Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
30th Meeting of the CEPF Donor Council
Washington, DC
12 January 2017
8 a.m. -11 a.m. EST

The Regional Implementation Team (RIT): Discussion on the RIT role and purpose

Recommended Action Item:

The Donor Council is asked to review and discuss the role and purpose of the RITs.

Background

One of CEPF's unique characteristics is that its investment programs in the hotspots are coordinated by Regional Implementation Teams (RITs), whose purpose is to convert the objectives described in the ecosystem profile into a cohesive portfolio of grants. This portfolio contributes to the achievement of CEPF's long-term vision for each hotspot. The RITs provide local knowledge and insight, and have primary responsibility for building a broad constituency of civil society groups working across institutional and political boundaries.

This model has evolved over the years, benefiting from significant on-the-ground experience, as well as a series of evaluations that have informed its enhancements. The evolution of the RIT is described below.

2001–2007
CEPF's initial structure, the Coordination Unit, was established to help CEPF coordinate conservation activities in the hotspots. Recognizing that effective conservation requires integration of biodiversity concerns into the work of all relevant agencies and, in particular, collaboration between these agencies, CEPF awarded a grant in each hotspot to facilitate this collaboration. Notwithstanding the fact that Coordination Units did not have standardized terms of reference (TOR), organizations charged with this responsibility played a crucial role in bringing together NGOs, private-sector experts and government agencies, building capacities for project development, and promoting sustainable conservation finance. The Coordination Units also played a role in proposal review and project monitoring. However, the primary responsibility for administrative matters, such as proposal review, contracting, and monitoring and evaluation, was retained by the Secretariat.

In 2006, an external evaluation recommended changes to this structure, thus paving the way for the new RIT model. Specifically, the evaluators recommended that efforts should be made to decentralize

decision-making once hotspot grant programs have demonstrated their capabilities by successfully progressing beyond their start-up phase, although such delegation of authority and responsibility should be approached cautiously, on a case-by-case basis.

2007–2011
In 2007, TOR for the RIT were approved, giving the team a mandate to be the steward of the ecosystem profile, to "convert the plans in the ecosystem profiles into cohesive portfolios of grants that exceed in impact the sum of their parts." The standard TOR included seven major functions:
1. Act as an extension service to assist civil society groups in designing, implementing and replicating successful conservation activities.
2. Review all grant applications and manage external reviews with technical experts and advisory committees.
3. Award grants up to $20,000 and decide jointly with the CEPF Secretariat on all other applications.
4. Lead the monitoring and evaluation of individual projects using standard tools, site visits and meetings with grantees, and assist the CEPF Secretariat in portfolio-level monitoring and evaluation.
5. Widely communicate CEPF objectives, opportunities to apply for grants, lessons learned and results.
6. Involve the existing regional program of the RIT, CEPF donor and implementing agency representatives, government officials and other sectors within the hotspot in implementation.
7. Ensure effective coordination with the CEPF Secretariat on all aspects of implementation.

To mitigate potential conflicts of interest, it was specified that organizations that were members of the RIT would not be eligible to apply for other CEPF grants within the same hotspot.

2011–2014
In April 2010, after receiving only one RIT proposal for the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot and two for the Caribbean Islands Hotspot, and experiencing some shortcomings in RIT programmatic leadership, the Donor Council instructed the Secretariat to carry out an assessment of the performance of the RITs and propose changes necessary to improve results. This assessment found that:
- The terms of reference approved in 2007 needed to be clarified and simplified.
- The 10 percent cap on the RIT grant as a proportion of the overall spending authority for a hotspot was limiting RITs' ability to perform the programmatic functions set out in the TOR.
- The RITs were being regarded as administrative entities, downplaying their critical programmatic functions, which were considered to be essential for effective implementation of the investment strategies, and most appealing to the best qualified candidates for the RIT role.
- There was some duplication of functions between the Secretariat and the RITs, particularly in relation to risk management.

As a result of this assessment, the Secretariat developed new TOR that more accurately described the functions that the RIT would be expected to perform, and also omitted any functions that were the responsibility of the Secretariat. These TOR were presented to the Donor Council in October 2010, where donors restated their desire to keep administrative costs below the 10 percent threshold. The revised TOR were subsequently approved by the Donor Council in March 2011. The new TOR covered

five major functions, each of which was determined to be either administrative or programmatic in nature.

Administrative functions	Programmatic functions
1. Establish and coordinate a process for proposal solicitation and review.	1. Coordinate and communicate CEPF investment, build partnerships, and promote information exchange in the hotspot.
2. Manage a program of small grants; that is, grants of less than $20,000.	2. Build the capacity of grantees.
3. Reporting and monitoring.	

The enhancement of the programmatic functions of the RIT meant that the overall RIT budget now exceeded $1 million. At the time, CEPF was prohibited from awarding grants for $1 million and above, because such grants would have required approval by the GEF Council. For this reason, the Donor Council agreed that the RIT could receive more than one grant, thereby allowing the Secretariat to grant separately for administrative and programmatic functions.

2014–2017

In June 2013, the CEPF Donor Council held a retreat, during which it discussed the development of a new strategic framework for the third phase of CEPF. The Donor Council discussed areas of work on which CEPF could focus to better deliver its mission of engaging civil society in conserving the world's most critical ecosystems, including by strengthening the role of the RIT. During the meeting, the representative of the GEF noted that the cap on the amount that can be approved without going to the GEF Council had been raised to $2 million. This obviated the need to split the RIT into more than one grant, which was seen as having introduced inefficiencies.

In January 2014, the Strategic Framework was approved by the CEPF Donor Council, and the Secretariat then started work to plan for the new and expanded third phase of CEPF. CEPF's Strategic Framework for Phase III has four components. Component 3, "Strengthened implementation organizations that become the sustainable stewards of the long-term strategic vision for the hotspots" sets forth CEPF's vision for expanding the RIT role from a focus on networking and capacity building for grantees to also include increased emphasis on direct coordination with government agencies and the private sector, as well as fundraising. To meet the new imperative approved by CEPF's donors, new TOR for the RITs were proposed and approved in June 2014. These new TOR included the addition of key functions that would allow the RITs to become effective stewards of the long-term vision of the hotspots. The TOR were revised to describe the RIT functions in clearer language, and to add selected new functions. The new functions included supporting civil society organizations to engage with private sector actors and governments, and helping to ensure the financial sustainability of the long-term vision.

It was acknowledged that expansion of the role of the RIT would have cost implications. Additional funds would be needed to ensure sufficient allocations for increased travel for engagement with government and private sector, increased number and scope of capacity-building efforts, the expanded communications role and additional staff time to adequately perform the RIT role. It was noted that these costs would vary across hotspots, depending on the size of the hotspot and number of countries.

Conclusion

RITs are key to the successful implementation of CEPF in the biodiversity hotspots, and an essential element of the CEPF model. RITs provide the strategic leadership necessary to attain the goals set out in the ecosystem profile and long-term visions. RITs are not purely administrators, issuing and managing contracts. Instead, they play an indispensable role of ensuring that CEPF support builds strong, credible and cohesive civil societies that can work across sectors to demonstrate innovative solutions to challenges of conservation and sustainable development, and amplifying these models through promoting their integration into government policies and programs and private sector business practices.

Following a decade-and-a-half of testing and refinement, the RIT role, as currently defined, is fully complementary to the role of the Secretariat. The Secretariat works closely with each RIT, providing training and supervision, to assist each RIT to gain the necessary skills and experience both to play the role of strategic leader and also to ensure compliance with financial policies, social and environmental safeguards, and other requirements of CEPF's global donors. With CEPF Phase III's emphasis on longer-term engagements in hotspots, guided by long-term visions, the Secretariat's objective in each case is to identify civil society organizations with a strong local presence and identity to perform the RIT role, and to support and mentor them to a point where they can become long-term implementation structures, able to coordinate and provide technical support and financial resources to civil society beyond the point where CEPF support to the hotspot is no longer needed.