



“Accelerating actions for a resilient Blue Pacific”

7th, 8th, 9th September 2021, Virtual Platforms
12:00pm – 5:00pm Samoa Standard Time

Agenda item 5.2: COVID-19 Impacts on SPREP Work Programme and Secretariat Response

Purpose of paper

1. To provide an updated overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SPREP programmes and projects in 2020 and the Secretariat response to ensure that work programme and budget delivery is maintained to the highest level possible.

Introduction

2. States of Emergency (SOE) and international border closures in response to the COVID-19 (CV-19) pandemic began to be put in place by SPREP Member countries and territories at the end of March 2020. This situation basically remains the same in 2021 and is likely to continue into 2022.
3. SPREP as a regional organisation has responded to the impacts of the CV-19 pandemic by:
 - Following SOE directives in countries where SPREP staff are based. In Samoa, HQ staff were home-based from end-March to end-May. In Fiji, Vanuatu and RMI where project and regional office staff are located, staff followed national directives.
 - In June Apia-based staff returned to working in the office. Some staff were permitted to return to their home countries prior to border closures but most have now returned to Apia while two have been unable to do so because of continuing travel restrictions.
 - Travel restrictions and border closures have had a major impact on SPREP’s normal modalities for delivering support to Pacific island countries and territories. This situation has been addressed as much as possible by refocussing service delivery through virtual and remote mechanisms.
4. While the Secretariat has been able to maintain support to Members CV-19 restrictions have had an impact on the delivery of projects, particularly those for which in-country engagements have been planned and budgeted. Unfortunately, CV-19 restrictions have compounded the slow start to a number of significant projects during 2018-2019 (as noted by 29SM) due to delays in donor approvals. These projects had planned for full implementation in 2020.

5. While some elements of projects can be re-adjusted for virtual and remote delivery this is not possible for all in-country project activities and has required some components of in-country project delivery to be postponed. This has also resulted in a reduction to forecast expenditure as noted in Agenda Items 5.1 and 5.4, with an overall end-of-year delivery of 52 percent of planned expenditure, with technical programme delivery ranging from 35 percent to 85 percent.

Responses and Lessons Learned

6. SPREP has worked with donors and implementing partners to secure extended time frames for delivery of projects and programmes, resulting in the granting of no-cost extensions for implementation of activities. The EU, SPREP's largest donor, has been particularly helpful in responding to the impacts of the CV-19 pandemic in negotiating time extensions and adjustments to project/programme delivery.
7. The impacts of the pandemic have highlighted the need for innovation and flexibility in the way that SPREP delivers its work programme. The immediate consequence of travel restrictions was to shift interactions to virtual platforms to enable dialogue between the Secretariat, Members and partners. The Secretariat has now invested in the technology required to enable this to continue on an ongoing basis during and after the pandemic. In the long term the skills and technology that have now been established in the organisation to interact virtually with stakeholders will enable a balanced approach to face-to-face in-country meetings and virtual meetings that may result in cost-savings to SPREP. Several successful meetings and webinars were convened by the Secretariat during 2020 and 2021. An outstanding example was the 10th Pacific Islands Nature Conservation and Protected Areas Conference, originally scheduled as a live event in Noumea, New Caledonia in April 2020 but then as a consequence of the pandemic convened as a virtual event in November 2020. Almost 2,000 people registered for the conference, and it achieved its programme objectives (see WP 8.2.2).
8. The delivery of programme activities under the pandemic regime has also highlighted the importance of facilitating direct in-country project and programme interventions. Technical programme support to Pacific island Members under the pandemic restrictions was most successful where SPREP had technical and project management staff on the ground and/or was able to engage local consultants to continue to develop and implement activities with national stakeholders on a daily basis. This level of implementation occurred in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and RMI where SPREP has established and maintained an in-country presence. Projects that were less successful in delivering their activities were those that have yet to establish an in-country presence.
9. A key lesson has been to validate the importance of establishing and maintaining a SPREP presence through national offices and/or integration of project staff with line ministries. However, recognising that it is not always possible for the Secretariat and its projects/programmes to establish an in-country presence it is increasingly important for SPREP to engage with partners to support Member countries and territories. New projects and programmes will be designed, where feasible and with approval of Members, to engage with partners that have an established formal relationship with

SPREP through memoranda of understanding to assist with implementation. For example, the new €12 million EU OACPS funded Pacific BioScapes Programme (SIDS Support Programme) currently in development will be implemented by the Secretariat directly and also by working with partner organisations in the Pacific Islands Roundtable for Nature Conservation that have established presence across the region. Even with ongoing pandemic travel restrictions this will enable delivery of programme activities.

Recommendation

10. The Meeting is invited to:

- 1) **note** the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SPREP 2020 work programme, and likely continuing implications on programme delivery;
 - 2) **note** the responses of the Secretariat to limiting the impacts of the pandemic on the organization; and
 - 3) **note** the opportunities provided in these responses to strengthening SPREP engagement with Members.
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