

## Constructing Conservation Impact: Understanding Monitoring and Evaluation in Conservation NGOs

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### Abstract

A growing number of scholars critically examine large conservation organisations to explore organisational intentions, practices, and outcomes. In parallel, other scholars have problematised audit cultures, suggesting that these seemingly good practices of evaluation and measurement are not neutral and instead have consequences for governance and power. This article combines literature on conservation NGOs, organisational theory, and audit culture to study the inner workings of conservation and to understand the construction of effectiveness and impact. I draw on semi-structured interviews to examine how a large, international conservation organisation, which I term the World Conservation Organisation (WCO; a pseudonym), coordinates monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes among its international, national, and local offices. I find individual staff within WCO make varying assumptions about the M&E policies and place different values on M&E, which results in different institutional logics towards M&E and a broader organisational failure to measure progress and reflect upon outcomes. The findings also show difficulties in translating broad organisational goals into specific project activities, underscoring tensions in implementation and limitations in M&E practice. I also find that organisational and managerial pressure to report success is greater than donor pressure, a finding that expands understandings of NGO-donor dynamics.

**Keywords:** monitoring and evaluation, biodiversity conservation, NGOs, organisations, Papua New Guinea, donors, environmental governance

### INTRODUCTION

It concerns me at a personal level that here we are trying to save species that are dying out and are critically endangered, places that are being destroyed gradually... We have to be as well organised as some of the best armies out there... we have to be really, really coordinated... We have a lot of key, star soldiers... who can storm the fortress walls, get behind the fence lines and send fire... and create these wins... And all the soldiers... they do not know where

the general is telling them to go or what battalion to support or when their supplies will be replenished... We have to be even more organised, I think, than the governments and private companies, given what we are trying to do, and, at the same time, balance it with a representative or democratic structure... [but] there was just this complete lack of coordination... the kind you really need between the different contributing offices and projects and programmes when it came to the programme strategy. So it is just sort of a whole lot of people throwing in their pennies over a wall and thinking it will all add up, and what was really achieved as a whole is completely unknown.

— Conservation manager, World Conservation Organization

It is surprising to hear that employees of a large conservation organisation hope that small, individual project activities, “throwing many pennies over a wall,” will contribute to the conservation interventions that are necessary to solve

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increasingly complex environmental concerns (e.g., saving critically endangered species and conserving threatened habitats). This manager's statement illustrates complex challenges faced by the World Conservation Organisation (WCO)<sup>1</sup> while also noting organisational failure to strategically address such challenges. When describing the "star soldiers," she recognises the ability and expertise of WCO staff. At the same time, she notes poor coordination among different offices, projects, and programmes, and emphasises the lack of high-level, strategic leadership to provide organisational direction. Finally, this manager underscores WCO's failure to clearly define how individual staff efforts and programme activities will contribute to addressing conservation challenges. This article explores how WCO's failure to clearly define, measure, and reflect upon outcomes, through institutionalised monitoring and evaluation (M&E), led to the situation, described above, in which WCO could not illustrate how, or even if, its activities contributed to its broader mission.

M&E represents a unique opportunity to examine how individual actors within an organisation work together to achieve common objectives and produce larger impacts because it theoretically involves coordination, cooperation, and management across multiple levels of an organisation. This article examines how WCO, a large, international conservation organisation, coordinates M&E activities across its international, national, and local offices. I consider the perspectives of the staff based at WCO's international headquarter office and at their Papua New Guinea (PNG) offices, to show how organisational processes and common routines work through individuals—shaping their attitudes and behaviour, and instituting norms and practices. This empirical analysis illustrates how individual attitudes and behaviour towards implementing M&E vary among the different WCO offices and shows difficulties in translating broad organisational goals into specific project activities, underscoring tensions in implementation. This analysis also illuminates how WCO and its staff construct effectiveness and impact, contributing to critical reflection on practices of evaluation and measurement within the field of conservation.

This article is organised into four sections, including this introduction. The introduction includes the theoretical framework, below, which synthesises insights from scholarship on political ecology, organisational theory, and audit cultures, and M&E. Section two describes the research methodology. The argument section presents results and analyses organisational culture at international and national levels. Section four presents the discussion and conclusion.

### Theoretical framework

My theoretical framework combines three fields of scholarship to examine how individuals coordinate and implement M&E across WCO's international, national, and local offices. I use insights from post-structural political ecology and critical studies of conservation to shed light on the governmentality of organisations and projects. I use organisational scholarship

to investigate how organisational processes shape individual action and behaviour, particularly on institutional logics. Finally, my theoretical framework incorporates scholarship on accountancy, indicators, and trends in conservation evaluation to situate my analysis of M&E within scholarship that recognises the potential consequences of such evaluation on governance and power.

Post-structural political ecology is useful for understanding how certain forms of power and knowledge produce particular discourses, and, in turn, how these discourses shape possible attitudes and behaviour. In many cases, post-structural political ecology portrays institutions as producing forms of knowledge that position individuals as experts. This expertise depends on simplifications and abstractions that depoliticise knowledge, allow concepts to be represented as universal, and simplify the world (Mitchell 2002). Such a construction of knowledge, Mitchell argues, is necessary to position individuals as possessing expertise about a particular concept that these experts then use to propose managerial and technical solutions to justify interventions and to incorporate individuals into relations of dominance (Foucault 1979). While many scholars describe organisations as framing a particular worldview as desirable or as shaping knowledge about biodiversity (e.g., Escobar 1998; Goldman 2005), attention to the organisations themselves appears merely incidental, a side component used to illustrate how conservation and development function. As a result, this scholarship elides an understanding of how organisations shape power, knowledge, and individuals, a lacuna I address by illustrating how WCO staff produce project knowledge.

As Cooper and Packard (2007: 27) note "we tend to treat [NGOs] in generic terms, not exploring their varied ideologies, [or] organisational forms". These types of assumptions blur the role of individual agency within organisations, overlooking how individuals influence organisational culture and decision-making. Moreover, some studies over-emphasise local agency (e.g., Scott 1990; Li 2007) or fail to consider "agency within the institution and between the institutions and other social actors" (Rhee 2006: 46). Consequently, there is a need to empirically examine organisational intentions, practices, and outcomes (Sundberg 2003; Heyman 2009; King 2009).

Recent contributions to what Mosse (2004) terms the "new ethnography of development" represent a promising avenue in considering the role of individual actors within institutions (see Mosse 2005; Rhee 2006). As West explains, "this new ethnography takes seriously the governmentality of projects—the fact that social lives, environments, and subjects come to make and be made by the productive power of structures created by projects... and the social interactions and transactions during all sorts of projects... which create new communities" (West 2006: xviii). van Ufford (1998) exemplifies such ethnographic scholarship: he analyses "the boards and NGOs as a whole, but also... the power balances between the directors, evaluators, and operating staff within the NGOs."

A rapidly expanding literature examines large conservation NGOs (e.g., Walley 2004; West 2006). Popular articles have also investigated conservation NGOs (e.g., Chapin 2004;

Dowie 2005, 2008; Macdonald 2008). Studies focus on how individuals and organisations produce particular knowledge forms that influence conservation policy (e.g., Brockington and Scholfield 2010), and show the role of transnational networks of well-connected elites (Holmes 2012) and conservation celebrities (Brockington and Scholfield 2009) in producing dominant attitudes and practices. Other studies highlight the negative consequences of “big conservation” on local actors and NGO missions (e.g., Neumann 1998; Corson 2010). Sachedina (2010), for instance, concludes the scaling up of the African Wildlife Foundation, and its focus on government and donor relationships, resulted in organisational practices that contributed to local disempowerment and poverty. These studies and others (e.g., Brosius and Campbell 2010) show how ethnographic methods can uncover the organisational practices through which conservation occurs.

To examine how WCO coordinates M&E across its multiple offices, I draw upon organisational scholarship to explain dimensions of organisational behaviour. Organisations represent central structures in society (Mills 1959) with the power to guide, enable, and constrain action (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983); therefore, understanding their influences, operations, and structures can shed light on individual behaviour. Organisations embody “social structures created by individuals to support the collaborative pursuit of specified goals” though definitions vary depending on disciplinary orientation and research motivation (Scott and Davis 2006: 11). Still, organisations generally have a common goal, established structures, and common routines for achieving their objectives. Organisations also create potential for accomplishing missions or tasks that would be impossible by individuals alone. For instance, conservation organisations facilitate the monitoring of fish spawning aggregation sites throughout PNG rather than the smaller number of sites that one individual could monitor.

Organisations tend to follow rules or logics of “appropriateness” where organisational action and decision-making follows previous experience with similar situations (March and Olsen 1984; Alison and Zelikow 1999). Organisations typically have standard operating procedures that require individuals to act in particular ways in specific situations. Standard procedures allow for quick, efficient decision-making so that any individual can perform individual tasks on any given day without consulting a chain of hierarchy—a marine scientist tagging whales according to an approved scientific protocol or a social scientist carrying out a participatory rural assessment, using an organisational handbook, exemplify such standard procedures. Further, organisations tend to reward staff who follow routinised and standardised practices, creating disincentives for other practices and limiting creativity and innovation, which can lead to broader organisational failure to adapt and change (Alison and Zelikow 1999).

A large body of scholarship, particularly in organisational theory and sociology, investigates the influence of organisational culture<sup>2</sup>—the shared patterns of beliefs, expectations, and

values—on individuals. Schein (1990) defines organisational culture “as (a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” (1990: 111). Schein (2011) emphasises culture results in consensus and similar outlooks among individual employees. For instance, individuals may dress in a particular way, communicate concerns in a specific way, or raise new ideas following accepted patterns for sharing opinions. Similarly, O’Reilly and Chatman describe culture as a “social control system based on shared norms and values” that can influence focus, shape interventions, and guide attitudes and behaviour (O’Reilly and Chatman 1996: 164). To these scholars, culture depends not only on rules and procedures but also on personal relationships and organisational hierarchies, representing a form of control based on scrutiny. In short, organisational culture constrains and shapes the behaviour, actions, and thoughts of individuals within an organisation, defines the norms of acceptable behaviour, influences organisational priorities, and shapes organisational interpretations of internal and external events.

Sociologists refer to such norms as institutional “logics,” a set of organising principles that provide actors in an organisation with a sense of identity and vocabulary while still allowing for individual agency for individuals and organisations to elaborate upon, interpret, and manipulate these logics (e.g., Alford and Friedland 1985; Friedland and Alford 1991). Through logics, institutions shape behaviour (Thornton and Ocasio 2008) and constrain individual and organisational action (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Friedland and Alford 1991). Thornton and Ocasio explain that “institutional logics provide a link between individual agency and cognition and socially constructed institutional practices and rule structures” and stress that institutional context “regularizes behavior and provides opportunities for agency and change” (Thornton and Ocasio 2008: 101-2). Actors internal and external to an organisation may shape organisational action, particularly in terms of status and legitimacy (see Suchman 1995). I use the concept of institutional logics to examine the potential for individuals to shape organisational norms and practices and for organisations to influence individual attitudes and behaviour.

Despite recognised benefits of M&E, including accountability and improvement, some scholars have problematised the idea of an “audit culture” (Strathern 2000), suggesting that these seemingly “good practices” of evaluation and measurement are not neutral. Instead, Strathern (2000) and others argue these practices have social consequences for governance and power. Power (1994) explains such audits facilitate Foucauldian ‘conduct of conduct’, writing that “governments... have discovered that if they make explicit the practices whereby people check themselves, they can ostensibly withdraw to the position of simply checking the resultant indicators of

performance” (cited in Strathern 2000: 4). This perspective suggests how audits shift responsibility to the performer, who complies with coercive pressure to “self-check.” Correspondingly, Shore and Wright (1999: 558) assert that an “audit is essentially a relationship of power between the scrutinizer and the observed”. Further, the ways in which organisations themselves are accountable, such as to their donors or boards of directors, can also influence individual behaviour.

Scholarship examining the role of donor funding in shaping NGOs attributes the construction and maintenance of project success to donor pressure. For example, many scholars recognise the accountability of NGOs to their donors (Tendler 1982; Derman 1995; Wapner 1995; Wapner 2002a,b; Ebrahim 2003; Dorsey 2005; Kilby 2006). This scholarship has raised concerns about NGO accountability to local populations and unease about the potential influence of donors in shaping NGO agendas and activities (see Benson 2012). Scholars identify mismatched timeframes between short-term donor projects and the comparably longer time necessary to achieve conservation objectives as additional challenges.

More recently, scholars have drawn attention to quantitative indicators, rather than qualitative narratives, in evaluating performance due to the type of knowledge that such indicators, and the programmes that rely upon and evaluate them, produce (Merry 2011; Høyland et al. 2011). Such indicators, as technologies of global governance, shape actions and decision-making and have the potential to influence the distribution and exercise of power, producing knowledge and governance effects. Merry (2011) argues such effects transform civil society organisations by demanding quantification of their accomplishments. Though such accountability is valuable, its social processes and effects are still uncertain. In examining M&E processes, I consider M&E as potentially valuable for improving conservation practice while simultaneously investigating its potential for producing particular subjectivities and representations of reality and recognising M&E has social consequences for governance and power.

Such a study is particularly relevant in the field of conservation, which adopted project evaluation methods in the 1990s, relatively late in comparison to sectors such as education, poverty reduction or public health (Stem et al. 2005; Ferraro and Pattanayak 2006). As one review article notes, “most conservation practitioners rely largely on anecdotal evidence, fashion, and gut feelings to select which strategies and tools to use” (Salafsky et al. 2002: 1477). There are a few reasons why the field of conservation lags behind in evaluation. First, conservation evaluation involves natural and social aspects, requiring more complex forms of evaluation than single disciplinary evaluations. In addition, conservation evaluation is tricky because “the units acted on are often not the units conservation projects want to ultimately influence. . . conservation projects are often designed to influence individuals, governments, or societies but their impact is measured in terms of species and ecosystem health” (Margoluis et al. 2009: 92). Conservation organisations also struggle to

define indicators; they tend to focus on biodiversity condition as the conservation target and to measure success as the change in species numbers in a particular area. Such indicators may fail to account for external threats, such as consumer demand for fish or changing government policies. Further, biodiversity focused indicators may not be appropriate, cost-effective, or even feasible (Salafsky et al. 2002). In addition, conservation evaluation often fails to consider counterfactual outcomes to evaluate what types of interventions work and when (Ferraro and Pattanayak 2006). Finally, the size of conservation organisations represents a challenge. The capacity of organisations to systematically learn about the consequences of their actions generally decreases as the organisation increases in size (van Ufford 1988), because of the number of individuals involved in such processes. Correspondingly, large conservation organisations with multiple offices may face greater challenges in implementing M&E.

Despite these challenges, conservation organisations have begun to recognise the importance of M&E for two key reasons: accountability and improvement (Margoluis et al. 2009). Accountability-focused evaluation serves to ensure that organisations account financially for their activities and implement promised activities and usually stems from a formal process required by the donors. Improvement-focused evaluation aims to improve implementation and organisational, management or project effectiveness. This improvement-focused evaluation is the focus of this article. I define M&E as the process through which organisations evaluate their practices and outcomes according to their mission and objectives.

## METHODOLOGY

This article relies on data from interviews personally conducted at WCO’s international headquarter office (“WCO Global”) in January 2010 and in their PNG offices between January and December 2010 (n=13). I conducted semi-structured interviews at large, international NGOs (n=18) and smaller, national or local NGOs based in PNG (n=10). I also conducted interviews with donor organisations funding marine conservation projects in PNG (n=5). This article draws primarily on 36 interviews with staff from large, international NGOs and donor organisations.

I interviewed people from all bureaucratic levels, from organisation directors to program staff, an approach that documents the multiple levels through which projects are shaped and influenced. Similar to the ways in which Corson (2010) and Sachedina (2010) conducted ethnographic research at both central organisation offices and village levels to examine the inner workings of conservation, I conducted research at international, national, and local offices to analyse if and how the attitudes and behaviour of WCO employees to M&E varied. I observed many WCO activities, including internal staff meetings and WCO community activities, which gave me insight into WCO decision-making processes, WCO staff interactions, and relationships between WCO staff and

communities. I also reviewed public WCO documents, such as press releases and website material, and internal documents, including strategic plans and workplans, and external project evaluations.

WCO is a large, international conservation NGO. It has an annual budget of hundreds of millions of dollars, employs thousands of people globally, and implements conservation projects around the world. Similarly, WCO's organisational structure is representative of large, international NGOs: it has an international headquarter office that interacts with national and field offices, including the WCO PNG national office and field offices described in this article. Like many international conservation NGOs, WCO Global receives funding from foundations, governments, businesses, and private donations. WCO PNG receives financial support from WCO Global for country specific activities and for regional initiatives, and also raises its own project funding. To maintain anonymity, I use pseudonyms for the organisation and its staff.

Figure 1 shows the multiple scales of WCO. WCO Global interacts with regional and national offices around the world, including the Asia-Pacific office and the PNG national office and the Madang and Manus field offices shown on the left. WCO Global also has strategic program areas, such as its M&E unit, a marketing unit, and a conservation unit, that interact with regional, national, and field offices around the world. Some of these strategic program areas have their own focus areas as well; for instance, the conservation unit includes work on forests, freshwaters, and other programs, as shown below.

**ARGUMENT**

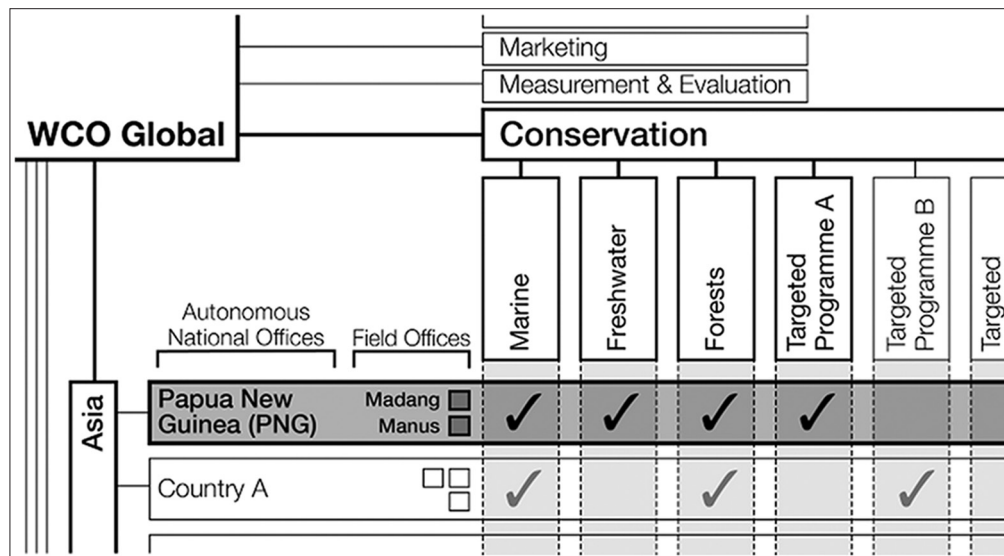
I present the results by first describing how individuals at multiple offices contribute to M&E processes. I next elucidate the assumptions that individuals at international and national offices make about the M&E strategies and project design.

I then describe efforts by staff at the international office to develop an M&E framework. Next, I identify two factors at the national level that resulted in failure to integrate M&E as an organisational process. Finally, I describe how these factors created an environment that discouraged critical reflection and emphasised maintaining an image of organisational and project success.

At WCO Global, individuals define the ways in which the organisational M&E processes should operate, sometimes in cooperation with the regional offices. The national offices have staff responsible for coordinating M&E among national projects and reporting to regional and international staff. Project and field staff are responsible for integrating M&E into their workplans, implementing activities that advance WCO goals, and reporting upon achievements. In theory, each individual within this M&E process helps to ensure that field level activities contribute to WCO's mission and objectives.

WCO's approach to M&E shares a basic assumption of organisational scholarship, that collections of individuals will follow regular, defined procedures and routines to achieve a common objective. WCO Global senior employees assume that individual staff incorporate M&E into project design and generally advance WCO's overall goals by aligning their activities with organisational aims. During interviews, WCO Global staff described these assumptions.

Tanya Russo, WCO's Conservation Monitoring Manager, explained that WCO's system allows offices "to say what enabled them to perform well and what hindered them from performing well... to show the relationship between good programme design and achievement at the other end; so if [we aren't] following best practices in how we design, does that translate into poor performance..." Liam Weeks, WCO's Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, agreed, stating that WCO's guidelines "ask people to consider [intended goals and impacts] right up front."



**Figure 1**  
*World Conservation Organisation organogram*

Some WCO Global managers incorporated M&E at the beginning of projects. Liam Weeks, a WCO Global project manager, described how her project defined evaluation indicators from the start. The project developed a monitoring framework through a process where offices involved in the project worked with WCO Global team to identify goals and priorities. Another WCO Global project manager described a project that began by “developing a strategy, looking at the key outcomes we want,” therefore defining its potential impact before carrying out project activities. Both projects exemplify the types of participatory, *ex ante* processes for incorporating M&E into project design that WCO Global managers assume occurs at its offices throughout the world.

In contrast to WCO Global, WCO PNG managers viewed M&E as an activity to measure project outcomes *after* project completion. WCO PNG’s Conservation Director, Sally van Vliet, explained “at the end of each project you assess what has been achieved and what is the way forward and how does it fit in the broader framework of the programme of the organisation.” While she recognises the importance of assessing project impacts within an organisational framework, she emphasises *ex post* evaluation rather than *ex ante* evaluation. This national level assumption is typical of most evaluation, which means that organisations lack baseline data to evaluate change over time (Margoluis et al. 2009). Conservation organisations often use this lack of baseline data to justify the need for conservation in the locations where they work. Such justification can become problematic when individuals experience pressure to produce evaluations that may not accurately reflect projects, a point I return to in the discussion.

Managers of WCO Global assumed that WCO had a well-defined framework for ensuring that the national offices contributed to WCO’s broader mission. WCO Global senior managers created the Conservation Strategy and Evaluation Office in 2008 to track national office performance and ensure an objective basis for evaluation. The unit’s six staff develop organisational standards on conservation achievements and financial performance and seek to ensure national offices follow M&E standards. Tanya Russo develops monitoring systems for WCO’s key global initiatives and helps national offices develop M&E strategies. Liam Weeks assists national offices in designing strategies and planning their work. For example, he worked with WCO PNG staff to develop their 2008–2012 strategic plan. Liam’s role is to ensure that the national offices and individual staff reflect upon how activities and projects contribute to broader organisational goals.

When Tanya Russo began investigating how WCO monitored its progress, she discovered “we have no reporting framework to design our programmes, to tell us what we are really achieving.” WCO lacked a systematic planning system that connected individual actions, project achievements, or national level outcomes to WCO’s performance. WCO national offices created their own strategic plans and workplans, and national managers did not necessarily connect project activities to WCO’s mission and objectives. This structure resulted in a monitoring approach that Tanya described as everyone “doing

their own thing” without coming together as a cohesive whole. Contrary to the assumptions by WCO Global staff, WCO lacked an organisational planning and reporting framework and failed to ensure an overall, organisational strategy.

Tanya explained the broader implications of this situation:

It goes into this much bigger design or planning issues that needs to be addressed in the network, because we do not go about things in a systematic way when we plan our programmes, so we do not connect a lot of the pieces together in a coherent framework: project to goals to programme and goals. So at the end of the day we just have a lot of small and medium sized wins, and it is getting worrisome that we can’t say that this programme in its entirety is going to achieve x and then we find out up to three years later we couldn’t do that, we couldn’t achieve x... Right now we have tiny little project achievements and outputs: stakeholder workshops, we have a commercial on tv. And you add it up and you think, ‘What did this programme do?!’

This last comment underscores an important finding: WCO fails to achieve broader objectives because it has “small and medium sized wins,” such as a television commercial that raises awareness on endangered species, that may not contribute to larger wins, such as reversing the endangered status of a species. Tanya further explained that WCO has well-trained, well-educated staff but that coordinated communication among offices, programmes, and projects was missing. She concluded WCO’s M&E processes did not ensure an overall strategy or contribute to understanding WCO’s achievements as a whole. Further, in the absence of an M&E framework to measure outcomes, managers and staff had no basis on which to identify and then address problematic results.

When Tanya reported this lack of coordination to WCO Global senior staff, she said they were shocked by the results. Their surprise confirms that senior staff assumed that WCO had standard M&E operating procedures for measuring and evaluating its outcomes and guiding staff attitudes and behaviour. One staff member admitted, after Tanya’s documentation of WCO’s lack of standard M&E procedures, he discovered that WCO has “ended up falling about twenty years beyond the curve of M&E” without realising it.

The international perspective highlights how WCO Global staff believed well-defined frameworks were an important component in achieving their goals. As the findings of the Conservation Strategy and Performance Office underscore, however, these assumptions were not systematically matched by individual behaviour of measuring and evaluating outcomes, and were not communicated to employees or presented as standard operational procedures or organisational norms throughout WCO. Communication of organisational assumptions is critical for a shared institutional logic on the importance of M&E to develop, as organisational scholars have demonstrated.

To illustrate how the absence of shared logics on M&E processes produced particular attitudes and behaviour towards implementation, I draw on interviews and observations from WCO national and local offices. Two factors at the national level illustrate why individuals did not integrate M&E processes into their daily routines. First, an organisational environment at the national level emphasised time in the office. Second, WCO PNG managers created an organisational environment that discouraged critical reflection and resulted in an environment where staff internalised organisational norms on producing images of success.

### **The national office environment: Busy being busy**

The organisational environment in WCO PNG office was one of busy, dedicated conservation officers working at their individual desks. Senior managers arrived at the office before 7 or 8am many mornings, stayed late to connect with WCO Global staff or staff in other regions, or came in over the weekends to catch up on emails and paperwork. These managers set an expectation of long hours at the office, an expectation reinforced by occasional comments to staff when they left the office after 8 or 9 hours a day. On a typical weekend day, two to five managers or senior staff might be in the office. Junior staff described periodically being called on Saturday mornings and asked to come in for informal meetings with their supervisors who had not had time to meet with them during the week.

Thomas McDermott, the former PNG country director, described such expectations in terms of job commitment: ‘you make yourself available and you do not count your time.’ He clarified, ‘You do not say sorry, it is half past 4, I am going now. And if someone calls you at 10 at night or to meet on a Sunday, you deal with that because that is part of the job.’ This environment emphasised the total amount of time spent at work rather than recognising efficiency or rewarding productivity, in part because managers can more easily observe and measure employee inputs, such as time, than subjective outputs, such as productivity. Additionally, as several junior staff stressed, the country director was highly unorganised and unable to prioritise tasks. His long hours did not necessarily equate with productivity or outputs but rather with a failure to efficiently organise and prioritise work. In summary, the organisational environment encouraged long hours at the office, including coming in on evenings or weekends, and lacked an emphasis on efficiency or prioritising activities, including M&E, which contributed to a façade of success that I address in the discussion. This emphasis on input (time spent in the office), rather than on output (efficiency or prioritisation), is common at NGO offices in PNG.

Further, in the absence of a focus on prioritising tasks, many busy staff did not make time for M&E or prioritise it as part of their everyday work. Fredah Donigi, WCO’s Community Forestry Officer, who is also WCO PNG’s M&E coordinator, explained “everyone is so caught up in ‘I have to do this and this’ and not enough [reflecting] is done and sit down and

look at what we have done and should we continue doing this or should we change our approach or why are we not doing this... and why are we not achieving this...” Similarly, Indira Bhatnagar, a WCO PNG project manager, said the office was “constantly producing lessons learned reports” and other internal and donor reports without focusing on learning or examining their “conservation paradigms and ways of working” to evaluate if they were effective. These comments illustrate how staff fail to reflect upon how their tasks contribute to the larger aims of WCO.

Tanya Russo’s concerns about tiny project achievements underscore how project staff may be busy without necessarily contributing to broader goals. For instance, a project may organise a village soccer tournament as part of its community engagement activities. Project staff might spend one month or more busily coordinating the tournament: double-checking the list of players, visiting community facilitators, ensuring sufficient refreshments, or reporting to their supervisors about progress. If the managers and staff viewed M&E as a priority, one of the first steps would be to consider how a soccer tournament contributes to conservation goals. A soccer tournament may be an effective way to improve trust between communities and WCO and to raise awareness about conservation, but such activities could just as easily fall into Tanya Russo’s classification of “what did this project do?!”

Such an organisational environment exemplifies a working style that a WCO Global manager described as employees who are “busy being busy.” Liam Weeks explained “people are busy being busy and one of the key priorities for me is to shut down their busyness because I do not know that they are busy on the right things.” His statement aptly characterises the WCO PNG office: individual employees stay at their desks for long hours, meeting their supervisors’ expectations, without necessarily focusing their efforts or contributing to larger conservation impacts.

Further, many staff felt their responsibilities consisted of two or three full time jobs. For instance, one staff member managed a site-based forest project and the climate change, payments for ecosystem services, and REDD initiatives, which involved policy engagement at the national level. There are a few reasons why staff may have, or feel they have, multiple responsibilities. In the first case, WCO combined two job responsibilities, a decision reflecting multiple institutional desires and insufficient funding for two employees. In other cases, staff responsibilities may develop into larger workloads. Finally, as in many types of organisations, staff with a commitment to the organisation and its mission often took on responsibilities they felt were necessary and not being done by others. For example, one employee rewrote WCO PNG’s HR policy because he discovered it lacked necessary safeguards and the HR staff had not taken the initiative to revise it. Such efforts can place strain on individual workloads and force staff to make choices about activities on which they spend time. Because WCO PNG managers did not communicate M&E as a critical responsibility, busy staff members did not choose to devote significant effort to it.

Paul Smith, a former Terrestrial Manager, exemplifies such an employee. He explained that he appreciated WCO Global's M&E and strategic planning staff, who encouraged staff to integrate M&E practices into their everyday work, but "I was doing three jobs and I was so sick of reporting and of [WCO Global] changing the reporting formats every five minutes so you have to redraft." For him and other national staff with competing responsibilities, M&E reporting was often seen as burdensome, particularly in the absence of explicit incentives for critical reflection.

### Incentives and motivations

While WCO PNG's organisational environment emphasises time spent at the office and does not emphasise M&E as a standard operating procedure, the gap between WCO Global's desire for a cohesive M&E framework and WCO PNG's limited attention to M&E is also related to WCO's structure and the social interactions between WCO PNG managers and staff. Many employees said that WCO does not reward employees for critical reflection. For example, Annamaria Barrera, a WCO Global Marine Manager, said:

There are no incentives to take time to reflect, forget planning, look at M&E and there is no incentive to reflect and learn from mistakes in an explicit organisational way. If someone does it, it is because they are conscientious and they want to learn and they want to adapt and improve... the incentives are to wrap up the project and package it for your donors and get some more money.

WCO PNG staff agreed there was little encouragement to reflect on activities or evaluate achievements, and said that WCO PNG managers did not communicate M&E as a priority. Paul Smith said the PNG office "didn't have enough M&E for our projects and programmes." Indira believed WCO PNG did not prioritise M&E. She said "we do not spend enough time [evaluating whether projects achieve their goals]... it is not built in at the beginning of the workplans... no one has ever said that [M&E indicators] should be in the workplan, or here is the M&E structure that you should look at."

At the same time, senior managers also expressed concern that WCO was failing to orient its activities towards larger goals. Sally van Vliet said one challenge was "getting the local [staff] to think not just about their small, specific area but to think more broadly about the programme, so the difference between the more regional planning versus local, site specific." These comments illustrate that WCO PNG staff and managers recognised the absence of M&E approaches: staff describe managers who do not encourage them to prioritise M&E in their daily work while managers feel staff do not think broadly enough. Together, these perspectives suggest an organisational environment where M&E was not a regular routine and the motivation for critical reflection was absent, which resulted in differences between WCO Global M&E intentions and WCO PNG M&E practices.

### Failure or modest gains? Pressure against critical reflection

While staff agree critical reflection is absent at the national level, busyness and limited incentives only partially explain organisational failure to evaluate how national activities contribute to broader WCO goals. In contrast with the findings of scholarship on NGO-donor accountability, my interviews with NGO and donor staff show that pressure to emphasise success also comes from within conservation organisations. Indira described the emphasis senior managers placed in appearing successful to donors:

I feel a lot of pressure to put positive spins on things. Definitely. And that is institutionalized as well. When you sit with your boss who has 25 years of experience and he changes the wording in your workplans to make it sound more positive when you should say this is total disaster... you need to say it did not work because of this and this, rather than say we achieved some modest gains in this part of the workplan, which is complete bullshit, sometimes... the kind of annual or quarterly reports we have to do on progress, they have to be channeled through the conservation director and sitting down with him to go through some of the reports, a lot of the wording was changed, the way progress was stated or not stated in the process. So, rather than words like failure, which sometimes is a perfectly acceptable word to use, it is changed into, you know, only modest gains were made... I think it is, well, it is not true actually and it is a pretense that everyone carries on... it is sort of institutionalized lying.

Indira said she believed that managers promoted a "total lack of reflexivity" in WCO because "people are desperately trying not to tell the donors we are doing a bad job." Further, when her managers removed language that described implementation challenges, they actively discouraged critical reflection. Such actions result in minimal motivation for junior staff to reflect upon challenges or to describe activities that did not go as expected. This situation illustrates how more powerful, senior employees shaped the type of knowledge produced by WCO PNG, promoting particular project interpretations and eliminating others in both internal WCO reports and external donor reports. Further, by describing "modest" gains in the project, managers articulated just enough progress to argue for further action and continued funding. This type of behaviour hinders M&E processes because information provided to WCO Global, donors, or others may not accurately reflect projects.

One donor official stressed her organisation tried to encourage "honest, reflective conversation" with its grantees. Mathieu Rousseau, another grant officer in PNG, agreed, saying "there is this transparency, we know that things change and sometimes you have to be flexible, flexible in terms of activities you have foreseen to do." Jane Hopkins, another donor official, said



pressure to present a successful organisational image “comes down to this element of donor pressure to get things done but also internal pressure to get things done.”<sup>23</sup> Jane further elaborated how internal organisational politics shape potential organisational success:

The biggest challenge we are having with how effective our grants have been is that the organisations themselves have to get their own internal problems and challenges sorted out. Until they get the right staff in place, that stay for more than a year, that are happy, they are working in a place where they are supported, until they have a leader that they respect, all of that, until that gets put in place, we will not be able to be successful because they are going through all of these problems... at the end of the day, if the organisation cannot deliver in the management activities and with the community, then we are not going to achieve the conservation we want.

While organisations still experience donor pressure to achieve successful outcomes, my findings show that conservation organisations have internalised pressure to demonstrate success and that managers place pressure on their employees to report success. This organisational culture of constructing and maintaining success can shape individual behaviour to report success, as Indira described. Further, these organisational politics also shape potential conservation success, as Jane’s statement underscores.

It is important to note, however, that attitudes towards reporting success vary within different WCO offices. At WCO PNG, Indira described how her supervisors changed her reports to describe “modest gains” rather than challenges or failure. In contrast, WCO Global staff expressed interest in learning about mistakes. Liam Weeks said, “when I am working with teams, training or designing, we learn a lot more from mistakes than successes. So I say, how about we hear about everything, I want to know all about it...” Liam’s belief in the importance of sharing challenges and failures contrasts with the approach of WCO PNG’s Country Director and the Conservation Director. These differing attitudes at international and national offices suggest the emergence of competing institutional logics within WCO, a point I return to in the following discussion.

## CONCLUSION

This article identifies and analyses the lack of coordination and shared institutional logics among international, national, and local WCO offices on M&E practices. WCO Global managers valued M&E processes as a method of performance evaluation, tried to integrate M&E into WCO’s overall structure, and welcomed critical reflection on project challenges. In contrast, WCO PNG managers possessed different institutional logics: they valued the time their employees spent in the office and their job commitment, and explicitly discouraged discussion of challenges in project and donor reports. In addition, when

WCO PNG managers described program evaluation, they characterised it as *ex post* evaluation that happened after the project occurred, rather than the type of *ex ante* evaluation that WCO Global preferred. These different institutional logics, rather than a single, common belief on M&E practices, illustrate the heterogeneity of beliefs within WCO and underscore WCO’s failure to communicate an organisational culture of valuing M&E. As organisational scholarship suggests, organisational culture must be taught to staff for shared values and norms to develop; in the absence of WCO Global leadership on, and communication about, such norms, WCO Global failed to ensure that employees valued M&E as an important organisational process.

These different institutional logics have two implications for WCO’s conservation practice more generally. First, they illustrate the challenges of translating WCO Global’s priorities into WCO PNG projects and activities. The involvement and decisions of WCO managers and staff at so many levels allowed competing logics to develop, resulting in implementation challenges. Second, these different institutional logics have consequences for the power and influence of WCO Global. WCO PNG staff said they pay more attention to the expectations and priorities of their immediate supervisors than to those of WCO Global, which means that WCO Global managers’ beliefs on the value of M&E have less influence with WCO PNG staff, particularly because WCO PNG managers do not emphasise the value of M&E.

WCO’s M&E processes have additional social consequences for governance and power. First, when WCO PNG managers changed descriptions of project challenges in internal WCO or donor reports, these managers simplified project knowledge to emphasise success and justify WCO’s particular approaches and positioned themselves, rather than project staff, as experts. This action shaped staff attitudes and behaviour on the types of knowledge they were expected to produce and placed staff in a relation of dominance, limiting their autonomy. Second, when managers pressure staff to produce reports that emphasise success, describing “modest gains” rather than challenges or failure, these reports produce incomplete pictures of project achievement, or “institutionalised lying,” and facilitate partial understandings of conservation practice and impact. By failing to effectively measure, much less address, how its project activities contribute to larger impacts, WCO misses an opportunity to use M&E to learn from its activities and improve organisational, management, or project effectiveness.

Foucault (1979) demonstrates that oversight produces individuals who regulate their own behaviour and eventually conform to the norms of conduct desired by institutions or supervisors. From this perspective, when conservation managers place pressure on staff to produce positive reports, staff are likely to begin constructing such reports, even in the absence of external coercion, becoming the self-checking evaluation performers that Power (1994) describes. Indeed, over time, WCO staff described how they limited descriptions of project challenges in their reports and instead produced reports that they knew would meet their supervisors’

expectations, even if these reports were not actually true. This finding suggests that organisational and managerial pressure to report success is greater than donor pressure, a finding that expands the understandings of NGO-donor dynamics.

The social production of success is also shown through the focus on time, rather than impact, in WCO's PNG office. When WCO PNG senior managers encouraged long office hours without emphasising efficiency or productivity, they created an organisational environment that valued busy, dedicated staff without simultaneously communicating the importance of M&E, prioritising conservation outcomes, or encouraging staff to define or measure desired outcomes or to reflect on whether or not their conservation approaches worked. As one staff member described, WCO PNG tended to continue to do the same activities and write similarly worded reports without considering alternative ways of working or alternative conservative paradigms.

More broadly, this analysis elucidates how M&E processes can become technologies of global governance that “convey an aura of objective truth” (Merry 2011: 84) while simultaneously concealing the politics of their production. For instance, when WCO managers and staff choose which information to include in project reports, they decide what information is shared and what information is excluded in reports. Such decisions then produce reports that demonstrate impact and effectiveness using clear, seemingly objective indicators and measurements. The managers' desire to present a positive representation of WCO to donors and others in order to secure WCO's reputation as a successful organisation likely influence decisions about included information, as Indira suggested. Further, as Merry (2011) points out, when WCO selects information to include in their reports (or even lies about its accomplishments), they also define how their accomplishments and effectiveness are measured. This finding suggests how M&E, which the field of conservation originally promoted to ensure accountability and improvement, may result in entirely different effects, such as selective or even inaccurate constructions of knowledge and subjective measurement. This finding also underscores some limitations of M&E; when managers and staff selectively choose what information to include, their reports become a particular representation of a project that they wish to present, rather than an M&E report. In this way, the practice of M&E does not necessarily accomplish accountability-focused or improvement-focused M&E and instead results in the social production of success.

NGOs face an additional disincentive to report on their challenges and failures because of the competition for funding among NGOs, even if donors say they are receptive to more honest reporting. For instance, if WCO produced donor reports describing their failure to achieve marine conservation objectives and another NGO reported to the same donor that it was successfully managing marine areas in partnership with local communities, the donor would be more likely to continue to support the “successful” organisation, even if WCO provided legitimate explanations for its challenges. This pressure to remain competitive with their peers is likely

another contributing factor explaining NGOs' behaviour of constructing effectiveness and impact.

Another reason why WCO PNG managers may have discouraged critical reflection is to minimise evaluations that challenge underlying organisational or project assumptions. Problematic evaluations that threaten a project's successful image may not be looked upon favourably, as other scholars have demonstrated. van Ufford (1988: 91) concluded it was important for all actors within Dutch donor agencies to show a common rationality and demonstrate that everything was going well:

Showing that a consistent policy had been executed was in the interests of all concerned: project staff, directors, government. If together they could construct an image of a well-organised machine, they could count on continued autonomy with regard to decision-making... It was in everyone's interests that a picture of smooth development administration be presented by the staffs to their directors, by the directors to the Ministry and in turn by the Ministry to Parliament.

Similarly, Mosse (2004, 2005) showed how the success of a UK Department for International Development (DFID) agriculture project in India depended not on its activities but on constant translation by project brokers who ensure project coherence. Project policy changes were the result of ruptures in the project's social relationships—“the alliances, the mediators, the chains of translations, interests, and agendas that are tied up in the project... the failure in interpretation is a social failure”—that occurred when the project's brokering networks and group of believers fell apart (Mosse 2005: 184). This anthropological scholarship underscores how organisations depend on networks of individuals to present a cohesive picture of a project or policy. In the case of WCO, varying staff attitudes and behaviour towards M&E resulted in competing logics among different WCO offices and failure to ensure organisational coherence on the value of M&E.

At the same time, M&E, as a technology of global governance, has the potential to transform conservation practice by orienting organisations towards defining and quantifying their accomplishments. WCO aims to address complex conservation challenges, such as saving critically endangered species and conserving threatened habitats, but appears to lack high-level leadership to communicate its aims and intended norms to its employees throughout its multiple offices. M&E represents one mechanism through which WCO could coordinate its multiple offices, programmes, and projects to ensure that it focuses on activities that will address key conservation challenges. If, however, managers fail to recognise the potential for M&E to produce particular representations of reality and do not encourage critical reflection among staff, M&E is more likely to become a technology of global governance that fails to make organisations such as WCO more accountable or more effective.

Although the data in this article illustrates varying attitudes and behaviour towards M&E and competing institutional logics within WCO, these data do not necessarily assume that WCO did not achieve success in its projects or that WCO's activities consistently failed to achieve larger impacts. As Ferguson's (1994) seminal work highlights, and Mosse (2005) confirms, a project that does not achieve its stated aims still has important effects and consequences. Rather, this article shows how WCO failed to communicate a common logic on prioritising M&E practices across its multiple offices, which has implications for WCO's long-term success as well as conservation implementation more broadly. Without senior-level prioritisation of M&E and incentives, critical reflection is less likely to occur, which means that WCO also misses an opportunity to identify and address problematic outcomes. It is possible, as the WCO Global Marine Manager points out, that an employee may reflect upon his mistakes, because he is conscientious, interested in learning, or recognises a need for improvement. As WCO's Conservation Monitoring Manager says, however, at an organisational level, star soldiers need direction in how to storm fortress walls—this article illustrates this lack of senior-level direction in coordinating M&E across WCO's international, national, and local offices, resulting in a broader failure to measure progress and reflect upon outcomes. Moreover, this article advances critical reflection on evaluation and measurement within the field of conservation by showing how staff at a large, international conservation NGO construct effectiveness and impact, and highlighting some of the limitations of M&E.

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### NOTES

1. The name of this organisation and of all individuals are pseudonyms. To further protect individual identities, some genders were changed.
2. Initial scholarship on organisational culture stemmed from an interest in explaining the relationship between culture and efficiency, using culture to explain why some corporations, such as Japanese firms, outperformed their competitors. This perspective emphasises “culture [as] instrumentally developed so that employees internalise and accomplish specific company objectives” (Godwyn and Gittel 2011: 304). Similarly, Kreps (1990) stresses corporate culture must be consistently and simply communicated for employees to learn and follow it. Organisational theorists now recognise culture as one factor

influencing organisational efficiency and performance. In contrast, neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) identifies legitimacy as important for organisational success (Thornton and Ocasio 2008).

3. These statements represent the perspectives of individuals in the donor communities of themselves and their actions; grantees may not share this perspective of donors as welcoming honest, reflective conversations.

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