

Regional Initiatives in East Asia and the Himalayas

Concept of the Asia II
Division of SDC

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Background

SDC is supporting different forms of regional collaboration worldwide, including regional networks, regional projects and regional programs. The present concept refers to all types as **regional initiatives**. They involve several countries of a Region (at least two) and have different degrees of institutional formality, of autonomy from donors, of involvement in operational activities and of centralization.

The Asia II Division has allocated its budget to the following categories:

- i. Priority countries:** Nepal, Mekong Region, and Bhutan
- ii. Special Program:** North Korea
- iii. Second priority country:** China
- iv. Asia regional initiatives**

While SDC's programs in priority countries are elaborated and revised based upon country programs (5 years horizon), no specific steering instrument, with the exception of the Asia II Division Strategy (1997-2006), provides the basis for the further development of the Asia regional initiatives.

The present concept defines the scope of SDC's support to regional initiatives and regional organizations, and aims at enhancing synergies and complementarities between national and regional activities. It cannot define the contents of present or future regional initiatives nor the operational details for their administration.

In the late 1980s the sustainable management of natural resources was seen as one of the key challenges for wide and densely populated areas of Asia. Furthermore, it was realized that the strategic research of the International Agricultural Research Centers needed to be complemented by adapted collaborative research networks and national programs.

The different countries of the South needed to be involved differently in order to increase their ownership and contribution to the ongoing research, and to link strategic with applied/ adaptive research. The heterogeneous state of development among countries of South East Asia on one hand and the similarity of challenges in natural resource management on the other, called for a regional approach.

Advantages of a regional approach were: i) forerunner countries (e.g. Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia) could share their specific knowledge with other countries in the region (South-South exchange), ii) addressing issues/problems of common concern would increase effectiveness and efficiency of problem-solving; and iii) countries involved in a network would get financial support for research and training relevant for SDC client groups in the Region and become important partners for research-development linkages.

At about the same time, more topic specific (e.g. IBSRAM for soil research, Bangkok) or eco-regional institutes were founded (e.g. ICIMOD, Katmandu) in the Region. These institutions became important partners for the implementation of regional initiatives for SDC up to today.

Most regional initiatives supported by the Asia II Division so far come within the NRM (Natural Resources Management) sector. The experiences outlined in the present concept therefore relate mainly to the NRM sector. The prospective parts of the concept are intended to cover all sectors supported by SDC.

Concept development process

The present concept was developed in a broad consultation involving different stakeholders of regional initiatives:

1. Different SDC Headquarters collaborators were invited to analyze and share the experiences and strategic elements of other SDC divisions regarding regional initiatives with the ASIA II Division (see Annex 1 for results);
2. In a workshop in Switzerland in June 2001 Headquarters staff and representatives from

Coordination Offices of SDC's Asia II Division, together with coordinators of three regional initiatives supported by the Division, did a strategic analysis and elaborated the basis for the concept (see Annex 2 for list of participants and agenda);

3. The process was enriched by a desk study on regional initiatives and bilateral projects of the Asia II Division in the NRM sector.



SDC's involvement in Asia – Asia II Division

- Priority countries
- Special program
- Collaboration
- Mekong Region

SDC's policy on regional initiatives

The policy frame for SDC's support to regional initiatives is outlined in four documents:

- [1] Bill to the Swiss Parliament on development cooperation of December 1998
- [2] Operational handbook of SDC (t.300 DAN/MOK/RK/GTO, August 2000)
- [3] SDC Long Term Strategy for Asia II 1997 - 2006 (August 1997)
- [4] Strategy SDC 2010, SDC, 2000

[1] underpins the need to complement SDC bilateral programs in priority countries with a regional approach and formulates the expectations regarding regional initiatives, improving overall efficiency of development support in the Region through:

- Scaling-up of successful local experience to a larger (regional) scale
- Joint, transnational solving of problems among counties with similar ecological or socio-economic context
- Fostering regional collaboration among partners by linking them through regional initiatives

SDC's regional approach emphasizes enhancing synergies and complementarities between partners in loose networks rather than supporting regional organizations.

[2] in addition to [1] outlines the different types of regional approaches, discusses criteria for typology and emphasizes the need to examine each regional initiative for predicted efficiency gains, impact potential, congruence with needs of participating countries and ownership in the Region.

[3] states that "Common transnational issues and challenges, inter alia potentially affecting

peace and security, either need to be or preferably are addressed in regional networks as means to provide conflict defusing discussion forums, to enhance synergies and impact, and to reduce cost." It further emphasizes that similar issues and problems (e.g. urban development management, sustainable management of natural resources) are common to a number of countries and regional organizations and are expected to become increasingly important. The Asia II Division commits itself to a programmatic approach through a cluster of projects in the same sector as a means to enhance synergies, networking, coordination and impact in policy dialogue.

[4] in a description of SDC's four core strategies, underpins the role of knowledge as "the most important capital" and therein the "joint learning processes". It states that "the increase in problems that extend across frontiers requires a transnational approach to finding solutions". It emphasizes that SDC "is committed to international networking" and "promotes and benefits from potentials for synergy between multilateral and bilateral programmes".

SDC counts on ample experience regarding the support of regional initiatives: In a study initiated in 1999 it was found that SDC supports 90 regional initiatives world-wide, slightly over half of them in the NRM sector. This study resulted in two instruments (see Annex 3 and 4) which since have been used in identifying, assessing and following regional initiatives. In addition, over the last two years, both the Latin America Division and the East and Southern Africa Division have up-dated their concepts on regional initiatives.



Regional initiatives covered by this concept

The broadest term used within SDC to refer to regional activities is "regional approach". There have been numerous attempts to come up with a coherent typology of regional approaches, all having their strengths and shortcomings. For the sake of clarification, the most widely used criteria for differentiating are presented in Annex 5, based on [2]. In order to clarify the focus of the present concept, we just distinguish regional approaches according to their relation with SDC:

- a. Regional collaboration within SDC (involving mostly SDC Coordination Office staff or SDC project staff)
- b. The regional initiative properly speaking (network, project etc. with participation of several partner institutions in several countries)
- c. Regional organizations (institutions aiming at enhancing regional integration)
- d. The Regional SDC Program (comparable to an SDC Country Program, but covering several neighboring countries)

There does not exist a clear cut border between (b) and (c); the main difference for SDC is that it has potentially more involvement in conceptualizing, planning and monitoring of (b) than of (c). Regional initiatives sometimes evolve into regional organizations (e.g. RECOFTC), obtaining the legal status of international organizations within their host country. Regional organizations may benefit from core or program support from SDC.

Over the past few years, SDC has elaborated regional programmatic plans (d) as a framework for its support to several neighboring countries served by the same Coordination Office (e.g. the "Mekong Regional Program").

The present concept mostly covers regional initiatives as defined in (b). It also considers regional organizations as under (c) supported by SDC, especially if this involves program support. Regional or global institutions *per se* receiving SDC support (like many CGIAR centers) are not included in this concept, but the regional activities executed by them for SDC are covered. Regional SDC Programs as under (d) represent a different type of regional approach and are not the focus of this concept. To avoid confusion, the term "regional initiatives" (rather than

"regional program") is coherently used in the present document to refer to type (b) approaches.



Experience with regional initiatives in Asia II

Origin and institutional set-up of regional initiatives

SDC started investing in regional initiatives more than 20 years ago in Central America. The first types of regional initiatives were research networks focusing on one commodity (potatoes, beans, maize), with development, evaluation and exchange of genetic material as a backbone, complemented by agronomy research. From the very beginning, the respective International Agricultural Research Centers played an important role in facilitating the constitutive process, in providing know-how and in network administration.

The positive experience with regional initiatives like tangible results and success stories, the enthusiasm of the members to mutually collaborate and learn as an expression of regional ownership, and the positive attitude of the International

Agricultural Research Centers involved, lead SDC to embark on numerous new initiatives with different set-ups, objectives, focuses, institutional partners. Soon initiatives beyond agriculture and NRM were initiated.

Many regional initiatives were identified by Headquarters staff, often jointly by a geographical division and a sectoral service of SDC. **Administration and operational responsibility** therefore often remained with Headquarters. This is reflected in Table 1 for the Asia II Division, where out of the six NRM regional initiatives three are followed by Headquarters, as well as the contributions to the two regional organizations. Regarding these regional initiatives, Coordination Office staff is often not well informed and is sometimes lacking a sense of ownership.

Table 1: Regional initiatives and organizations supported by SDC Asia II Division in the NRM sector (status by July 2001)

Entity supported	Responsible	Type	Focus	Implementing agency
ARCAVDRC	Mekong Coordination office	Training center R&D network	Vegetables	AVDRC
RECOFTC	Mekong Coordination office	Training center, R&D, now organization	Social forestry	
MRC	Mekong Coordination office	Institution (core and program contribution)	Water resources management	MRCS
IRRC	Headquarters	R&D network	Irrigated rice	IRRI
ASL/SL	Headquarters	R&D network	Sustainable technologies sloping land	IBSRAM/IWMI
PARDYP	Headquarters	R&D network	Community based NRM	ICIMOD
ICIMOD	Headquarters	Regional Organization; core contribution	Mountain development	
IBSRAM	Headquarters	Regional organization (now integrated in IWMI), core contribution	Soil fertility management	
In addition contributions by units of SDC other than Asia II division going into the Region (to IRRI, ICRISAT, CIP, CIMMYT, IUCN)				
ASL/SL	Asialand Slopingland Network (IWMI (former IBSRAM), Bangkok, Thailand)			
ARC-AVRDC	Asian Regional Center- Asian Vegetable Research and Development Center (Bangkok)			
CIMMYT	Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maiz y Trigo (Mexico D.F, Mexico)			
CIP	Centro Internacional de la Papa (Lima, Peru)			
IBSRAM	International Board for Soil Research and Management (Bangkok, Thailand), now integrated into IWMI			
ICIMOD	International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (Katmandu, Nepal)			
ICRAF	International Council for Research in Agroforestry (Nairobi, Kenya)			
ICRISAT	International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (Patancheru, India)			
IRRC	Irrigated Rice Research Consortium (IRRI, Los Banos, Philippines)			
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute (Los Banos, Philippines)			
IUCN	The World Conservation Union (Gland, Switzerland)			
IWMI	International Water Management Institute (Colombo, Sri Lanka with substation in Bangkok)			
MRC	Mekong River Commission (MRC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia)			
MRCS	Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia)			
PARDYP	Peoples and Resources Dynamics Project (ICIMOD, Katmandu, Nepal)			
RECOFTC	Regional Community Forestry Training Center (Bangkok, Thailand)			



Relationships between regional initiatives and SDC Country Programs are rather ambiguous and depend to a certain degree on personal interests and preferences. As no clear guidelines exist regarding the relationship between regional initiatives and Country Programs, this may lead to diverging views on relative priorities among Division staff.

There exists a certain competition between regional initiatives and national, bilateral projects: Coordination Offices, being primarily responsible for their priority country and the respective Country Program have the tendency to concentrate resources in this country, preferably in national projects and programs. Headquarters staff argue that overall efficiency may be considerably enhanced by working at regional level and taking advantage of the synergies and complementarities between different partners, including non-SDC-priority countries.

Following-up of regional initiatives is time consuming, time that Coordination Offices could otherwise invest in monitoring bilateral projects or in donor coordination. Coordination Offices may decide to concentrate on the latter activities in order to not disperse their efforts. Time allocation thus is a matter of setting priorities. Coordination Offices feel that regional initiatives would require much attention, but do not have enough time to put in.



Strengths

The following strengths and positive aspects were identified for the regional initiatives supported by Asia II Division:

Enhanced efficiency

The regional approach allows for solving major common problems by one entity and thus makes it affordable, as especially research and specialized education are often too expensive for individual countries. Comparative advantages of different partners and local expertise can be fully exploited and pooling them can allow for critical mass to be reached. For SDC, regional initiatives can be a low cost and input efficient way of support.

South-South exchange and capacity building

Regional initiatives offer the opportunity for systematic South-South exchange. Experience and solutions can be shared between similar countries. Interaction on approaches can lead to joint capacity building, involving also implementing agencies and SDC. Exchange of competences can enhance professionalism and cooperation among important partners in the Region. Often, ownership is strongly with the

members and thus strengthens self-confidence of the South. Synergies (added value) between regional initiatives and country programs can occur (e.g. RECOFTC and SFSP jointly developed methodologies and concerted actions), yet they need to be nurtured as they hardly evolve on their own.

Advocating SDC principles on larger scale

Through the regional initiatives it supported, SDC was able to advocate its principles like participation, empowerment and flexibility in approaches, on a larger scale. An important contribution in this sense was the continuing dialogue with the implementing agencies of regional initiatives.

Addressing issues that can only or better be dealt with at regional level

Regional initiatives provided the means to address trans-boundary issues (environmental protection, sustainable management of the lower Mekong basin etc.) and the opportunity to promote innovative approaches. They can facilitate collaboration with Centers of Excellence in the Region, for both the donor and the partners in the countries. The broad base of partners allows for identifying critical or priority areas for research and development in the Region and for jointly strengthening the respective R+D capacities and links. Otherwise neglected topics can attract enough advocacy in the regional context to get addressed (e.g. the rat problem in rice).

Enhancing regional collaboration and mutual understanding

The dialogue in the context of regional initiatives fosters mutual understanding and respect among conflicting interests or parties.





Weaknesses

Among the weaknesses and difficulties related to regional initiatives, SDC internal problems got a prominent place in the analysis: Poor links with Country Programs and lack of consensus between SDC Headquarters and Coordination Offices regarding regional initiatives, as outlined on page 9. Further weaknesses referred to:

Management

The many partners make planning and managing of regional initiatives a complex and demanding task. To reach a consensus on priority issues is difficult and may lead to blurring of the focus and hence to confusion on objectives. The lack of capacity, training opportunities and tools for program development and consultation, but also for managing and monitoring a complex network, can lead to a certain inertia in regional initiatives: The agenda is sometimes not adapted in time in response to past experiences and changes in the context; in addition, as processes are slow, networks can go by for some time with ample rhetoric instead of impact. In general, drawing of lessons regarding management and policy of regional initiatives in view of its future improvement has been insufficient. Little has been done to develop tools and approaches

for institutional strengthening in terms of institutionalizing participatory approaches, civil society strengthening, enhancing the institutional capacity to manage change etc.; while this lack is similar in bilateral activities, it is especially hampering in regional initiatives.

Partners

Choosing partners is crucial for regional initiatives and disparities among partners complicates collaboration further. Conflicting views among partners may hamper efficiency and progress and with the many stakeholders at the level of donors, implementing agencies and partners, the risk for diverging interest is considerable. Good partners (individuals) are often involved in several different networks ("network tigers") and thus may be extremely busy and not in all cases able to live up to expectations.

Duplication

In some regional initiatives, unreflected and often unnecessary repetition of activities across countries occurred, leading to duplication and thus rising doubts about the value added by the regional approach over bilateral settings.

Strategic foundation for regional initiatives

Expectations of SDC

The rationale for embarking on regional initiatives is based on the expectation of efficiency gains, be it through enhancing benefits (output, results, impact) or reducing costs through complementing bilateral projects with a regional approach. In this sense, the following is expected from regional initiatives:

- Enhanced exchange of experience in the Region, including capitalizing and extending existing knowledge
- Exploiting synergies and complementarities among countries and organizations participating in the initiative and thus making more efficient use of existing resources in the Region (competent human resources, infrastructure, social capital like specialized research and training capacities)
- Making more efficient use of SDC resources (through enhanced effectiveness as outlined above, but also through a more rational way of backstopping and administration)
- Enhancing regional capacity building (through well coordinated support to specific institutions and teams participating in the regional initiative) and facilitating mutual learning among partners in the Region
- Addressing trans-boundary issues that cannot be addressed efficiently at national level
- Distribution of risks related to political instability through working with several countries (activities, solutions developed, know-how and social capital may be quickly shifted from a country suffering an outbreak of political instability to other partners in the Region and may thus be preserved from loss)
- Contribution to a better mutual understanding and enhanced cooperation in the Region beyond the thematic scope of the initiative
- Exploiting the possibility to work with less formal links with governments and public services, where strong links (often a condition in bilateral activities) hamper progress





Context for regional initiatives

Several trends emerging at present or expected for the future affect the context for regional initiatives, creating either more favorable frame conditions or affecting them negatively:

- Political evolution calls for more attention to governance, this improves the scope for regional collaboration: On one hand, several themes are becoming increasingly important in several countries of the Region (decentralization, democracy, public administration reform, participation) and may call for a regional approach; on the other hand, any regional initiative can strongly benefit from more democracy, empowerment, participation and more efficient institutions at national level.
- Globalization and convergence of political systems further favor regional approaches
- Urbanization and industrialization create more interest in the non-NRM sectors and certain issues can be handled more efficiently at regional level
- Pressure on natural resources will continue to increase and so will global interest in and concern for these resources. The magnitude of the problem and its non-territorial nature ask for common approaches in this sector (even though political will to address it may be weak).
- The threat of outbreaks of political instability will continue to be present throughout the Region. While a regional initiative will certainly be negatively affected by political unrest in one of its partner countries, the consequences will be mitigated by the regional nature of the initiative as outlined on page 12. SDC may want to further strengthen regional approaches as a strategy for risk distribution.
- The evolution of systems for Intellectual Property Protection will change the way of exchanging research results (germplasm, other intellectual property) in the Region. As free exchange of research results, knowledge, methodologies, germplasm and prototypes constitute the backbone and *raison d'être* of regional initiatives, this evolution may create new threats (blockage of exchange within the Region), but also new opportunities (more commitment to developing and exchanging intellectual property within the Region, as exchange beyond may become more difficult) for regional collaboration.
- Regional initiatives are often linked to regional Centers of Excellence. In the NRM sector the International Agricultural Research Centers have played a crucial role in initiating and facilitating regional collaboration and in backstopping the activities. In the future, it will be more important to identify facilitators of agendas, coalitions and learning processes. For regional initiatives in other sectors, the role respective Centers of Excellence could possibly play would have to be carefully assessed.



Core competencies and capacities of Asia II Division

The Asia II Division of SDC can rely on a set of important competencies and capacities regarding the support of regional initiatives, which are unique in this specific composition and represent an asset for future support to regional initiatives:

- The Asia II Division has ample experience in advising and supporting regional initiatives (in planning, evaluation, monitoring and implementation) in Asia and has access to experience from other continents: Decision support tools specific to regional initiatives have been developed by SDC and have been tested and used by the Asia II Division; Asia II staff participated actively in restructuring and shaping some of the regional initiatives supported. Presently SDC, involving Asia II, is embarking on a more systematic process of learning lessons regarding regional initiatives.
- SDC has insisted on participatory interactions at all levels of regional initiatives. This allowed for accumulating ample experience and capitalizing on it. This experience makes SDC credible and competent regarding participation.
- SDC has the flexibility to provide different types of support for regional initiatives (including building or strengthening institutions, where required).
- SDC has a policy of providing medium to long-term support to partners. This willingness and possibility to take on long-term commitments is especially important for regional initiatives, as the complexity of the institutional setting and of the issues addressed ask for longer-term horizons.
- For Asia II, NRM has long been a priority sector, both at national and regional level. This allowed the Division to develop a high degree of competence in NRM at different levels.
- Asia II can benefit from the knowledge and experience of the thematic divisions of SDC (especially in NRM).

Risks associated with regional initiatives

High expectations, rather positive perspectives for frame conditions, and a unique set of competencies of the Asia II Division for supporting regional initiatives, contrast with several risks associated with such initiatives. These risks need to be addressed by appropriate measures or avoided by conceptualizing the initiatives accordingly:

- Confusion and inefficiencies due to conflicting ideas on regional initiatives between Headquarters and Coordination Offices (disagreement on appropriateness/purpose of specific initiatives or on mutual obligations and expectations)
- Comparatively low priority accorded to regional initiatives by Coordination Offices because of lacking ownership or unclear mandate
- As many stakeholders are involved, finding consensus is difficult and may blur the focus and conflicting views can even lead to blockages
- Distortion of the agenda by influential stakeholders (donors, implementing agency, long-term partners), or on the other hand inertia and inability to adjust the agenda in due time
- Expectations regarding regional initiatives are often too high and thus may not be fulfilled: Impact is to be rather on systems (research, extension systems etc.) than at farm level; such impact may be more difficult to measure
- Risk associated with management of regional initiatives: Disappointment about slow progress as management is time consuming; failures occur, if appropriate human resources are not allocated to this demanding task
- Individuals participating in many different networks (because of their dedication and capacities) may become overloaded
- Contacts and Centers of Excellence may be lacking for non-NRM topics

Future scope

Based on the analysis presented above, scope for improving existing regional initiatives and for embarking on new ones exists along the following lines:

Strengthening the competence and competitiveness of national partners and their cooperation

In view of making sustained impact at the level of national and regional institutions and systems, it will be important to contribute to capacity building (both at personal and at institutional level) through enhanced use of professional competence in the Region and in this way to facilitate mutual learning. Valorizing and building on local knowledge, competence and capacities in the context of a regional initiative will enhance transparency of the assets in the Region and improve self-confidence of partners, both important elements of competitiveness. By enabling the dialogue among different countries, regional cooperation will be fostered beyond the mere scope of the initiative. Strengthening and empowerment will be sustainable, if the regional initiative complements and does not replace national efforts.

Improving management of regional initiatives

Given the challenges in managing regional initiatives on one hand and the considerable experience and steps done so far by SDC, efforts to improve management will be a rewarding task. Flexible models for dealing with the complexity of networks should be developed and fostered. Facilitating and management capabilities of key staff in regional initiatives should be strengthened, especially in view of managing change. New and innovative partners should be identified to avoid overloading the "network tigers". Special attention should be given to monitoring and documenting impact.

Access to Centers of Excellence and knowledge systems

Regional initiatives offer scope for teaming up with Centers of Excellence to assist and support national partners. This will allow for accessing a wider, multilateral knowledge base and cutting edge technology. In the NRM sector, the long standing relations of the International Agricultural Research Centers with the National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems proved to be an important advantage for convening a regional initiative. Access to knowledge can often be enhanced through regional activities and interaction with partners advanced in knowledge generation and utilization.

Strengthening research – development linkages

Most present regional initiatives and a good share of bilateral NRM projects of SDC's Asia II Division address research - extension linkages. The interface between research and extension is crucial for development and despite the major effort in this field, there exists scope for improvement. In more general terms, research - development (including extension, credit systems, input supply, marketing etc.) interaction should therefore be a priority issue in both, existing and new regional initiatives.

Including sectors beyond NRM

The Asia II Division is convinced that regional initiatives constitute a mechanism of support, which merits to be examined also in other sectors. The challenge will be to identify suitable partners and, wherever deemed useful, relevant Centers of Excellence with their network of national partners.

Scaling-up of successful local experiences

On other continents, scaling-up of promising experiences made in one country to several neighboring countries has yielded encouraging results. Identifying such national success stories for extension to the Region will therefore be an explicit strategy of Asia II.

Extend to policy dialogue

There exist interesting opportunities for policy dialogue related to regional initiatives: The experiences at micro, meso and macro level can be linked and compared across countries, which allows for more conclusive analysis. Associating policy makers in regional events can help to create awareness and pressure, and hence facilitate policy dialogue at national level.



Guiding principles for regional initiatives

Sectors and thematic fields for the future

In the future, specific efforts will be undertaken to extend regional initiatives beyond NRM, while maintaining support to NRM and building on experiences and lessons learned there. The following broad areas for regional collaboration were identified, with the first two being of higher priority:

- **Governance**
- **Education, especially vocational training**
- Transport and infrastructure
- Institutional and organization development, including public administration reform

Identifying specific options for new regional initiatives shall be a process involving SDC's Asia II Division (both Headquarters and Coordination Offices), thematic divisions of SDC, and Centers of Excellence. This shall be an important common task for the year 2002. It shall involve the following actions:

- Derive, based on the above broad areas, specific fields for potential regional collaboration

- Collect information on regional activities and actors in these fields
- Identify and assess respective Centers of Excellence in the Region
- Collaborate with other donors and consultants with expertise in these fields
- Identify common development priorities among countries in the Region
- Identify success stories in Country Programs which have scope for extension to regional level

A brainstorming among the participants of the workshop in June 2001 identified ideas for new regional initiatives (see Annex 6b). However, the workshop participants had only limited expertise on non-NRM sectors and therefore respective ideas are clearly under-represented. The Asia II Division will consider establishing an "open list" to collect ideas and topics for new regional initiatives.



Geographic scope for regional initiatives

Broadly speaking, the geographic scope for future regional initiatives will be the countries of Asia II, i.e. Nepal, Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, North Korea, Mongolia, Indonesia, Philippines, China and Thailand. However, depending on the thematic area of collaboration envisaged, it will make sense to expand geographic coverage beyond this list, and to include other countries (especially of Asia I).

Participation in regional initiatives will be a matter of interest of the country and the commitment of potential partner institutions and stakeholders within this country. Geographic coverage will have to be discussed on a case-by-case bases, assessing costs and benefits of including each country or institution individually. For initiatives beyond the NRM sector, ecological similarities will probably play a minor role and similarities in socio-economic, historic and political terms will become more important for defining the geographic scope.

Institutional aspects

The objective is to involve actors from the private sector, the public sector and the civil society. Priority will be given to networking among existing institutional and organizational partners and entities at national and regional level. However, where there is a lack of strong institutions active at regional level, such institutions may be strengthened or developed through regional initiatives.

Volume of regional activities

The regional approach will be further strengthened within the Asia II Division. In terms of budgetary allocation, the intention is that by the end of the current SDC long-term strategy for Asia II in 2006, 20% of the Division's budget will be allocated to regional initiatives (Figure 1) up from 15.3% in 2001. This will create space for non-NRM sectors to initiate regional initiatives/programs while leaving a certain flexibility for the NRM sector to exploit new opportunities. The budgetary ceiling stipulated is to be considered as a target, which will have to be revised periodically and adapted to changes in the context.

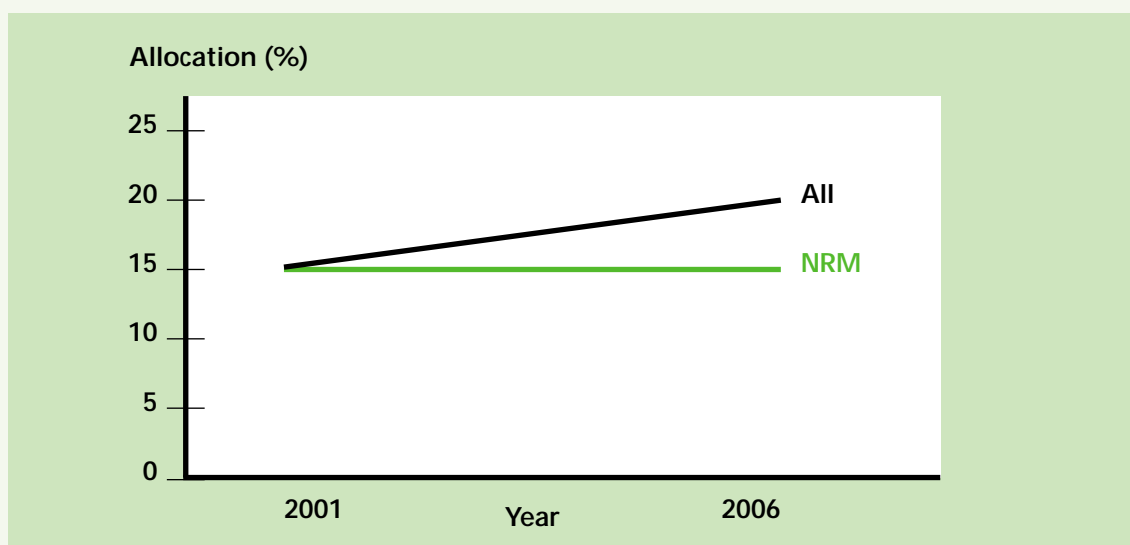


Figure 1: Trends in SDC Asia II allocation of budget to regional initiatives (as percentage of total annual budget of the Asia II Division)

Criteria for assessing proposals for new regional initiatives

Proposals for new regional initiatives will be assessed according to the following criteria:

Regional initiatives must:

- Have a potential for impact (specifying, what type of impact at what level is sought)
- Add value to activities at national level
- Address problems which can only or better be handled at regional level
- Enhance national member countries' capacities and their mutual learning
- Build on strengths and potential of partners
- Build upon existing competencies and opportunities in the region
- Address a high priority issue for the countries concerned
- Address a problem of regional significance
- Make efficient use of synergies and complementarities among countries or organizations involved

The decision to engage on new regional initiatives should as far as possible be based upon consensus within Asia-2 Division.

As a rule, regional initiatives should reinforce an SDC bilateral field of cooperation and vice versa, hence synergies between regional and national initiatives supported by SDC are actively sought. There exist however cases, where regional initiatives without such links are justified:

- Themes which are of overarching importance to Asia II strategy; or
- Topics of strategic importance for SDC as a whole; or
- Strong arguments of key stakeholders to work beyond the priority countries and the Asia II Region

In addition to the above criteria, the "guide for rapid appraisal of regional initiatives" (Annexes 3 and 4) shall be used to assess proposals for new initiatives and to evaluate existing ones.

Institutional set-up (division of responsibility)

Operational responsibility (planning, evaluation, monitoring and implementation) within SDC will be clearly defined for each regional initiative. The division of responsibility between SDC Headquarters and Coordination Offices will be according to the following general rules:

- If the regional initiative is mainly implemented in priority countries, it should be handled by one of the respective Coordination Offices
- If one or several Coordination Offices are predominantly involved in the design of a new regional initiative, one of them should be attributed the operational responsibility
- If a regional initiative does not exhibit a particular link to Country Programs or covers a geographic area reaching far beyond the Asia II priority countries, it should be handled by Headquarters

For all other cases, the mandate for following the initiative shall be defined by the Division. Defining operational responsibility for each regional initiative will be an integral part of reaching a consensus between Coordination Offices and Headquarters. Reporting on regional initiatives shall be improved in view of achieving higher transparency and optimal information status of all Division staff.



Interactions with national activities

Links among projects and initiatives supported by SDC

There presently exist interactions between regional initiatives and bilateral projects, but there are ample opportunities for further collaboration (Table 2).

Interactions among different regional initiatives exist as well: PARDYP and RECOFTC have common board members; ASL/SL and PARDYP are working with common partners and in common research sites. In the future, all regional initiatives could benefit from recent experiences made by IRRC in the area of management of regional initiatives. MRC and RECOFTC could collaborate with ASL/SL regarding sloping land technologies.

Furthermore, many projects supported by SDC work on research-extension linkages or have strong extension components. At regional level these are IRRC, ASL/SL, PARDYP, ARC-AVRDC: At national level the following come within this group:

Bhutan: RNRRC Jakar

Nepal: Tuki, SSMP, new agricultural project

Laos: Lao-extension, Lao-IRRI

Vietnam: SFSP

The maize projects in Laos and North Korea both have strong breeding/agronomy components.

Table 2: Interactions between SDC regional and bilateral support

Regional Initiative or regional organization supported	Existing interactions with bilateral projects	Potential interactions with bilateral projects in:				
		Bhutan	Nepal	Laos	Vietnam	Norh Korea
IRRC	Lao-IRRI (irrigated rice)	RNRRC Bajo			New projects upland	Miru hills
ASL/SL	Lao-IRRI (upland cropping)	RNRRCs	New agric. Project	Laos extension	New projects upland	Miru hills?
PARDYP	Katmandu university SSMP NRM projects of Nepal	RNRRCs	New agric. Project	Laos extension		Miru hills?
MRC				Laos extension	New projects upland	
RECOFTC	NSCFP SFSP (social forestry)	RNRRC Yusipang Forestry III		Laos extension New projects upland	New projects upland	
ARC-AVRDC	RNRRC Bajo (vegetables)		SSMP			
IBSRAM, IWMI SEA-office	North Korea (training)					
ICIMOD	RNRRC Jakar (rangeland management; bee keeping) NRTI (GIS course)					

Abbreviations for different projects supported by SDC Asia II Division

ASL/SL	Asialand Slopingland Network (IWMI (former IBSRAM), Bangkok, Thailand)
ARC-AVRDC	Asian Regional Center- Asian Vegetable Research and Development Center (Bangkok)
IBSRAM	International Board for Soil Research and Management (Bangkok, Thailand), now integrated into IWMI ICIMOD International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (Katmandu, Nepal)
IRRC	Irrigated Rice Research Consortium (IRRI, Los Baños, Philippines)
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute (Los Baños, Philippines)
IWMI	International Water Management Institute (Colombo, Sri Lanka with substation in Bangkok)
Lao-IRRI	IRRI support of the Lao national research system (Vientiane, Laos)
MRC	Mekong River Commission (MRC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
NRTI	Natural Resources Training Institute, Bhutan
NSCFP	Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project, Nepal
PARDYP	Peoples and Resources Dynamics Project (ICIMOD, Katmandu, Nepal) RECOFTC Regional Community Forestry Training Center (Bangkok, Thailand)
RNRRC	Renewable Natural Resources Research Center, Bhutan
SSMP	Sustainable Soil Management Project, Nepal
SFSP	Social Forestry Support Programme, Vietnam



Fostering synergies between regional initiatives and national approaches

There exists the will to further foster interactions between SDC regional and bilateral support. The first step is to exchange information on project activities at both levels and to identify scope for interaction. Lack of information on contents and approaches of the different activities supported by SDC was identified as a major reason for limited interaction so far. It has, however, to be considered that there exist many opportunities to link up with other projects beyond SDC supported ones and that the capacity to interact is limited. Therefore, whether or not to link up with whom should be decided on a case-by-case basis.

The Asia II Division defined the following actions to foster interactions between its projects: An overview table (on the basis of Table 2) will be designed and up-dated regularly. It will be complemented by electronic addresses and a short description of all projects. This overview will be made available on SDC's Internet site. It will be revised yearly.

Highlights of interaction and collaboration among Asia II projects will be reported in annual programs. Themes of common, cross cutting interest may be identified in view of further interactions between projects. Yet, the selection of linkages should be based on a programmatic approach, observing the limits of and the limited capacity for interaction.

Indicators for successful collaboration between different SDC funded projects are:

- The satisfaction of the different projects with the collaboration
- Changes in agendas, approaches, partners etc. due to increased collaboration

Both will be reflected in sections on between-project collaboration in the respective project reports.

Priority setting at regional and national level

The present relationship between regional initiatives and SDC Country Programs is illustrated in Figure 2: Each country has its own development priorities. The Country Programs of SDC cover only part of the national development priorities. Regional initiatives on the other hand, while also well within the national priorities, focus either on other sectors or on other specific issues of regional importance within the sectors targeted by SDC's Country Program. Thus, they

often have a limited overlap with Country Programs and exhibit rather weak links with these programs.

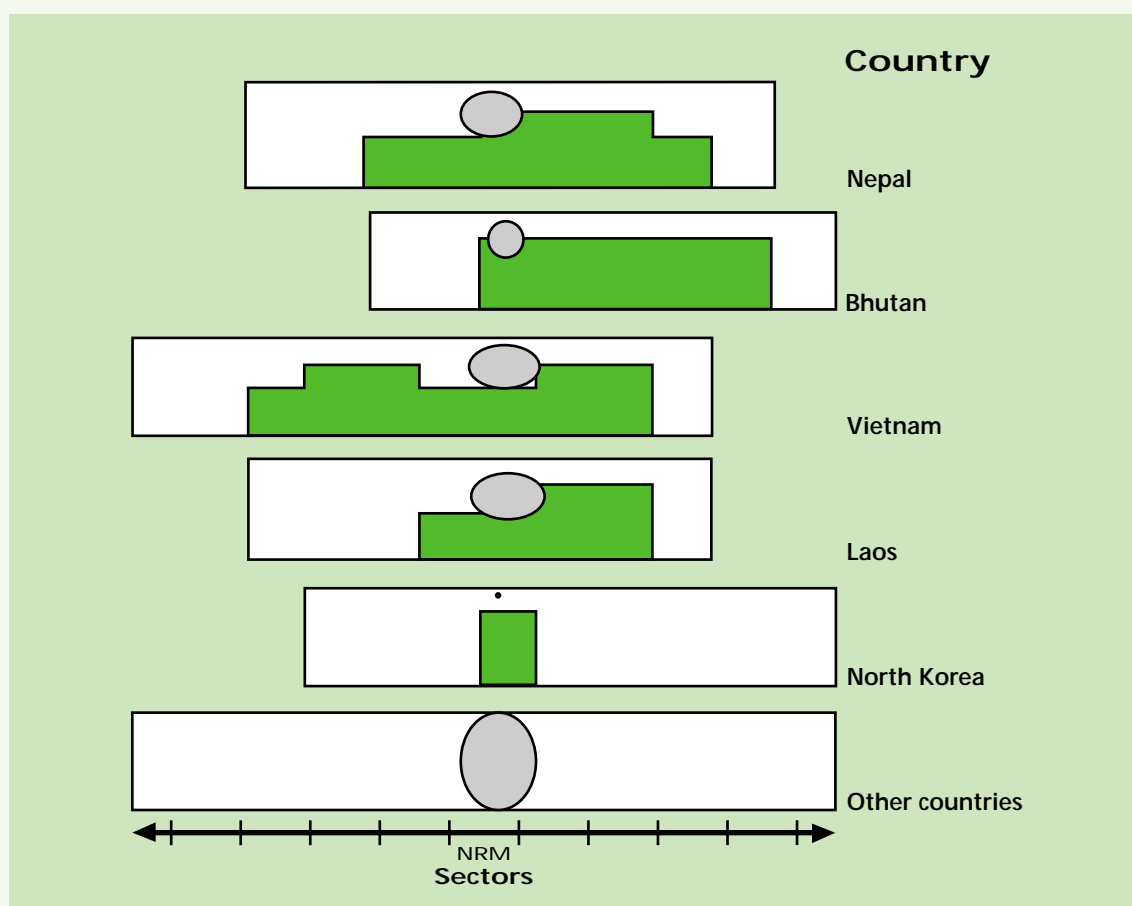


Figure 2: Relationship between regional initiatives and SDC Country Programs in Asia II: Present situation

White boxes: National development priorities
 Green shaded areas: SDC's Country Program
 Ellipses: Activities of regional initiatives

Figure 3 shows a possible model for developing stronger coherence between regional initiatives and Country Programs: The principle outlined in the Asia II Long Term Strategy of focusing on four sectors for SDC's interventions will lead to thematic concentration in the Region and thus will enhance scope for stronger links. But as Country Programs will further prioritize within these four sectors, the strategy will certainly not lead to full congruence between regional and national priorities for SDC supported interventions.

More overlap can be reached by shifting Country Program priorities and by adjusting the focus of regional initiatives. It is, however, not a goal in itself of SDC to reach full overlap between both types of interventions. Rather, it is the links between national and regional interventions, that need to be clearly defined and strengthened, if appropriate, i.e. on a case-by case basis. Embarking on regional initiatives in non-NRM sectors will enhance the opportunities for strong links with the Country Programs right from the outset.

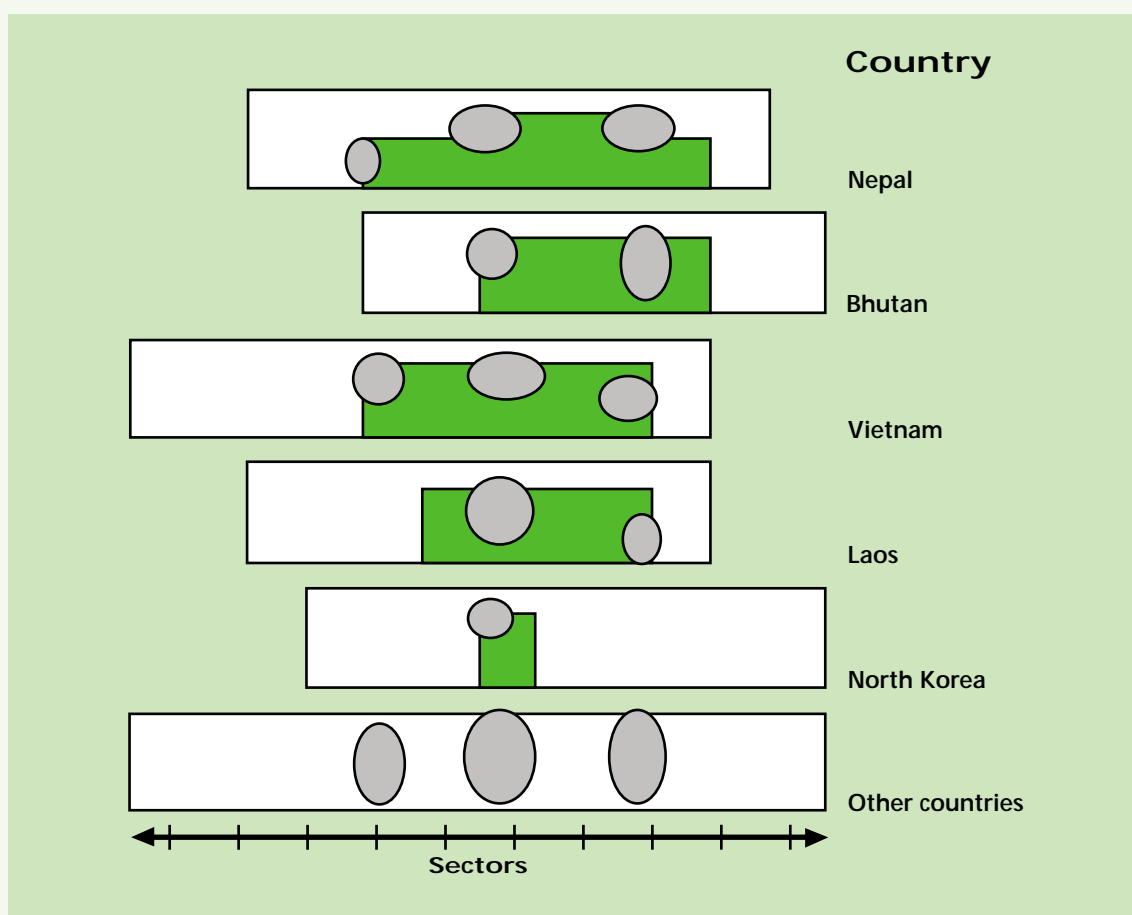


Figure 3: Relationship between regional initiatives and SDC Country Programs in Asia II: Possible model for more coherence

White boxes: National development priorities

Green shaded areas: SDC's Country Program

Ellipses: Activities of regional initiatives

The sectors considered by Asia II are: Human resources development and small industry promotion; Food production and food security; Management and protection of natural resources; Urban development and rural infrastructure

Capitalization of experience in the NRM sector

An analysis of NRM projects supported by SDC revealed a number of key experiences on topics common to several projects, which could be relevant to others in the Region (see Annex 6a):

1. Skills for group approaches and organizational or institutional development: Methodologies for stakeholder participation in multi-stakeholder processes, group facilitating skills, organizational set-up for regional initiatives, participatory curriculum development
2. Experiences in the management of common natural resources (forest, grassland, animal genetic resources): Forestry user group formation, participatory development of management agreements or plans, understanding community group dynamics in view of working with these groups more efficiently, conservation of genetic resources
3. Policy influence in NRM: Understanding the influence of forest policy on community forestry, federation of forest user groups
4. Research - extension linkages: Approaches for linking research and extension at national and regional level, integrated approach to research, extension and training
5. Experiences in soil and water conservation: Understanding of land use dynamics and their effects on water household, understanding of organic matter dynamics, development of strategies and options for soil fertility enhancement (especially related to organic matter management and technologies for sloping land)
6. Vegetable production training: For researchers and extensionists

For each of these themes, experiences can be presently found in several projects (except for vegetable production, which is restricted to ARC-AVDRC). Therefore there exists considerable scope for capitalizing on these experiences through comparing them across projects, joint analysis and drawing lessons. The Asia II Division will explore the possibility of initiating a dialogue among all involved and interested in a certain theme.

Theme (1) appears to have the highest potential for further interaction in the Region. This institutional topic could be highly relevant for new regional initiatives as the lessons learned so far in this respect are probably not specific to the NRM sector.

These experiences will be screened as to their relevance in non-NRM sectors and may constitute additional core competences of the Division for backstopping regional initiatives. Some may provide additional ideas for new regional initiatives.



Conclusions

The major points of the present concept are:

- The Asia II Division is committed to strengthen the regional approach
- The intention is that by 2006, 20% of the Division's budget will be allocated to regional initiatives, up from 15.3% in 2001
- Special attention will be paid to clearly define within the Division responsibilities for regional initiatives
- The Division is determined to take the idea of regional initiatives beyond the NRM sector, it is aware of the fact that this will need special efforts to identify promising themes as well as good partners
- The Division will build upon its core competences for supporting regional activities
 - ample experience regarding structures and management as well as the respective tools developed in the past
 - competence regarding stakeholder participation at all levels
 - flexibility of approaches and possibility of long-term commitment
- The Division will explore the feasibility of capitalizing its ample experience regarding regional initiatives



- The Division will make a systematic effort to reduce the pitfalls associated with regional initiatives (as outlined on page 15) by applying sufficient selectivity for embarking on new initiatives or by conceptualizing new initiatives accordingly



Annexes

1. Experiences within SDC with regional initiatives (workshop at SDC, April 2001)
2. List of participants and agenda of the workshop on Asia II Regional Initiatives Concept (June 2001)
3. Guide for rapid appraisal of regional initiatives (SDC, March 2000)
4. Ten critical elements to ensure the success of a regional initiative (T. Gass, D. Guenat, U. Scheidegger, 2000)
5. Typology of regional initiatives
6. Opportunities for further regional collaboration

Experiences within SDC with regional initiatives

Report of a Workshop with different SDC Headquarters collaborators, Bern, April 4, 2001

Objective: To analyze experiences of different SDC divisions regarding regional initiatives and to collect elements for a new Asia-II concept regarding regional initiatives and evaluate them jointly.

Agenda

1. Introduction: Background and objective of the concept development process
2. Conclusions from the SDC-wide study on regional initiatives in 1999/2000
3. Discussion on experiences from different divisions
 - What are the comparative advantages of regional over bilateral initiatives in your division (why do you support regional initiatives)?
 - What are weak points or risks specific to regional initiatives, which according to your experience are often not sufficiently considered?
 - How do you manage to foster synergies between regional and bilateral initiatives?
 - What concepts and strategies (or strategic elements) do you have in your division regarding regional initiatives? How do you decide on issues like fund allocation between regional and bilateral initiatives?
 - How do you assess new project proposals with regional dimension (what instruments do you use)?
4. Closure: Which elements discussed could be useful for Asia II?

Participants

Paul Egger, Thomas Gass, Christine Grieder, Thomas Zeller

The participants were more knowledgeable regarding regional initiatives from Latin America, Eastern and Southern Africa and Asia-II. Nevertheless, experiences from West Africa and Asia-I were also taken into consideration, even though no representatives of these divisions could attend. All the participants were from the RNR sector and thus the view is somewhat biased towards this sector, yet this is congruent with the fact that roughly half of all the regional initiatives supported by SDC are located in this sector.

Which type of regional initiatives are supported by the different SDC divisions?

In all the divisions different types of regional initiatives are supported:

- Type A (concentrating on information exchange, coordination and institutional strengthening)
- Type B (output oriented and beneficiary dependent)
- Type C (output oriented and not beneficiary dependent)

Another type of regional collaboration was presented by the Latin America division: "SDC internal regional exchange" i.e. the exchange of technical competence, administrative procedures and strategic experience between SDC staff in the Region.

A further type of regional approach was presented by Latin America and Asia-II: Developing actually a regional program similar to a country program (Centro-America Program and Mekong Regional Program).

Many of the regional initiatives are related to research and technology development

Rationale for supporting regional initiatives

The basic question here was: What are the comparative advantages of regional versus bilateral initiatives.

Regional implementation of promising experiences made at national level (Type B1, typical example POSTCOSECHA):

- scaling-up of local experiences, have an impact on a larger scale
- backstopping capacities become affordable

More efficient way to tackle certain issues:

- Research and specialized education are often too expensive for individual countries, regional approach makes it affordable and more realistic
- Topics like ecology/environmental protection, trade, security, infrastructure can be dealt with more efficiently in the regional context

- Certain problems (e.g. the control of the cassava mealybug, sustainable use of the Mekong river basin) can be addressed only at regional level
- Sharing of responsibilities enhances efficiency
- Possibility to exploit synergies between countries

Strengthening the competence of national partners and their cooperation:

- Exchange South-South using the different strengths of different partners (e.g. high level of education in South Africa, driving force of Mexico)
- Investing in regional educational competence and capacity (e.g. Zamorano, RECOFTC)
- More efficient use of local human resources
- National competencies and capacities become more visible in the regional context - > can be tapped bilaterally
- Allows to foster regional integration

Risk aversion:

- Risks related to political instability in certain countries can be mitigated by working with several countries (focus of work can be shifted in short term e.g. from Nicaragua to Honduras and back)
- Recovery from disasters (natural and man made) can be quicker in the regional context as resources can be shifted between countries (human resources, know-how, institutional capacity, germplasm)
- By working with several countries, the risk of complete failure is reduced

Policy dialogue becomes more effective:

- Regional discussion creates higher awareness and pressure at national level
- Possibility to use relevant experiences of regional program for policy work (e.g. Biodiversity, intellectual property)
- Scope to relate the micro and the macro level
- Regional activities gain in visibility at national level

Access to centers of excellence:

- Easier tapping of multilateral know how and research
- Facilitates collaboration with centers of excellence

Benefits for SDC:

- Allows SDC to build and up-date thematic, sectorial competence and capacities
- Enhances professionalism and horizon of SDC staff (both at HQ and in COOFs)
- Complementarity regarding centers of excellence (Divisions: What can we use? Sectorial services: How can we help maintain, develop, orient this excellence?)
- Increases effectiveness of bilateral projects (e.g. PapaAndina, AGUASAN)
- SDC internal exchange allows to capitalize on experience "in real time" and opens horizons of SDC staff (to our colleagues, to experiences from outside)

Risks or weaknesses specific to regional initiatives

Risks were identified in the following fields:

1) Impact orientation

It is sometimes felt that the orientation of research networks is to academic and theoretical, especially among the many regional initiatives undertaken in collaboration with CG centers. The number of papers published seems more important than impact. Important partners of most regional initiatives, the national (often governmental) institutions may tend to neglect demand orientation. Yet, it was also mentioned that because regional initiatives are often dealing with issues not immediately tangible (capacity building, methodology development, pilot strategy and technology testing) it is difficult to demonstrate impact at the national or sub-national level. Impact is often dependent on intermediaries (e.g. extension) and if these are weak or if the initiative fails to establish adequate links with them, impact at the grassroots level will be missing.

2) Priority setting

There exists a genuine risk that priorities in regional initiatives are guided more by the professional interest of its national partners than by national realities. However, the mechanisms for priority setting in regional initiatives are different from those for country programs: Different partners and stakeholders are involved differently in the process. This sometimes con-

veys the impression that "priorities of the regional initiative do not correspond to national reality".

3) The role of SDC and ownership

Responsibility for regional initiatives is often not clearly with an SDC COOF. A lack of ownership by SDC staff in the field may result, with corresponding lack of interest in and information about the initiative. This situation is aggravated by a lack of coincidence between bilateral and regional activities of SDC in terms of geographical focus, priorities and themes. In general, the role of SDC in regional initiatives is more delicate. A risk of conflict occurs especially, if empowerment is a declared objective of the initiative on one hand, yet on the other, SDC (or the implementing agency) tries to get involved in micro-management.

Yet, ownership has another aspect: Regional initiatives depend on strong national, organizational or individual stakeholders. If ownership among members is weak, there exists a risk of perceiving the initiative as just a source of funds or even of misuse of the regional initiative by a few members. Alternatively, especially with mature regional initiatives, there exists a risk that it is run by a few members as a routine affair; the budget is allocated according to "tradition" rather than along a clear concept and no programmatic development occurs anymore.

4) Leadership

Leadership is crucial for regional initiatives and is very demanding. In research networks often researchers are recruited for this task, yet they are frequently poor coordinators and communicators.

5) Funds and funding

Regional initiatives often depend to a high degree on international funding. Financial contributions by member countries are difficult to ensure. This leads to questions regarding the sustainability of this mechanism of collaboration. Donors engaging on regional initiatives need to be aware, that these often have a longer term investment horizon and thus represent a longer term commitment.

Regional initiatives are sometimes considered to involve high transaction costs (e.g. for meetings, mutual visits and study tours, joint planning and evaluation of activities across borders etc.). In addition, in the case of CG centers serving as implementing agency, it is sometimes criticized that the Center is charging a project management fee (overhead) instead of recognizing the "additional value" derived from managing the initiative.

6) Miscellaneous risks

There exists a risk that countries are "flooded" by regional initiatives, which partly overlap. In regional initiatives, success and failure take more time to express themselves. And finally, it is important to keep in mind that regional initiatives are not a substitute for national programs, rather they can complement them.

How to foster synergies between regional and bilateral initiatives?

The following strategies were mentioned as having served this purpose:

- In the Latin America division, clear thematic priorities were established for bilateral projects; since presently projects on similar topics are implemented in several countries of the region, regional initiatives may be identified corresponding to bilateral priorities and hence with good potential for synergies with bilateral projects.
- In Eastern and Southern Africa there is a move to choose an eco-regional focus in such a way that synergies between regional and bilateral initiatives occur; it is also a tendency to use different types of regional initiatives (including SDC internal exchange) in a complementary way.
- The use of results of the regional initiatives (services, products, training) at national level is fostered; however, to make this happen, regional initiatives need to communicate their results and SDC should pay close attention to monitoring of the regional initiatives and circulation of the lessons learned.

On a general level, the following measures were discussed to foster synergies:

- Themes and levels of intervention should be chosen that are conducive to regional coordination.

- A concentration process should be initiated (geographical, institutional, thematic concentration) of different activities at bilateral and regional level.
- Activities (bilateral and regional) should focus on the same problem; the challenge will be to identify common interests.
- Awareness of staff for opportunities related to regional initiatives should be promoted.

Strategic questions

An important question raised was, if it is realistic and necessary to insist on synergies between regional and bilateral initiatives. It was argued that regional initiatives have a "raison d'être" in itself.

This especially considering that the objectives of both types of interventions may be different:

Regional level:	HID Sharing tasks Coordination Awareness raising and policy aspects
Bilateral level:	Changes at meso and micro level

Regarding the measures mentioned above, it was emphasized that convergence (of focus) requires time and the preparedness to abandon traditional partners and institutions.

Finally, the following questions should be addressed and clarified:

- How are synergies defined, what are the criteria? Is the overall criteria that synergies should enhance the efficiency of bilateral projects (that regional initiatives should "serve" the bilateral purpose)?
- Why have synergies not been exploited in the past?
- What are the conditions and the incentives needed to foster the interest in synergies?
- In search of synergies, should there be a tendency of up-scaling or down-scaling?

List of participants and agenda of the workshop on regional initiatives, Asia II, June 12 – 14 2001

Participants

Asia II Division, Headquarters:

Eliane Darbelley
Paul Egger
Werner Hunziker
Jaques Mader
Carmen Thoennissen

Asia II Coordination Offices

Pradeep Itty, Hanoi
Walther Roder, Thimphu (representative)
Roger White, Katmandu (representative)

Coordinators of regional initiatives

Jim Hill, IRRC
Cor Veer, RECOFTC
Roger White, PARDYP

Others

Peter Bieler, SDC Natural Resources and Environment
Urs Scheidegger, Facilitator/moderator

Objective of the workshop: To develop a new concept for the SDC Asia II division support to regional initiatives, which shall define the scope of these programs and provide guidance for enhancing synergies and complementarities between national and regional initiatives

Guiding principles for the workshop:

- The new concept shall as far as possible represent a consensus among all participants
- The concept shall provide a new programmatic framework, i.e. based on overall vision, purpose, scope and objective of Asia-II and relevant experiences. The aim is not to elaborate a concept that would justify on-going regional initiatives.
- Future purpose, scope and volume of regional activities shall be discussed in the workshop and are not pre-determined

Agenda

Time	Topic	Input
Tuesday: Analysis of Regional Initiatives		
09:00	Welcome	
	Objective of the workshop	Paul Egger Carmen Thoennissen
09:15	Review the agenda	U. Scheidegger
09:30	Presentation of IRRC; Discussion	Jim Hill
10:30	<i>Coffee</i>	
11:00	Presentation of RECOFTC; Discussion	Cor Veer
12:00	The different types of Regional Initiatives in SDC and Asia-II	U. Scheidegger
12:30	<i>Lunch</i>	
14:00	SWOT analysis of Regional Initiatives	All
16:00	<i>Coffee</i>	
16:30	Relation between regional and bilateral initiatives	All
19:00	<i>Dinner</i>	
20:30	Relation between regional and bilateral initiatives, continued	All
Wednesday: Prospects of Regional Initiatives		
08:00	Strategic analysis: Expectations, context and competences regarding RPs	All
09:30	Experiences and strategy regarding regional approaches in Eastern Africa	Peter Bieler
10:00	<i>Coffee</i>	
10:30	Presentation: SDC guidelines for regional approaches; regional strategy in Latin America	U. Scheidegger
11:00	Presentation of PARDYP, Discussion	Roger White
11:45	Strategic choice: Identifying options	In groups
12:30	<i>Lunch</i>	
14:00	Strategic choice: Assessing options	All
16:00	<i>Coffee</i>	
16:00	Scope of these options in the Asia II program development	Paul Egger
16:30	Implications, Implementation in Asia II (priorities, partners, responsibilities, organization)	
	Implications for existing RP	All
19:00	<i>Dinner</i>	
Thursday: Scope and Synergies of Bilateral and Regional Initiatives in NRM		
08:00	Strength in national and regional NRM initiatives	All
09:00	Synergies between national and regional NRM activities,	All
10:00	<i>Coffee</i>	
10:30	Opportunities for further regional cooperation in NRM	All
11:30	Opportunities for regional collaboration in sectors other than NRM	All
12:30	Next steps for concept formulation and implementation	
	Closure	U. Scheidegger, Carmen Thoennissen
13:00	<i>Lunch</i>	

Conceptual framework for strategy development during the workshop

Objective	Means	Details
Create a common understanding regarding the issues at stake	Presentation of cases from Asia II	Leaders of IRRC and RECOFTC present their programs (- > can serve as examples in later discussions)
	Presentation and discussion of types of regional initiatives	Results from workshop-1 and desk study
	SWOT analysis of Asia-II regional initiatives	
Create a common understanding regarding the relations between regional and bilateral (national) activities	Structured discussion Presentation of results of desk study	Asia-II activities by sector Links between regional initiatives and Country Programs/MRP Competition between regional and bilateral activities Do we need synergies between regional and bilateral activities Potential for synergies (general) Indicators for synergies
Develop strategic elements for the Asia-II regional initiative concept	Strategic analysis and choice: Structured discussion Presentation of regional initiative strategy in Latin America, Eastern Africa and SDC-wide	Expectations of SDC regarding regional initiatives What are realistic expectations from regional initiatives The context for developing regional initiatives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political situation in the Region Regional activities of other donors Resources and competences of SDC Asia-II Strategic options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thematic areas Institutional choices (partners, regional initiative type) Geographic choices (priority countries, others) Strategy evaluation and selection: Matrix scoring
Agree on principles for strategy implementation	Structured discussion	Regional initiatives and organizational structure of the section Resource allocation, scope and volume of regional initiatives Managing strategic change
	Analysis of implications for on-going regional initiatives (case studies)	Discuss intended changes with regional initiative leaders
	Agreement on next steps	Next steps for concept paper formulation etc.
Assess or identify opportunities for regional collaboration	Structured discussion	Implications for on-going regional initiatives
	Brainstorming	Potential for synergies between regional initiatives and bilateral projects (specific)
	Brainstorming	Opportunities for regional initiatives in sectors other than NRM

Guide for the rapid appraisal of regional initiatives, Berne, Switzerland, March 2000

The advantages and opportunities of working through regional initiatives

Choosing to work through a regional initiative is an important strategic choice, both for potential member institutions or country as well as for cooperating agencies

Regional initiatives have a strategic role in development co-operation

- Regional initiatives can help to reach critical mass and facilitate complementarity. When resources are scarce and problems are common to several countries, a regional approach can help development or research activities reach a critical mass of participants in order to come to a meaningful sharing of burdens, make more efficient use of the members' different capacities and thus reach a solution in shorter time. This has been recognised by the European Commission, which requires research proposals to include a critical mass of relevant partners within the region.
- Regional initiatives can help capitalise on specific experiences. By allowing formal and informal mechanisms of peer review as well as a certain competition between members to take place, regional initiatives make more of the individual experience of members. They also help underpin a regional "institutional memory".
- Regional initiatives can facilitate consensus building and participation. The development of a "common language" within regional initiatives allows for more efficient collaboration across national and cultural frontiers. Regional initiatives facilitate the identification and definition of common problems, as well as agreement about common approaches to solving these problems. They also allow the setting of common standards at regional level.
- Regional initiatives can make investment into development more efficient. Member institutions jointly participate in the identification of problems and selection of approaches to solving these. Significant benefits can arise from this common undertaking (simultaneous problem solving in the member institutions or coun-

tries). As long as the context is comparable and the problem shared among several countries, a regional initiative can allow considerable economies of scale and speed up the diffusion of successful solutions.

- Regional initiatives can foster empowerment. If well oriented and managed, regional initiatives emphasise the contribution and value of each member towards the common objectives. The visibility and the influence of the member institutions can thus be enhanced at the regional and at the national level. By taking a common stand, the members of a regional initiative can obtain a voice in forums in which they would not normally be heard. E.g. regional groups in large international conferences. In development agencies, we are frequently reluctant to strengthen national (or national level) institutions. However, their empowerment needs to be seen as complementary to the empowerment of the end-beneficiaries.

Based upon a study of the regional initiatives (networks, regional projects, regional programmes, etc.) in which it is involved, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has drafted the present Guide for the Rapid Appraisal of Regional Initiatives. The purpose of this tool is to highlight the principal risks related to various forms of regional initiatives and to suggest avenues for the resolution or avoidance of such problems.

The rationale underpinning the present tool is that the success of a Regional Initiative depends heavily on the **coherence between the objectives, the internal factors and the frame conditions** of the regional initiative. For this reason the questions of this Guide refer firstly to the objectives, to the internal factors and then to the frame conditions.

This tool **does not pretend to capture the whole diversity** of forms and approaches of existing regional networks and programmes. Its objective is to draw the attention of the user upon possible risks and solutions related to the main

traits of the regional initiative. It should furthermore help donors in assessing the coherence between their expectations of regional initiatives, and the means provided for their support.

SDC and Regional Initiatives

SDC has a long history of involvement in and support of regional initiatives. A recent study has identified 90 Regional initiatives, excluding core financing to regional or international centres of expertise. Figures 1 and 2 show how these regional initiatives are distributed thematically and regionally.

Figure 1: Thematic distribution of Regional initiatives in which SDC is involved

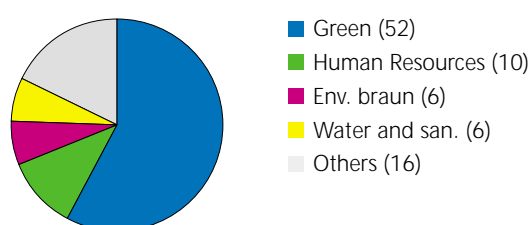
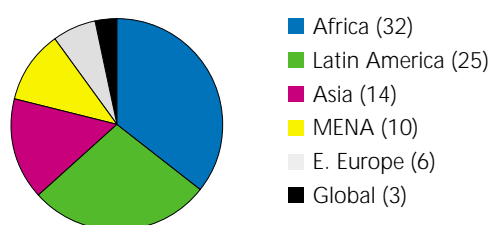


Figure 2: Regional distribution of Regional initiatives in which SDC is involved



How to use this Rapid Appraisal Guide

1. Obtain background information about the regional initiative. Obviously the more is available the higher the reliability of the assessment. However, the purpose of this tool is to facilitate a preliminary assessment to identify potential risks and critical issues, on the understanding that these would then require further verification. Typically, an SDC *Credit Proposal* should provide a sufficient basis to make this assessment.

2. Are the preconditions for a successful project met? The success of a regional initiatives is strongly predetermined by two factors which determine the success of any project, namely:

- The **quality of the management** of the regional initiative, including charisma and leadership quality, as well as management tools for planing and monitoring.
- The general **attitude of the donor agency towards the project** (its themes, its people, its institutions). It would be dishonest to pretend that a donor's attitude towards a regional initiative (or any project for that matter) is totally free of prejudices and unbiased. The personal preferences of a programme officer may strongly determine the continuation of support to a project irrespective of the objective results achieved by the latter.

If the two above-mentioned criteria can be answered positively, the analysis that follows may point to a number of critical issues without pretending to be neither exclusive nor totally comprehensive.

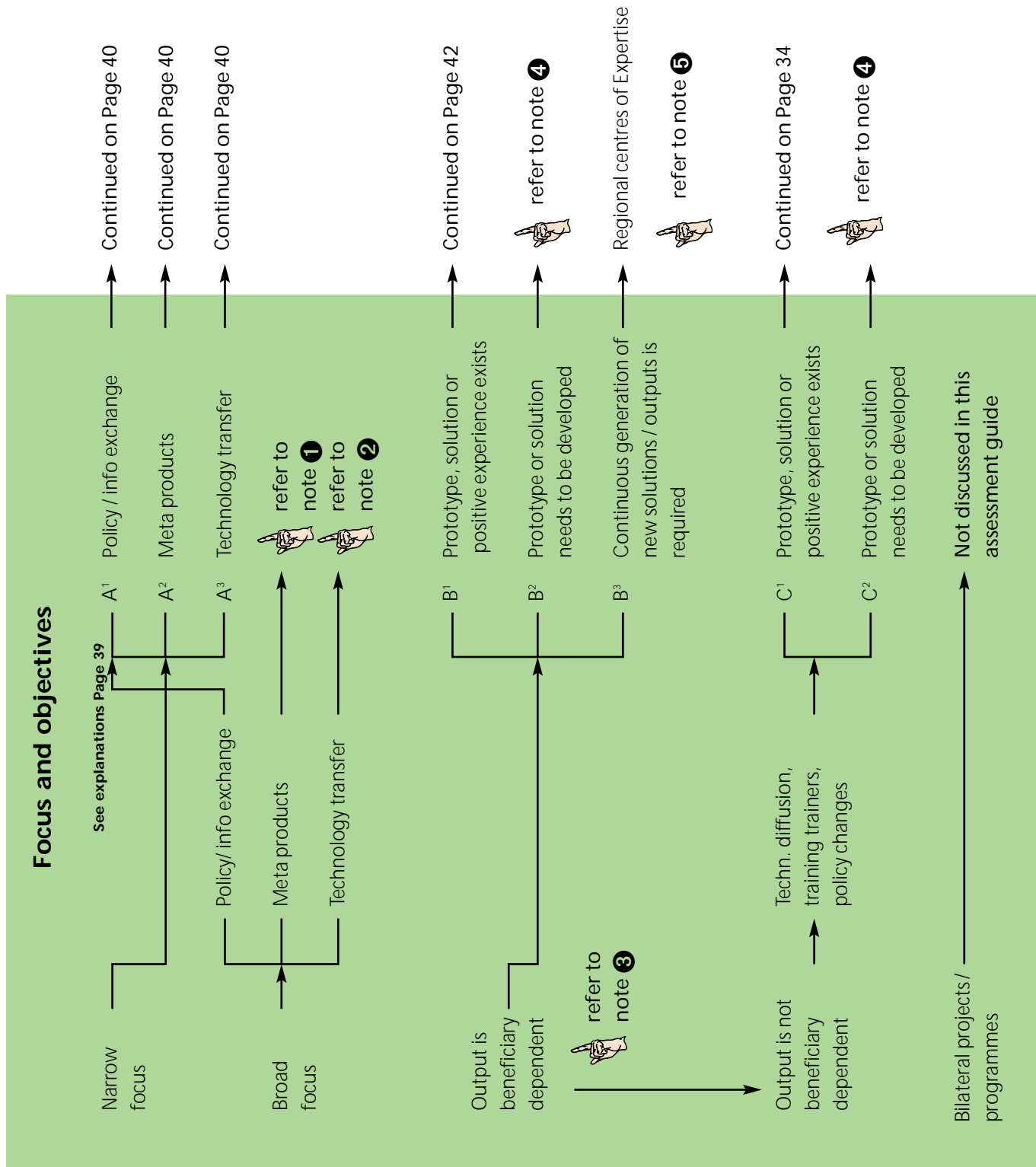
3. Determine the path which best corresponds to the situation/description of the regional initiative at a given moment in time, by using the chart and the corresponding notes. A "🚧" -symbol" along the path will point to potential difficulties or to critical factors, or may redirect you towards a new path. Reaching the "✅" -symbol" would mean that the main critical issues and potential risks have been steered clear off, and that a high degree of coherence exists between objectives, internal and external factors. Frequently it will be necessary to test several paths in the guide to determine the one best describing a given regional initiative. Also changes in time or complexities within a regional initiative may make more than one path relevant for a given initiative.

4. Notes about consequences for funding. It was noted during the study that the duration of the donor's funding commitment is a very frequently debated issue. For the donor, financial self-sufficiency of the regional initiative is implicitly or explicitly an important objective and a proof of sustainability. At the end of each "successful path", a note preceded by the "👉" -symbol", attempts to draw a number of conclusions regarding funding implications for donor agencies.

Type of regional initiative
(see explanations Page 39)

A

Coordination info-exchange and institutional strengthening (see legend on facing page)



B

Output oriented, diffusion of technology/positive methods and experiences (see legend on facing page)

C

D

Type A Regional initiatives concentrating on information exchange, co-ordination and institutional strengthening. Low involvement in output-oriented operations.

Type B Output oriented regional initiatives (generation or transfer of technologies); the output is beneficiary dependent - that is, the contribution or adoption by beneficiaries is essential for the success of the initiative (e.g. use of a new technology by entrepreneurs).

Type C Output oriented regional initiatives in which the output is not beneficiary dependent - that is, the contribution or adoption by the end-beneficiaries is not essential for the success of the initiative (e.g. biological pest control by inundation, establishing pollution standards for imported cars, training trainers programmes, etc.).

Focus Does the regional initiative focus on a specific topic (e.g. malaria, beans, training) or on complex issues (e.g. sustainable resources management)?

Policy/Info Regional initiative concentrating on policy dialogue within the region, on awareness raising, advocacy, etc. implying mainly decision makers at political level

Meta-products Products such as research results, methodologies, prototypes, enhanced germplasm, etc.

Note 1 – diagnosis

In the case of complex themes (e.g. natural resources management: rural development, urban development, etc.), achieving the "meta-products" will require more time and resources than for simple themes. It is likely that donors' commitment will decline as the expected results are delayed, especially if the regional initiative is not strongly linked to similar activities/projects at the bilateral level.

Note 2 – diagnosis

Same comments as under Note 1 (above), but in addition the link of the regional initiative to existing and effective intermediaries at the national level (NGOs, business centres at meta level, efficient extension service, private professional advisors, etc.) is essential in order to ensure impact at the target population level.

Note 3 – comment

For initiatives in Category B, the quantity of outputs and the level of impact are highly correlated with the operational funds being invested by the donor (as long as the strategy is right - of course). In this type of initiative, "sustainability" means that an increasing part of the operational costs are being taken care of by the project partners (members or other donors) in order to maintain the same output level. The big challenge is to avoid that the level of operations falls back when the funding agency withdraws from the project.

Note 4 – diagnosis

The regional initiative is oriented towards concrete outputs, but the solutions or technology to produce these products still needs to be developed before diffusing them. In this case, one should distinguish and clearly separate the solution finding phase of the project (see 4a and 4b), from the diffusion or multiplication phase of the project (see 4c).

Note 5 – diagnosis

If the continuous generation or development of technological solutions or meta-products is needed, the key question to ask is whether this activity corresponds to a public or to a private good. If the development of the meta-product is a public good, end-beneficiaries will not be prepared to pay for them. Long term commitment from donors will therefore be essential (see 4a and 5b). If the development of the meta-product corresponds to a private good, heavy donor involvement may distort the market for that meta-product (see 5c).

Solutions

- 1a) Reduce the Initiative to a bilateral project and restrain to countries in which good coherence with the overall bilateral programme exists.
- 1b) Focus the objectives to achieving results at policy/info exchange level.
- 1c) Provide sufficient funding to enhance level of operations and choose a mode of operation within Category B.

Solutions

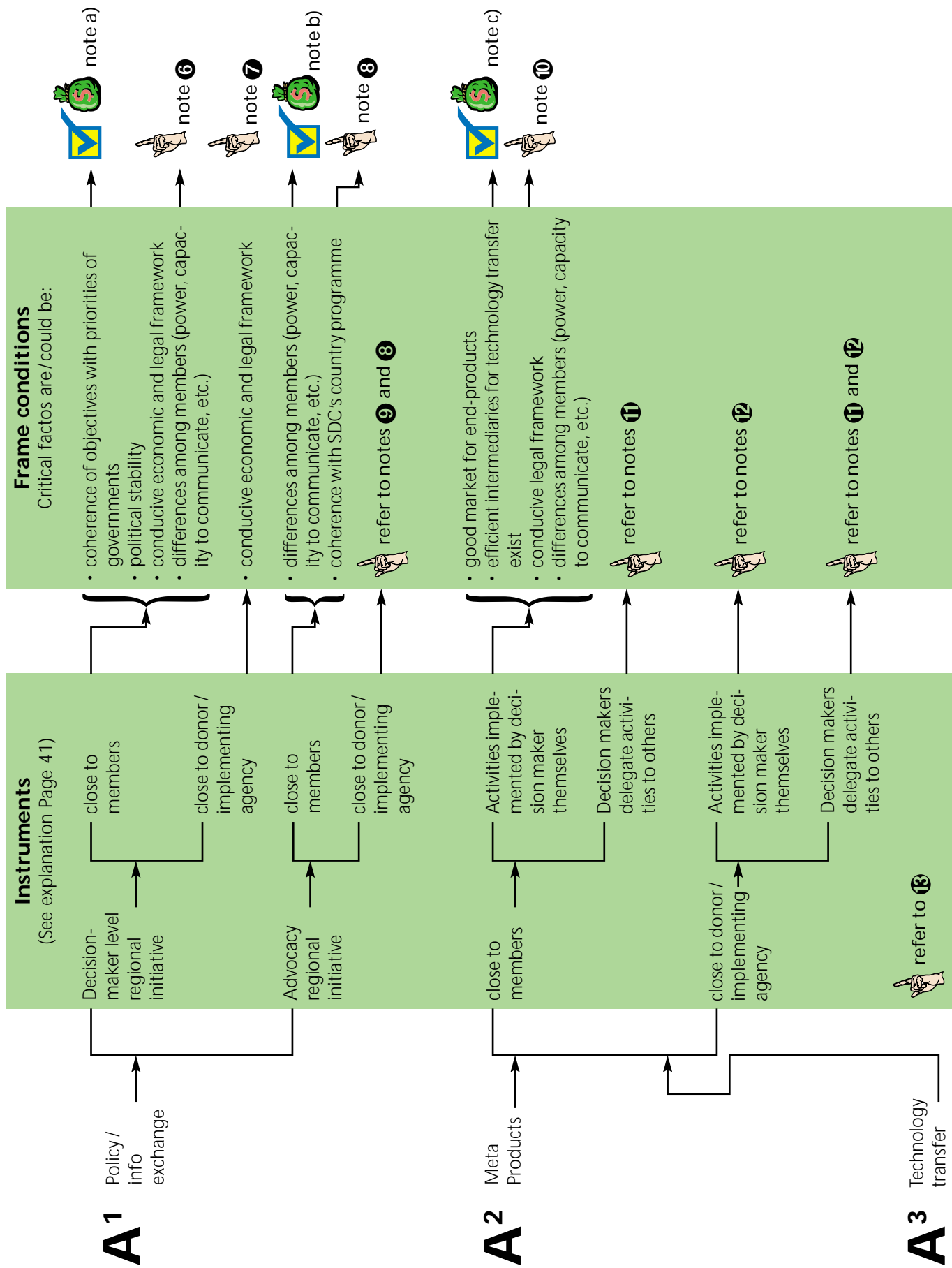
- 2a) Reduce the initiative to a bilateral project and restrain to countries in which coherence with donor's bilateral programme is high. Ensure intermediaries either exist or are strengthened by the project.
- 2b) Reduce or focus the objectives to achieving results at policy/info exchange level.
- 2c) Provide sufficient funding to enhance level of operations and choose a mode of operation within Cat. B.

Solutions

- 4a) If each member has something essential to contribute towards the development of the solution or the "prototype", consider a regional initiative of the Type A1, but leave sufficient control of funds to the members to avoid the problem flagged at Note 12 (on Page 6).
- 4b) If members have nothing essential to contribute to the development of the solution, concentrate efforts for the development of the solution in one country or in a regional centre of expertise. A regional initiative of Type A1 may be useful, as "sounding board" to ensure need orientation, testing and relevance of the solution or prototype being developed.
- 4c) Once the solution or the "prototype" has been developed, or the positive experience in the pilot country has been achieved, restart the path at the Letter B1 (or C1).

Solutions

- 5a) Option I: The national institutions could be strengthened to become able develop the needed solutions through a combination of bilateral projects and perhaps a regional initiative of type A2.
- 5b) Option II: There may be a need to establish or to work through an existing regional or international centre of competence, since the long term donor involvement is most efficient in this way.
- 5c) If the development of the meta-product corresponds to a private good, it is worthwhile to first test the approach through a bilateral project. In any case, donor funding should only be in the form of starting funds or seed money - that is, operational costs should not be subsidised in the long term. **See also note f).**



Decision-maker level regional initiatives are those in which meetings and communication prevails at the level of those taking the operational decisions which are essential to reach the impact thought by the regional initiative.

Advocacy regional initiatives are those in which meetings and communication prevails among persons and institutions who need to convince policy makers to take certain decisions in order for the regional initiative to have an impact (e.g. Regional environment or human rights lobbies)

Note 6 – diagnosis

If the mentioned frame conditions are negative, this "constellation" of factors will probably lead to endless discussions but to no positive changes. The regional initiative will probably soon die due to lack of funding and support by the members.

Note 7 – diagnosis

There is a risk that the donor/implementing agency involvement "dopes" the negative effects of the external factors such as coherence of objectives with priorities of governments and stakeholders; conduciveness of legal and economic framework; and differences among members. The donor could be manipulating the members of the regional initiative. If this is the case, the regional initiative will not survive long after exit of the donor.

Note 9 – comment

In this case the donor support/influence should remain at a minimum (e.g. funding of only 50% of the common services - such as salary of the co-ordinator, publications, etc.). If this is not so, that is, if the donor funding is quite substantial, there is a strong risk that this kind of network does and speaks what it thinks the donor would like.

Note 8 – diagnosis

If differences among members are great, the regional initiative could be dominated by a few of its members. In addition, the regional initiative could be advocating or lobbying for something which is contrary to government policy. This could bring the donor's bilateral programme into a difficult situation.

Note 10 – comment

As long as only "Meta-products" (e.g. technological solutions, enhanced germplasm, etc.) are expected, this type of regional initiative is quite successful, as it can fully make use of the advantages of a networking structure. The level of activities however depends on the level of funding available to the members at their own discretion. This determines the amount of voluntary (in-kind) contributions they can make towards the core objectives of the regional initiative. If more then "meta-products" are expected, the external factor "links to effective intermediaries" very becomes critical.

Note 11 – diagnosis

In this case, primary outputs such as meeting reports and awareness raising activities are usually satisfactory, but the real opportunities related to networking can not be capitalised upon because the people/institutions taking the operational decisions and actually doing the work, do not meet/interact directly. If the regional initiative is close to the members it tends to remain superficial. If the regional initiative is close to the donor or implementing agency (e.g. because of substantial operational funding), the mode of operation is very "centrifugal" (or top down).

Note 12 – diagnosis

There may be incoherence between the objectives for this regional initiative. If a donor agency invests a lot of funds it usually expects more than meta-products, namely concrete impact. The regional initiative is probably being taken by the donor or implementing agency from a Cat. A to a Cat. B or C type of regional initiative (that is, towards a stronger output orientation). If this is the case, start the algorithm again at the letter B or C.

Note 13 – diagnosis

If the success of the regional initiative is measured in terms of "adoption of technology", the link of the regional initiative with effective intermediaries is essential. Within Cat. A, the lack of such intermediaries can usually not be imputed to the project itself, unless it had funds and the mandate to establish/strengthen such intermediaries.

Close to donor / implementing agency is meant to describe regional initiatives in which substantial funding or a very proactive role gives the donor a disproportionate influence on strategy and priority setting of the regional initiative.

Close to members is meant to describe regional initiatives in which the members (countries or national institutions) set the agenda themselves with at most minor influence from donors (e.g. when the initiative is mostly self funded, funded through many donors, or funded by one donor on a discretionary basis)

Solutions

6a) Monitor and try to influence in a favourable way the external factors: coherence of objectives with priorities of governments and stakeholders; conduciveness of legal framework; differences among members.

Solutions

7a) Monitor very carefully the following external factors mentioned in Note 4 and try to influence them favourably.

7b) the donor agency may "justify" its continued involvement by the need to "catalyse" policy changes in the countries of the region, for example compliance with international conventions, WTO, IMF, etc.

Solutions

9a) The funding/support could be reduced to a level which would oblige the members to themselves substantially contribute to the regional initiative. In this way it can be ensured that the regional initiative serves the needs of the members and not those of the donor.

Solutions

8a) Training and institutional strengthening can be provided to correct differences among members.

8b) In the case of political incoherence with the donor's bilateral programme, the regional initiative could be supported indirectly through a Swiss NGO.

Solutions

11a) Consider restructuring the regional initiative to have more interaction/meetings of those (people or institutions) who are implementing the activities. This can be obtained through the activation of specific working groups and a reduction of the number of meetings of the Steering Committee - that is, by bringing more of the networking activities to the "operational" level.

Solutions

12a) If the objective of the regional initiative is "self-management" in order to empower the member institutions, the funds should be given with very few conditions. Note also that if the members of the regional initiative, are obliged to create or mandate an institution, to manage large amounts of funds, this institution may begin to act as an implementing agency and compete with the member countries own national programmes instead of strengthening them. In this case the algorithm should again be started from the letter B or C.

Solutions

13a) If intermediaries are lacking or weak, consider strategies to establish/strengthen them either through the regional initiative itself, or through complementary bilateral activities. Start the algorithm again at the letter B or C. Page 7

	Instruments	Frame Conditions Critical factors are / could be:	example / refer to
<p>B¹</p> <p>Prototype, solution or positive experience already exists</p>	<p>Regional programme to diffuse / transfer the model to other countries</p> <p>Close to members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> many donors member funded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> good market for products efficient intermediaries conducive economic and legal framework differences among members (power, capacity to communicate, etc.) coherence of objectives with priorities of governments coherence of objectives among donors <p>note 10</p>	<p>note d)</p> <p>note 14 and 16</p>
<p>C¹</p> <p>Prototype, solution or positive experience already exists and can be implemented without participation of beneficiaries</p>	<p>Regional programme to diffuse / transfer the model to other countries either by working directly at policy level or through a training centre</p> <p>Close to donor / implementing agency</p> <p>note 17</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> good market for products efficient intermediaries <p>note e)</p> <p>note 18</p>	<p>note g)</p> <p>note 19</p>

Note 14 – diagnosis

These critical factors can impede the regional initiative in various ways:

- Lack of market for end-products: lack of efficient intermediaries and a restrictive economic and legal framework will hinder the adoption of the solutions or technological options proposed by the regional initiative. This can result in a lack or absence of impact. See 14a)
- If the differences among members (power, capacity to communicate, etc.) are great, the initiative could be dominated by one or few members, or the governance will de facto be given up to the coordination unit or institution. See 14b)
- Lack of coherence of objectives among donors can lead to continuous restructuring and resetting of the agenda, and finally to the paralysis of the regional initiative. See 14c)

Note 15 – diagnosis

In developing countries, this case (high member involvement, low donor involvement and high level of outputs) probably represents the unattainable ideal situation. A high level of member funding can sometimes be reached through linking to debt-conversion programmes or if the perceived benefit/cost ratio is so high that a country would invest into the regional initiative instead of solving its own problem directly. This may be the case with some regional activities in Category C, in which impact/benefits from the initiative are not dependent on numerous factors at national/local level.

Note 16 – comment

If the members are forced by the donors to establish or mandate an institution, to manage the funds and coordinate the project, this institution may begin to act as an implementing agency and compete with the member countries' own national programmes instead of strengthening/empowering them.

Note 17 – diagnosis

If differences among members are great, the regional initiative could be dominated by a few of its members. In addition, the regional initiative could be advocating or lobbying for something which is contrary to government policy. This could bring the donor's bilateral programme into a difficult situation.

Note 18 – diagnosis

If the price of the end product is declining, the demand for the "meta-product" (research result, technical solution, enhanced germplasm, etc.) may also be declining. Technology adoption and impact will be hindered. See 18a) If efficient intermediaries at meso level are lacking or not well linked to the regional initiative, it will not reach the criteria for success (adoption of technology), the link of the regional initiative with effective intermediaries is essential. See 18b)

Note 19 – diagnosis

Output oriented regional initiatives in which the outputs can be "imposed" on the beneficiaries, have the disadvantage that the feedback about relevance of the product to the beneficiaries may not occur automatically or may be difficult to obtain. (e.g. biological pest control by inundation, establishing pollution standards for imported cars, training trainers programmes). The project can not rely on "lack of adoption" to protect it from diffusing non-relevant or even harmful solutions.

Solutions

- 14a) Monitor and try to influence these factors. If these factors remain negative, the project will be expensive without having impact. There is little justification for further support, except perhaps to change from a Cat. B1 to a Cat. A1 type of regional initiative until these factors have become positive. Note that changing to a Cat. A1 type of regional initiative would require a reduction in funding and possibly the dismantling of a heavy project implementation unit.
- 14b) This problem can sometimes be resolved through training and institutional strengthening.
- 14c) Differences between donors need to be settled as much as possible away from the Board or Steering committee of the regional initiative.

Solutions

- 15a) It may be worth testing an approach whereby, the member countries buy services from the regional initiative - contributing in this way to its funding (ref. "invertir la mirada" at the regional level).

Solutions

- 16A) The management of large funds by network members at a regional level is unrealistic. A certain institutionalisation of the management of such initiatives is unavoidable. Donors should be aware of the possible competition with national institutions.

Solutions

- 8a) Training and institutional strengthening can be provided to correct differences among members.
- 8b) In the case of political incoherence with the donor's bilateral programme, the regional initiative could be supported indirectly through a Swiss NGO.

Solutions

- 18a) This may be a constraint which is impossible to overcome. It may be necessary to change either the meta-product, the countries involved or close the project.
- 18b) Consider strategies to establish/strengthen such intermediaries either through the regional initiative itself, or through complementary bilateral activities.

Solutions

- 19a) It may be useful to collaborate with a broadly based network of the Type A1, to ensure that the products are relevant. In the case of a training centre or a training-the-trainers programme the Board or Steering Committee can take this role as long as its members are sufficiently aware of the realities in their respective countries.



Notes for discussion about consequences on funding and donor commitment

- a) Regional coordination to exchange information, harmonise positions and raise awareness of policy makers is extremely important for the empowerment of institutions and organisations in a country. The need for this type of regional initiative is frequently long-term. Donor commitment to such initiatives should be long-term, restricted in quantity (part of the coordination costs), made dependent on a proven demand by members (i.e. preparedness to contribute at least in kind to the coordination costs), re-evaluated at rather longer intervals (not more frequently than every 3 years), and provided with little "strings attached".
- b) Justification for support is similar to a), but this type of regional initiative is probably more sensitive to donor influence and less dependent on long-term commitment by donors. Funding should only cover part of the coordination costs; donor profile should be low (initiative could even be supported indirectly through a Swiss NGO); and funding duration could be linked to certain milestones (e.g. international conference) or the achieving of specific results (e.g. countries of a given region join an international convention on Human rights).
- c) The generation of meta-products can make very good use of the opportunities of regional coordination. However it requires more than just funds for coordination. The challenge is for the donor agency to provide funds for operations without "taking full control" of the network. This means that the funds need to be quite discretionary or distributed through a competitive funding mechanism for which the rules are established with the network members. Commitment needs to be long-term (time needed to develop meta-products). Donor agency needs to be aware that it is too much to ask of this type of network to "establish the intermediaries" needed in order for the meta-products to achieve an impact in the field. These are additional activities which may need to be supported bilaterally.
- d) In this Type of regional initiative, multi-donor support is usually preferred for donors to avoid risk or because the costs are too high for one donor. In both cases it is difficult to achieve a real empowering effect at the level of member institutions / countries, because the quantity of funds involved usually require a separate regional or international institution to be mandated with the management of these funds (e.g. UN programmes). The cost / benefit ratio of these initiatives is not very high but donor participation is frequently motivated by multilateral obligations.
- e) As is mentioned in Note 17 (Page 8), the choice whether to go regional depends on management efficiency. Several bilateral projects with good information exchange between them may be just as effective. Duration of donor support can be linked to the achievement of specific objectives. Phase out and "privatisation" of the project needs to be considered from the beginning.
- f) When continuous generation or development of technological solutions is needed in the case of a public good, donor commitment must be long-term (> 10 years). This is true whether the donor chooses to strengthen national institutions or whether the work is to be done through a regional centre of competence. Excessive restrictions to the funding (earmarking) will prevent the implementing institution to follow strategic long-term goals and force it to be opportunistic. The result is that soon none of its donors are satisfied.
- g) In this Type of regional initiative, multi-donor support is usually preferred for donors to avoid risk or because the costs are too high for one donor. In both cases it is difficult to achieve a real empowering effect at the level of member institutions / countries, because the quantity of funds involved usually require a separate regional or international institution to be mandated with the management of these funds.

Ten Critical Elements from the perspective of a development agency to ensure the success of regional initiatives

Thomas Gass, Dominique Guenat, Urs Scheidegger

The strategic role of regional initiatives in development

Regional approaches in development co-operation projects are frequently based on the following rationales: 1) increased efficiency in the implementation and administration of projects that need to be carried out in several countries; and/or 2) enhanced shared management and problem solving contributing to an enhanced sustainability of the project.

Enhanced management efficiency is based primarily on the short-to-medium term perspective of the donor or the implementing agency for which economies of scale and the simultaneous advancement of an agenda in several countries may be important from a strategic point of view. Examples of this approach include the development of simple post harvest technology in one country and its subsequent diffusion in a region (Project POSTCOSECHA), and the germplasm enhancement by international research centres leading to the distribution of advanced breeding material through a regional network).

The second rationale - that is, that regionalisation will bring about shared management, institutional strengthening and enhanced sustainability, is the principal focus of the present paper. Although this is frequently quoted as a reason for regionalising a project, it is often unclear how the mode of operation of the project will facilitate reaching this objective and how its achievement will be measured.

In 1999, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) conducted an internal study of networks and regional projects. This study led to a Guide for the rapid appraisal of regional initiatives. This guide is based on an assessment of the coherence between objectives, mode of operation and frame conditions, and can be used in the preparation of the planning or evaluation of a regional initiative. The following ten points resulted as some of the key elements determining the success of a regional initiative.

Critical element 1: Clarity about goals and objectives

Regionalisation implies a diversification of project partners with varying perceptions of the "common problems" and the priority they should be given. If these partners are actively involved in the decision making processes as the second rationale (see above) would require, it frequently leads to a broadening of the projects objectives. This is particularly the case when the theme of the project is very comprehensive (e.g. natural resources management, urban development, etc.). While regional projects can contribute towards broad goals (expected impact of the project), it is very critical that the objectives or the purpose (i.e. the expected effect during the project lifetime) are established very realistically. Such clarity in the objectives takes to arrive at in a participatory way. Up to 18 months and sufficient flexibility may need to be budgeted in the project planing process.

Critical element 2: Maintaining a clear focus

Regional initiatives, which attempt to deal with complex issues (e.g. natural resources management, rural development, urban development, etc.), are slower in the development of methods, in the establishment of objectives and the implementation of workplans. Socio-economic factors and subjective perceptions play a more important role in problem solving, and variations of the key factors influencing success may be larger between countries than within countries. Such projects frequently have to face the impatience of nervous foreign donors who rapidly start micromanaging the project and thereby tend to exacerbate the project's difficulties. The SDC study showed that such regional initiatives have been more "successful" when they have worked towards objectives such as enhanced information availability, the sharing of tasks and capacities, the diffusion of methods/products among countries, capacity building and institutional strengthening.

Where the objective was to bring about a change at the "grassroots" level, the success of the project depended on too many factors, which were not under control of the regional initiative. Much of the expected changes needed to be brought about by local or national institutions/NGOs which did not have sufficient resources and/or independence from the regional co-ordination to act in a demand driven way.

Critical element 3: The right type of network to fit the objectives

The Rapid appraisal guide refers to a number of types of regional initiatives characterised by their mode of operation. These types are not necessarily mutually exclusive as a regional project may combine several of them and may evolve from one type to another over time. The guide argues that this modus operandi needs to fit with the objectives set for the regional initiative.

Critical element 4: Membership is a question of costs and benefits

In the case of regional initiatives of Types B and C, each new country added to the project means additional costs and complexity. Since the regional initiative functions in a centrifugal

way, additional members/countries are additional users/consumers but not really contributors. The key question here is whether economies of scale really outweigh the limitations linked with the regional approach (more difficulties to adapt to specific national frame conditions or to change them). Therefore, each new member needs to be assessed carefully (total funds available; additional costs versus additional impact). Furthermore, it is feasible to plan the phasing out of interventions in one country in order to focus on new ones.

In the case of Type A regional initiatives, the following questions need to be answered:

- Can the new member (new country) be brought to buy-in to the essential consensus already reached by the existing group?
- Is it likely that the potential new member will contribute additional capacities, resources, ideas, etc. and increase the likelihood of achieving the goal and objectives?
- Will these additional benefits outweigh the additional cost resulting from the new member's participation?
- In some cases the objectives may require new members to be included even if the answer to the above questions is negative (e.g. regional co-ordination at policy level).

	Modus operandi	Realistic objectives
Type A:	Close to members, co-ordination unit plays a facilitating role, moderate (or discretionary) funding by foreign donor, links between members are emphasised	Enhanced information availability, the sharing of tasks between members, the diffusion of methods/products among countries, capacity building and institutional strengthening
Type B:	Strong co-ordination unit, high level of funding, link to and capacity of intermediaries is actively promoted, relationships between members and the co-ordination unit prevail over those between members	Diffusion of a successful technology or method for which adoption by beneficiaries is essential. Changes at grassroots level
Type C:	Centrifugal type of regional initiative centred around an institution (centre of excellence), relationships between members and the co-ordination unit prevail over those between members	Diffusion of a successful technology or method for which adoption by beneficiaries is not essential. E.g. training centre, biological pest control by inundation, etc.

Critical element 5: Avoiding dominance by donor or implementing agency

Whenever empowerment of member institutions is an objective, the interactions between members of the regional initiative and the network's sensitivity to their priorities and challenges is essential. This is very difficult to achieve if the donor and/or the implementing agency are very dominant (in terms of funding, or technical content). To avoid such dominance, an increased share of the funding may need to be provided on a discretionary basis (given adequate control and management mechanisms), the total budget may need to be reduced to ensure that member institutions can match the external funds adequately, and decision making mechanisms may need to be revised. The character of the co-ordinator (co-ordinating team) is essential and the donor's and implementing agency's ambitions for higher regional visibility may need to be moderated.

Critical element 6: Enhancing interactions at operational level

In order to capitalise on the advantages of a network, regional interactions should happen at the level of those who are expected to work together between meetings. Many regional initiatives would gain from a reduction of the Steering Committee meetings and an increase of interactions between specific working groups. This also reduces the risk for micro-management and means that operational decisions are delegated to a more relevant level (subsidiarity).

Critical element 7: The role of centres of excellence and experts

Centres of excellence and experts play an essential role to guarantee the quality of the regional initiative's activities and outputs. They also facilitate links of the regional initiative with relevant partners at the international level. If the role of these centres is very dominant, progress will be impressive, but empowerment of the partner institutions and identification of these with the initiative will be low. It takes a lot more time for a regional initiative to develop an

annual workplan in a truly participatory way, than for the centre or implementing agency to suggest it. The dominance of a centre of excellence will also polarise the interactions in the network (at the cost of the relationships between members). It should be noted that the dominance of the implementing agency is sometimes exacerbated by the donors requirements for rapid and tangible results.

Conflicts of interest may also arise between a centre of excellence needing to affirm its international authority through high level policy or research, and the members of a regional initiative who are seeking to enhance their own profile and solve the sometimes very "down to earth" problems in their constituency.

Critical element 8: Seeking complementarity between regional initiative and donor's bilateral programme

Rapid and durable impact at the level of end users depends to a large degree on the existence of active intermediaries, which respond and convey the demand of the end-beneficiaries, and need to be well connected to the regional initiative. The regional initiative is seldom given the means to activate such intermediaries. In such cases, a bilateral or multilateral programme needs to specifically take care of this function in close co-operation with the regional initiative.

Critical element 9: The quality of Management

The personality of the co-ordinator, but also the quality of decision making and management processes play a key role in the success of any project. In the case of regional initiatives decision-making processes and communication are frequently more complex and frame conditions affecting the partner institutions are more difficult to influence. Furthermore, country representatives in the decision making fora are often higher ranking (in hierarchy) than their colleagues who will have to implement the agreed workplan, which makes co-ordination very challenging.

Critical element 10: The commitment of donors

The commitment of donors towards regional initiatives needs to take into account the time needed to reach the objectives and the fact that regional priorities compete with national ones when it comes to the allocation of restricted national budgets. *Regional co-ordination to exchange information, harmonise positions and raise awareness of policy makers* (Type A) is extremely important for the empowerment of institutions and organisations in a country. The need for this type of regional initiative is frequently long-term. Donor commitment to such initiatives should be long-term with little "strings attached", but restricted in quantity (part of the co-ordination costs) and made dependent on a proven demand by members (i.e. preparedness to contribute at least in kind to the co-ordination costs). In some cases it may be best to limit the funding duration to certain milestones (e.g. international conference) or the achieving of specific results (e.g. until a given number of countries join an international convention on Human rights).

Research for development can make very good use of the opportunities of regional co-ordination. However, it requires more than just funds for co-ordination since member countries frequently do not have the means to carry out an agreed workplan. The challenge is for the donor to provide funds for operations without "taking full control" of the network. This means that the funds need to be quite discretionary or distributed through a competitive funding mechanism for which the rules are established with the network members. Intermediaries may need to be activated through a separate project, which could also include funds for them (as users) to pay for services from the regional initiative (as supplier).

In large regional programmes of Type B, multi-donor support is usually preferred in order to avoid risk or because the costs are too high for one donor. In both cases it is difficult to achieve a real empowering effect at the level of member institutions / countries, because the quantity of funds involved usually requires a separate regional or international institution to be mandat-

ed with the management of these funds (e.g. implementing agency, UN-Agency, etc.).

When continuous generation or development of technological solutions is needed in the case of a public good (health, natural resources management, etc), donor commitment must be long-term (> 10 years). This is true whether the donor chooses to strengthen national institutions or whether the work is to be done through a regional centre of competence. Excessive restrictions to the funding and micro-management will prevent the implementing institution to follow strategic long-term goals and force it to be opportunistic.

The nature of a regional initiative can change, or be changed over time through the influence of donor funding and commitment. This needs to be part of the sustainability strategy for the regional initiative.

Regionalisation as a donor approach

Regionalisation of a whole co-operation programme has been considered by donors and international institutions instead or complementary to a bilateral approach. The rationales for doing so are analogous to those for regionalising a single project. The following, albeit incomplete and debatable list of pros and cons of a regional donor approach is intended as a basis for discussion. It is likely however that a donor's regional approach can only be as good as the regional approaches of the specific projects it entails.

Advantages of a regional donor approach:

- Integration into a regional thrust and dynamic
- Strengthening of countries' capacity to deal with globalisation
- Risk avoidance and flexibility for the donor
- Higher catalytic function of the activities (impact in more countries)
- Higher empowerment effect
- Opportunities for complementarities between regional and bilateral
- Can apply to work with governments or /and NGOs
- Better integration with multilateral initiatives

Disadvantages of a regional donor approach:

- In case national priorities change substantially, and supplant regional ones, there is a risk of increased donor dependence (sustainability).
- Ownership of national stakeholders may be difficult to obtain/increase.
- Impact is more indirect and hence less under the control of the donor
- The visibility and direct influence of a donor at the national level may be reduced
- Less influence on objectives such as decentralisation and local governance (unless complemented by the necessary bilateral projects)
- Intermediaries (such as national networks, institutions, NGOs, etc.) need to be activated in each country to facilitate the transfer between the regional initiatives and the end beneficiaries.
- Limited influence over the frame conditions at national policy level. Success requires a number of minimum frame conditions to be met.

Regional initiatives have a strategic role in development co-operation

Regional initiatives can help to reach critical mass and facilitate complementarity. When resources are scarce and problems are common to several countries, a regional approach can help development or research activities reach a critical mass of participants in order to come to a meaningful sharing of burdens, make more efficient use of the members' different capacities and thus reach a solution in shorter time. This has been recognised by the European Commission, which requires research proposals to include a critical mass of relevant partners within the region.

Regional initiatives can help capitalise on specific experiences. By allowing formal and informal mechanisms of peer review as well as a certain competition between members to take place, regional initiatives make more of the individual experience of members. They also help underpin a regional "institutional memory".

Regional initiatives can facilitate consensus building and participation. The development of a "common language" within regional initiatives, allows for more efficient collaboration across national and cultural frontiers. Regional initiatives facilitate the identification and definition of common problems, as well as agreement about common approaches to solving these problems. They also allow the setting of common standards at regional level.

Regional initiatives can make investment into development more efficient. Member institutions jointly participate in the identification of problems and selection of approaches to solving these. Significant benefits can arise from this common undertaking (simultaneous problem solving in the member institutions or countries). As long as the context is comparable and the problem shared among several countries, a regional initiative can allow considerable economies of scale and speed up the diffusion of successful solutions.

If well oriented and managed, regional initiatives emphasise the contribution and value of each member towards the common objectives. The visibility and the influence of the member institutions can thus be enhanced at the regional and at the national level. By taking a common stand, the members of a regional initiative can obtain a voice in forums in which they would not normally be heard. E.g. regional groups in large international conferences. In development agencies, we are frequently reluctant to strengthen national (or national level) institutions. However, their empowerment needs to be seen as complementary to the empowerment of the end-beneficiaries.

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Annex 1: To what extent do specific regional initiatives contribute to capitalising on the regional approach of SDC in a given region

++ = yes
 + = to some extent
 0 = no

Advantages	Rating	Comments
Within the regional initiative, SDC and its counterparts are integrated into a regional thrust and dynamic that goes beyond what would be possible with a sum of simple bilateral projects		
Through the regional co-ordination/integration resulting from the initiative participating countries and institutions are strengthened in their capacity to deal with globalisation		
The initiative contributes to spreading SDC's risk in the region and provides it with additional flexibility with regard to geographic emphasis of its interventions		
The regional initiative makes best use of synergies, complementarities, and economies of scale thus raising cost efficiency and optimising likelihood of impact at a regional and national scale		
The regional initiative contributes significantly to the institutional strengthening of its member institutions (empowerment) and raises their profile at a regional and national level		
The regional initiative makes use of all the opportunities for complementarity and synergies with relevant bilateral and multilateral projects in the region		
The regional initiative is temporarily preserving the provision of an important public good in the member countries, while a new partner basis is being established at the national level to provide this public good		
Disadvantages		
Higher risk of donor dependence as priorities of participants at national level do not coincide with the ones of the regional initiative (no demand for a regional approach)		
Impact is more indirect and will take longer to be achieved, than through a sum of bilateral projects		
The visibility and direct influence of the donor at the national level is less than with a sum of bilateral projects		
Little impact on SDC's objectives such as decentralisation and local governance (unless complemented by relevant bilateral projects)		
Additional costs through the need to activate intermediaries (such as national networks, institutions, NGOs, etc.) to facilitate transfer between the regional initiatives and the beneficiaries.		
A number of important frame conditions for achieving the specific objectives are not met and are placed outside the sphere of influence of SDC because the initiative is regional instead of a sum of bilateral projects		

Typology of regional initiatives

The broadest term used within SDC to refer to regional activities is "regional approach". There have been numerous attempts to come up with a coherent typology of regional approaches, yet all have their strengths and shortcomings. For the sake of clarification, the most widely used criteria for differentiating are presented here, based on the Operational handbook of SDC (t.300 DAN/MOK/RK/GTO, August 2000):

1) Differentiation of regional approaches according their relation with SDC

- a. Regional collaboration within SDC (involving mostly SDC Coordination Office staff or SDC project staff)
- b. The regional initiative properly speaking (network, project etc. with participation of several partner institutions)
- c. Regional organizations (institutions aiming at enhancing regional integration)
- d. The Regional SDC Program (comparable to an SDC Country Program, but covering several neighboring countries)

There does not exist a clear cut border between (b) and (c); the main difference for SDC is that it has potentially more involvement in conceptualizing, planning and monitoring of (b) than of (c). Regional initiatives sometimes evolve into regional organizations (e.g. RECOFTC), obtaining the legal status of international organizations within their host country. Regional organizations may benefit from core or program support from SDC.

Over the past few years, SDC has elaborated regional programmatic plans as a framework for its support to several neighboring countries served by one and the same Coordination Office (e.g. the "Mekong Regional Program").

2) Differentiation based on criteria for defining the "Region":

- geographical/ecological similarities
- political, historical, socio-economic similarities
- similarities within the sector of interest
- existing trade relations or economic networks
- existence of a regional institution or several institutions with similar regional focus

3) Differentiation based on envisioned functioning of the initiative

- exchange of information
- exchange of material (germplasm, training material, prototypes etc.)
- exchange of competence, services etc.
- common work plan and division of responsibilities

4) Differentiation based on structural set-up of initiative

Degree of formality and relations between coordination and members

5) Differentiation based on focus and objectives of the initiative

(Typology followed in the "Guide for the rapid appraisal of regional initiatives", Annex 3)

- Type A: Focus on exchange of information, coordination and policy dialogue
 - 1: Policy/information exchange
 - 2: Meta products
 - 3: Technology transfer
- Type B: Output oriented, beneficiary dependent
 - 1: Prototype, solution or positive experience exists
 - 2: Prototype or solution need to be developed
 - 3: Continuous generation of new outputs required
- Type C: Output oriented, not beneficiary dependent
 - 1: Prototype, solution or positive experience exists
 - 2: Prototype or solution need to be developed

Opportunities for further regional collaboration

a) Analysis of the experiences in SDC supported NRM projects, which could be relevant for others in the Region (workshop, June 2001)

Topic / score*	Specific experience	Source
Experience in management of common resources •••	Forestry user group formation, management planning	RECOFTC (from Nepal)
	P, C + I process multi-stakeholders; basis for management agreements	RECOFTC
	"Farmers' forest management schools"	RECOFTC
	Experiences in the management of common resources (forest, grassland)	Bhutan
	Community group dynamics (how to work with these)	ICIMOD, NSCFP, PARDYP
Skills, organizational, institutional development •••••	Conservation of animal resources (domesticated and wild)	Bhutan
	Participatory curriculum development	RECOFTC
	Participatory curriculum development	SFSP, RECOFTC
	Methodologies in stakeholder participation	IRRC
	Experience of working with many partners in NRM regional initiatives	Asia II Division
Soil and water management ••	Training in facilitation skills in forest user groups	RECOFTC
	Project structure for regional approaches	IRRC
	Improved organic matter management and dynamics	SSMP, PARDYP
	Soil fertility management	IRRC, ASL/SL, PARDYP, SSMP, Lao-IRRI, Miru Hills
	Effect of land use on water household	Nepal, MRC, ASL/SL, PARDYP
Research extension linkages •••	Technology for sloping land	ASL/SL
	Land use dynamics (understanding and implications)	PARDYP
	Research extension linkage	SDC, LBL, Bhutan, Laos
	Integrated approach in research and extension and training in NRM	Bhutan
	Models, approaches to link research and extension (NARES)	IRRC, ASL/SL, RNRRC-Jakar, Lao-IRRI, ARC-AVRDC
Policy influence in NRM •••	Interaction with NARES (continuum for research and extension)	IRRC
	Influence of forest policy on community forestry	RECOFTC, NSCFP
Vegetable production training	Federation of forest user groups	NSCFP
	Training on vegetable production (for researchers and extensionists)	ARC-AVRDC

• Votes given by participants regarding the question: "Which two themes have the greatest potential for interaction in the Region?" The question was detailed further by agreeing that Asia II would explore the possibility to initiate a dialogue with all involved and interested on such cross-

cutting themes. One theme would be on the agenda for about one year. The theme with the highest score would be a good candidate to begin with. If and how to embark on such a thematic dialogue will have to be defined by the Asia II Division.

b) Ideas for new regional initiatives (tentative, incomplete)

A brainstorming among the participants of the workshop in June 2001 identified the following ideas for new regional initiatives. The participants were explicitly asked for ideas both within and beyond NRM; yet, due to the experience represented in the group, most ideas come within the NRM sector. Thus, this clearly represents a preliminary, tentative list of ideas.

Enhancement of skills (organizational and institutional development, program management, participatory decision making)

- Leaders' circle(s) on well defined themes (e.g. governance)
- Fostering issues relating to governance
- Intercultural reflection on governance
- Develop enhanced project management skills
- Knowledge management and learning networks
- Enhance access to knowledge (shared project knowledge)
- Support a regional program or initiative to work on a theme identified in the session before (Annex 6a).

Certification of organic products

- Scope of niche products (e.g. organic products from mountain agriculture) on international market
- Market for organic (or broader "sustainable") products

Other ideas in the NRM sector

- Regional program for selected ICRAF and CIAT activities
- Agricultural extension service (loose network)

