



The Common Country Programming Process

Lessons from Bhutan

January 2008

1. Background

Being one of the first countries to go through a common country programming process involving also a common cCPAP, the UN country team (UNCT) in Bhutan sees the need to document the lessons learned during this process.

This paper is an attempt to capture challenges and lessons learned from the common country programming process. It looks at the process; the benefits of a common plan, what worked well and what could have been done better, as well as provides suggestions for improvements.

2. Common Country Programming

The common country programming process started in January 2006 with the formulation of the Common Country Assessment (CCA). The CCA provides a shared analytical perspective of the UN system on the development situation in Bhutan and serves as a basis for preparation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). The CCA was finalised in August 2006.

The formulation of the CCA was done mainly by the UN agencies but in agreement with the RGoB, whereas the UNDAF which is more of a planning tool was formulated in a highly consultative manner with participation of resident as well as non-resident UN agencies, counterparts from the RGoB and other national and international stakeholders. This included several consultative workshops, meetings, as well as five thematic working groups set up with representative from UN agencies, RGoB

line ministries, RGoB coordinating bodies and other stakeholders.

In line with the UN reform and the emphasis on UN agencies to deliver as one at the country level, the UNCT decided to formulate a Common Country Programme Action Plan (cCPAP) open to all UNDAF signatories as well as other interested agencies.

As an operationalization of the UNDAF, the cCPAP was formulated during August – December 2007 based on the key components of the UNDAF and on the Country Programme Documents (CPDs) of the individual UN agencies prepared during the first half of 2007.

As the cCPAP is more on a operational level it specifies the development challenges, and expected results, budget, implementation strategies, management responsibilities, and commitments of the Government, the ExCom Agencies and the participating agencies, and is a legally binding document for the ExCom agencies. The UNDAF was formulated in a highly participatory and consultative manner and with strong commitment from the RGoB. This continued during the cCPAP formulation process mainly spearheaded by the Excom agencies.

In December 2007, the cCPAP encompassing the planned results of 14 UN agencies (resident & non-resident) was signed between the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and the UN agencies.

The 14 agencies involved in the cCPAP are the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and World Food Programme (WFP) as the four ExCom Agencies, as well as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Volunteers (UNV), all referred to in the cCPAP as the Participating Agencies.

2.1. Why a Common Plan

The overall goal of not only a common UNDAF but also a common CPAP is to maximize the contributions of the participating UN agencies by enhancing coherence, coordination and programmatic synergies to build a prosperous, equitable and democratic Bhutan.

Working together based on common programming and planning tools developed through the UNDAF and cCPAP will lead to a better development product for the RGoB by having agencies combining resources and expertise. Having one plan prepared in participation with all stakeholders reduces risk of duplication and poor coordination, and increases efficiency. At the same time it reduces requirements of agency specific planning documents.

To implement the cCPAP, common annual work plans are being developed for all joint programmes. Also, common progress reports, joint monitoring and evaluation including reviews are being introduced. All in all, this will make implementation easier, reduce transaction costs, result in less meetings and hence ease the work load and save time and cost for all UN agencies and implementing partners involved.

To implement the one plan strategy and further embark on delivering as one UN, in 2007 the UN agencies embarked on the Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfer (HACT) developed to decrease transaction costs for partners and UN by reducing, simplifying and standardising procedures, by promoting the use of national systems as a way to strengthen the self-reliance of countries managing their development, and by focussing more on building sustainable national capacity.

2.2. Joint Initiatives

The positive impact of joint initiatives with involvement of more UN agencies complementing each others fields of expertise has become already evident through some recent joint initiatives. Some examples are:

- The project on “promotion of culture based creative industry for poverty reduction and community revitalization” supported by UNESCO, UNIDO and UNDP. Having expertise from three different agencies with each their specialization, UN has been able to assist the RGoB in a holistic and comprehensive manner with more impact than if only one agency would have been involved.
- The Bhutan MDG Needs Assessment and Costing exercise carried out in 2007 is a collaboration between the RGoB and UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA. The exercise was carried out to help make the 10th Five Year Plan MDG based. The three UN agencies complemented each other in bringing in technical expertise and participated as co-chairs of the eight working groups set up.
- Joint support to the Bhutan Living Standard Survey 2007 and the Poverty Assessment Report from a joint technical team from UN comprising UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP and FAO. The team was involved in reviewing draft questionnaires and the draft reports.

- Solution Exchange – an e-mail based knowledge network for exchange of knowledge and solution between development practitioners working on issue pertaining to Bhutan. Set up as a UNCT initiative.

3. Lessons from the Common Programming Process

Although a common UNDAF had been produced before, this was the first time it was formulated in a highly participatory and consultative manner and with a clear aim of serving as a common plan to be implemented in a joint manner.

It was also the first time UN agencies embarked on a common CPAP. Of the 14 agencies participating only 5 are resident agencies, and it is the first time that non-resident UN agencies have entered into a joint cooperation framework in Bhutan rather than assisting in the form of individual (often ad-hoc) projects.

More than anything it was a learning experience for all involved agencies and individuals as it was the first time for all to embark on such a comprehensive process.

Involving so many stakeholders, the process is set to be long and lots of issues to arise. Although some things cannot be changed, some can and with this in mind below is an attempt to share with the reader some of the lessons learned – looking at what worked well, what could have worked better, and ideas for improvements. The following is five examples of what worked well, followed by four examples of what could have worked better:

3.1. Wide Consultations

Bringing together a large number of UN agencies, relevant RGoB counterparts and other stakeholder through a highly consultative approach in formulation of the UNDAF worked very well and led to a strong national commitment and ownership of the UNDAF which is seen as one of the main strengths of the document.

Another success is the partnership of 14 UN agencies of which 9 are non-resident agencies. Bringing all into the process worked out very well especially because there was intense coordination and follow-up from the UN Resident Coordination Unit in Bhutan coupled with a strong commitment and leadership by the ExCom agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and WFP).

3.2. Using MDGs as a Guiding Principle

Fitting different agencies mandates into one common plan is a big challenge which implied lots of negotiations, flexibility and leverage from all parts. However, using the MDGs as a guiding principle helped agree on common themes in the CCA and UNDAF, and it fostered support from the Government having already adopted the MDGs in its own national development priorities.¹

3.3. Thematic Working Group Arrangement

In general the thematic working group arrangements for UNDAF worked well with regard to enhancing ownership and coordination. In each working group there was representation from relevant UN agencies, government counterparts and other stakeholders. The approach of thematic groups together with other workshops and meetings opened up for a more dynamic development dialogue than had previously been the case between UN agencies and the Government and other development partners in Bhutan.

3.4. Parallel Programming

The programming of UNDAF and cCPAP coincided with the national planning process (formulation of the 10th Five Year Plan) which led to some confusion as the prioritization and programming could not be based on a holistic national plan. However,

¹ The order of UNDAF chapters do not follow the order of the MDG. Following the order of the MDGs through all the documents would foster consistency and make MDG related monitoring and reporting easier.

most details of intervention areas were known, given the fact that representatives from the various line ministries took part in the formulation of the UNDAF. But, most importantly, the parallel programming processes with quite a lot of stakeholder involved in both at the same time led to interesting discussions with impact on both plans leading to cross fertilization between the two processes.

3.5. Enhanced Cross-Agency Understanding and Coordination

Despite the long and intensive programming process most participants agree that the process has been very useful in building up relations and common understanding as a platform for knowledge sharing and much closer working relations both among the UN agencies but also between the UN agencies and the RGoB and all other stakeholders.

As an example, some resident UN agencies have reported much closer working relations with some non-resident UN agencies as a result of common meetings. All in all this will lead to better coordination and effective implementation of the planned programmes and lead to reduced transaction costs.

3.6. Overlapping Programming Tools

The UN has a standardized country programme planning process: CCA-UNDAF-CPD-CPAP-AWP. The planning practice in Bhutan proved that there is an overlap between UNDAF, CPD and CPAP, all three being five year tools. While the CPD is an individual agency document required to establish budget envelopes and agency accountability to the respective Executive Boards, the UNDAF and CPAP are both frameworks of cooperation with the Government.

While some were of the opinion that agency specific CPDs should be done away with or minimized, others argued that CPD would serve a better purpose if preceding the UNDAF and the UNDAF and cCPAP merged into one document.

A more in-depth analysis of the pros and cons of the various suggestions, including

also lessons from other countries, would be useful.

3.7. Difficulties to fit all – different procedures, cultures and mandates

Combining country programming of different UN agencies working in often very different ways and with different organisational cultures into one common process and document turned out to be a big challenge. It involved issues such as:

- How to include in-kind contributions?
- How to reflect specific agencies large logistical operations?
- How to include agencies represented by others at country level into the process?
- How to include agencies with a cross-thematic approach?
- How to ensure attention to agencies with a special focus area not set as a priority themes? And,
- How to include agencies working on an ad-hoc project basis having no committed annual resources to plan with?

Fitting all these and many more concerns/issues into a common plan, taking into account also issues from the RGoB and other stakeholders was a huge challenge, but worked out quite well at the end, mainly due to the flexibility in the programming process, the strong commitment of the agencies involved and the good working relations between the involved agencies. However, it would have been useful to map out some of the issue foreseen before approaching on the actual programming, and try to deal with the issues up front before they grew into actual problems.

3.8. Inconsistency in timing of plans

The different time span of the UNDAF/cCPAP and the 10th Five Year Plan created some confusion. Whereas the UNDAF/cCPAP covers 1st January 2008 to 31st December 2012, the 10th FYP will cover 1st July 2008 to 30th June 2013.

Difficulties are also encountered with inconsistency of the UN and the Bhutanese

financial year. Whereas the UN financial year follows the western calendar year, the Bhutanese financial year starts in July and finishes by end June. As a mitigation measure, UN Bhutan is piloting a system of annual work plans with a range of minimum 18 months to synchronize the Government and UN planning cycle.

In addition, signing of the cCPAP in late December (21st December 2007) left very limited time for formulation of annual work plans (AWPs) with activities starting from 1st January 2008.

3.9. Results and M&E framework

There is increasing focus on Results Based Management (RBM) and accountability for results of the UN system. Therefore the M&E framework and the results matrix in the UNDAF are of high importance.

With lack of guidelines and participants who were not very familiar with Results Based Management, the formulation was quite a challenge. In addition, different agencies had different interpretations of what an indicator is, some wanted very broad indicators, others very specific ones.

It would have been useful to have a technical expert to train and coach during results and M&E framework formulation.

4. Recommendations

For small UN agencies and for several government counterparts with limited staff and resources it has been a challenge to follow through on the relevant thematic areas. Many participants felt overburdened with the many meetings and workshops. Although most participants have agreed that in general the process was important and worthwhile, several have pointed out the need to look at how to decrease the workload through a more efficient way of formulation, while retaining the participatory approach. The following have been suggested as ways to make the process more efficient without losing the important consultative and participatory aspect:

1. Better sensitisation of all involved at the beginning of the process.

2. Ensuring a common understanding within UN before involving others
3. Development of a more efficient common meeting culture.
4. A coordinator/facilitator to assist participants throughout the process.
5. More coaching and training with regard to formulation of results and M&E frameworks.