

What is different about INFFER?

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20 September 2011

Participants in INFFER training sometimes provide feedback that INFFER seems similar to their existing decision process. It is quite likely that this is true for some aspects, but INFFER includes a number of important elements that generally are not included in environmental decision processes that are actually used. Our experience and detailed analysis shows that including these additional elements makes an enormous difference to the quality of decision making and the extent of environmental outcomes that can be delivered.

Here we outline the areas where INFFER offers more than the processes that most people in the environmental management sector are accustomed to.

1. Comprehensiveness

INFFER includes a much broader range of information than most environmental decision processes. We have found that decisions are often made without accounting for crucially important information. For example, two of the most important determinants of the cost-effectiveness of an environmental project are (a) the effectiveness of the on-ground works and actions (i.e. the cause and effect relationship between actions and outcomes) and (b) the adoptability of the required works and actions for relevant land and water managers (i.e. to what extent will the required works and actions be adopted?). Both of these things are very commonly omitted completely, or are included in a very weak way. If they are not properly considered, then the results of the prioritisation process will be essentially random.

2. The Public: Private Benefits Framework

INFFER includes this tool to provide guidance on the most appropriate class of policy mechanism to use in the project being assessed (positive incentives, negative incentives, extension/information, technology development, or no action). We have observed that many projects are hampered by the use of inappropriate policy mechanisms, so we developed this unique tool, which is one of the key outputs of our Project Assessment Form.

3. A sound formula for cost-effectiveness

It is one thing to collect the relevant information to assess a project, but it is also necessary to combine the information in a way that provides an accurate picture of the relative merits of different projects. Most processes to prioritise environmental projects do not achieve this. They rely on a weighted additive formula that is not consistent with economic theory and logic. The INFFER approach is theoretically sound, based on calculation of the Benefit: Cost Ratio for each project that is assessed in detail.

4. Comparisons of different types of projects

INFFER allows systematic comparison of investment options across all types of environmental and natural resource issues, not just within any one category (such as biodiversity). It also allows comparison of large and small projects, and of short-term

versus long-term projects. All of these comparisons are made in terms of the benefits generated per dollar invested. Other systems are not designed in a way to validly allow this degree of flexibility.

5. Logical consistency

Many proposals for environmental project are not logically consistent. For example, a project may specify a goal, and a series of on-ground works and actions, but the works and actions would not actually achieve the goal. Sometimes the works and actions are poorly specified and not quantified, so it is impossible to check for logical consistency. The INFFER Project Assessment Form includes a series of seven consistency checks that users have to respond to. This is important to reduce the risk that funds will flow to projects because their performance has been exaggerated. We are not aware of any other environmental decision system that addresses this issue.

6. Explicit handling of uncertainty

There is always uncertainty about proposed environmental projects – usually quite high uncertainty about several aspects. Unlike other systems we've seen, INFFER deals with uncertainty head on, and in several ways. In the Project Assessment Form, users capture information about the key knowledge gaps relevant to the project, and how they will be addressed. The quality of information used to complete different sections of the form is scored, so that decision makers know how much confidence to have in a project. Various risks to the success of a project are assessed, and these risks are factored into the calculation of the Benefit: Cost Ratio.

7. Being specific about outcomes

We see many projects where the intended outcomes are not clear. Even where goals are given, they are often not specific, measurable or time-bound. Without this, it is not possible to evaluate the project in a meaningful way, nor to conduct useful monitoring and evaluation of the project once it is implemented. INFFER requires a specific, measurable, time-bound goal to be set, and for the target environmental assets to be spelt out.

8. A seven-step system

INFFER embeds the above elements in a well-structured seven-step process. The early stages are designed to ensure that the process is efficient – they identify a large number of potential projects, and filter them using relatively simple criteria. This avoids the need to do time-consuming evaluations of a large number of projects. The middle stages are about detailed assessment and decision making, and the latter stages are about implementation, monitoring and adaptive management.

9. Training, support and quality assurance

Recognising that adopting and using a more sophisticated decision process can be challenging for people, INFFER offers support in various ways. Support is available on the INFFER web site (accessible documentation and background information), is built into the INFFER Project Assessment Form software (context-sensitive help, example answers to questions, advice about where and how question responses are used, frequently asked questions) and is delivered by members of the INFFER team (a well-developed training course, advice about specific aspects of the process, feedback on draft project assessment forms).

While INFFER is a comprehensive and rigorous process, its structured and systematic approach mean that it is an efficient investment of time. It can, in fact, save time when users become familiar and confident with the process.