were held with programme staff at the head office where the observations and preliminary conclusions of the MT review were presented and discussed.

Debriefing and reporting

The MT then presented verbal reports to the donor agency representatives (usually

supported by a short written report) which served as input for the latter in their formal discussions with the authorities. Depending on the outcome of the discussions, the implementing agency might then be asked to work out adjustments to the plans and present new versions to the donor, in which case the donor might ask the MT for comments before giving final approval.

RESULTS AND IMPACT OF THE MONITORING SYSTEM

The purpose of this monitoring system is to keep the donor better informed about the performance of the project while it is still being implemented, so that, if necessary, corrective measures can be taken. Has the work of the MT in fact had any effect? In this section we offer a few examples of modifications or new activities that were introduced in some of the projects as a result of deficiencies or problems detected during monitoring.

Costa Rica

In its follow-up of the PDF in Costa Rica one issue raised by the team referred to the level of involvement of farmers' organisations. During meetings in the field it was discovered that the farmers were rather marginally involved in the annual planning of the programme, which they felt was entirely directed and controlled by DECAFOR. This observation was communicated to the donor who brought it up during the annual meeting with the General Forestry Directorate which eventually led to an agreement to incorporate the two leading forest-farmer organisations in the country, namely JUNAFORCA and AGUADEFOR, more directly in the planning and execution of the programme. In fact, the entire plan of operation

for the programme was revised giving these organisations direct executing responsibility for some of its components. This change proved to be crucial and has since greatly increased these organisations' interest and their sense of involvement in the programme.

In the case of support to the Conservation Areas in Costa Rica, there was a similar problem in the sense that priority tended to be given to protection activities in the utilisation of this support while fewer resources were assigned to development support among the local population living within, or adjacent to, the protected areas. This criticism was made repeatedly by the MT in reports to Sida, which in turn raised the point several times with its counterpart in Costa Rica with, unfortunately, little success. This situation was due in part to the conservation-minded orientation of the National Park Service which at that time headed these areas, but was also the result of the lack of a clear strategy and capacity for such development work at the grassroots level by the area administrators themselves.

This is not to say that the insistence of the MT on this point was entirely ineffectual. It was eventually agreed that part of Sida's support to the National Park Service should be used to finance a study on the experiences in Costa Rica of involving local communities in sustainable management of protected areas so as to get a more systematic picture of how such an integrated conservation-development approach could be applied in practice. This study has now been finalised by the Tropical Scientific Centre. Moreover, it was agreed that at least 50 percent of the interest generated by the trust funds to be set up for each area should be used to strengthen the capacity of the area

administration to support development activities among the rural communities in its area of influence. The local population should also be represented on the steering committees to be set up for these funds. These were, however, relatively minor adjustments whose effects, if any, remain to be seen.

A more concrete result refers to the creation of a small trust fund for the Shiroles Educational Farm in Talamanca under the direct control of the indigenous groups living there. Sida's support to ACLA initially contemplated funding for the construction of a training centre for the indigenous communities in Suretka in Talamanca. During monitoring in the field it was revealed that a similar training centre already existed in nearby Shiroles, which was administered by a local NGO (ANAI). Since this was seen as somewhat controversial in the eyes of some of the indigenous leaders, they preferred to have a new training centre built, rather than share the facilities of Shiroles. Faced with this situation the MT suggested an alternative solution: to create a trust fund for Shiroles that would be managed directly by the indigenous communities themselves. After lengthy deliberations all the parties consented to the idea. A trust fund has now been established for Finca Shiroles under the supervision of ACLA but with its own by-laws and steering committee where representatives of all the indigenous groups in the area participate.

Nicaragua

The next example refers to the modifications introduced over time in Sida's support to the activities of MARENA on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. As explained earlier, part of this support was for strengthening the institutional

capacity of ADFOREST in its work with delimitation and administration of the state-owned forestland on the coast. Since this could not be accomplished without taking into consideration the indigenous communities' traditional land rights, ADFOREST was to work on this aspect as well, principally by entering into a dialogue with the communities through the organisation of 'forestry committees'. This would be one of the tasks of the field staff that ADFOREST kept on the coast.

While initially it was thought that it would be relatively easy for ADFOREST to enter into agreement with the indigenous groups on the delimitation of their communal lands, it was soon obvious that this was a much thornier issue than anticipated. If not handled with extreme care and sensitivity, it might easily lead to serious conflict. For one thing, many of the indigenous communities did not accept the existence of any state-owned forestland and argued that, for historical reasons, it all belonged to them irrespective of whether they were utilising the land at the time or not. As for those who, in principle, accepted that there was some land that eventually might be classified as "state owned" because it had no other legitimate owner, the area was, in any case, considerably smaller than the 'central government' (i.e. ADFOREST) had originally considered. Thus the boundary between state-owned and communal lands was definitely a controversial issue. In addition, the borders of the communal lands of neighbouring communities were often not clear either and this frequently led to disputes and sometimes to open inter-community conflict. This was another issue that needed to be considered.

These problems became abundantly clear during the MT's first real field trip to the region in August of 1996 when meetings were held with representatives of several indigenous communities in RAAN. Out of these consultations came the realisation that the delimitation and legalisation of the communal lands was to take precedence over the delimitation of the possible state-owned lands and that ADFOREST's work, at least for the time being, should be reoriented accordingly. Specifically, it was proposed that ADFOREST concentrate its efforts on facilitating the former process and support the establishment of the required mechanisms and procedures at different levels, as well as assist the communities in their internal work of defining and clarifying their communal areas. ADFOREST should, in addition, refrain from taking any position on the legitimacy of the resultant land claims which would have to be settled by a special authority organised for this purpose.

Sida and MARENA agreed on the basic principles during the semi-annual review of the programme in September 1996. Sida also made it clear that a prerequisite for further support was that no new forest concessions be issued by ADFOREST in areas where the land-tenure situation of the affected communities had not previously been agreed upon between all interested parties.

Another change introduced on that occasion referred to the extension work of SFN. As mentioned earlier, SFN received support through the programme for the establishment of a forestry extension system on the Atlantic coast. Such a system was to be built up gradually, rooted in the municipalities and should address both the recently settled peasant

groups living in the agricultural frontier areas and the traditional indigenous communities.

Up to that point SFN had operated quite independently from ADFOREST with its own team of extension workers and logistical resources. During the monitoring, it was concluded that there was much to be gained from having closer coordination, and even integration, of the work in the field between SFN and ADFOREST when their respective staff was operating in the same area. For instance, the former could provide extension in forestry management to the communities where the latter was giving assistance in land tenure issues, thereby complementing each other's efforts. Moreover, by having closer coordination of their respective activities it would be possible to make more efficient and economical use of available resources, including those provided by Swedish support. It was thus agreed that from then on SFN and ADFOREST would seek to coordinate their work plans and activities more closely at the central, regional and field levels.

The functioning of these various modifications was followed up during the next visit by the MT in January 1997. It was verified that ADFOREST had indeed concentrated its efforts on providing assistance to the communities in their internal negotiations on their respective communal lands. In fact, judging by the interviews the team held with several community leaders, ADFOREST's support in this context was greatly appreciated and considered fundamental in moving the process forward. On the other hand, there were certain indications that this work was moving a bit too fast by initiating activities simultaneously in a large number of

communities without having the required capacity for follow-up. There were signs that the procedure of organising community forestry committees was a bit hasty and top-down without sufficient attention to the need for creating a firm base within the community.

As for the agreement of coordinating the activities of ADFOREST and SFN better in the field, there were some positive results, especially regarding the organisation of work at the community level. A limiting factor was the difference in basic orientation and mandate of these two institutions, which created tension between the directors at the central level. Added to this was the fact that Swedish support to these two institutions was handled as separate projects, each having its own plan of operation and budget, which in and of itself tended to encourage vested interests and other institutional blockages to collaboration.

After analysing the situation the MT concluded that the best solution would be to transform the Swedish support into a single project with SFN and ADFOREST as joint executors but according to one integrated plan of operation coordinated by a special unit within MARENA. This proposal was adopted by Sida and MARENA during the subsequent annual review in February 1997 and it was agreed that the latter would elaborate a new plan of operation for the year reflecting these changes.

The first opportunity to evaluate the outcome of this quite radical change was in August of that year when the team visited the project for the fourth time. Despite the fact that activities had been virtually paralysed during the previous months due to turmoil in the

institutions in the wake of national elections, there was some promising development. For instance, the respective field staff of SFN and ADFOREST now tended to work more in unison, coordinating activities with one another, sharing logistical resources such as means of transport and office space, etc. Regarding work at the community level, they also sought to apply a more integrated approach by combining facilitating the on-going land-delimitation process with training in the basics of sustainable forest management and other related themes.

Obviously this integrated method of working was only in an initial stage and needed more time to mature. Unfortunately, by that time only six months of the three-year period originally assigned for this programme remained, and, against the recommendation of the MT, the donor was reluctant to consent to an extension. This is not the place to argue against this decision. Suffice it to say that the decision was primarily motivated by serious concerns regarding the performance and institutional situation at MARENA that led the donor to question the effectiveness and sustainability of its support. At the time of writing it is not clear what will happen with the work of MARENA on the Atlantic coast in the future if other external support is not forthcoming. There is a danger that the whole effort of restructuring and better adapting MARENA's activities to local conditions and requirements will have been in vain if work does not continue.

This account may leave the impression that the MT alone lay behind the various changes and modifications introduced over time in the project. While it is true that the MT acted as proponent and driving force in this context,

most of the proposals were, in fact, the results of intensive dialogue with project staff and reflected their concerns and analyses of the situation supplemented by the ideas of the team. In this sense one might say that the Monitoring Team merely served as initiator or catalyst for changes that were latent in the project implementers.

CLARIFYING THE ROLE OF THE MONITORING TEAM

Experience has shown how important it is for all the parties involved in a programme to be clear about the role of the Monitoring Team herein discussed. For instance, in the two cases described above it was made clear at a very early stage that the MT had the role of supporting the donor in the follow-up of the programme and it was only responsible for reporting to the donor. Moreover, it was clearly spelled out that the MT had no decision-making power but rather served as adviser to the donor. It was up to the donor to decide to follow the advice of the team or not. The donor might, for instance, have other factors to consider in taking its decisions; factors beyond the scope and mandate of the team, which is restricted to examining programme implementation in relation to established goals and objectives. It is essential that these guidelines be clarified at the start to avoid confusion and false expectations regarding the role of such a Monitoring Team, vis-à-vis both the implementing agency and the donor.

As a matter of principle the MT in these two examples acted as an external observer and did not take part in the operating decisions of the programme, which were the responsibility of the local implementing agency. This is not to

say that the implementing agency and its staff did not benefit from this monitoring work. In practice the work was carried out in close collaboration with project staff. In both programmes staff members frequently accompanied the team on field visits. There was ample opportunity for the informal exchange of ideas and technical discussions between the MT and project staff at various stages throughout the process.

In addition, the team made a point of discussing its preliminary observations and conclusions with the programme direction at central level before the final monitoring report to the donor was prepared. In this manner the work of the MT, albeit informally, also contained a 'technical advisory' element for the implementers, something which was recognised and appreciated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A crucial difference between international development cooperation in the past and today is that, whereas earlier donors were often directly involved through their own staff or consultants in the implementation of the projects they supported, nowadays their role is most often merely to provide financial resources while actual implementation is in the hands of national institutions and staff.

Another difference is that while previously such support was oriented toward a specific project with its own goals, targets and project organisation, nowadays it is common for donor support to be provided in the form of broad-based programmes which aim to strengthen the technical and institutional capacity of institutions and organisations in the recipient countries in their regular development activities.

The fact that donors are less directly involved in project implementation today means that they need some other mechanism for keeping themselves informed about the activities they are supporting. Continuous follow-up is important in order to maintain an active and constructive dialogue with the counterpart institutions which, in turn, is an essential aspect of this new type of development cooperation. It is against this background that the usefulness of the Monitoring Team approach should be viewed.

Several advantages can be attributed to the MT approach. Firstly, it provides donors with a much more complete and up-to-date picture of the functioning and performance of the projects they support than is possible just from ordinary follow-up meetings. Especially important in this context is the fact that the MT approach is based on recurrent in-depth reviews of activities in the field, including discussions with beneficiaries and other stakeholders regarding their perception of the work being done. Such feedback from the field makes it possible for the cooperating parties to get a more realistic and profound understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the support.

Another advantage of this approach is that modifications may be introduced into project operation during the course of implementation as experience is gained or when circumstances in the project environment change. While in the past many projects tended to follow a top-down "blueprint" approach to planning with relatively inflexible pre-set targets and activities, nowadays it is common that projects, especially rural development projects, are designed as fairly open-ended processes subject to adaptation through continuous learning feed-

back. The MT approach to monitoring is particularly well suited to this kind of project as it is a system which supplies the cooperating agencies with continuous information on operational problems and achievements in the project while enabling them to take necessary corrective actions before it is too late.

A third advantage is that the MT approach ensures continuity as the same group of consultants regularly reviews the project. This allows the team to build up certain knowledge of the project in its socio-political, cultural and institutional context, which is important for correctly analysing the situation and the changes taking place. Another positive aspect is that the team and project staff have an opportunity to really get to know each other, which facilitates interpersonal communication and the flow of information.

A possible negative aspect of this kind of monitoring is that it might become too much of an "externally" driven process in which the Monitoring Team, by primarily representing the interests of the donor, imposes its criteria and priorities on the implementers. The problem of external intrusion is, of course, built into the system and is, therefore, to some extent, unavoidable. There are, however, ways in which this can be mitigated. For instance, in the case of the two programmes referred to above, the MT tried to lessen the external orientation by always informally discussing its observations with the project staff and other involved national authorities before making recommendations to the donor.

This is not to say that in these cases the national implementing institutions did not benefit from the work of the Monitoring Team. On several

occasions the staff of these institutions expressed their appreciation of the visits of the MT, which provided them the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss project matters with a group of outside professionals sufficiently knowledgeable about the project to understand their concerns. Through the MT they could be assured that some critical issues were raised at higher levels which they perhaps had difficulty in raising on their own.

It should be recognised that the MT approach presented in this paper was designed primarily for the purpose of strengthening donor follow-up of activities they support in recipient countries. A similar approach might be useful to national institutions interested in having their projects and programmes monitored by an external team. In fact, such a model of recurrent visits by a group of short-term consultants might even be considered for technical assistance to nationally-implemented projects and programmes: this being a more cost-effective alternative than long-term consultants permanently posted to a country. The role of the team in such a situation would then be that of project adviser rather than that of external observer as was the case discussed herein.

ACRONYMS

ACLA	Conservation Area La Amistad
INTECFOR	Forestry Technicians Training Centre (Instituto Técnico Forestal)
MARENA	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (Ministerio del Ambiente y Recursos Naturales)
MT	Monitoring Team
PDF	Peasant Forestry Development Programme
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SFN	National Forestry Service

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