prais

briefing

1. Process

Realising a paradigm shift in monitoring and assessment within the UNCCD

Summary

Both the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the scientific community have raised concerns about the inadequate evidence-base used for decision-making within the UNCCD. A particular concern has been the lack of quantitative evidence regarding its implementation. To address this, with a new monitoring and assessment (M&A) process was introduced during the first leg of the fourth Reporting and Review process in 2010. After the initial success of this system in using 'performance indicators' to report against the Operational Objectives of 2008-2018 UNCCD Strategic Plan and Framework in the 2010 reporting cycle, a set of identified 'impact indicators' will be used to report on the Strategic Objectives during the second leg of the fourth reporting cycle in 2012.

The Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) sought to develop reporting tools, to build the capacities of Parties in assessing the baseline and progress made using agreed performance indicators, and to establish a knowledge management system to inform and guide subsequent assessment of the implementation of UNCCD. PRAIS introduced the first ever online portal for a major MEA and any Rio Convention reporting processes, which once finalised, will offer major cost-saving opportunities over the long-term and a promising entry point for streamlined reporting by all the Rio Conventions. Future considerations for PRAIS include the addition of impact indicators, how best to provide capacity support to Parties, as well as the need to identify additional country-specific DLDD-related indicators.

The introduction of indicator-based reporting represents a major change in the Convention that will also impact at sub-regional and, in particular, national levels. In order to build on this initial success, the PRAIS project results suggest:

- Increased and continuous engagement with the scientific community;
- The functions of the national STCs be strengthened;
- The capacities and structures of the CST should be enhanced;
- Synergies between the three Rio Conventions should be enhanced and reporting processes harmonised; and
- Technology, data and information sharing should be encouraged

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Introduction

Despite the importance of the UNCCD to global sustainability and development, particularly in drylands, commitment to its implementation has been mixed since its entry-into-force in 1996 (Toulmin 2006; McDonagh & Lu 2007; ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5). This is primarily attributed to a lack of solid evidence from monitoring and assessment processes (ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5; Grainger 2009a&b)[1], with both the Parties to the Convention and the scientific community raising concerns about the inadequate evidence-base used for decision-making within the Convention (Bauer & Stringer 2008; ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5). In particular, national reporting process and the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) have only captured qualitative information on its implementation (ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5; Conliffe 2011), and poor engagement with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and local communities, and a lack of cross-country coordination, has led to inefficiencies in reporting systems (Adeel *et al*. 2006).

It is widely argued that Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) should plan and manage their activities based on a thorough evaluation of their past activities (Balmford *et al*. 2005; Davidson & Finlayson 2007; ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5). The other two Rio Conventions–the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)– began global Results Based Management (RBM)results-based management processes before the UNCCD adopted its 10-Year Strategic Plan and Framework in 2007. The UNCCD has seen comparatively little comprehensive assessment, although sub-global assessments of Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought (DLDD), while not necessarily intended to support the UNCCD, have contributed to its work. In recent years projects like the FAO's LADA, UNU-INWEH's KM:Land, DSD, WOCAT and e-DLDD (for details see Annex 1) have used impact indicators and/or strategic assessments to form a baseline for future comparison, demonstrate initial trends in DLDD and Convention implementation and assess the results of the Convention at a range of scales.

PRAIS Portal

PRAIS introduced the first ever online portal for a major MEA, which, once finalised, will offer major cost-saving opportunities and a promising entry point for streamlining reporting by all the Rio Conventions.

The online reporting facility (www.unccd-prais.com) was designed to allow National Focal Points and other authorised officers to submit information required for the 4th Reporting and Review process online. Its introduction proved largely successful; while internet availability had been a stated concern prior to implementation of the Portal, only 6 out of 194 Parties requested an offline alternative[2].

Performance limitations, such as slow internet speeds during busy periods, mean there is a need for the system to be upgraded and streamlined. In addition, a public interface is being added to help Parties and stakeholders fully realise the benefits of the system. A fully functioning analytical module, to enable wide dissemination and effective use of the new knowledge generated during the reporting process, is expected to launch at COP10.

The PRAIS monitoring and assessment framework

A new monitoring and assessment process, the Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS), was introduced in 2010 during the first leg of the 4th Reporting and Review process, to address the lack of quantitative evidence regarding the implementation of the UNCCD. PRAIS uses) a new monitoring and assessment process was introduced. It was based on a set of 'performance indicators' to, which measure progress against the Operational Objectives and led to the implementation of the 'Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System' (PRAIS). The PRAIS initiative is concerned entirely with the implementation of the Convention's 10-year Strategic Plan and Framework, and provides policy-driven information–such as financial flows and awareness-raising–which is commonly underrepresented in other initiatives. During the second leg of the 4th reporting cycle in 2012 it will additionally assess progress against the Strategic Objectives using a set of identified 'impact indicators'. By focusing on all of the country Parties, and specifically on the objectives of the UNCCD, PRAIS provides a more complete picture of the level of implementation of the Convention than previous initiatives, and a means to evaluate its progress.

[1] McDonagh & Lu (2007) looked for case studies of success in UNCCD implementation, using indicators with "empirical evidence to support claims of success, impacts that are self-sustaining once external support and benefits decrease, some evidence of spread or likelihood of spread of impacts, and impacts that benefit the whole or most of the community including the poorer households and individuals". Unfortunately rigorous studies that provide sufficient information to test for this type of success proved few in number.

[2] The offline alternative required no bandwidth to complete, but was still submitted via email. Furthermore, the UNCCD's normal mode of communication with Parties is email; therefore, almost without exception, UNCCD Parties are connected to the internet.

The PRAIS monitoring and assessment framework

PRAIS responds to a COP9 decision that called for the preparation of reporting tools for the fourth reporting cycle in 2010. The main purpose of PRAIS is to assist UNCCD country Parties to undertake monitoring by putting in place the capacity to roll-out this new approach. Implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and supported by GEF, the project (www.unccd.int/prais) focuses on:

(i) development of reporting tools;

(ii) building the capacities of affected Parties for the assessment of the baseline and performance using agreed performance indicators; and

(iii) establishment of a knowledge management system that will inform and guide subsequent assessment of the implementation of UNCCD.

PRAIS forms part of a wider movement to increase the use of rigorous monitoring and assessment systems by MEAs, thereby addressing criticisms about a general lack of a scientific evidence-base in MEAs. In particular, and in contrast to the assessments outlined in Annex 1, PRAIS relates directly to the Operational Objectives of the UNCCD and focuses on all country Parties. In this way, it begins to build a complete picture of the level of implementation of the Convention, and provides a means to evaluate success and failure

The 2010 Reporting Exercise: Challenges and Lessons Learned.

Despite some success, PRAIS is yet to provide the solid, global evidence-base demanded by the UNCCD, as a result of uneven capacity and implementation at the national level (Perez *et al*. 2011 a, b). This is expected to improve with future reporting cycles.

Reporting issues

The high level of variation between countries provides a serious challenge to the use of generic indicators, yet comparable indicators are crucial for gauging progress across countries and regions, and informing policy and management. Related, the ability to align UNCCD reporting indicators with those of NAPs and other national policies is vital in enabling UNCCD monitoring and adaptive management to be incorporated into national planning and implementation processes. Capacity-building on the mainstreaming of reporting and the addition of country-specific DLDD-related indicators should be considered in the future.

The timetables of the Convention and of national processes often conflicted, and Parties were often reluctant to undertake ongoing monitoring. Some Parties may review their successes and failures exclusively when completing reports for the UNCCD, at times omitting information sources altogether when not directly prompted by the template. As a result, it is recommended that UNCCD reporting is mainstreamed into national information management and monitoring systems. This will require national-level capacity building.

Financial resources are currently insufficient for comprehensive reporting at both the level of the Secretariat and national governments (ICCD/COP(8)/INF.5). For example country Parties received the equivalent of a maximum of US$4,000 per country for 2010 through the GEF Land Degradation Enabling Activities, despite estimates by the GEF that the cost of reporting and aligning NAPs at a national level in 2012/13 will be US$50,000 per country. Once in place however, monitoring and assessment systems should generally not be very expensive to maintain, and could form an integral part of normal operations, maintained by core government resources. Nonetheless, as the new impact indicators and NAP alignment were not considered in 2010, further resources to establish those elements are clearly needed from 2012 onwards.

A survey of Parties who had yet to submit their fourth National Reports in February 2011 carried out by the PRAIS Secretariat, suggests that issues relating to access to the Portal, coordination between ministries, changes in the National Focal Point, availability and accessibility of data, and time, were the main reasons for delayed submission, rather than the lack of capacity or financial resources. (Cvijetic 2011).

Synergies between Conventions

Cross-Convention policies and evidence-based action in relation to DLDD, biodiversity, climate change, ecosystem management and human well-being could be both cost- and resource-effective (Chasek *et al*. 2011), particularly at the national level, as many UNCCD Parties highlighted in the reporting process. Work in this area is already underway, including the GEF-funded project Integrated Reporting to Rio Conventions (FNR-Rio)[3], which is piloting national approaches to cross-Convention reporting.

It is recommended that existing synergies between the three Rio Conventions, such as the Joint Liaison Group, should be enhanced and reporting processes harmonised. Similarly, technology and data sharing should be developed at national and regional levels on issues that are common across two or more MEAs. Evidence from the FNR-Rio project shows that improved cooperation between national representatives to the different Rio Conventions minimises the obstacles to joint monitoring and assessment.

Engaging with science

Increased engagement with the scientific community would ensure the credibility of policies and strategies, including the selection of indicators and the methodologies for their measurement (Orr 2011; Reed *et al*. 2011). Despite some progress in this area, for example during the recent selection of impact indicators (Orr 2011), the first UNCCD Science Conference held at COP9 was considered to be too politically driven (UNCCD 2010). In the long-term, it may be most appropriate for scientific institutions to collect data which is subsequently validated by officials such as the Science and Technical Correspondents (STC). This would stimulate research and debate on the findings, and could enhance the relevance of the information collected.

The Committee on Science and Technology (CST) should receive the mandate and resources to work on the interface between national scientists and the country Parties. This would require its capacities and structures be strengthened, and it be positioned more centrally in the workings of the Convention. Tools and reports developed by emerging scientific initiatives, such as DesertNet International, should be incorporated. For example, a recent assessment by the Secretariat to gather input on 'Knowledge Needs' (UNCCD 2011) was undertaken soon after a similar process by DesertNet International and UNU-INWEH (Akhtar-Schuster *et al*. 2010), thereby resulting in the duplication of effort and irritation in the scientific community.

In the longer term, the roles and functions of the STCs and CST may prove to be too restricted by the political nature of their existing mandates. A 'polycentric pathway' (Ostrom 2009) with an independent science-policy interface may be a way forward (Adeel *et al*. 2009; Akhtar-Schuster *et al*. 2011; Reynolds *et al*. 2011; Winslow *et al*. 2011). This could build on existing initiatives by strengthening the links between scientific institutions and networks, validating the relevance of data for political decision-making, and providing scientific information to the policy level in an appropriate format.

[3] http://rioconventionsreporting.net/

Linking monitoring and assessment with scientific advice and turning the results into policy

Despite an historic suspicion of science within Convention bodies, and concern from some developing countries that it could be used to undermine development funding (Bauer & Stringer 2008), there is a recognised need for policy to be derived from scientifically validated evidence.

As a response, the COP established a Scientific Conference to provide scientific and technical support to the CST (Winslow *et al*. 2011). These conferences will assess knowledge on a specific theme, and translate the scientific findings for use by policy makers. The first was held in 2009, with the second planned for 2012. While considered a step in the right direction, the inclusion of the UNCCD First Scientific Conference in the official agenda of COP9 resulted in it being perceived as overly political (Bauer & Stringer 2008). Calls have been made for the Science Conferences to be detached from COPs and the focus on science to be strengthened. The second special session of the CST (Bonn, February 2011) recommended that future conferences be held biennially in the years between the COP and following the CRIC to ensure the participation of scientists and decision-makers (UNCCD 2010).

There are ongoing discussions within the scientific community on the need for a scientific multi-disciplinary dryland-specific observation system (Adeel *et al*. 2009; Akhtar-Schuster *et al*. 2011; Reynolds *et al*. 2011, Gilbert 2011), which would use standardised and scientifically valid methods to make cross-boundary comparisons. However, as Briggs & Knight (2011) point out, policy is formed through the intermingling of scientific knowledge, political judgment, and practical considerations, and the science-policy interface is turbulent, not linear, with scientific input playing only a small role. They also argue that scientists must understand this policy process and work with policy makers to reduce political risk, rather than simply providing scientific facts. On the other hand, scientific quality largely depends on independence. This may diminish if policy priorities influence research agenda (Akhtar-Schuster *et al*. 2011).

Policy makers from the local to global level need similar categories of desertification data, but the exact nature of these data, and the methods for its collection, differs greatly across the scales. Knowledge from all scales, including from local and indigenous peoples, validated in multiple ways must be eligible for inclusion, especially since DLDD is primarily experienced locally. This will entail what Hulme *et al*. (2011) describe as a move "beyond conventional scientific knowledge assessments that legitimise, almost exclusively, only peer-reviewed material".

A number of existing initiatives may provide, or support, such an infrastructure; these include: Group on Earth Observations Biodiversity Observation Network (GEO BON), Global Network of Dryland Research Institutes (GNDRI), the Working Group on Dryland Observation Systems under DesertNet International, and the emerging Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Additionally, Reed *et al*.'s (2011) proposed framework for indicator selection involves stakeholders at all levels, thus providing a channel for the input of local knowledge.

Parties to the UNCCD recognise the PRAIS process as a central tool under such an infrastructure (UNCCD 2011). PRAIS can already contribute early scientific feedback on the analytical framework (UNCCD 2011), but the process will become increasingly important for decision making at all levels on land issues once the impact indicators are incorporated. In addition, while it is currently completely within the auspices of the Convention, the information collected could be used within other processes, for instance, as part of synergistic efforts across MEAs. Equally, PRAIS could be improved through cooperation and synergies with these other processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In 2010, PRAIS began a paradigm shift in the monitoring and assessment of the Convention through the introduction of indicator-based reporting. This will also impact at sub-regional and, in particular, national levels.

The inclusion of impact indicators in the next iteration of PRAIS is an important step in the Convention's move towards scientific-based policy formation. This will coincide with increased NAP alignment and focus on the national level. The indicators used must be relevant at the national level, but prescriptiveness is not advisable in order to allow for the diversity of national situations and systems.

Recommendations

- Increased and continuous engagement with the scientific community will ensure the credibility of policies and strategies, including the selection and review of indicators.
- The functions of the national STCs should be strengthened to both improve national data collection and encourage interaction between the scientific and policy making communities. The role advising the National Focal PointPoint should be maintained and strengthened.
- The capacities and structures of the CST should be enhanced, and its position made more central to the workings of the Convention. An independent institution at the science-policy interface on land issues may be required in the long-term to work closely with a strengthened CST, other MEAs, and existing scientific institutions and networks at national and global levels.
- Existing synergies between the three Rio Conventions should be enhanced and reporting processes harmonised.
- Technology, data and information sharing should be encouraged. At a minimum, the UNCCD should make data widely available. To achieve this through the PRAIS Portal, its public interface on the Portal must be finalised, and the Secretariat should ensure that information is published in appropriate formats for different audiences.

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Annex 1: examples of sub-global assessments of DLDD

Name	Organisation(s)	Timeline	Summary
Land Degradation Assessment in Drylands project (LADA)[4]	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	2006–2010	A GEF-funded initiative which used a variety of technologies, from satellite images to digital databases and soil and vegetation sampling to assess DLDD in six test countries. It took into account both biophysical and socio-economic issues, working under the assumption that human activities on the land are the main driver for land degradation.
World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT)[5]	Centre for Development and Environment at the University of Bern, ISRIC-World Soil Information, and FAO.	Ongoing	A global network of specialists and a collation of methods on Sustainable Land Management (SLM), with publications of associated case studies.
KM:Land (Ensuring Impacts from Sustainable Land Management)[6]	United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU- INWEH)	2007–2010	A GEF-funded initiative with the aim of addressing knowledge management gaps by providing a scientific and technical basis for selecting indicators that demonstrate the benefits, impacts and best practices of SLM projects via an online Learning Network. It seeks to develop global and project-level indicators that demonstrate the impacts of actions to combat land degradation on the environment and people's livelihoods. It is also developing a framework for knowledge management and capacity building for SLM through the development of a KM:Land Learning Network. And it aims to define a process for establishing a monitoring and evaluation system that supports results-based management for SLM projects.
Dryland Science for Development (DSD) Consortium[7]	DesertNet International, International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), European Commission's Joint Research Centre Institute for Environment and Sustainability (JRC-IES) and UNU-INWEH	2008–2010	UNCCD selected the DSD Consortium to organise the first UNCCD Science Conference in 2009 to discuss ways to improve the global monitoring and assessment of dryland degradation in order to support decision-making on land and water management. Scientists involved in the DSD Consortium published their findings in three White Papers, as conference proceedings, and peer-reviewed papers in a special issue of the journal Land Degradation and Development.
Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (drylands chapter and desertification synthesis)[8]	Millennium Ecosystem Assessment	2001–2005	The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) was initiated after a call from the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to assess the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being and to produce a scientific basis for action needed to enhance conservation and sustainable land use. With input from over 1,360 experts worldwide, the five technical volumes and six synthesis reports produced a scientific appraisal of the condition and trends in the world's ecosystems and the services they provide.
Planned assessment			
The Economics of Desertification, Land Degradation, and Drought (e-DLDD)[9]	International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Center for Development Research (ZEF) of the University of Bonn, Germany	2011+	Published in response to a request from the Government of Germany and the UNCCD, this pilot report scoped the science on DLDD economics. It aimed to assess the analytical approaches to gathering knowledge on DLDD and to identify knowledge gaps. The discussion focuses on the causes and driving forces of DLDD; the effects of DLDD on land productivity, including changes in the provision of terrestrial ecosystem services; the social and economic costs of DLDD; and the costs and benefits of enhancing land productivity and (re-) establishing ecosystem services.

[4] http://www.fao.org/nr/lada/

[5] http://www.wocat.net/

[6] http://www.inweh.unu.edu/drylands/KMLand.htm

[7] http://dsd-consortium.jrc.ec.europa.eu/php/index.php?action=view&id=160

[8] http://www.maweb.org

[9] http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp01086.pdf

Project organization

The PRAIS project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and executed by the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in close cooperation with the UNCCD Secretariat and the Global Mechanism.

The project has worked in collaboration with 14 regional and sub-regional Reference Centres across the globe to deliver capacity building in indicator reporting through a 'training of trainers' approach.

Regional and sub-regional reference centres:

Learning Together, Working Together, For a Sustainable Future

More details at **www.unccd.int/prais**