Guidelines for Documenting "Processes" within Natural Resource Management

Natural resource management (NRM) projects and initiatives tend to produce unexpected, and sometimes unwanted, outcomes. As projects become established the ways in which project staff, resource management organisations (RMOs) and non-participating stakeholders interact will change as new relationships form. It is important that these changes are recorded in order to achieve a better understanding of appropriate (and inappropriate) practice and to ensure greater chances of success in the future. Process documentation (PD) is a tool that can help to track change and help explain NRM performance and outcomes.

"What are *Processes*?"

In the context of NRM initiatives, "processes" can be described as those activities and relationships that go on to produce NRM "outcomes". In this regard, processes encompass both those formal activities that projects intend to carry out and informal processes that represent the way things tend to be done on an everyday basis.

The range of activities to be undertaken and the formation of special bodies like RMOs are usually described in project literature and reports before any activities are started. These can be termed "formal processes". This set of activities and structures is obviously intended to result in beneficial NRM and livelihoods outcomes (Figure 1).

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"Integrated floodplain management – institutional environments and participatory methods" (R8195)

DFID Natural Resources Systems Programme

Formal processes	→	**Intended outcomes**
Agreement		Equity
Participation		Sustainable NRM
Regular dialogue		Sustainable livelihoods

Figure 1. Typical formal processes and intended outcomes.

However, projects and their interaction with primary and secondary stakeholders are complicated human systems. As projects become established, certain procedures and habits will start to evolve. Local people and staff may emphasise certain activities and approaches at the expense of others, for instance. Sometimes there may be marked differences in "*the ways of getting things done*" between sites within the same NRM project. These habits may be positive and creative or they may result in unexpected or undesirable impacts and outcomes such as local disputes, interference by wealthier entrepreneurs or inappropriate management or resource use. Often, local project activities have to be re-aligned in response to unforeseen obstacles such as problems with access to land or waterbodies or obstructive individuals, for instance. These can be termed "informal processes" (Figure 2).

Intended processes → *Informal (**actual**) processes* → ***Actual** outcomes*

Personal relationships
Different interpretations
Skill differences (staff & beneficiary)
Unforeseen obstacles & revised goals

Figure 2. Typical informal processes that shape actual outcomes.

In summary, there is a divergence between expected and *actual* processes and outcomes – or, as in the Bengali proverb:

"the cow is in the book – but not in the shed!".

Extending this thinking, it is obvious that both formal and informal processes operate at different scales. At the national level, formal and informal process will influence project performance in respect to relations with policy formers and at the regional or meso-level, processes will shape the type of interaction with important secondary stakeholders like local government organisations. Finally, at the local level, processes will influence project impacts on non-target groups and the type of relationship between project staff and target beneficiaries. This local level is particularly important to understand because it represents an interface between project dialogue and local action and activities by primary stakeholders. It is also the most complex and dynamic because the range of interests, stakeholders and the frequency of everyday interaction is so high. Specially-formulated RMOs such as resource management committees or resource user groups tend to represent an interface between external stakeholders and local stakeholders and interest groups (Figure 3).

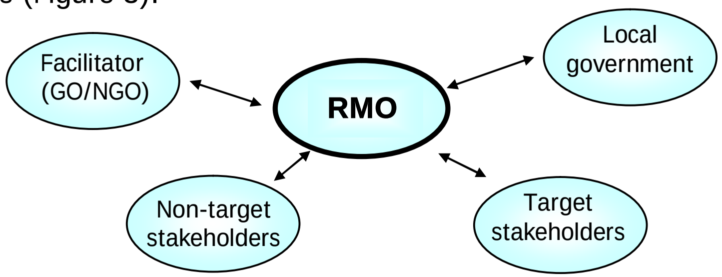

Figure 3. The RMO as the interface between external and local stakeholders and interests.

Process Documentation

Normally, only outcomes are monitored because these are both simpler to quantify and are of obvious interest to donors and government. A project may expend considerable time and finances determining changes in harvesting and household income in an attempt to evaluate project impact, for instance. However, it is also important to understand the *context* of NRM initiatives and to understand processes because they can help explain differences in project performance, identify early problems and capture local project knowledge and good practice. A thorough consideration of livelihoods aspects of NRM requires us to think about physical or visual impacts on non-target groups and also how these groups might be effected in more subtle ways relating to social capital or access to representation or influence.

Process documentation (PD) is a broad methodology that attempts to record this context and change.

Documenting processes and changes can:

1) Highlight problems before they worsen e.g.

- ✓ Reveal the background cause to local disputes
- ✓ Track differences in the practice of local staff and other stakeholders
- ✓ Highlight differences between RMO performance and local legitimacy
- ✓ Reveal externalities (hidden impacts on others)

2) *Highlight positive outcomes and best practice*

- ✓ Record the development of RMOs and activities that result in successes
- ✓ Enable development partners to share positive experiences and approaches
- ✓ Identify opportunities (supportive secondary stakeholders or new activities)

Anchoring process documentation

PD has been applied within two DFID projects relating to IFM – *Consensus Building for Management of Common Property Resources* (R7562) and the recently completed project *Institutional Environments for Integrated Floodplain Management* (R8195).

In order to interpret feedback derived through PD it is first necessary to identify criteria by which the NRM activity or initiative might be gauged. Normally this is done by selecting appropriate generic representations, or indicators, of good practice. In R7562, for instance, PD was applied to review processes within the Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) workshops and eight indicators for good practice in consensus building were identified from the literature. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were then designed to elicit responses relevant to these criteria. It was then possible to tally and discuss facilitator and participant feedback in relation to the attainment of “good practice”.

A similar approach to PD was adopted within R8195. Local processes were studied at a range of IFM initiatives and project staff, target and non-target groups were interviewed to reveal attitudes towards local activity and RMOs. In this case, however, the criteria to anchor the PD and discuss feedback were a combination of generic criteria for good institutional performance (transparency, equity, participation etc.) and community-identified criteria (honesty, regular decision-making, representative of poor etc.) identified via a survey. In many cases, these sets of criteria were found to overlap.

Once suitable indicators of success have been identified, an appropriate methodology must be developed, incorporating a realistic sampling strategy, field tools and lines of enquiry.

Engaging with the RMO and other stakeholders

PD can be applied as a one-off research-based activity or can be applied within ongoing projects and programmes, ideally as an integral part of overall project monitoring. In the former case, the researcher might devise interview formats or questionnaires based on lines of enquiry for each of the stakeholder groups with an interest in NRM. For instance, in relation to *transparency,* we might want to uncover how decisions and constitutional issues are relayed to participants and non-participants (for instance, “*what are the formal mechanisms for communication, how frequent is this, which stakeholders are informed, how has this changed over time?”).* PD within the two DFID projects was able to scrutinise local processes and procedure relatively closely and independently in this way.

If PD is to be part of an ongoing monitoring programme, it is important that simple indicators or proxies for change can be incorporated into staff reporting formats or diaries. In this case, it may be useful to record one-off incidents such as serious disputes, RMO interaction with UP members, *mathbor* etc (see Box 1 & Table 1 for suggested sampling frameworks for CBFM-2).

In both cases, the RMO may provide a central topic for discussion with respondents but it is important to gauge the impacts on, and opinions of, the surrounding stakeholders depicted in Figure 3.

Analysing and interpreting feedback

Because PD focuses on context and the quality of relationships, feedback tends to be qualitative and attitudinal in character. Although attitudinal feedback is of limited use in isolation (the informant may have imperfect knowledge or unreasonable expectations, for instance) it can provide a very useful gauge of project potential. However well or poorly-informed respondents may be, their perception of project activities, staff and outcomes are very real and will influence the level of support, local legitimacy and sustainability of project institutions and activities.

Feedback must be reviewed in relation to project objectives and, ideally, with an understanding of the interests and motives of the respondents. By treating all responses and opinions seriously, a better understanding of local realities (issues of concern or encouraging developments) can be achieved through triangulation.

The form of analysis required depends on the type of processes documented and so the type of information collected. Open-ended interviews produce a broad range of qualitative responses but it is possible to break these down into several key response types (responses relating to positive or negative relationships with other stakeholders, for instance). These types of responses can then be tallied to track any upward or downward trend over time. If suitable proxies for consensus or conflict have been applied it should be possible to track positive or negative change in relation to the frequency of incidents per month, for instance. Timelines can then be drawn up to represent any change in important positive (such as institutional linkage) and negative (such as disputes) processes.

Once again, PD feedback must be interpreted in relation to the objectives of the NRM initiative in question and with respect to opinion from a broad range of relevant stakeholders. In this sense, PD is useful tool for complementing case study reports that describe the evolution of activities, institutions and outcomes over time.

Key literature & useful sources

Davies, R. 2002. Improved Representations Of Change Processes: Improved Theories Of Change. Paper presented at the 5th Biennial Conference of the European Evaluation Society – "Three Movements in Contemporary Evaluation: Learning, Theory and Evidence". Seville, 2002.

Lewins, R. 2003. Process documentation within CBFM-2: report on the training module for project partners (Dhaka, 25-26th September 2003) and guidelines for future use. WorldFish Center, Dhaka.

Lewins, R., Alam, M. and Sultana, P. 2004. *Process documentation of IFM institutions.* DFID Project R8195, Final Technical Report: Annex B-ii.

http://www.iied.org/forestry/tools
A useful site for guidance on uncovering local dynamics and relationships, including checklists and examples.

http://www.mande.co.uk
A discussion group for monitoring and evaluation in development including news and topical papers.

It is possible to identify four basic nodes of activity which articulate with one another and which are comprised of distinct stakeholders with distinct functions. At the national level WorldFish Center and the Department of Fisheries act as coordinators and in turn interact with the partner NGOs at the interface level. Moving to the project site, we then find the resource management committees and finally the beneficiaries and non-target primary stakeholders. The formation and function of resource management committees is especially interesting because of its role as interface between project and community.

Performance criteria for PD and collection methods
Currently, most monitoring within CBFM-2 relates to the outcomes of technical activities (fish sanctuaries established, catch and gear information, for instance) and where institutional aspects of the project are monitored this tends to focus on quantifiable and easily reportable criteria (the number of resource management committees formed, date of formation and the number of members). Extra knowledge of processes surrounding these resource management committees, such as the level of satisfaction within groups, the level of understanding of group function and the "knock-on" effects of their formation would be very useful. It would identify any current problems, future needs and help design future activities and overall strategies.

As a co-management project with a focus on local level resource management institutions, collective action and empowerment of the poor, indicators or criteria for the evaluation of project performance should be compatible for those of good development practice in general (high levels of participation, transparency, equity in decision-making etc.). The choice of criteria will depend on the level to be analysed. At the national level, for instance, policy processes may be documented with respect to linkage with policy-formers over time (level of support, number of events or workshops) or the transfer of knowledge over life-span of the project.

Box 1. Potential Process Documentation within CBFM-2

The method of information collection depends on coverage, timing and logistics. Survey activities are already a central component of CBFM-2 and it may be preferable to identify key processes, key stakeholders and current record-keeping measures that can be adopted to focus on distinct issues. For instance, current diary keeping and special case study reports could be expanded to systematically capture this type of information (see Table 1 for suggested approaches).

Interpreting feedback – the importance of context
Each of the four project levels can provide useful feedback regarding project process that can be discussed with reference to the criteria developed for interview and questionnaire design. However, previous experience has demonstrated how important it is to review feedback in relation to project context and in context with other stakeholders' feedback (triangulation). It must be remembered that there are several forms of local management structure operating within CBFM-2 and it may also be necessary to discuss feedback in the context of local history (previous resource management conflicts, project interventions and NGO activity etc.).

PD within CBFM-2 should help build a contextual picture of project activities over time but it is important that in formalising a systematic approach to PD, important local context is not overlooked.

Source:
Lewins, R. 2003. Process documentation within CBFM-2: report on the training module for project partners (Dhaka, 25-26th September 2003) and guidelines for future use.

Box 1. (continued)

Formal Processes	Informal Processes	Evaluation Criteria	Stakeholder to Consult	PD Format & Frequency
RMC Formation	Staff / RMC / Community consensus/conflict	Degree of early RMC / Community support & enthusiasm	Staff & RMC members (& non-members)	Staff diary / once, post-formation
	Character of selection process	Representation of stakeholders e.g. - directed or participatory?		RMC minutes or diary / once, post-formation
RMC Management (meetings, plans, solvency etc.)	Intra-group & external consensus & conflict	Agreements reached & potential impact (SWOT analysis of plans?)	Staff & RMC members & non-members	Staff diary / monthly RMC records
	Perception & knowledge of plans by non-members	Public knowledge of plans	non-members	Staff diary / feedback from existing HH survey
	Character of decision-making process	Frequency & quality of meetings (attendance, voting)	Staff & RMC members	Staff notes of RMC records (minutes/diary)
	Other variations in internal management	Financial sustainability	RMC treasurer	Staff review of accounts (quarterly)
RMC Linkages (with CBFM partners, GOs etc.)	Character of relations with CBFM partners, GOs (consensus & conflict)	External NGO/GO support to RMC plans, RMC conflict with other institutions & frequency of links	Partner staff & RMC members	Staff notes & RMC records (minutes/diary) & RMC member feedback
	Role of GOs to RMCs & plans	Formal agreement (input / advisory?)	UP, Upazilla, UFO, DFO, Upazilla Jalmohal Committee	Staff notes & GO feedback

Table 1. Proposed approach to process documentation (CBFM-2).

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