

*The Methodology of the idea programme*

## **4. The Methodology of the IDEA Programme**

### **Underlying approach**

At the most basic level, IDEA works in two ways: realistic, iterative environmental problem definition, and individualised responses designed to improve management capability relevant to each country task. In short, the IDEA teams intervene in the process of management, learn about it and improve it in an hands-on approach. In this sense, IDEA's methodology is action research or action learning, which has been described as:

combining past experience, organisational intelligence and future goals in a mode of action-oriented management which is intended to produce valid information, informed choice and, most importantly, a commitment to action based on consensual knowledge  
( Comfort,1985).

An underlying premise of IDEA is that common definitions of environment are often too narrow in their focus on biophysical factors, at the expense of the human, social environment and requirements for increased production for human survival and national development. Such a narrow definition of environment narrows the management task unacceptably and leads to failure. IDEA redefines environment, and thus the tasks of environmental management in the context of national development, as a mediation process between economic/industrial needs and the maintenance of the biosphere, with the objective of an increased level of integration. In this way IDEA projects attempt to operationalise the vague but useful concept of sustainable development in a practical manner. Within IDEA, sustainable development is a dynamic process of good environmental management, not a static product.

A second premise of IDEA, now validated, is that senior scientists or administrators, with the support of a network like the CCGTM/IDEA Network, can move outside of their professional boundaries to become important agents of change in the improvement

of the quality of environmental management for development, where management is defined as the broad process for effecting change. This understanding, and particularly the means to achieve it, is a major output of the Programme.

In IDEA's seven pilot action and management projects, the project leader initiates a process whereby institutional and human resource constraints on integration are gradually overcome by the iterative problem redefinition, and a gradual widening of awareness and participation in problem resolution among major stakeholding agencies and individuals. These people gradually coalesce into a concerned local network, but at a pace which is politically and socially sustainable on a local basis.

The local project networks benefit from their linkages to the wider IDEA Network, and its parent Network, the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Technology Management, which has links to around 150 senior scientists, managers, planners and environmentalists in the 50 countries in the Commonwealth. The linkage is far from one way however, and the international IDEA/CCGTM Network draws much of its knowledge and authority from its involvement in practical case studies, such as the IDEA projects.

### **Methodology**

In a nutshell, the methodology is such: the IDEA programme identifies a project leader with the potential to develop wide ranging scientific, political and inter-personal skills. The team leader selects an IDEA funded researcher to assist. Between them, they identify an environmental problem of major national or regional significance and secure approval to tackle this problem through the IDEA programme from the Office of the Prime Minister or the appropriate financial ministry. The IDEA Project is outside of the usual bilateral aid programme.

The project leader then begins to publicise the problem, often through contacts in the media, and gathers together a Project Advisory Group (or Steering Group) of relevant, initial stakeholders. Stakeholders have been defined as an individual or a group which can have an impact, either positive or negative on a given situation (Honadle and Cooper, 1989). A stakeholder has access to resources which can be mobilised to affect the problem.

A well chosen advisory group lends credibility to the project, and is a key early step to resolving the problem.

The project advisory group, working with the project leader, becomes a self-organising team which then redefines the problem as necessary and starts to develop consensus as to its true nature. As a result of this process of problem reiteration, the original problem gradually gets redefined at a level at which it starts to become manageable, neither too limited in scope and therefore excluding relevant factors, nor too large to be tackled spatially or organisationally.

This process of problem reiteration therefore has inter-related spatial and institutional dimensions. For example, the watershed management project in Ghana found that it needed to expand its focus to encompass logging in the upper reaches of the watershed for relevant action to be possible. The spatial expansion drew two additional government agencies and another local administration into the management process. The Zambian team, on the other hand, found that the huge watershed of the Kafue, which was their initial focus, was simply too large and diverse to tackle as a project in institutional development. After some 'learning by doing' they refined their area of focus to the most stressed areas of the lower Kafue basin and the Copperbelt region.

The main criteria in these decisions is to make progress in improved environmental management for development rather than stick rigidly to a particular boundary definition. Often it is only the informal, parallel organisation which has the flexibility to redefine its mandate in this way during an unfolding process of problem redefinition.

The process also allows agencies to begin to mediate their conflicting objectives by recognising the importance of both self-interest and a growing awareness of the general environmental good, and starts generating commitments by agencies to participating in problem resolution. In other words, agencies (including the private sector) start becoming part of the solution rather than the problem. The process also allows other agencies to be drawn in as necessary. The team leader either facilitates this process, or in more stubborn cases, acts as a mediator between agencies. The local researcher services the advisory group, preparing reports as necessary, and documenting the process. The international network/team provides further credibility,

technical and moral support as required, periodic peer review to keep moving forward in the right direction, and a systematic overview to draw together transferable learning.

### **Main concepts**

Each aspect of this network approach is described in more detail:

#### ***The team leader***

The IDEA programme has taken great care in identifying local individuals, usually senior scientists or public administrators, with the willingness to go beyond their professional and disciplinary boundaries to develop the wide range of scientific, economic, political and interpersonal skills needed to generate innovative responses to environmental problems in their countries. In this sense, the team leader is the catalyst of the entire process. This also underlines the lesson that good environmental management begins and ends with people rather than with institutional frameworks.

#### ***Environmental problem selection***

The local team selects the problem, but only those serious environmental problems for which there is a potential for significant progress are selected; the progress itself becomes part of an exercise in raising local confidence in indigenous management skills. Conversely, to engage in an effort which is certain to fail is pointless, demoralising and therefore counterproductive. Tackling a difficult but potentially resolvable environmental problem generated the skills and network linkages to move on to other, more difficult challenges.

The approval of the Office of the Prime Minister or the main financial ministry is secured to give political credibility to the effort, and give some authority to the process of inter-departmental liaison. In one case, for example, a worthwhile project proposal which was politically unacceptable on religious grounds was replaced with an equally worthwhile project more likely to move forward. Unfortunately there is no dearth of serious environmental problems. Given that the purpose of IDEA is to enhance environmental management capability, rather than solve problems per se, this is no great constraint.

***Project advisory group***

An early step for each of the project teams has been the establishment of project advisory groups, of 8 -14 people, representing the main interested parties. These, often influential, groups provide political and technical guidance, and raise the profile of the project to assist implementation of the action programme, beginning in their own agencies and rippling out from there. In each step of this awareness creation, people examine their own agency's actions and the potential to control their contribution to the problem. This in turn builds up a momentum of commitment. In most cases these actions have resulted in new inter-departmental linkages among government departments and agencies, and linkages between government and the private business and university/research sectors.

The advisory (or steering) group, together with the team leader and researcher, constitute the team. The team usually grows as the problem is redefined. Gradually, the team is the nucleus of a local network concerned with the problem and thus with generating local environmental management capability.

***Iterative problem redefinition***

It is very unlikely that a problem can be adequately defined at the first go; complexity and interactive effects weigh against this, and it will invariably be too broadly or too narrowly defined. The team therefore engages, with the help of the local and international IDEA network, in a continuing process of problem definition and feedback from initiatives as part of the generation of a dynamic, local understanding of the nature of the problem. The understanding this generates in turn sows the seeds for the development of a broadening 'constituency' (local, national and international) of people committed to problem resolution, and indicates areas of institutional or legal reform, and training needs.

***Facilitation and mediation***

The team leader and/or the researcher's role is usually facilitation, but in cases of dispute some mediation skills may be brought to bear. Facilitation is required where issues are unclear and/or undefined. It describes a role intended to promote shared feeling and perceptions to the point of consensus, information exchange, generation of possible options and decision making and commitment by participants.

Mediation skills become necessary where issues are more clearly defined but positions are polarised and conflict exists or is likely.

The literature of environmental mediation distinguishes unnecessary and genuine conflict. Unnecessary conflict can sometimes be resolved by a non-professional mediator with the appropriate skills and diplomacy. For example, in the Nigerian case study, a logjam between two agencies caused by data and relationship conflicts appear to have resolved by the informal mediation of a newly appointed IDEA researcher from a neutral, university post not associated with the conflicting agencies. Structural and interest conflicts are more difficult to resolve, but can also be tackled by facilitation if positions are not hardened.

### ***Concerted action***

IDEA projects always move towards problem resolution, making use of IDEA resources, with a recognition that expenditure in any one area (eg, training) is likely to be wasted if not part of an integrated approach involving all five areas of IDEA action: real time projects, training, advice, research and network membership. The pace of action must be dictated locally; this can be a source of frustration to other members of the network used to stricter, more rational notions of progress. But if it is not determined locally, there is a risk that the 'ownership' of the solution becomes eroded, that is, yet another case of outsiders taking over responsibility for development. There is also a risk of alienating the very agencies and individuals needed in the project partnership. That said, it is also the case that the wider IDEA network and project evaluation process play an important role in keeping projects moving forward.

### ***Nested networks***

Projects have clearly benefitted from the supportive IDEA/CCGTM network of regional and international expertise. These are 'nested' in the sense that the local network is within the international IDEA network which is within the CCGTM network of 150 scientists and public administrators worldwide. The IDEA/CCGTM network offers the following advantages as a complement to more traditional environmental management approaches:

- communication, without organisation into a hierarchical structure, enhances the creativity of members and sharpens discussions to the task at hand;
- an inter-disciplinary diversity of expertise and advice, often from senior people with a wealth of experience, can usually be provided at low or no cost, to back-up the local effort and to link it into a wider knowledge base;
- regular and supportive reviews of progress by the network, result in constructive criticism and interactive peer review. This provides both motivation and reinforcement and generates confidence in local actions.
- continuing systematic analysis (research) supports and analyses the projects and consolidates aspects of transferable learning; and
- the international network, especially when members are on field visits, provides much credibility to the local team and enhances their status, thus contributing to the visibility of the problem and drawing new members into the local network.

On the latter point, each of the week-long IDEA project review meetings has devoted one day to an open roundtable discussion of an important and relevant issue in environmental management, and used this as a means of reaching a wider audience in the country. This has proved very helpful to the task of strengthening the local network.

Each country task has also benefitted from the advice and assistance of all the IDEA network, in group meetings, in assistance visits, and in the provision of specialist expertise. For example, the IDEA team leader for Ghana has visited the similar watershed management project in Zimbabwe, and then gone on with the Zimbabwean team leader to assist the Zambian IDEA project. Similarly the advisor from the Policy Studies Institute has assisted the Mauritian team, and the advisor from the CCGTM has assisted the Malaysian team. The IDEA programme has provided specialist legal advice on national environmental legislation to the team from Guyana, and the Malaysian Government, through IDEA, has offered placement training to Guyanese officials in environmental management. There are many other examples of the way in which the expanding IDEA professional network is supporting country tasks in environmental management.

Finally, it worth noting that the IDEA/CCGTM network is resolutely one of equals, and any member of the network is



legitimately regarded as having reached the same stage of development as, and being of comparable worth to, any other member of the network, irrespective of nationality. This makes the idea of national societies as more or less developed outmoded, as is the old fashioned and erroneous notion that the developed world teaches the less developed. In the IDEA work all participate equally in the learning process.

### ***Project review meetings***

The entire core team meets regularly at about six monthly intervals. The meetings have been hosted by project teams. Venues included Kuala Lumpur, Harare, Georgetown and Accra. Each meeting lasts about five days and involves intensive project reviews and critiques, field visits, roundtable discussions and one or two guest experts to lecture on relevant environmental management topics. The meeting also provides an opportunity for the host team to demonstrate first hand its project approach, and for the visitors to assist in advise and discussions. Although relatively expensive in terms of travel costs, the meetings serve not only project review and evaluation functions, but serve to integrate local and international networks together in manner which could not be done in any other way.

### ***Research function***

As stated at the outset, the IDEA methodology is action research, in which the experiment or the case studies provide a hands-on, field situation for studying environmental management. The benefits to the research team are obvious, perhaps less so are their responsibilities, which are mainly to generate transferable knowledge about the programme.

Transferable knowledge is generated by recording the process in each of the case studies as it develops, analysing that material, drawing connections between the case studies, making reference to the wider academic literature of institutional development and environmental management, and by returning that information to the project teams and the wider network. The research team also provides the opportunity for members of the network to publish their working papers, to publish the project in journals (Carley, 1990; Carley et al., 1991a,b) and lecture about IDEA to a wider audience. Finally the research team has responsibility to the project funding bodies to

analyse the programme on a continuing basis, to document the replicable learning to be derived and to produce reports as required.

***Administrative function***

Finally, a widespread, task-oriented network like IDEA, made up of many senior people and employees (researchers and consultants), requires a very substantial amount of network support and maintenance, financial control and, most important, a central focus of direction and guidance. The CCGTM support unit has provided this essential function for the network.

The advantages and lessons to be derived from the participants' experience of the IDEA methodology are given in the next chapter.