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Aiding the environment: the Australian Development Agency's experience of implementing an environmental management system

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Abstract

Aid agencies, like commercial businesses, are increasingly concerned with incorporating sound environmental management into their operations. Different approaches are being used to integrate sustainability into development assistance to ensure that environmental impacts are assessed and managed. One approach being used by AusAID, the Australian aid agency, is to implement an environmental management system (EMS) across program and project areas. This paper examines how AusAID has adapted the EMS approach to suit aid agency operations, and some of the lessons from the Australian experience.

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1. The greening of development

Interest in improved environmental management within aid programs is increasing as development agencies try to ensure that policies promoting sustainable development

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actually make a difference to their operations and on the ground results (ADB, 2003; AIDAB 1991; AusAID, 2002; DFID, 2000; OECD, 2000; World Bank, 2000, 2002, 2003a). While much support has been given to the concept of integrating social, ecological and economic concerns into the aid agenda, the methods and approaches needed to integrate them and bring about sustainable development outcomes have been slow to emerge. Those that are in place (for example, triple bottom-line reporting, strategic environmental assessment and sustainability assessments) have had varying degrees of success. Challenges in applying these approaches range from a lack of political commitment to more systemic issues, including:

- policies that are insufficiently translated into the operational guidelines to be used by project officers and field staff (Scholten and Post, 1999);
- assessments that focus on ensuring ecological, social and economic impacts are addressed, not on determining whether the development is actually sustainable (Pope et al., 2004);
- environmental impact assessment processes that stand alone, or fail to complement environmental management systems, thus contributing to the weak implementation of mitigation measures and monitoring (Sánchez and Hacking, 2002);
- assessment systems that have not been designed to be adaptive and to adjust to system changes, despite the complex and uncertain nature of developments (Noble, 2000).

The challenge for aid agencies has been to incorporate sustainable development commitments into the aid program, when bureaucratic structures have not been changed to accommodate a more systemic approach to complex environment and development issues. The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, recognised this challenge and argued that ‘major institutional development and reform’ are required to achieve sustainability (WCED, 1987, p. 10).

It is now clear that institutional arrangements do need to evolve to achieve continual improvement in sustainable development outcomes in development assistance. A good example of this is the AusAID experience. In the past, AusAID, the Australian aid agency, was considered a leader in the development area for its approach to environmental assessment (AIDAB, 1994; AusAID, 1995). At the completion of the 1994 independent OECD Development Assistance Committee review (OECD Development Assistance Committee, 1995), AusAID was judged to be ‘at the vanguard of development assistance agencies’ in its environmental assessment practices. The review commented positively on AusAID’s performance with respect to applying sound environmental policy and assessments, and undertaking biannual environmental audits. Following a subsequent internal audit of its own environmental performance in 1998, however, AusAID realised that it had probably slipped from being ‘in the vanguard’ and determined to review and improve its environmental management.

The changes to operations that followed were aimed at achieving a better integration of environment and development management systems, and to ensure that sustainability policies were supported by operational guidelines. AusAID chose to implement an environmental management system (EMS) to ensure that environmental performance

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