

Information Note

Key Lessons from Nepal Mid Term Reviews

*Prayer flags, Kathmandu,
Credit: Simon Mercer*

Key Lessons

Darwin Mid Term Reviews (MTRs) are carried out on around 10% of Darwin projects each year. MTRs are formative evaluations intended to provide an independent assessment of project progress against its aims. They also offer an opportunity to capture and share key lessons of value to other Darwin projects, and to provide targeted support where required.

In 2016 MTR visits were conducted on two Darwin projects in Nepal:

- Project 22-009 - **Securing Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve's grasslands and wellbeing of local communities**
- Project 22-018 - **Mainstreaming biodiversity and ecosystem services into community forestry in Nepal**

This Information Note documents key lessons of relevance to the wider Darwin community, from these evaluations.

The Darwin Initiative supports developing countries to conserve biodiversity and reduce poverty. Funded by the UK Government, the Darwin Initiative provides grants for projects working in developing countries and UK Overseas Territories (OTs).

Projects support:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS)
- the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)
- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

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*Suklaphanta dairy cooperative,
Credit: Simon Mercer*

The Projects

Project 22-009 led by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) is focused in and around the Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (SWR), the most westerly of Nepal's protected areas. SWR, designated a National Park in December 2016, encompasses the largest area of continuous grassland in Nepal and is home to a wide range of significant and endangered species.

Overgrazing in SWR is resulting in the rapid decline of grassland habitat and poses a significant threat to a range of key species protected by the reserve. At the same time, the livelihoods of local communities are heavily dependent upon the natural resources the park provides.

This project aims to address this significant conservation challenge, protecting the fragile grassland ecosystem and wildlife of SWR whilst supporting the livelihoods of buffer zone communities and improving their wellbeing.

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Community forestry (CF) has a long and successful history in Nepal as a means of achieving both conservation and livelihoods benefits. Project 22-018 is working to ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem service values are fully integrated into national CF guidance, to assist the Government of Nepal in reaching its ambitious target of ensuring that all community managed forests include a biodiversity chapter in their operational plans by 2020.

The project has a strong focus at the policy level, is working to produce a supplementary annex to the CF guidelines, and is providing associated training to forestry professionals. At the community level it is piloting conservation, ecosystem service and livelihood interventions in 14 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), and working to build community capacity to integrate biodiversity conservation into CF management. In doing so it is creating an enabling environment for poverty alleviation and enhanced resilience.



*Young cattle,
Credit: Simon Mercer*



*Biodiversity survey planning,
Credit: Simon Mercer*

The Mid Term Reviews

The aims of the MTRs were to:

- i. Review project progress against its stated objectives
- ii. Ensure that project activities are being delivered efficiently and effectively
- iii. Where appropriate influence the project's design as it is rolled out
- iv. Comment on the contribution the project is making to the programme's objectives
- v. Identify any learning points

Multiple methods were used to gather and triangulate evidence, informed by the OECD DAC criteria for evaluating development assistance. Methods focused on gathering data on the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of the project, as well as its contribution to the programme level objectives of the Darwin Initiative.

Project 22-009 was shown to be progressing well. The project is highly relevant to the local context, whilst making a clear contribution to the achievement of national and international conservation priorities. Project design and implementation have benefitted from the inputs of multiple stakeholders, drawing on longstanding engagement between project partners. Robust project management structures have facilitated this process. In

addition, the clear gender focus of the project's wellbeing interventions provides an excellent illustration of the importance of gender considerations in Darwin projects.

Despite some concerns raised in its first Annual Report Review, project 22-018 was also found to be performing well. Clear articulation of project effectiveness in annual reporting had been hindered by limitations in the project logframe. The project has forged strong partnerships with key government and civil society stakeholders all of whom are strongly engaged, and the project is highly relevant to the Nepali context, assisting the Government to meet key Aichi targets. Implementation efficiency has been built upon simple, effective project management procedures and the 14 pilot sites selected by the project for community level interventions have been identified on the basis of the presence of previous and ongoing interventions by project partners, further enhancing efficiency.

Both projects provide a clear illustration of how individual Darwin interventions contribute to programme level objectives. Over the longer term these project interventions stand to make an important contribution to arresting rates of biodiversity loss in Nepal, whilst reducing the role of poverty as a driver of biodiversity loss and contributing to improved national capacity for conservation.



Fodder collection,
Credit: Simon Mercer

Key Lessons

Through analysis of data gathered during the MTRs, a number of shared lessons have emerged.

Robust M&E frameworks provide a strong foundation for project success. Establishing a clear plan for monitoring and evaluation before implementation begins, enables a project to effectively monitor progress and demonstrate this in annual reporting. For project 22-018, the original logframe lacked SMART indicators at the output and outcome levels, limiting the ability of the project to demonstrate progress over its first year of implementation.

Weak logframes and poorly defined indicators lacking interim targets, hinder adaptive management, and clear articulation of project progress and effectiveness in annual reporting. Resources to assist project with **creating an M&E plan, logframe preparation**, and defining **SMART indicators**, can be found on the Darwin website.

There is value in building upon existing relationships and longstanding engagement with project partners.

This has relevance for all stages of the project cycle. Bringing trusted partners on board early enables them to feed in to project design and can help ensure stakeholder buy in and relevance to national priorities and the needs of beneficiaries. Success for project 22-018, for example, is dependent on successful collaboration with Government stakeholders. Fostering engagement with key Government departments from the first stages of project design has helped secure the relevance of the project's aims.

For project 22-009, engaging with beneficiaries during project formulation and design has ensured the relevance of project activities to local context and need, and has helped to secure buy in from key local stakeholders. Involving beneficiary representatives in the project management unit and local decision making



*Trishakti dairy cooperative,
Credit: Simon Mercer*

processes has further cemented support for the project. Engaging government stakeholders in delivery has also had benefits for project sustainability. Engaging the Government Livestock Department in the delivery of vet services has led to Government of Nepal commitment to take on responsibility for their continued funding, and ongoing operation and management.

Scoping Awards

For those organisations new to the Darwin Initiative, that do not have the advantage of longstanding engagement or existing networks within a proposed project area, **Scoping Awards** are available. These competitive awards provide limited funding to develop a workable project idea and build partnerships with key focal country organisations.

Clear consideration of gender issues can be a positive route to improved wellbeing. Particularly noteworthy poverty impacts for project 22-009, stem from its focus on the establishment of women-led dairy cooperatives. Darwin projects often struggle to fully engage with gender issues, however the MTR identified significant impacts for women beneficiaries from these interventions. Members of the cooperative are already experiencing livelihoods benefits, and associated training and support provided by the project has helped to reduce pressure on the reserve's grasslands.

Additional indirect wellbeing benefits widely reported include improved safety and security, and wider empowerment benefits.

Engaging with wider stakeholders can enhance value for money and extend project impact.

Both projects visited during the MTR were actively pursuing wider partnerships. For project 22-009, developing links to non-Darwin projects working in the same geographical area has enhanced effectiveness and value for money. Establishing formal links to complementary conservation organisations has facilitated inter-project learning, and built a critical mass of support for conservation around the wildlife reserve.

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Similarly, the efficiency of project 22-018 to deliver its outputs is enhanced through engagement with interventions funded by other donors. Developing links to these projects, that address complementary yet distinct issues, has enabled the project to extend the reach of its activities, and to benefit from existing infrastructure and relationships with beneficiary communities.



*Project beneficiary, Suklaphanta,
Credit: Simon Mercer*

Key lessons for project design

Build on experience of previous interventions to inform project design

A key component of the ZSL project involved establishing new vet centres. This intervention built on experience gained through the successful establishment of four veterinary clinics in the buffer zone of a National Park between 1998 and 2001, using broadly the same approach employed in this project.

Establish relationships with key stakeholders early

Engaging key partners during project design can have a positive impact on project relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Early engagement with project beneficiaries helps to ensure the appropriateness of project design to local context and need.

Ensure robust M&E frameworks are in place before work begins

Doing so enables a project to effectively monitor progress from the start, is a cornerstone of adaptive management approaches, and helps to facilitate effective annual reporting.

Address gender considerations in project design as an effective means of improving wellbeing

Substantive engagement with gender issues can have direct livelihoods benefits for traditionally marginalised groups, as well as indirect capacity building and empowerment impacts.