

briefing

3. Lessons

Implementing a new monitoring and assessment system for the UNCCD: Lessons learned from the PRAIS Project

Summary

The introduction of indicator-based reporting has proved to be a successful new way forward for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which previously used qualitative measures of performance. The Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) relies on the quantitative measurement of a set of performance and impact indicators to determine progress against the operational and strategic objectives of the UNCCD 10-year Strategic Plan, and ultimately the performance of the Convention. A fundamental characteristic of the new PRAIS system is its in-built learning through the concept of an 'iterative process', which acknowledges the need to continuously refine and improve the set of indicators being measured and other reporting requirements based on the best scientific knowledge available at the time and lessons learned from the experience.

This briefing note reflects on lessons from the Global Environment Facility (GEF)-funded PRAIS Project, which was established to support the first iteration of reporting using PRAIS in 2010 and feed lessons into its iterative improvement. It is the third in a series of three notes on the PRAIS Project.

Introduction

The UNCCD Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) was introduced in 2010 during the first leg of the 4th Reporting and Review process. The system relies on the quantitative measurement of a set of performance and impact indicators to determine progress against the operational and strategic objectives of the 10-year Strategic Plan, and ultimately the performance of the UNCCD. Special attention is also placed on measuring the flow of investments for implementation of the UNCCD and the dissemination of best practice of Sustainable Land Management.

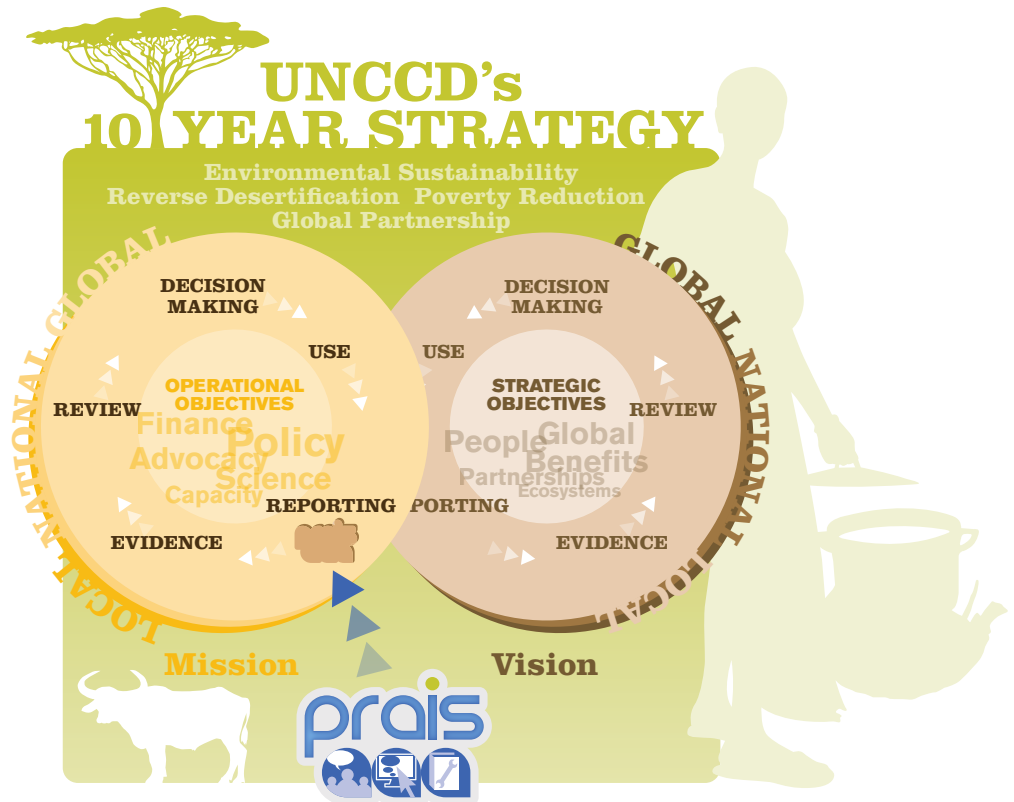
The introduction of indicator-based reporting is a new way forward for the UNCCD which previously used qualitative measures of performance. Country Parties, Convention institutions and their subsidiary bodies, have invested significantly in this process which is the start of a long journey to a more credible and science-based understanding of Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought (DLDD), and a more effective modality of implementation of the Convention.

A fundamental characteristic of the new PRAIS system is its in-built learning through the concept of an 'iterative process'. This acknowledges the need to continuously refine and improve the set of indicators being measured and other reporting requirements based on the best available scientific knowledge and lessons learned from experience. As a result, the PRAIS system is expected to become ever more fit-for-purpose, realistic and flexible. Such an extensive and continuous feedback process on a national reporting exercise is unique among Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). As such, it is a valuable process which is expected to contribute significantly to improving the reporting process.

Recommendations for improvement in 2012/3:

- Allow more time for the reporting exercise itself, and provide more financial, coordination and communication support
- Improve the alignment between UNCCD reporting at the global and national level processes
- Integrate reporting-related processes among the Rio Conventions
- Provide medium and long-term capacity building support to reporting Parties
- Improve the reporting templates: improve balance between quantitative and qualitative elements, refine some of the performance indicators, and streamline the financial sections
- Better align the 2010 reporting requirements with monitoring, assessment and reporting on the National Action Programmes (NAPs)
- Adopt a more consultative approach which is better aligned with national needs

PRAIS Project supported the first iteration of the PRAIS system



This work requires an unprecedented effort from the country Parties, but such efforts need both short and medium-term resources and capacity development, particularly in the field of monitoring, evaluation and data management. These needs were addressed by the UNCCD through the GEF-supported project *Enabling a Paradigm Shift on Monitoring and Assessment within the UNCCD* (the 'PRAIS Project'). The PRAIS Project was implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and executed by the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in close collaboration with the UNCCD Secretariat, the Global Mechanism, regional collaboration centres and Parties.

In this paper, we present a summary of the key lessons learned by the PRAIS Project stakeholders as they tested the new indicator-based reporting under the 4th Reporting and Review cycle of the UNCCD (2010). It is drawn from a detailed project report which complements relevant official documentation produced by the UNCCD Secretariat for the 10th Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the UNCCD¹. It is intended to inform further discussions among the country Parties and other UNCCD stakeholders².

The sources for this report include i) the National Reports, and more specifically the sections on additional information; ii) feedback provided by country Parties and other reporting entities throughout the reporting process, during CRIC 9 and the regional meetings held in parallel; iii) relevant UNCCD documents containing analysis of the 4th National Reports, namely the series of CRIC 9 documents on "synthesis and preliminary analysis of information submitted by the Parties"; iv) reports of the PRAIS training workshops and Final Reports on "Lessons learned, best practices and technical recommendations, including regional/national capacity needs aspects of the Reporting and Review process" prepared by Reference Centres as a part of the PRAIS project; and v) findings of the "Survey on challenges and constraints faced during the 2010 reporting and review process by country Parties that had not submitted their 4th national reports to the UNCCD by 25 February 2011" prepared as a part of the PRAIS project.

¹ See especially ICCD/CRIC(10)/11: Iterative process: refinement of the set of performance indicators and associated methodologies; and ICCD/CRIC(10)/14: Guidelines for the preliminary analysis of information contained in reports from Parties and other reporting entities

² It does not intend to pre-empt additional detailed feedback on the reporting process by the various country Parties and other stakeholders.

General Lessons Learned on the UNCCD Reporting and Review process

The new PRAIS process of the UNCCD was generally well-received by the country Parties who found the methodology to be a major step towards improving evidence-based decision-making within the UNCCD. As a result, they confirmed their strong commitment to the full implementation of PRAIS, including the introduction of the impact indicators from 2012. Importantly, many country Parties highlighted that the new framework is useful, not only for monitoring the Convention, but also for national planning purposes. Country Parties have called for an in-depth analysis of all the information that PRAIS generates and for a process through which this new knowledge can be fed back to them so that they can use it to more effectively implement the Convention.

Furthermore, the experience with the 2010 reporting process demonstrates that the full benefits of the new system are still to be realised and that this will largely depend on both improving the system itself and on the ability of the UNCCD and its stakeholders to effectively use the information it generates for policy making and communication.

The new reporting requirements

Overall, while there is clear support for the new, quantitative approach to reporting, country Parties and other stakeholders called for:

- Improved balance between quantitative and qualitative elements of the reporting template;
- Better alignment of the 2010 reporting requirements with monitoring, assessment and reporting on the National Action Programmes (NAPs);
- Refinement of some of the performance indicators in order to make them more e-SMART³, and of their related guidance note to ensure clear understanding of terms and requirements;
- Streamlining of the financial sections; and
- Simplification of the template for collection of best practice on SLM, including adaptation.

The reporting templates and guidelines (and the associated training materials) were regarded as relevant and useful, but the Parties felt that they would have benefited from a more comprehensive glossary and additional tools to help with data collection at the national level. Both the experience with the 2010 reporting process and the above requests from the Parties demonstrate that the development of the reporting tools would benefit from a more consultative approach and better alignment with national needs.

The online reporting tool

The introduction of the online reporting system—the PRAIS Portal—was largely successful; only 6 of 193 country Parties had to resort to submitting their report using an offline format. While a number of issues were reported by users of the PRAIS Portal, an in-depth analysis shows that many of the problems experienced were caused by the fact that the system was being developed and tested during the actual reporting period (due to time constraints). In fact, issues tended to be more frequent and serious during the early stages of the reporting period, and became less and less common as the system developed and stabilised. Therefore, the solid platform that was created in 2010 will allow the process to go much more smoothly when the Portal is re-opened for the next round of reporting in 2012. However, it will be imperative that any upgraded elements of the PRAIS Portal are developed and tested well before the launching of the reporting exercise.

³ See ICCD/CRIC(8)/5/Add.1.



Figure – In terms of its page layout, the structure of the PRAIS Portal received mixed reviews. Investment into user-friendly design should be considered in the future.

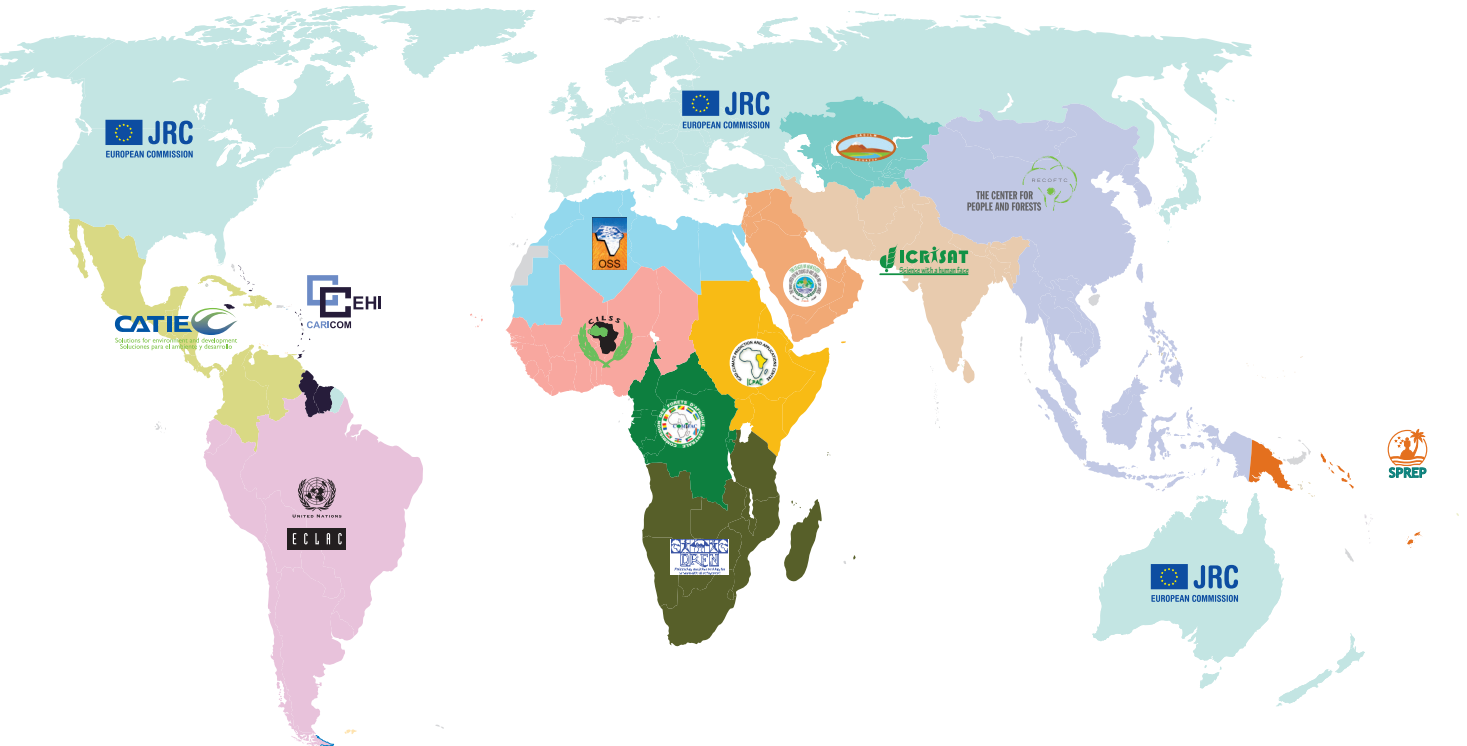
Another set of concerns raised by many countries was related to the performance of the system, in particular, its slow speed during high traffic periods. This issue will also need to be addressed during further development of the system in order to make the PRAIS Portal more user-friendly and efficient. This will entail upgrading the IT infrastructure accessed by the UNCCD Secretariat and streamlining the design of the website.

In order to realise its potential, the PRAIS Portal not only needs to include a fully functioning analytical and reporting module, but needs to have a fully-fledged public area where the new knowledge generated during the reporting process can be widely communicated. Plans to this effect are currently underway.

Capacity building approach of the project

The capacity building approach of the PRAIS Project provided Parties with access to regional and sub-regional partners - called Reference Centres (RCs) – who, in cooperation with the Secretariat, the GM and UNEP-WCMC, offered training, and continuous technical assistance via a 'Helpdesk' function. Overall, the capacity building strategy of the project has been successful, demonstrated by the results of the reporting process - over 130 reports received by September 2011, about 90 of which were on-time. The regional approach piloted by the PRAIS Project has been well-received and should be considered in any follow-up project as it has promoted cooperation and built peer support networks within the regions and across them. In particular, the Training of Trainers approach has been effective in building a global network of regional teams that worked closely with the Secretariat and the GM during the 2010 reporting process in order to serve the country Parties in their respective regions and pass on knowledge to the national level. Adequate financial resources need to be mobilized to guarantee similar or possibly increased level of support during the 2012 reporting exercise.

Figure – All country Parties to the UNCCD were able to access support from a Reference Centre and dedicated Helpdesk



However, it is clear that the experience of working with the RCs was different in each region and sub-region. The capacity of the RCs to provide technical support during the reporting process was influenced by factors such as not having a clear mandate to support the implementation of the UNCCD, previous experience with reporting processes, being unable to link support for reporting with current regional processes and activities, and the cost-effectiveness of the support itself. Although a consultation helped to select the RCs for the PRAIS Project, it is clear that a wider and closer consultation regarding the selection of regional partners will be required to make the RCs' involvement more effective. Similarly, as requested by many Parties—and provided additional financial resources could be made available in the next reporting cycle—the role of the RCs could be broadened by including specific activities at the national level (facilitation, support missions, etc.) and by expanding the opportunities for regional/sub-regional interaction (for example, an additional PRAIS workshop mid-term to share experience and solve problems together).

National-level issues

National-level issues had a significant impact on the reporting process and included: differing or complex national processes for consultation on, validation of, and submission of the report; coordination mechanisms; data availability and accessibility; information management and monitoring systems; integration and harmonisation across the Rio Conventions; and linkages to NAPs and other relevant planning documents. Among other things, time and financial constraints had some impact with regards to national processes for submission of the report, with a few countries missing the official deadline due to national protocols requiring different levels of approval.

Other major challenges to the reporting process were represented by dispersed responsibilities on DLDD and a lack of coordination at the national level; difficulties in accessing and sharing data, particularly on sensitive information such as financial flows; difficulties in convening all relevant stakeholders; and multiple demands and reporting requirements from different MEAs. In this respect, one of the most important lessons learned from the PRAIS Project is that coordination mechanisms, such as the UNCCD National Coordinating Bodies, play a fundamental role in the success of the reporting process. Reporting is a national undertaking which requires many different stakeholders to pull together; therefore, a suitable forum where national stakeholders share responsibility for implementing the UNCCD is the natural space to facilitate reporting. In a number of cases, the reporting exercise contributed to reviving such bodies, while in the vast majority of cases, the Parties resorted to other existing mechanisms or ad-hoc committees/task forces.

While cooperation at the national level was generally good, most national focal points (NFPs) reported that data collection was the most challenging task, particularly in terms of data availability. This is not surprising as this is the first time Parties have been asked to report on detailed indicators as part of the UNCCD. To ensure that the next reporting period runs smoothly, it is important that all country Parties are informed as soon as possible about what information they need to collect, both in terms of additional requirements (i.e. impact indicators, best practices on financing) and revision of the 2010 requirements, and helped to adapt/establish their national monitoring systems to make the reporting happen.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the lessons learned by the PRAIS Project, a number of recommendations are listed below which would strengthen the PRAIS system and the reporting process

a. Provide more time for reporting

A more realistic timeframe for the reporting process and the related enabling and capacity building activities should be a major consideration for the 2012/3 reporting process. A process open for no less than six months would provide adequate time to familiarise with the templates, consult at national level, verify and validate reports prior to submission. The official launching of the reporting process should however be preceded by the delivery of the training and full testing of the expanded/ revised PRAIS portal. Furthermore, it is important that national processes initiate early on during the reporting period to ensure adequate time available.

b. Provide adequate resources

The availability of adequate financial resources to Parties is crucial for the success of reporting under the PRAIS framework, particularly in the establishment phase. In order to enable country Parties to meet the demands of the new system, efforts need to be made by all UNCCD stakeholders to provide sufficient resources initially, and then to a lesser degree in the medium- and long-term maintenance of the system. This will need to include resources for national-level activities, as well as funding for the necessary global and regional technical assistance.

c. Improve communication

Improved communication and coordination of the reporting process is required in order to make the exercise even more efficient at all levels. A more streamlined Helpdesk service, as well as a more proactive role for the NFPs and the cooperation of stakeholders, will help to avoid communication problems.

d. Improve and widen consultation with stakeholders

Increased consultation with, and participation of UNCCD stakeholders during all phases of the reporting process is fundamental to ensure a better quality and ownership of the reporting process, particularly at the national level. This means stakeholders being involved in everything from the development of the reporting templates to the compilation and submission of the final reports. This inclusive way of working will need sufficient time and resources to be effective.

e. Continue to learn from the process

The refinement of the PRAIS system on the basis of best scientific knowledge available and lessons learned from experience is crucial to make the reporting and review process more fit-for-purpose, realistic and flexible. The 2010 experience has already provided the UNCCD with valuable feedback which enables the UNCCD Secretariat to make huge improvements to the process (such as simplifying reporting requirements, streamlining the format, etc) ready for the 2012 reporting cycle.

f. Collect more solid and rigorous data

While certainly representing a major step forward, the 2010 experience of indicator-based reporting has shown a number of limitations in terms of data availability and collation that need to be resolved in order to obtain more solid and rigorous data that can be unequivocally compared across countries. Protocols for quality checks, and validation and interpretation of the data need to be developed. The UNCCD Secretariat and the GM also need to find the resources to undertake analysis of data.

g. Further develop the PRAIS Portal

The PRAIS Portal is an effective tool, but needs to be upgraded and streamlined through subsequent reporting cycles. In order for the country Parties to fully realise the benefits of the system, the Portal also has to be completed as planned with the development of analytical tools and a public area. The advantages of the new system are clear to the Parties and outweigh the inevitable 'teething problems' that come with any new technology. Yet, the complexities of managing and maintaining the platform should not be underestimated, particularly in terms of resources.

h. Improve integration of reporting for different conventions

Country Parties frequently ask that reporting among Rio Conventions and other MEAs is better integrated and harmonised. The long-term monitoring framework represented by PRAIS, with its quantitative and online reporting systems, represents a start towards easier sharing of environmental information and potential integration. However, such efforts are still impaired by widely differing reporting requirements under the conventions, limited coordination of planning and activities, and a lack of integrated technology.

i. Support countries with data management

Continued national-level capacity building on monitoring systems and managing data is required to strengthen and refine assessment within the UNCCD. This should particularly focus on the establishment of integrated and adequate databases, environmental information systems, data-sharing protocols and mechanisms.

j. Continue to work at a regional level

The regional approach piloted by the PRAIS Project has already built cooperation in and among regions and should be used for any follow-up project. The RCs have proved to be effective partners for supporting the implementation of the Convention at the regional and sub-regional level. The UNCCD may wish to consider their involvement in supporting the 2012 reporting process, particularly considering the introduction of the impact indicators in the next cycle. As suggested by several Parties, this may include an expanded role with increased support at the national level.

k. Make resources available for capacity building

Regional and national-level capacity building is an expensive process and sufficient resources are needed to support it. The partnership with the GEF and other donors should be expanded into a structured, long-term capacity building engagement for the implementation of the UNCCD.

l. Continue training events, and make them even better

The training events delivered under the PRAIS Project have been a useful tool for sharing knowledge on the new reporting system, supporting the preparation of the reports, and establishing regional and sub-regional 'communities of practice' which have a common understanding of requirements, and of roles and responsibilities. Nonetheless, improved delivery of PRAIS training could be ensured through: a) better planning and timetabling; b) more active involvement of countries in the preparation and delivery of the training; c) advance testing of reporting materials, as well as of the PRAIS Portal, so that problems are identified and addressed at an early stage; d) development of additional tools for data collection; e) development of guidelines on best practices with regards to involving stakeholders and potential fundraising; and e) inclusion in the training programme of sessions on planning NAP monitoring and tackling strategic issues regarding the implementation of the UNCCD at the global, regional and national level.

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:



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