



GEF R2R/ RSTC.7/ WP.01

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Seventh Meeting of the Regional Science and Technical Committee for the GEF Pacific Ridge to Reef Programme

Suva, Fiji 18th – 19th January 2022

RSTC Chair's Report – Highlights, Challenges and Opportunities

Summary:

The paper provides the Regional Scientific and Technical Committee (RSTC) Chair's Final Report to the RSC at its final meeting. This is the last meeting of the RSTC as the project closes on 1 March 2022. The paper recognizes the hard-working members of the RSTC and members' contributions supporting the project over the year. The report also provides an opportunity for reflection on the successes, challenges and lessons learned in delivering on the RSTC ToRs and offer suggestions on opportunities ahead.

Generally, the work of the RSTC could have been improved having suffered from limited time to meet and providing action-oriented expert support in scientific and technical aspects. This is important to facilitate the achievement of the goals and objectives of the UNDP/SPC IWR2R project, and with responsibility for:

- (i) overseeing the scientific and technical elements of the project;
- (ii) ensuring effective implementation of activities undertaken during project execution; and
- (iii) providing sound scientific and technical advice to the Project Steering Committee.

The meeting is invited to note and endorse the RSTC Chair's final report.

RSTC Chair's Report – Highlights, Challenges and Opportunities

Overview

1. This is the last meeting of the RSTC as the project closes on 1 March 2022. Therefore, the Chair's report at this meeting is dedicated to all hard-working members of the RSTC. The report also provides an opportunity for reflection on the successes, challenges and lessons learned in delivering on the RSTC ToRs, and opportunities ahead. The science and evidence-based approach is already an international best practice, and it underpins the work of this group over the last 5-years of the IWR2R project.
2. As previously stated in the 2019 RSTC meeting, there is a fundamental principle of maintaining high quality science to frame scientific and technical advice thereby informing policy discussion and decisions at the RSC. Therefore, the role of the RSTC ought to be active and action-oriented by providing guidance through robust technical discussion on aspects of project implementation such as testing of innovative technologies, review research methods and sampling designs used, and critically assess and advise on recommended best practices and upscaling R2R investments.
3. Recall that to facilitate the achievement of the goals and objectives of the UNDP/SPC IWR2R project, the Regional Scientific and Technical Committee (RSTC) was established with responsibility for:
 - (i) overseeing the scientific and technical elements of the project;
 - (ii) ensuring effective implementation of activities undertaken during project execution; and
 - (iii) providing sound scientific and technical advice to the Project Steering Committee.
4. Further recall that the RSTC is responsible for ensuring that scientific and technical aspects of this project meet international standards. Specifically, the RSTC reviews the substantive activities of the project to:
 - (i) conduct diagnostic analysis of threats to priority coastal areas to guide investment in integrated environmental and natural resource management;
 - (ii) improve State of Coast reporting and it's mainstreaming in national Strategic Action Planning for Ridge to Reef approaches to Sustainable Development Planning;
 - (iii) enhance information management and knowledge management and sharing in support of the national uptake of best practice management approaches and technologies;
 - (iv) guide the establishment and operation of regionally appropriate results-based management and reporting systems, including monitoring of the effectiveness of management actions; and
 - (v) strengthen national and regional cooperation and coordination in the operation of the Pacific Ridge to Reef programme

Achievements, Challenges & Opportunities

5. Generally, evaluating RSTC role in ensuring scientific and technical aspects of the R2R programme meet international standards is mixed and cause of concern. The group meets once annually and efforts to meet more often virtually or face to face did not work out as anticipated. There were challenges in the retention of group members and the occurrence of COVID-19 impacted efforts of the group further. However, there was improvement in scientific and technical aspects of the R2R Programme following the recruitment of new staff in 2019, and the convening of technical consultations for the RSTC and the R2R Technical Working Group. More details on the outcomes and products emanating from these efforts are accessible online.
6. A substantive activity of project component 1 is to develop a regionally appropriate method and procedure for the characterization and prioritization of PIC coastal areas for R2R investment and the conduct of diagnostic analysis to identify needs for key reforms and investments in priority areas. There were good results and products coming out of these project works, and the corresponding reports and publications are accessible online. However, due to time limitation and challenges related to COVID-19, the development and trials of the spatial prioritization procedures and modelling were only performed in Vanuatu and the

Solomon Islands. The trials will need to be extended to other PICs for better improvements in the methods and align the model to the context of each country.

7. The RSTC reviewed and provided expert advice on the preparation of the R2R science to policy strategic framework that was approved in 2019, and a modified version approved in 2020. The Rapid Assessment of Coastal Areas (RapCA), spatial prioritization procedures, diagnostic analysis, 'State of Coasts' (SoCs) and Strategic action Frameworks (SAFs) reporting were essential steps of the science-policy framework. The production of reporting against these regionally led activities in-country vary considerably. The regional guidelines for implementing the above steps were published in 2021. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 it was not possible to hire and send international consultants project staff from Suva in-country to carry out the above technical work. Local consultants were hired, instead.

8. Investments in human capital for integrated environmental and natural resource management is one essential area of the project. The design of curricula and training materials for the regional post-graduate training programme offered through James Cook University was a 'big' success. The original intent of the programme, amongst others, was to provide regional guidance to the national 'State of Coasts' (SoCs) reporting and harmonized results reporting to be undertaken as part of component 3 and 4, respectively. Unfortunately, the plan to link JCU graduate training with development of SoCs reporting and harmonized results could have been executed better and efficiently. Accordingly, the graduate training is largely executed remotely, and the students were experiencing internet connectivity issues. Due to country lock downs and restriction of movements, the students were unable to carry out to their field research which is an important component of the course.

9. Moreover, the RSTC was earmarked to lead in the development of regionally appropriate knowledge tools to support evidence-based coastal and marine spatial planning in PICs. Unfortunately, there was little done on this by the RSTC other than providing expert advice on aspects of knowledge tools during the group's annual meeting. The two technical consultations of the RSTC were useful exercises to engage this group and other stakeholders in technical dialogue, peer review research papers and contributed to enhancing research methods and working towards improving results from range of R2R funded research.

10. The RSTC has the opportunity to deliberate and provide expert advice on a more comprehensive approach for capturing and exchanging lessons learned, good practices and impact experiences from community and stakeholder level using the Most Significant Change technique and the Participatory Video technique. These techniques and their benefits were introduced to the committee and example videos shown, recognizing several high impact events showcasing the products generated through the various modes of collecting lessons learned in 2019 and several other periods in 2020 and 2021. These events showcased, amongst others, personal verbal story-telling advocacy of R2R work amongst community and stakeholders, premiere videos and stories, hold interactive workshops with managers and stakeholders, and present community level art and crafts associated with the programme.

11. The role of RSTC was relatively limited in guiding the establishment and operation of regionally appropriate results-based management and reporting systems, including monitoring of the effectiveness of management actions. The group contributions relate more to reviewing relevant documentations presented by RPCU staff. The reporting systems and templates were prepared to enable efficiency in harmonized data collection and monitoring of management actions. A harmonized and simple results reporting system (HRR) was developed and has served the project reporting well. This was an important undertaking realigning national activity of both R2R STAR and IW projects to the GEF Focal Area Objectives, the targets specified in the logframes for GEF Focal Areas, and identify what SDGs and SDG targets the projects would deliver against, and which conventions related to these targets. The HRR provides clear relationship and overlap between several global results reporting frameworks. Apparently the RPCU experienced the need for ongoing guidance and reminders in the course of implementing the project and its reporting requirements.

12. There was minimal experience observed and documented where RSTC plays a role to strengthen national and regional cooperation and coordination in the operation of the Pacific Ridge to Reef programme. That said, the RSTC members' level of engagement, sharing of experiences, contacts, key people and agencies previously worked often speed up efforts to cooperate and coordinate project work nationally and

regionally. Most of the members have their own extensive list of collaborators already in natural resource and ecosystem research and management projects and programmes.

13. The implementation of project science workplan is often faced with operational challenges beyond the control of the RPCU. There is very little the RSTC can do to assist addressing these challenges. The commitment and engagement of lead persons and consultants undertaking technical project work vary considerably. In most cases, COVID restrictions do not allow project staff and consultants to visit specific project sites and carry out field work. The alternative platforms to engage remotely and virtually are relatively useful and speed up work, but only if internet connectivity is strong.

14. Consequently, the RSTC had observed difficulties maintaining the international standards expected in the operation of the R2R project which includes the quality of science and rigor. In this vein, several technical reports are the result of reviews, consultations, interviews and other related desktop modalities. The majority of other technical reports follow the usual necessary requirements of field work employing standard methods and sampling designs. Another similar issue relates to the availability of adequate expertise and capacity in-country and therefore arrangements were done to secure expertise outside the countries in question. A concept of establishing a centralized hub of experts to support implement scientific and technical works of the project everywhere was floated but not implemented.

Conclusion

15. Overall, and given the circumstances, the RSTC had the opportunity to discharge its functions in the best way it can. Obviously, there is much more needed to be done and would have done differently if not more efficiently without the challenges outlined earlier. Nonetheless the RSTC did well adopting the alternative means of executing its ToR and support the project.

16. With the closure of the project and efforts to prepare a replacement R2R project, it is important for the RSTC supporting future project work that strengthen a science-based approach for the prioritization of catchment and coastal areas for integrated catchment and coastal management. The guidelines and technical reports supporting science-based approach have been developed, available and accessible online.

17. Moreover, the trialing work characterizing coastal areas and sites using the guidelines and strategic frameworks outline earlier would need to be continued. Technical people in country needs upskilling in the implementation of spatial prioritization procedures and modelling, including but not limited to:

- (i) compiling comparable information in agreed format, including sex-disaggregated data for socio-cultural characterizations,
- (ii) prepare final site characterizations for identified coastal areas for compilation into datasets, and using agreed procedures and modelling to identify priority locations, including implications for coastal and marine spatial planning, for R2R investments in PICs.
- (iii) use of remote-controlled drone were useful for taking aerial video and stills imagery. The diagnostic approach and analyses are useful means to the identification of required R2R reforms and interventions at priority locations.
- (iv) prepare diagnostic reports for priority catchment and coastal areas presented for approval by national Inter-Ministerial Committees and related authorities in-country.