



**REPORT OF LESSONS LEARNED
FROM THE UNCCD PRAIS TRAINING
AND 4TH NATIONAL REPORTING EXERCISE IN THE
PACIFIC, JUNE – NOVEMBER 2010**



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30 November 2010**

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Background

This report is prepared to highlight and share with the wider UNCCD stakeholders some of the key and valuable lessons learned from the experiences of the Pacific Island Countries and region. The report encapsulates the different experiences gained by the Reference Centre, National Focal Points, Country Teams and key regional organisations in the Pacific who were involved in the process for the preparation of the fourth national reports to the UNCCD through the new reporting portal and monitoring system referred to as the PRAIS. The lessons learned report covers the period from June to November of 2010. The report is based on empirical observations from the UNCCD PRAIS Pacific regional training on 12-16 July 2010; the in-country PRAIS trainings held in Samoa, Kiribati, Niue and Nauru from 8 September to 28 October; and a review of electronic correspondence between the Reference Centre and country parties in the Pacific on the preparation of their CCD reports using PRAIS.

There are 14 Pacific Island Countries that are parties to the UNCCD and they are: the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, 13 parties participated in the regional PRAIS training with the exception of Niue. An additional in-country training was held for Niue because they missed the regional training and follow up training and support were provided for Samoa, Kiribati and Nauru.

The countries were divided according to land forms and types 1) large islands of volcanic and upraised continental shelf origin which include Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji; 2) medium volcanic and atoll islands which include Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Tonga, and Niue; and 3) small atolls which include Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu. This range of land forms was recommended at the PRAIS training because of shared similarities and differences experienced by these countries.

1 Training of National Focal Points

1.1 Training Capacity

1. In general the PRAIS training provided a valuable learning experience for both the participants and the trainers which had helped all of us to gain a better understanding of the PRAIS system, context and development. It also enabled us the Regional Centre staff to strengthen our capacity and confidence in conducting follow up training in the countries and guide the countries reporting activities. Further, it had also enabled us to design a more logical structured training that meets the level of capacity and understanding at the country level of the PRAIS system, the UNCCD strategy and linkages to national priorities. This was clearly demonstrated in the follow up in-country trainings that were held in Samoa, Kiribati, Niue and Nauru. We found it more effective to base the training on the experiences of the countries with their land management issues, NAPs and involvement in the convention processes as a conduit to building their understanding of the PRAIS system.
2. Having a good understanding of the historical development and administrative arrangements of the UNCCD both at the convention level as well as at the national level helped to better understand the PRAIS system in its entirety including its key components. This was most useful particularly given the mixture of participants and the different roles they play. For our training, we had three type of representatives from each country party – the NFP, the technical focal point and SLM manager – and equally important was the participation as resource persons in the training of representatives of regional organisations who are collaborating with SPREP on the convention and country's NAP and related programs – the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Division of Land Management and UNDP Country Offices in Fiji and PNG.

1.2 Reporting Tools

3. Having a comprehensive understanding the reporting tools requires time and collective efforts of all the key stakeholders. A wide range of expertise and stakeholders in the countries were required to provide information and input to the reporting process. For instance, the financial commitments and investments reporting tools specifically the SSFA and PPS required the involvement of state finance agencies because they have better databases of funded programs and projects in the country; and technical staff of line departments who are directly involved in implementation on the ground. As such, it was inevitable that a multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approach was required to facilitate the reporting process in-country.
4. The application of the Rio Markers, RACs and PCs were difficult as these were fairly new concepts. We also found a range of different interpretation and application of these concepts which was quite challenging. As such, it was important to have a collective agreement among all the stakeholders on what codes to apply. We found the *Best Practice* template to be relatively straight forward to complete however, the requirement for selecting cases relevant to the template criteria was very challenging to the countries.
5. The main difficulty countries experienced was in collecting the required information and data within the reporting timeframe. A lengthy process was required to raise awareness, secure support and participation of relevant sources of information from a wide range of state and non-state actors besides the CCD NFPs and technical focal points. Limited staff and multiple commitments meant that a more practical approach to the national reporting process was essential. Existing SLM project teams and in-country arrangements were utilized to implement the PRAIS reporting exercises integrated as part of the SLM implementation. This process was perceived as a strategic approach towards aligning NAPS with the UNCCD Ten Year Strategy.
6. Out of all the reporting tools, we found the *Performance Indicators* to be the most difficult one especially when it came to assessing the indicators in the *Additional Information* reporting tool. Queries were

raised on why some of the data are required and especially how it will be used to measure progress at the country level. A lot more information is required to clarify how the information and data collected will be used to measure progress, or more precisely the criteria that will be used to assess the extend of implementation at the country level.

1.3 PRAIS Portal

7. The online hands-on input and management of information in the PRAIS portal was found to be a very practical approach to enhancing knowledge and skills in operating and managing the system. The main challenge experienced was the slow connection and lengthy processing time which was encountered when entering information on the PRAIS system. We initially encountered this during the PRAIS training and subsequently later on when countries started to enter information online.
8. Accessing the portal was another difficulty encountered due largely to administrative requirements of the CCD Secretariat and its inflexibility to facilitate a smooth access process instead of rigidly following the administrative requirement. This was clearly an issue outside the RC's jurisdiction and one where the RC had no control or influence over.
9. The RC found it very difficult to assist NFPs and country teams with their portal problems because the RC was not given any access rights to the portal similar to the NFPs. It would have been more useful if access rights were given to the RC to enable us to respond effectively and assist with specific country queries on portal functions. Having said this, we however, found that all other PRAIS functions and operations in general were adequately accessible in the portal navigations. All key information were readily available in the system.

10. The main lessons learned from the trainings and operation of the PRAIS portal were:

- Having the SLM project coordinators, NFPs and technical focal points attend the training was very useful particularly in getting agreements to use the SLM projects to complete the 4NRs.
- The participation of regional partner organizations (SPC and UNDP Pacific Offices) as resource peoples was very useful especially their role in coordinating regional support to the countries.
- Grouping of participants according to the sizes of the islands - big, medium and small was quite effective as it allowed countries to share and appreciate the challenges that are specific to their respective sub-grouping situations.
- Connectivity was a major issue encountered during the training and this was an issue at the country level when countries started to enter their 4NRs online.
- Differences in the interpretation of the content of the 4NR requirements were an issue particularly when different people are completing the report.
- Gathering and collecting information was a key challenge particularly in situations where the information is not known or available and where access to the information was restricted.
- Country delegations and reporting teams agreed in general that PRAIS is an advance and user-friendly monitoring system for assessing and reporting on the convention implementation, but admitted that much more work is necessary in their countries to effectively meet the system's requirements.

2 'Helpdesk' service

11. The most common queries received from NFPs and country teams in the Pacific were to do with procedural and administrative requirements for obtaining their PRAIS credentials; and requests for financial support for the preparation of the reports and completing the tasks on the

PRAIS portal. We've spent most of our time clarifying to country teams and NFPs the procedures and administration of PRAIS credentials, and we've also facilitated communications between the country team with their NFPs and following up with them on actions to take to process their PRAIS credentials and financial support applications.

12. Regarding online portal operations, it was extremely difficult to assist our NFPs or country reporting teams with the few queries of this kind, due to the lack of practical experience in accessing the online portal as an NFP, thus we weren't able to help them out much more than referring queries to the UNCCD Support Team.

13. Being well familiar with the conditions in the countries and the teams involved in the exercise, we feel the Reference Centre is in a much better position to strategically assist our colleagues with the administration of direct access to PRAIS and the online functions of the system. It is therefore appropriate to adequately equip the RCs with the knowhow and tools for helping NFPs and country teams with their online PRAIS operations and with the administration of PRAIS credentials.

14. The main lessons learnt with assisting NFPs and reporting country teams were:

- The need to provide portal access rights to the RCs to ensure timely and reliable assistance is provided to NFPs
- The need for the UNCCD Secretariat to be more flexible in applying the administrative requirements for the issuance of access rights to the NFPs. The UNCCD Secretariat should consider a more active direct role of RCs and countries Technical Focal Points rather than restricting it to just the NFPs which was quite cumbersome and resulted in delays in submitting reports on time.

3

Insight into National Assessment Process

3.1 Reporting Arrangements & Approaches

15. The countries' national reporting exercises were generally led by country delegations who attended the regional PRAIS training and follow ups and exchange were directly with these officers. Some of these delegations took upon themselves the responsibility of collecting information and preparing the report using PRAIS. In other countries including those where additional in-country trainings were held, larger country reporting teams were formed with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for preparing the report. In most cases it was not the NFPs who entered the data and used their PRAIS accounts, but instead this was assigned to their Technical Focal Points.
16. Countries realised the need for further awareness raising and training of other national stakeholders who are members of their NAP and SLM projects steering committees to secure their support and involvement in the reporting exercise. Key state actors that were recognised as holding relevant information should be fully informed and involved with PRAIS reporting such as the ministries or departments of finance, agriculture, mining, public works and other land development agencies. Among the key CSOs were the environmental NGOs, farmers associations, and other major community and business groups who are directly involved with land developments in the countries.
17. Funding to support staff time and organisational support in the collection and organisation of reporting information is essential in ensuring key information are collected to assist with the completion of the reports. In several cases country delegations were either unfamiliar or unable to make the necessary arrangements for securing funding including disbursement arrangements of the UNCCD. In most cases, the reporting country teams carried out the exercises using their own resources and time while in others, arrangements were made to reimburse the reporting team services either directly with the financial assistance grant or through their SLM project funding.

3.2 Information & Data

18. Data was largely scattered and not properly collected and well organized to meet the PRAIS reporting standards and requirements. Accessing data was also quite difficult. In some cases formal arrangements were necessary to release data and information and reporting teams were not able to meet these requirements within the reporting timeframe.
19. Country reporting teams faced difficulties in selecting appropriate data and information for the relevant reporting templates especially quantitative data for several of the performance indicators that were very limited. The exercise therefore has identified key gaps in information and data requirements for monitoring and assessing the convention and country's NAP implementation.

3.3 Main Lessons Learnt, Conclusions & Recommendations

20. It is essential for the effective implementation and development of PRAIS requirements in countries to secure the full and active involvement of all the relevant national stakeholders. Achieving this goal is an important element of improving information, data and understanding of PRAIS and the alignment of country NAPs with the UNCCD Strategy.
21. It's important to recognise the distinct roles of the NFPs and Technical Focal Points in fulfilling national reporting requirements. In most cases the NFPs are the countries foreign or external affairs departments. Often they are not engaged at the technical level and as such their involvement is very limited. However, on the other hand, the Technical Focal Points – which generally are either the agriculture or environment agencies are found to be the most active and knowledgeable people to complete the national reporting requirements. Because of these national arrangements, it is necessary to provide a flexible approach to the use of PRAIS and issue access rights to technical officers to enable them to enter the information into the portal. However, validation and submission of the reports should remain the responsibility of the designated NFPs.

4 Capacity Development & Institutional Arrangements

4.1 Institutional Arrangements and Capacity Needs

22. Most of the PRAIS operations and administration are done at the national and regional levels and this should be targeted for further institutional strengthening of capacity on the PRAIS system. At the national level, the roles of the NFPs, the TFPs and reporting teams needs to be clearly sorted and clarified with the UNCCD Secretariat.
23. Necessary formal arrangements for developing, accessing and using data and information according to the PRAIS requirements should be made an essential requirement of the PRAIS administration.
24. National stakeholders including state agencies, CSOs and STIs within the countries need awareness and training on the PRAIS; convention implementation; and the enhancement of their respective roles in the implementation and monitoring of the Ten Year Strategy.
25. Countries will need to improve their environmental monitoring and assessment systems to incorporate the PRAIS requirements in a coherent and synergistic manner with other reporting requirements countries are obligated to meet. Generally country parties in the Pacific have weak national environmental monitoring and assessment capacities and systems. Individual environmental sectors have some monitoring and assessment experience which is largely on a ad hoc basis often to meet international and donor funding reporting requirements. With limited resources, it is important for country parties in the Pacific to develop integrated MEA monitoring systems rather than stand alone systems for the UNCCD PRAIS and other reporting requirements.
26. Regional Reference Centres would need to also have access to the portal similar to the NFPs to enable them to be fully informed of how the systems operate and to assist countries directly and effectively on a timely manner.

4.2 Individual Capacity

27. PRAIS implementation will depend largely on the commitment and support of those who were trained and have gained practical experience in the system. Similarly, strengthening institutional capacities are essential to ensure a robust and effective enabling environment is established to assist with future reporting and management of the PRAIS system.
28. Ideally those who should benefit from the training and be engaged to involve in the preparation of the reports through PRAIS are people directly involved in the implementation of their countries' NAPs and related programmes. This is very important as the experience and learnings from practical involvement with implementation can substantially provide meaningful reporting. This is especially helpful when assessing the impacts or changes accrue from the implementation of the convention.
29. Financial resources are needed to support the development of country experts to conduct PRAIS monitoring and its integration with other key national environmental monitoring and assessment requirements.

5 Outcomes & Follow Ups

30. The main outcomes of this current UNCCD reporting exercise using PRAIS were:

5.1 Outcomes

- The successful completion and timely submission of the national reports by 5 of the 14 country parties of the Pacific by the due date set by the UNCCD Secretariat which was the 12th November 2010. Three other national reports were ready for submission but could not make it on time due to PRAIS credentials and online portal issues that they were not resolved on time. Several of the remaining countries have made progress and all the remaining countries have

the potential to complete their reports before the CRIC meeting in 2011.

- The establishment of a regional team of experts who have practical knowledge and experience of the purpose and operation of PRAIS and the application of PRAIS for preparing their country reports.
- The enhanced knowledge and capacity building of the Reference Centre to improve the training of its country parties on the PRAIS system and assisting them with the use of its reporting tools and guidelines.
- The increased interactions between some of the country parties reporting teams with the UNCCD and the PRAIS Support Team on the operations and administration of PRAIS.
- The active involvement of key regional and national stakeholders in the PRAIS training and providing support to the reporting exercises in the countries which helped to strengthen collaboration in the region on the implementation of the convention and its new monitoring system.
- Increased understanding and involvement of NAPs and SLM projects country teams on PRAIS exercises and identifying the relevant actions to follow up for aligning their NAPs with the convention strategy and improving their monitoring systems to meet PRAIS standards and requirements.

5.2 Follow-Up Actions

The key follow up actions that were identified during the project were:

- Development of countries monitoring and assessment capacities to effectively incorporate PRAIS and other MEA reporting requirements in an integrated manner.
- Alignment of the country NAPs with the UNCCD's ten year strategy and improving the capacities of country teams involved in NAP implementation to assess and report their experiences through PRAIS.

- Improving the support services provided by regional organisations to the 14 Pacific Island Country parties for PRAIS and implementation of the Convention.
- Strengthening the capacities and resources of the Reference Centre to assist countries with PRAIS and other related convention processes in collaboration with regional and international partners.

Project assessment

6.1 Reference Centre's Role

31. The RC's terms of reference were very clear and followed closely. However, there were instances where reporting country teams referred queries to the RCs on matters that were purely of conventional administrative requirements between the respective country governments and the UNCCD Secretariat.

32. Financial support provided for the RC role was adequate and sufficient to cover additional in-country training and visits. However, follow up training would be useful on specific areas where assistance is still needed particularly in setting up appropriate national monitoring systems for future PRAIS reporting.

6.2 UNCCD Secretariat & PRAIS Support

33. The support from the global PRAIS team was largely directed to country parties and was mainly to do with securing the countries' PRAIS credentials and operations of the PRAIS portal. Other specific queries on the components of PRAIS were addressed and clarified at the regional PRAIS training. It was quite helpful to have a representative of the UNCCD Secretariat attend the training to provide clarification and guidance.

Conclusion

Overall, the roll out of the PRAIS system would have been more successful if adequate and sufficient time was allocated to complete the 4th national reporting requirements. Nevertheless, the whole exercise was perceived as a learning process with further improvements required. This will ensure the system is effectively managed, maintained and used strategically. There is a lot of awareness and capacity building to be done which would require proper planning and adequate resources to ensure capacities and systems are in place to assist with future reporting requirements. The role of the RCs should be extended and continued to provide training and support to countries particularly in taking forward some of the lessons learned and recommendations from the PRAIS and 4th national reporting processes.