

Agenda Item 5.3: COVID-19 Impacts on SPREP 2021 and 2022 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 2021 and 2022 and the Secretariat response to ensure that work programme and budget delivery is maintained to the highest possible level.

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 globally and by SPREP Member countries and territories at the end of March 2020. This situation basically remained the same in 2021 and has continued into most of 2022 with borders around the region gradually opening and expecting full opening of borders by the end of 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 – Samoa Headquarters and in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Marshall Islands where project and regional offices staff are located.
 - Build capacity and continuing to deliver services to Pacific island countries and territories virtually and hybrid format.
 - Adjustments to the activities and timelines of work programmes and project work plans where necessary after consultation with members, donors, and partners.
 - While travel was not possible in most cases but the Secretariat on an exceptional basis, was able to travel and provide in person support – for example supporting Pacific island delegations at UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow. The Secretariat established stringent measures to ensure the safety of staff and while travelling and safeguard the Secretariat when this was necessary.
4. While the Secretariat has been able to maintain support to Members, CV-19 restrictions have had an impact on the delivery of its core services including 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 as noted by 30SM due to delays in donor approvals. These projects had planned for full implementation in 2021.

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 either postponed or adjusted as appropriate. This has also had an impact on the expenditure delivery of projects – See WP 5.4.

Responses and Lessons Learned

6. SPREP continued to liaise closely with donors and implementing partners to secure appropriate and realistic extended time frames for delivery of projects and programmes, resulting in the granting of no-cost extensions for implementation of activities.
7. The continued impacts of the pandemic prompted the Secretariat to adopt innovative approaches and flexibility in the way that it delivers its work programme. The Secretariat continued to use virtual platforms to facilitate dialogue and interactions with Members and partners. The Secretariat has invested in the technology required to continue to support virtual engagement as part of its delivery modality. Since the start of the pandemic, the Secretariat has improved its technical and technological capacity to interact virtually with stakeholders which will complement the face-to-face in-country engagement when borders are fully opened. Several successful virtual meetings and webinars were convened by the Secretariat in 2021 including the Thirtieth Meeting of SPREP Members and the meetings of the Parties to the Noumea Convention and the Waigani Convention respectively
8. The delivery of programme and project activities under the pandemic regime has also highlighted the importance of having a presence in country to facilitate and coordinate direct in-country project and programme interventions. The Secretariat considered and implemented arrangements for the engagement of more national consultants, including the integration of national project staff with line ministries as well as engaging partners to support Member countries and territories. We are continuing to decentralise and are strengthening our presence in key countries when resources allow to better service our members should a similar situation be repeated.

Recommendation

9. The Executive Board Meeting is invited to:
 - 1) **Note** the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SPREP 2021 work programme, and the continuing implications on the 2022 programme delivery;
 - 2) **Note** the responses of the Secretariat to ensuring the services of the Secretariat to Members continue amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19; and
 - 3) **Note** the opportunities provided in these responses to further strengthen the resilience of the Secretariat and Members.
 - 4) **Support** the Secretariat to strengthen in-country presence.