PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FOR

HUMAN AND ECOSYSTEM WELLBEING AND

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

a system assessment method

IUCN INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT TEAM

TEST DRAFT

November 1997

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Who this book is for

This book has been prepared for people in governments and non-governmental organizations who wish to assess the human and ecological system in which they are working, or who wish to help others undertake such a system assessment.

The book describes a particular method of system assessment. It does not provide generic guidance on system assessment or descriptions of other approaches. It gives an overview of the method, but is not intended as a training manual.

The method is designed for use at any level: international, national, local, and levels in between. However, since it could be confusing to discuss the options and variations possible at each different level, the focus of this book is on the national level. It is also suitable for use at provincial (state) and international levels, since applications there would be very similar. A companion document is planned to show how to use the method at district, city and village levels.

What is assessment and why do it?

Assessment has a narrow and a broad meaning. Narrowly, it means evaluation or judgment. Broadly, it encompasses the activities that make evaluation possible (collecting data, analyzing information, and making judgments), the activities to foster reflection within the organizations doing it, and the process needed to communicate and use the results of the assessment.

The purpose of assessment is to increase understanding, improve decision-making, and (as a consequence) achieve goals. Assessment works best when it is part of a continuous cycle of reflection and action, rather than a stand-alone activity.

Assessment is done by organizations (alone or jointly) whose purpose is to influence a particular situation or reality (called system in this approach) through specific activities (referred to generically as projects). This is not a linear sequence (organization-projects system): on the contrary, interactions can be identified between every combination of these three elements.

Each of the elements requires an assessment method suited to its own characteristics and needs, thus defining three fields of assessment:

> ***Organizational self-assessment*** is a process by which organizations explore their performance and the factors that support or hinder that performance, in order to improve their impact on the system. Our approach emphasizes the importance of developing skills and structures to build or strengthen self-assessment capacities, instead of external evaluations. Organizational self-assessment analyzes the organization's perception and vision of the system, and the organization's capacities and performance.

> ***Project self-assessment*** is the evaluation of specific activities and their results by the group undertaking the activities. Its function is to assess the relevance and impact of the activities in relation to the system and to the organization's purpose or mission. It also assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of the activities. Information for project assessment comes from analysis of project planning tools (such as logical framework analysis and results based management), the results of implementation, and system assessment.

> ***System assessment*** is assessment of the system in which the group and its activities take place. The system comprises human societies and their economies and the ecosystem that supports and surrounds them. As the system cannot assess itself, system assessment is usually done by organizations of people who live and act within the system. The function of system assessment is to show the conditions and trends of people and the ecosystem, the impacts of human activities on both, and which activities most need changing.

System assessment has a key role in organizational and project assessment. It helps the organization and its projects take account of system changes and contribute to larger coals by showing the effect of the organization and its actions on people's lives and the condition of the ecosystem. Assessing the system enables an organization to improve its understanding of the context in which it is operating and the conditions it is trying to influence, to examine the relevance of its mission, and to articulate its vision for the future. System assessment provides the information required to analyze the relevance and impact of projects. It is essential for results-based management because it evaluates real results-actual changes in the condition of people and the ecosystem-rather than intermediate outputs such as an immunization program or a protected area.

Putting project and organizational self-assessment in a framework of system assessment also prevents duplication and reduces the overall burden of assessment and reporting. At the same time, organizational and project assessment tie the system assessment to a group of actors and their activities and so ensure that it is not an academic exercise.

Since the three types of assessment are intimately linked, it is unwise to do one without the others, But if capacities prevent doing them all, any of the three provides an entry point to the others.

To learn from their actions, and so act more effectively, organizations need to develop a culture of assessment. This entails undertaking all three types of assessment and fostering questioning. Nobody knows what makes a resilient and supportive ecosystem, how to reconcile different cultural and individual ideas of human wellbeing, or the nature of sustainable development. If actions are designed to test questions as well as achieve results, people will be better equipped to learn from experience. The more people question their assumptions and expose their judgments to scrutiny, the more robust their assessments will be. And better assessments will be more likely to improve actions.