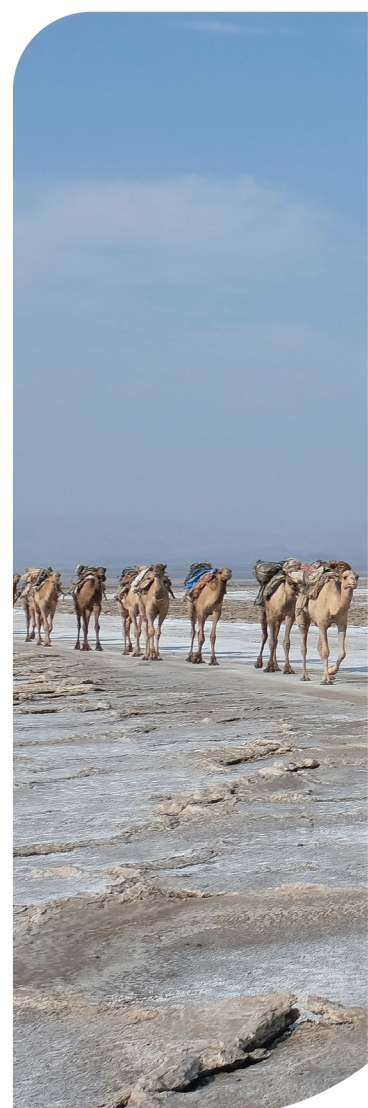


CAPTURING LESSONS LEARNED FROM NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS

VOLUME 1 COMMON ELEMENTS

AUGUST 2021



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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	3
BACKGROUND	4
KEY MESSAGES	8
INTRODUCTION	10
COMMON ELEMENTS	12
Establishing the governance structure and building the assessment team	14
Stakeholder engagement	17
The national biodiversity platform	20
Identifying and addressing capacity needs	22
Communicating about the national ecosystem assessment	23
CONCLUSION	25
REFERENCES	26

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BES-Net	Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network
CANARI	Caribbean Natural Resources Institute
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
COP	Conference of the Parties
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
NP-SPBES	National Platform for Science-Policy Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Cameroon)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP-WCMC	United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

BACKGROUND

Ecosystem assessments are processes that aim to evaluate current knowledge about the interrelationships between human activities and biodiversity.¹ These assessments primarily provide a critical synthesis report on the status of, and trends in, biodiversity and ecosystem services and their drivers of change, both direct and indirect. Importantly, ecosystem assessments can also provide a knowledge base for informing pathways for action and policy options to respond to future scenarios. Such assessments have been carried out at different geographical scales (e.g., global, regional, national, local) and cover a range of specific topics or areas of concern.¹

The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was a critical moment in the landscape of assessment due to its focus on ecosystem services and their synergies with human well-being and development. Called for by the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2000, this assessment aimed to evaluate the impact of ecosystem changes on human well-being and set out an evidence base for action towards conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was intended to support the needs of those responsible for meeting biodiversity targets and included a range of stakeholders, among them representatives of various international conventions, national governments, the private sector, and representatives from civil society, including indigenous peoples and local communities, within its governance structure.² The method and unique governance structure of this assessment set a strong precedent and framework for those that followed. Subsequently, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) established the Sub-Global Assessment Network (SGAN) to support regional, sub-regional, national, and sub-national assessments that were catalyzed by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

In 2012, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was established as an independent intergovernmental body to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services. IPBES conducts global, regional, thematic, and methodological



assessments while also encouraging countries to undertake their own national-level assessments using the processes developed by the platform.¹ Its Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, published in 2019, responded to an invitation by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to prepare a global assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services and the effectiveness of responses, including the Aichi Targets.³

In 2018, the CBD COP highlighted the value of national ecosystem assessments, with COP decision 14/1 urging “parties and invites other Governments, as appropriate, to consider undertaking national assessments of biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services”.⁴ Under recommendation 22/4, the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA), an intergovernmental scientific advisory body which provides support to countries to meet their commitments to the CBD, stressed the value of IPBES assessments and encouraged the uptake of such assessments at the national level.³

In 2017 the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) established the National Ecosystem Assessment Initiative (NEA Initiative) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network (BES-Net) and more recently with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as part of an innovative consortium between the three UN agencies to deliver tailored guidance to support countries undertaking national ecosystem assessments. This report summarizes the key lessons that countries have learned while undertaking their own national ecosystem assessment processes with support from the NEA Initiative and consortium partners. Highlighting the commonalities and differences between country partners’ approaches to the assessment process can provide insight and foster innovation within the process.



WHAT IS A NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT?

A national ecosystem assessment is a nationally-driven process to develop an up-to-date, comprehensive and critical synthesis of knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem services and their interlinkages to people.³ These assessments are contextualized to suit national needs and respond to specific policy questions. They shed light on the status and trends on biodiversity and ecosystem services in a given country, their drivers of change, the present and future impacts of those drivers, the implications for those relying on nature, and the effectiveness of interventions and responses to counteract the loss of biodiversity.^{5, 6}

National ecosystem assessments bring together different knowledge types and engage with a wide range of stakeholders to strengthen credibility, legitimacy, and relevance. Assessments aim to address specific policy questions to empower the full consideration of the value of nature in decision-making. The NEA Initiative supports countries to tailor the process developed by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) to carry out ecosystem assessments. The aim is to adapt national ecosystem assessments to specific national needs and circumstances to empower greater support for decision-making.



ASSESSMENT STAGES

Volume II. *Capturing Lessons Learned from Ecosystem Assessments: Stages of the Assessment* describes lessons learned by countries relating to specific stages of the national ecosystem assessment:

- i. Scoping: assessment teams explore how and why an assessment might be carried out and define the key policy questions to be addressed by the assessment. A scoping report is the main output of this stage.
- ii. Evaluation: country teams evaluate existing knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem services. This stage is guided by the key policy questions identified during the scoping stage. A technical report and a summary for policymakers (SPM) are the main outputs of this stage.
- iii. Approval: Stakeholders, in particular the government, accept the technical report and approve the summary for policymakers. This increases the likelihood of the key messages being used to inform decision-making processes.
- iv. Use of assessment findings: Based on the approved assessment, an action plan is developed to support the integration of assessment findings into policy processes and decision-making. The work starts here towards empowering the consideration of the full value of nature in policy processes.

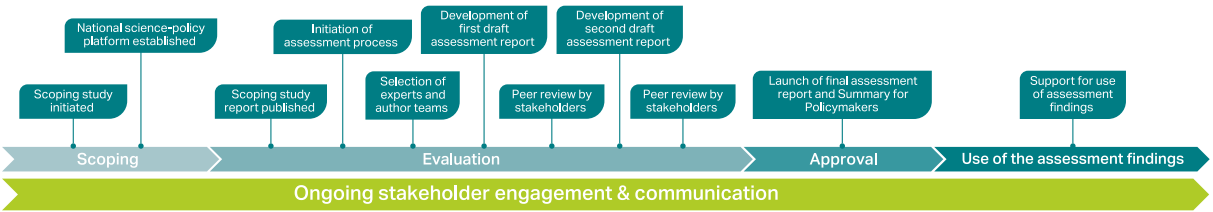


Figure 1: The national ecosystem assessment timeline.



KEY MESSAGES

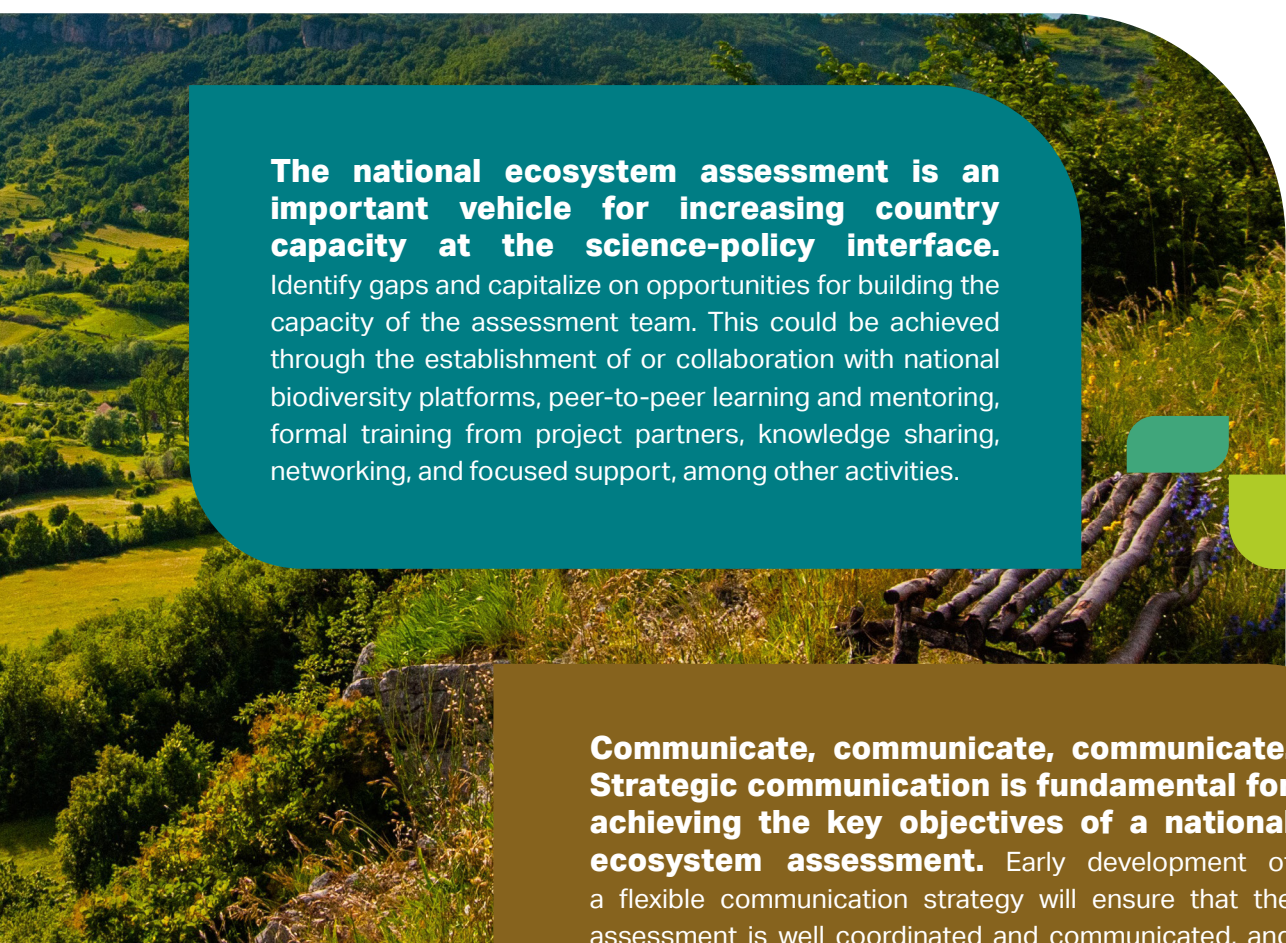
These key messages summarize lessons learned by the assessment teams for Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Grenada, and Viet Nam that have thematic relevance throughout the assessment process. These lessons, drawn from UNEP-WCMC's consultations with each national team leading this process, aim to address a wide range of practical considerations that will support countries to undertake a national ecosystem assessment, while also sharing experiences and insights relevant to other types of ecosystem assessment. Importantly, the lessons aim to present the diversity of approaches to the national ecosystem assessment chosen by country teams of the NEA Initiative, as opposed to offering official guidance or prescribing a specific approach.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to managing a national ecosystem assessment.

A clear governance structure is key for achieving a well-managed assessment (e.g., continued engagement and positive relationships with stakeholders, coordination of the assessment team, and delivery of a national ecosystem assessment). Strong assessment teams bring together technical capacity, project management and administrative skills, and policy expertise.

It is important to build ownership and ensure the relevance of the assessment from the start. Assessment teams should engage with a wide range of stakeholders early and throughout the process.

The inception workshop and the drafting of key policy questions are a good place to begin. Draw on existing networks as a starting point for engagement and think beyond the usual stakeholders. Build trust and tailor your strategies to each stakeholder group, especially Indigenous peoples and local communities. Careful planning and capacity-building around stakeholder engagement methods is necessary.



Align key policy questions to national policy priorities and revisit these throughout the assessment process to ensure the relevance of the technical report and the summary for policymakers.

The assessment should respond to the informational needs of decision-makers. There are many opportunities in the assessment process for governments to play an active role in shaping the assessment. Examples include inviting representatives from ministries and focal points for government processes to take part in the national ecosystem assessment and become members of the Technical Support Unit; promoting their involvement through participation as co-chairs or as authors; ensuring that ministries are well represented on the national biodiversity platform*; and requesting feedback from government ministries on key drafts.

The national ecosystem assessment is an important vehicle for increasing country capacity at the science-policy interface.

Identify gaps and capitalize on opportunities for building the capacity of the assessment team. This could be achieved through the establishment of or collaboration with national biodiversity platforms, peer-to-peer learning and mentoring, formal training from project partners, knowledge sharing, networking, and focused support, among other activities.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Strategic communication is fundamental for achieving the key objectives of a national ecosystem assessment.

Early development of a flexible communication strategy will ensure that the assessment is well coordinated and communicated, and that the team can respond to emerging needs.

* National biodiversity platforms are also known as science-policy platforms focused on topics related to biodiversity and ecosystem services.

INTRODUCTION

Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments is an analysis of the experiences reported by eight countries while undertaking the assessment process. *Volume I. Capturing Lessons Learned from Ecosystem Assessments: Common Elements* focuses on lessons that have thematic relevance throughout the whole of the assessment process. *Volume II. Capturing Lessons Learned from Ecosystem Assessments: Stages of the Assessment* describes lessons learned by countries relating to specific stages of the national ecosystem assessment process (i.e., from the scoping stage to the approval stage). Further volumes will provide insights on topics relating to the use of assessment findings and the integration of key recommendations into decision-making. These will be drawn from further conversations with and data collected from countries supported by the NEA Initiative. Volumes I and II are intended to be complementary and to lay a foundation for highlighting key lessons emerging from national ecosystem assessments.

Contributing to a growing body of literature which explores lessons learned from ecosystem assessments, this analysis of lessons learned is the first to be produced by the NEA Initiative at UNEP-WCMC.³ This work establishes a foundation for future exploration into lessons learned by country partners, and it is intended to be reviewed periodically to include further reflections from partners as they join the NEA Initiative. This effort aims to strengthen the collective capacity to support and deliver national ecosystem assessments.

Volumes I and II summarize key lessons learned by the assessment teams for Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Grenada, and Viet Nam while implementing their national ecosystem assessments with the support of UNEP-WCMC. The lessons captured offer practical insights into the national ecosystem assessment process and serve as valuable guidance to countries that are already embarking on this journey or those that are interested in doing so in the future. The assessment teams are referred to by the name of their country for simplicity in the text of this report, however the lessons presented represent the experience of the assessment teams specifically.



METHODOLOGY

1. Literature review: Existing documents produced within the NEA Initiative were analyzed and synthesized. These included scoping and narrative reports, workshop video recordings, and a report conducted by the SGAN in 2012, entitled *Lessons Learned from Carrying Out Ecosystem Assessments*.⁷

2. Virtual interviews with country teams about lessons learned: Thirteen interviews were conducted with 27 interviewees from eight partner countries that were at mid-way or in the later stages of the assessment process. Interviewees included members of countries' Technical Support Units, assessment co-chairs, co-ordinating lead authors, lead authors, and contributing authors. These interviews captured key lessons and practical tips from countries' experiences of the assessment process.

3. An online lessons learned survey: An online survey was shared with country teams to encourage input from authors and members of their Technical Support Units on each of their assessments. This was to maximize accessibility for as many members of the assessment teams as possible. A total of 23 individual responses were received, covering six of the eight countries involved in this effort.

4. The Lessons Learned Workshop: A six-day online event took place in July 2021, presenting key messages from the previous stages. Country partners of the NEA Initiative also received a first draft report for review. Gaps identified in the first draft informed the agenda for the Lessons Learned Workshop, and further insights were gathered through knowledge exchange sessions, exercises, panel discussions, and presentations to help fill these gaps.

5. Final review: Once information from the workshop had been integrated, feedback from NEA Initiative partners was welcomed on the final drafts of Volumes I and II of this report, *Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments*.

COMMON ELEMENTS

From the lessons that countries shared during the research done for this report, a number of thematic topics emerged that have relevance at all stages of the assessment process. Lessons learned around these topics—which we refer to as “common elements”—are presented in this volume, distinguishing them from lessons that are largely relevant to specific stages of the assessment (these are presented in Volume II). The common elements we describe include governance of the assessment team, stakeholder engagement, capacity-building, and communications. The recurrence of lessons learned by country teams around these common elements highlighted their significance to the assessment process as a whole.







ESTABLISHING THE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND BUILDING THE ASSESSMENT TEAM

Setting up operational and governance structures for a national ecosystem assessment can help to ensure effective oversight of the technical, administrative, and financial aspects of the process. It will also contribute to the legitimacy, credibility, and relevance to policy of its findings. The assessment team is generally comprised of a Technical Support Unit, a management or steering committee, an expert panel, and author teams. The Technical Support Unit handles technical and administrative support for the process, coordinating meetings and workshops, selecting assessment authors, managing financial and reporting elements, ensuring adequate stakeholder engagement and policy relevance, and implementing the communications strategy for the assessment. The author team and the expert panel undertake the evaluation, producing the technical report and the summary for policymakers. The level of contribution of each specific author will depend on their role within the author team.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to managing a national ecosystem assessment. It is crucial that the assessment team’s governance structure is suitable to the context and that it maximizes opportunities for influencing policy processes. When it comes to assembling the management team that will be responsible for overseeing the assessment process, the specific structure and the roles within the team should be the most appropriate and practical for each country. Defining the governance structure provides a good opportunity to bring together national actors with a wide range of skills and experience to strengthen the assessment. For example, Ethiopia assembled a “multidisciplinary technical committee”, consisting of individuals from the Ethiopian Biodiversity Institute (EBI) and academia, and one individual from a non-governmental organization (NGO), each of whom contributed specific expertise towards the coordination of the assessment. According to Azerbaijan, the number of individuals making up the assessment management team is generally less important than ensuring that the skills and experience of everyone involved are well suited to its requirements. The country’s Technical Support Unit stored and managed information about the capacities and expertise of team members and other contacts through a database, which helped to identify assessment team members, authors, and members of the national science-policy platform. For Grenada, the involvement of civil society was a priority, so a regional NGO with expertise in working with civil society, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI), was appointed as the implementing agency to conduct the assessment.

Ensuring that government representatives have oversight of the national ecosystem assessment may also help to strengthen links and ensure the assessment’s relevance. Bosnia and Herzegovina established a Project Advisory Committee, with representatives from relevant ministries.³ Azerbaijan’s assessment team sought official endorsement from the national government for the establishment of a national biodiversity platform and nominated a government official as its chair. This kind of approach encourages government stakeholders to play a direct role in overseeing the assessment.

Several countries highlighted the importance of having co-chairs whose skills and knowledge were complementary. Cameroon found that having co-chairs from both science and policy backgrounds helped to ensure that government stakeholders were clear about the aims and objectives of the assessment, while Colombia highlighted the value of having a co-chair with links to local community networks to help arrange their involvement with the assessment. In the case of Grenada, the assessment co-chairs included a government focal point with policy expertise, a co-chair from academia with good technical knowledge of science and research, and a co-chair from civil society who was well placed to represent its interests.

A clear governance structure for managing the national ecosystem assessment is important for delivering a well-coordinated, timely process and for optimizing the capacity of each team member to conduct the assessment. Countries supported by the NEA Initiative agreed that a clear governance structure was important for effective engagement and coordination of the assessment team. This includes assigning specific roles and responsibilities to each team member, including those within the Technical Support Unit and the author teams.³ This will support the use of individual strengths within the team and ease the progress of the assessment.⁷ Administrative and financial requirements need to be planned for in order to keep progress on track. Bosnia and Herzegovina communicated with team members the often complex administrative requirements of the assessment, especially with regards to navigating approvals and the time needed for reporting. To support similar efforts, Azerbaijan, Grenada, and Ethiopia hired administrators to manage the financial and complex reporting processes of

the assessment. For Viet Nam, holding regular and constructive dialogues within the team to delegate roles and to carefully plan the timeline and requirements of the assessment was essential to manage the work at hand with a small Technical Support Unit. This also allowed the assessment team to collaborate effectively with partner organizations, filling capacity gaps and easing information gathering. A clear governance structure can also be enhanced by a good internal communications strategy.

Knowledge and understanding of the assessment process developed by IPBES can be instrumental in supporting the Technical Support Unit and author teams to navigate the assessment process, and in strengthening links in the assessment between science and policy, especially through direct involvement of the national focal point. In some cases, members of the Technical Support Unit will not have previous experience of working with the IPBES framework, so having someone in the team with knowledge of the IPBES assessment process can help countries engaged with the NEA Initiative to better understand how to conduct their assessments. For instance, Cameroon appointed the national IPBES Focal Point as a co-chair for its assessment to demonstrate clearly to the national government the link between the national ecosystem assessment and IPBES.³ This helped to give the assessment more credibility in terms of its potential impact and influence within the country. Azerbaijan reported that nominating the IPBES focal point to support coordination has given the assessment team access to a larger professional network. This focal point was also able to explain the key differences between an IPBES assessment and a national ecosystem assessment, which was important in communicating the relevance of key policy questions for the team.

Assessment timelines should be adapted to relevant events in the national calendar. Considering the individual schedules of team members (e.g., university exam seasons, key deadlines, or events) when arranging the workplan is also important to mitigate clashing commitments. Countries reported that two-way communication between the Technical Support Unit and the authors throughout the assessment process helped to identify important events and circumstances that could affect progress.³ Grenada noted that such communication should include individual schedules, and that working with full knowledge of authors' competing priorities allowed for better planning. The Cameroon team also highlighted the importance of such considerations; it took care to plan assessment-related events outside of the university exam season as many of the authors in its team were academics. The assessment team generally needs to negotiate multiple internal and external priorities, and it is important to strike a balance between rigor and flexibility to ensure timely progress and continuous engagement.



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement underpins the national ecosystem assessment process, which is shaped and defined by its intended audience, users, and those potentially affected by decisions derived from its findings. Incorporating the knowledge of stakeholders and engaging with them from the scoping stage to using the assessment findings provides an opportunity to identify priority information needs to be addressed, produce relevant outputs, and increase ownership and buy-in of the assessment's findings.

Identifying a wide stakeholder base as part of the scoping stage lays the foundations for continued engagement during the assessment process and builds ownership among stakeholders. In Colombia, the assessment team identified the IPBES National Committee, led by government ministries, as an important stakeholder group to engage with. This science-policy platform has grown to include a larger group of contributors from across the country, and the participation of representatives of Indigenous peoples and local communities in national decision-making processes has increased, supporting their sense of ownership of biodiversity-related processes at the national level. In Cameroon, contractual agreements on free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) were put in place to formally acknowledge the contributions of Indigenous peoples and local communities to the assessment and to encourage their ownership of key outputs. This approach overcame initial reluctance on the part of these stakeholders to engage in the process, following previous experiences of engagement where their contributions had not been recognized.

It can be useful to draw on existing networks to begin identifying the stakeholder base. Most country partners of the NEA Initiative started by identifying stakeholder groups that were already engaging with issues related to biodiversity and ecosystem services, before reaching out more broadly. These included relevant ministries, national focal points for the CBD and IPBES, and academic or research institutions. Reaching out to stakeholder networks that are already established through relevant national entities (e.g., national platforms, institutions, NGOs, committees, etc.), can be an efficient way to identify and engage with a wider group of stakeholders from the beginning of the assessment process. Exploring beyond established networks and identifying stakeholders from vulnerable groups is also important, as such groups may be at risk of being excluded from consultative processes. In Cambodia, support from the Ministry of Environment helped the assessment team to identify government stakeholders from other ministries, as well as to gain access to NGOs and civil society groups. Responding to the needs of Indigenous people and local communities and civil society was a central priority for the assessment process in both Colombia and Grenada. Grenada approached key stakeholders from local communities and NGOs first, in order to assure these groups of the value of their input into the assessment process and to encourage their continued participation.

Creating strong links with different government stakeholders is key to ensuring that the assessment addresses relevant policy questions and meets national demand for information on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Ideally, relevant decision-makers should be involved from the beginning of the assessment process, contributing to the identification of key policy questions and ensuring that the assessment tackles national priorities. This resonates with the literature on lessons learned, which highlights the importance of understanding the decision-making context.⁷ In Viet Nam, many of the assessment authors are government representatives and therefore have a good understanding of national priorities and needs across sectors. Equally, Cameroon ensured that relevant ministries were represented in the national science-policy platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services and that they were invited to all the platform's meetings and capacity-building workshops to ensure their ongoing engagement throughout the assessment process.

Innovative methods of engaging with stakeholders can spark greater interest in the assessment and encourage a wider range of voices to participate.

As part of Grenada's national ecosystem assessment, a national mobile phone video competition was launched to encourage stakeholders to share their knowledge and perspectives on the country's ecosystems. During community consultations, members of local communities were trained on using mobile phones for data collection and advocacy. As a result, more community members were able to contribute local knowledge to the assessment (Box 1). This innovative use of digital tools for storytelling and knowledge-sharing was timely given the onset of COVID-19 in the Caribbean, and that mobile phones are accessible to a wide base of stakeholders.

The inception workshop, which takes place at the beginning of the assessment process, provides an ideal opportunity to initiate stakeholder engagement.

Country teams have used the inception workshop as an opportunity to build stakeholder awareness on how the IPBES assessment process can be tailored to national circumstances in terms of the need for and uses of a national ecosystem assessment, developing a conceptual framework, and identifying national priorities and key policy questions. The engagement of diverse stakeholders in these processes has proved essential in understanding the needs of different groups in relation to biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as defining a relevant rationale for the assessment. For example, Cambodia held initial meetings with representatives from key stakeholder groups to define the scope and priorities of the assessment. Once the scoping draft and list of key policy questions had been produced, a wider group of stakeholders was engaged with for validation. Azerbaijan invited representatives from all stakeholder groups identified as being relevant to the assessment process to contribute to the design of the assessment during its inception workshop. Approaching representatives of stakeholder groups added flexibility down the line when some individuals were no longer able to commit to the process. Cameroon, after hosting the first global inception workshop for the global assessment, proceeded further to organize a national inception workshop that brought together the most important science and policy stakeholders to define key questions and the methodology of the national assessment.

Emphasizing the value of biodiversity and the potential use and impact of the national ecosystem assessment can leverage engagement from sectors and industries dependent on growth. Including relevant private sector representatives in the assessment process promotes consideration of their perspectives and their ownership of the outputs. In Viet Nam, the national ecosystem assessment highlighted the links between conservation of biodiversity, pollination, and growth in agricultural sectors, and its messaging was targeted to draw in stakeholders in agriculture and other sectors who might otherwise feel constrained by the recommendations made in the assessment. Similarly, private sector engagement can be encouraged by demonstrating dependencies on biodiversity and ecosystem services. Viet Nam’s assessment also made links to sustainable energy and eco-tourism, and highlighted opportunities for private sector engagement. Cambodia built understanding about the perspectives and priorities of private sector stakeholders in order to build trust. This included highlighting opportunities to support social responsibility targets, improve their public image, respond to consumer demands, and sustain revenue.

Box 1: Grenada’s local mobilizers



During Grenada’s scoping exercise, the Technical Support Unit employed a number of “local mobilizers” with close ties to civil society groups to organize and facilitate community consultation meetings. These mobilizers came from local communities or from NGOs and were responsible for communicating when meetings were happening, encouraging people to attend by explaining the purpose of the meetings, and facilitating their coordination. The Technical Support Unit explained that stakeholder fatigue was widespread because public consultations happen frequently in Grenada. Thus, local mobilizers were used strategically to increase levels of engagement among local communities. They also relieved some of the pressure on the coordinating lead authors by becoming key contact points between the assessment authors and local communities. This proved particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic, when authors were unable to travel to communities.

THE NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY PLATFORM

“A national biodiversity platform is a framework for bringing together key knowledge-holders and stakeholders on biodiversity and ecosystem services to support decision-making and knowledge generation. It aims to enhance knowledge-brokerage amongst science, policy and society, build communities of practice, support national and sub-national governmental processes (including ecosystem assessments), creating enabling environments for stakeholders to engage with each other, and to raise awareness of biodiversity topics.” – Guidance on National Biodiversity Platforms⁸

A national biodiversity platform can help to secure ownership and buy-in for the national ecosystem assessment, while also supporting its credibility. In Cameroon, the National Platform for Science-Policy Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (NP-SPBES) was particularly important during the scoping stage given the diverse range of stakeholders it convened (e.g., government bodies, NGOs, funding agencies, Indigenous peoples and local communities, research institutions, and student representatives from universities). Cambodia underlined the value of its Biodiversity Technical Working Group, which facilitated access to knowledge from a range of stakeholders, encompassing representatives from more than 20 government bodies and NGOs with a range of experience, knowledge, and capacity. Viet Nam and Cambodia both emphasized the need for diversity on their committees and highlighted the fact that stakeholders from local communities were engaged via existing organizations and groups. Colombia invited youth organizations and university students and their organizations to be part of the IPBES National Committee; this increased the platform’s potential for impact over time. Azerbaijan set up its national platform during the scoping stage to support the assessment process and to emphasize the value of establishing links to government for longevity and impact. Its core motivation was to ensure and facilitate future national engagement on issues related to biodiversity and ecosystem services (Box 2).

Adapting existing platforms can be more efficient and cost-effective than creating a new one.

The team in Cameroon designed the NP-SPBES as a technical advisory organ under the existing National Biodiversity Committee. The national platform is charged with generating viable scientific information on biodiversity and ecosystems and thus strengthening national capacity to report to the CBD. The Technical Support Unit recognized the opportunity to support reporting by the Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development to various international agreements, given the lack of rigorous and centralized information regarding the state of biodiversity within the country, thus promoting the platform as a way of addressing this need and highlighting its potential role in implementing and reviewing the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). In the cases of Cambodia and Viet Nam committees aiming to guide policymaking on biodiversity and conservation already existed, and assessment teams evaluated which of these established platforms were the most appropriate to support the assessment by providing access to a range of stakeholders and information.

“The appropriation of the findings of the assessment is based on the multi-stakeholder and consultative approach from the outset. The creation of a national platform is a useful institutional tool to provide these guarantees, and it needs to be set up at the very outset of the assessment.”

– Survey response, anonymous author

Box 2:

Azerbaijan’s National Platform on Biodiversity—supporting the national ecosystem assessment process



Before embarking on its national ecosystem assessment, Azerbaijan had no dedicated platform that could bring together policymakers, scientists, practitioners, and local stakeholders around the topic of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The assessment team therefore sought to enhance synergies between the Ministry for Ecology and Natural Resources (MoENRes) and the Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus (REC Caucasus), a well-established regional NGO, to generate support for the creation of a science-policy platform to support the assessment. After initial discussions between these two entities, other stakeholders were invited to contribute to the design of the platform. In December 2019 MoENRes issued a letter of “official non-objection”, marking the legal establishment of the National Platform on Biodiversity.

The assessment team chose to structure the platform with three distinct bodies, each of which performs a particular role in the national ecosystem assessment and offers specific benefits to the process:

- The Coordination Board oversees the assessment process and is comprised of two representatives from government and one from academia, strengthening collaboration between science and policy.
- The Advisory Board includes representatives of government, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector. Its role is to review each draft of the assessment.
- The Secretariat is the platform’s “implementing unit” and provides administrative and logistical support for the assessment. Currently, REC Caucasus acts as the Secretariat, providing a strong administrative

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING CAPACITY NEEDS

A key objective of the national ecosystem assessment process is to build in-country capacity to carry out policy-relevant evaluations of knowledge and to foster dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and concerted action on biodiversity and ecosystem services at the science-policy interface. Thus, identifying and addressing capacity needs within the assessment team and amongst stakeholders is crucial throughout the process.

National ecosystem assessments are important vehicles for identifying and filling gaps in national capacity. The country representatives interviewed shared a wealth of examples of the multiplying effects that capacity-building efforts within the assessment team had in terms of improving capacity at the national level. These activities included workshops for dedicated expert training, one-to-one sessions, mentoring, and help-desk support, and all were reported to strengthen stakeholder networks, improve information-sharing, and increase cross-disciplinary collaboration. For example, the Grenada assessment team, supported by the Environment Division of the Government of Grenada and CANARI, hosted a series of training webinars on foresight scenarios. The training was delivered by one of Grenada's coordinating lead authors and was primarily geared towards the authors, contributors, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in the country's assessment, though the sessions were also open to (and attended by) other interested persons. The teams in Grenada and Azerbaijan both consulted stakeholders to identify capacity-building opportunities. Azerbaijan did this during the inception workshop, after which the team worked with its experts to develop training materials on the concept of ecosystem services and their value and relevance to different sectors, ministries, and regional authorities. In Grenada, providing training to civil society groups on using cell phones to record footage documenting their local ecosystems proved a useful approach to collecting data for the assessment.

The national ecosystem assessment provides an excellent opportunity to increase capacity regarding the use and integration of information from a range of knowledge types and disciplines, as well as providing opportunities for capacity-building with early-career professionals. Colombia, for example, developed a practice by which authors could approach Indigenous and local knowledge, facilitating its use and acknowledgement in future work after the assessment. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ethiopia both reported the emergence of a strong culture of collaboration between experts from different disciplines. This supported discussions and negotiations and made it easier to reach compromises. Colombia and Azerbaijan also included youth groups and invited representatives from youth movements to take part in the national ecosystem assessment and in their national biodiversity platforms to help build the capacity of early-career professionals in policy processes. In Azerbaijan and Cameroon, the teams paired students with chapter authors as fellows of the assessment team. This helped to raise awareness and increase understanding of the national ecosystem assessment processes among university students and encouraged their engagement and input.

Proactively seeking expertise beyond the assessment team can help to meet the capacity needs of the assessment. In addition to building its team of assessment authors, Cambodia drew upon the expertise of an existing national advisory body on biodiversity and ecosystem services to provide feedback and guidance on chapters of the assessment. This advisory body also gave the assessment team access to its network of contacts, including government ministries, research institutions, NGOs, and Indigenous peoples and local communities, which facilitated information-gathering. In Viet Nam and Cameroon, the teams built the capacity of their members in developing scenarios with support from experts and from UNEP-WCMC, a training opportunity that several other countries are also now looking to capitalize on. Furthermore, where relevant, country teams have found it useful to seek advice and expertise from other organizations. In Cameroon, the team mobilized support from World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) to expand the scope of stakeholder consultations and authors' dialogue sessions and to align the assessment with other relevant international processes.

Building the capacity of authors at the science-policy interface is essential for bridging knowledge gaps. Authors may not be familiar with decision-making processes or may not have had much prior interaction with decision-makers. In such cases, building familiarity with and understanding of the relevant policy processes and instruments, and how to engage with them, is vital to ensure the relevance of the assessment. For example, Grenada provided training for its authors and civil society representatives on ecosystem valuation, as this was particularly important in communicating information about biodiversity and ecosystem services to decision-makers. Viet Nam highlighted the value of having an author team with varied expertise, including scientific and policy expertise, and of bringing authors together as a team to share knowledge and build capacity in the science-policy interface.



COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT

Communications strategies set out the rationale and approach behind the communication and engagement decisions that will be made throughout the assessment process. Strategies are complemented by plans that have specific tactics, activities, and budget implications, and should address both internal and external communications and engagement. Internal communications focus on improving communication and collaboration within the assessment team and with key stakeholders. External communications focus on wider audiences and target groups, aiming to better disseminate the assessment findings and targeting their integration into relevant policies, plans, and other societal processes.

A clear communications strategy and plan are vital from the beginning of the assessment process to ensure shared understanding across team members and stakeholders. For example, Colombia's communications strategy guided the early production of key outputs (e.g., visual identity, a webpage, videos, podcasts, articles) to raise public awareness of the assessment process and its potential impact on decision-making. Grenada noted the value of engaging with stakeholders from civil society and local communities when designing its communications strategy. In its case, engagement led to the team producing written guidance documents on the purpose of the assessment ("Citizens' Guides") to enhance interest and ownership among local communities. In Colombia, the inclusion of a communications expert in the assessment's Advisory Group allowed for the consideration of strategic advice on communications throughout the process. The collaborative work of communications offices within partner institutions also ensured that calls for authors and reviewers were disseminated widely, resulting in a diverse team of authors who contributed to the credibility, legitimacy, and relevance of the assessment. In Viet Nam, the communications strategy included guidance regarding the relevance of specific information to different stakeholders to increase the efficiency of communication efforts. Cambodia focused its communications with private sector stakeholders on topics related to ecosystem management and sustainable resource use.

Communications requirements change at each stage of the assessment process and for each target audience. This means that the communications strategy must be kept fresh and relevant. The national context and relevant stakeholder groups are always evolving; therefore, it is important to revisit the communications strategy regularly to maintain its relevance and respond to emerging demands. For Cambodia's assessment team, communications with ministries required support to help them understand the relevance of the national ecosystem assessment to different industries and sectors. Cameroon found it helpful to appoint an expert to support the development of its communications approach. The team started with a general plan that was later refined as the assessment progressed and engagement with stakeholders was enhanced. Flyers and other outputs were translated into several different languages to reach specific audiences. The strategy also addressed internal communications by identifying channels that were most accessible and most appropriate for authors. In the case of Viet Nam, the communications strategy targeted decision-makers by highlighting gaps in the use of information on biodiversity and ecosystem services in policy processes that had been identified by the assessment. In this way it highlighted the potential value of the process to these stakeholders to further encourage their engagement. The Viet Nam team leveraged engagement from private sector audiences in a similarly targeted way by communicating the economic value of better information around biodiversity and ecosystem services.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, communications came to depend largely on internet access. This increased the need for clear communications strategies targeting all relevant stakeholder groups. In most countries, the assessment teams found that platforms such as television and radio programmes and a diverse range of social media became prominent in their everyday communications. As highlighted by the survey results, however, using online platforms may not be possible for all stakeholders, and postal services, text messages, phone calls, or the use of radio may still be necessary. Equally, the choice of which online platform to use in communications is important, as some platforms may be more familiar to certain stakeholders than others. To overcome challenges posed by changing national calendars and the emergence of COVID-19, the Cameroon team developed adaptive measures in terms of timeframes and approaches for its communications priorities as well as its project activities. For example, during the country's election period and then again during the COVID-19 lockdown, the assessment team communicated with one another via telephone and email and by holding meetings on Zoom, as it became challenging to organize physical workshops.

CONCLUSION

This publication, *Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments*, draws upon, and contributes to, worldwide expertise around ecosystem assessments. It builds on efforts such as the Global Environment Outlook, the Global Biodiversity Outlook, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the Sub-Global Assessment Network, and the assessments carried out by IPBES, among others. The key messages and lessons included in each volume of this publication have been distilled from the experiences of eight countries supported by the NEA Initiative at UNEP-WCMC. They highlight commonalities in countries' experiences, as well as differences in approaches taken by national assessment teams on topics of relevance throughout the assessment process.

This analysis paves the way for improved support and more tailored capacity-building efforts targeted towards country partners embarking on national ecosystem assessments. Currently, there are still gaps in our understanding of country experiences and approaches to the assessment process. Assessing these gaps will help to identify areas for further research in future iterations of this lesson-learning process, and analysis will be undertaken periodically to gather information about lessons learned under the umbrella of the NEA Initiative. The next iteration of the learning process will be focused on the use of assessment findings stage, once country partners are in a position to offer information on how their assessment findings are being used, and how this contributes towards the main purpose of conducting a national ecosystem assessment: consideration of the full value of nature in decision-making.



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The NEA Initiative hosted by UNEP-WCMC contributes to a world where countries are able to assess the status and drivers of change to biodiversity and are empowered to transform policies to account for people and nature. The NEA Initiative builds capacity, provides support, and fosters knowledge exchange through a highly qualified, multicultural, and interdisciplinary team of practitioners and partners. Our approach is tailored to country needs, building a community of practice across five continents.

Since 2017, the NEA Initiative has worked with 14 countries to scope or conduct their national ecosystem assessments. Our support is delivered in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) through the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network (BES-Net). Through this work, the NEA Initiative supports the rolling work program up to 2030 of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the IPBES Capacity-building Rolling Plan.

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