



Regional International Waters Project Brief Project Management Lessons Learned



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Prepared by

Samasoni Sauni

(R2R Regional Programme Coordinator, samasonis@spc.int)

Produced and published by

GEF Pacific International Waters Ridge to Reef Regional Project,
Pacific Community (SPC), Suva, Fiji



Suva, Fiji, 2022

Summary

This paper presents an account of lessons learned and experienced during the implementation of the Regional International Waters Ridge to Reef Project, at least in the last three (3)-years of the project, 2019-2021. In particular, the paper identifies lessons in project administrative and financial management and the level of commitment and oversight by host agencies, and the technical backstopping role of the Regional Programme Coordination Unit. Specific technical lessons are documented elsewhere in other R2R publications.

Lesson 1

Timely disbursement of funds to support project implementation, and delays in financial reporting and acquittals. While it may be difficult and challenging to pursue due to domestic policies and regulations, it is worth considering establishing a separate bank account in-country for the project/program to streamline internal processes and support timely delivery efficiency

Streamlining of all development aid, grants, and project funds into a centralised system in national government treasuries, often called the 'black hole', is a common practice in Pacific Island countries. This is considered by some to be good practice, to centralise all financial transactions into the country to store in one place, instead of numerous 'piece-meal' bank accounts for projects and programmes implemented by governments.

However, the experience of accessing and withdrawing project funds from a centralised financial system to implement approved project activities proved to be inefficient and non-transparent. The system requires multiple layers of screening, vetting and signatures from a range of persons with authority and accountability.

To remedy such problems, the main donor may negotiate from the start that a separate stand-alone bank account is set up for the project or programme for purposes of financially supporting and implementing an approved MYCWP that links to a logframe, theory of change, 'prodoc' and an MoA or related legal instrument signed between the countries and the executing agency or implementing agency.

This is usually not a popular option with governments of PICs as they require all project funds and development aid to channel through the agency with the right authorization and deposit funds into the government's Treasury. However, the proposed model has proved to be quite successful through the FFA Observer Program (in-country fund account) and the SPC Malaria Program in the past.

While the current system may serve the host government well in housing all external funds and development aid money in a centralised repository for easy monitoring and reporting, the problem of lengthy processes to authorise taking funds out to support project implementation and preparing and reporting acquittals often gets buried in the bureaucracy and proved difficult to handle.

The other common issue is that the funds are often, without the necessary knowledge and approvals of the executing and implementing agencies, to support activities outside the approved Multi-year Costed Work Plan and logframe process.

Lesson 2

Adequate and available in-country capacity with the right mix of qualifications and practical skills is a potential problem in several PICs. As observed in several projects and programmes, they often resort to hiring staff who tend to cause more issues than supporting project implementation. It is considered best practice to establish a Project Management Unit (PMU) with a good team of finance, monitoring, evaluation, learning, accountability, and communications. Multi-tasking with the aim to save money may help but often leads to dealing with more difficult issues.

Where project funds exceed US\$10 million, it is recommended that a PMU is established with a strong team of a Project Manager, Finance Officer, M&E Officer, and Comms Officer. An Assist. Finance Officer can be hired to deal directly with acquittals and procurements. It is recommended to prepare templates for reporting, and related project work, to assist with the monitoring and evaluation of the project progress of implementation and delivery on key targets and indicators. For instance, guidance and templates should be developed for reporting (quarterly, annual, mid-term and final), trips (trip reports), procurement, leave (medical, annual, etc.), experience notes, research proposals and papers, consultancy reports (inception, progress, final), technical reports, and others.

Lesson 3

Depending on the skills-set of project staff, timely and quality reporting is always an issue with project implementation in PICs. It may be worth considering establishing and funding a Technical Taskforce or PMU and placing it in the government host agency or ministry dealing specifically with project technical analytical and reporting matters. This will free up the project PMU to deal with administrative and financial matters.

The technical and scientific capacity vary significantly between PICs, with several countries doing well, while the majority require external technical assistance, training, and mentoring. This is potentially a difficult problem faced in implementing the IW R2R project across 14-PICs. If not addressed, the projects are then exposed to practices of corruption, misused funds, and poor reporting.

Accordingly, a Technical PMU can be established and funded externally, and with functions to review and approve all technical work of the project, analyse all field data collected by the project and generate reports following templates required by different sources – e.g., host government, donor, clients, minister briefing, etc. This way the project PMU can concentrate on supporting implementation and making informed decisions in reference to reports churned by the TPMU. The Ministry of Finance can also get exactly the standard report suited for their own purpose and filter out all the operational details not needed.

This model is preferred for donors supporting multiple projects with large sums in countries – e.g., MFAT, DFAT, EU, GEF, GCF, WB, ADB etc. This group reports to both the country focal point as well as the external focal point – often considered as the ‘eyes’ on the ground.

Where government systems may not be conducive to handling and managing project funds, an independent consulting entity that has the capacity and setup already in place to handle these tasks can be engaged to provide these functionalities and reporting obligations.

Lesson 4

Resources and resourcing has often been cited as a problem affecting projects and programmes implemented in PICs. This includes resources to fund the establishment of technical units and positions. To get around the problem, worth negotiating such arrangements at the start, and allocating adequate budgetary resources to support technical positions placed in government agencies and line ministries to provide additional project management support

This lesson ties to that in lesson 3. Initially, the issue is the lack of capacity in-country to handle government main programmes of work, as well as additional work resulting from externally funded projects and programmes. This is often the case for local counterparts, full-time staff of the host agency or ministry wearing multiple 'hats' dealing with multiple projects additional to deliver on his/her own ToRs. This often leads to delays and a backlog of outstanding work where staff are overwhelmed with additional tasks without proper compensation in a pay rise or overtime pay or similar incentives. This leads to staff resigning and looking for opportunities elsewhere, thereby exacerbating the problem of the capacity gap.

The project/ programme can offer to pay for technical positions (e.g., Specialists in M&E, project management, etc.) in the host agency or ministry to support your work but also assist with additional tasks and a clear backlog of work put on the agency or ministry staff.

Lesson 5

Practical technical hands-on demonstration and support to train and mentor unskilled staff and project team

Due to limited capacity in-country, it is difficult to hire skilled and competent staff and therefore important to train and mentor the staff appropriately until they master the tasks. For example, experience dictates that unskilled and unqualified staff can be trained on the job in preparing acquittals, financial reports, analysis, and technical writing can all be done with hands-on training over the course of the project. The use of clear templates and procedures pre-designed and approved for use are useful tools. Once after they master the skills, they can be seconded to another agency to train others.

If there are more than five (5) people to train, then arrange for a training workshop to bring people up to speed and awareness-raising. More importantly, practical exercises through workshops should prepare staff to improve skills and increase competence.

Lesson 6

Knowing the project document well with respect to duties & responsibilities, covering undocumented sensitivities, and including ways to ensure smooth execution and compliance

There is often a clash between the requirements of “to-dos” and “not to dos” as set out in the legal instrument of government project implementation, and domestic processes and mechanisms. Arguably, as often experienced, government processes are often regarded as the ‘only acceptable way’ and none other when it comes to what takes priority.

For example, sometimes the host agency uses project funds to do other priority government work despite such work is not in the approved logframe and workplan. As a result, the civil servants and project staff are often trapped in such misuse of funds because the authority to use such funds is under their signatures. The high-level powerful people with authority in government who pressure and approve the use of funds often get away from these allegations.

Several countries are already using these alternative processes and setups with very successful outcomes including the timely delivery of quality technical reports and regular reporting following templates, which are acceptable to the government and donors. Counterparts learned a great deal from technical staff under such arrangements.

Lesson 7

Dedicated and Skilled Project Team with Support from the Government Host Agency and External Partners is a Recipe for Project Success

Qualification and experiences with demonstrable skills-set do matter and are expected of a Project Manager in an IW R2R project. The second-best thing to happen is to hire the second or third best candidates to fill the positions, with the expectation of on-the-job capacity building, upskilling, and mentoring to occur over time from both the supervisors, host agency and the regional project. There is a disparity in capacity and skills set amongst PICs, which can be improved and strengthened through hands-on project works. Ongoing mentoring and training are essential elements of development projects in PICs.

COVID-19 pandemic constrained movements and therefore national project teams who suffer the most are those with relatively weak capacity and capabilities to handle challenges and catalytic impacts to progress implementation. Virtual technical support does not necessarily always work, however, technical people working in host agencies can offer help.

Lesson 8

No one Size Fits All, recognizing the limited capacity of small island developing countries

Very often projects are faced with unforeseen circumstances and therefore encounter significant implementation delays. Several PICs are geographically small in land size and population coupled with limited capacity. This makes it difficult to support the implementation of externally funded projects and programmes. Most countries have relatively vulnerable economies and priorities often rest on supporting productive sectors like agriculture, fisheries, mining, and tourism. Several countries have been slowly building back after the economic development collapse caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change (loss of biodiversity & food production, deteriorating quality water and sanitation conditions, etc). Populations in low lying coastal areas and atoll countries are living and coping with the impacts already. Future projections and trajectories of climate change and sea level rise are important for coordinated planning, recognising those in low islands and atolls are already living with devastating impacts and experiences.

PICs' priorities are centred on development and economic growth but also cognizant of environmental and climate change commitments. Technical assistance is critically important in driving build-back efforts including priorities on waste pollution and habitat restorations. This has been clearly communicated to the RCPU during Steering Committee meetings and the response was only received in the latter half of the project lifetime.

Development partners and donors do not necessarily believe that the financial economies of scale are present in PICs. Therefore, several criteria and guidelines are developed to guide their decisions to financial support a project concept or full proposal. For instance, the Green Climate Fund (GCF) determines the success of project proposals and the selection of participating countries based on GCF readiness criteria, including but not limited to in-country capacity – i.e., both in terms of capacity development needs and existing implementation capacity. Only a handful of more advanced and developed PICs with positive economic growth meet the criteria.

Lesson 9

Continued Disregard and Support for Gender Mainstreaming

Gender inclusion and acceptability in Pacific cultures and traditions are slowly getting traction. A lot of the success is attributed to gender advocates and champions supporting the voices of marginalised, many in the typical village and community traditional governance. Confusion remains in the broader context and role of gender in development work, which to some people, it is above men and women or sex disaggregation. The IW R2R project has provided important lessons in the way gender has influenced the successful implementation of project work but also complying with donors' expectations promoting gender in all phases of the project and implementing activities in all localities. The broader scope of gender role in the effective conservation and sustainable use of ecosystem goods and services remains some way to go before Pacific societies can fully embrace and accepted it as a core value.

Lesson 10

Shifting Paradigm of Self-Reliance Building Resilience and Seek Help Later, the Only Way Forward

One does not need external assistance to replant coastal areas, restock over-exploited species, and exercise restraint from unnecessary and indiscriminate harvesting and use of ecological systems goods and services. Often in PICs, we teach ourselves and keep secrets of traditional innovations through chanting tales of nature and singing songs of despair to maintain the vast knowledge we inherit and pass on between generations. Living in harmony with nature is a tried Pacific story.

Until it is no more, greed creeps in and cash economies infiltrates village minds of many, and to hear the suggestion to look elsewhere seeking help. Trouble in paradise has begun and the tragedy of the commons begins to manifest through competition for limited resources. It is the survival of the fittest until realising the only way to sustain life is to seek help and start over.

The IWR2R project simply cements the need for a shifting paradigm of self-reliance to reverse the cumulative challenges and threats thereby restoring and maintaining ecosystem goods and services.

