

LESSONS IN SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT

Sustainable land management (SLM) is integral to securing human survival and well-being, particularly in safeguarding global food and water security. UNEP has been at the forefront of SLM interventions, including designing and implementing SLM projects through its GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit.

The Evaluation Office of UNEP selected a sample of recent terminal evaluations of SLM-related projects to assess collectively and identify best practices, opportunities, and recommendations. The five selected projects implemented SLM and land degradation neutrality (LDN) activities in Cuba, Western Kenya, Madagascar, Serbia, and Albania.¹ The five projects are listed in the table below. Referencing the findings of this assessment, this brief aims to support UNEP in its design and implementation of similar future projects to promote more strategic and sustainable results.

Project Title	Project Dates
Promoting SLM in Albania through Integrated Restoration of Ecosystems [GEF ID 9477]	Oct 2017 - Dec 2021
Participatory SLM in the Grassland Plateaus of Western Madagascar [GEF ID 5354]	Dec 2016 - Dec 2021
Scaling Up SLM and Agro-Biodiversity Conservation to Reduce Environmental Degradation in Small-Scale Agriculture in Western Kenya [GEF ID 5272]	Nov 2016 - July 2022
Enhanced Cross-Sectoral Land Management through Land Use Pressure Reduction and Planning (Serbia) [GEF ID 5822]	Oct 2015 - June 2020
Capacity Building for Information Coordination and Monitoring Systems/SLM in Areas with Water Resource Management Problems of Country Pilot Partnership Program on SLM (Cuba) [GEF ID 8003]	Sep 2015 - Dec 2021



Best Practices in SLM Interventions

- **Empowering and incentivising local SLM champions.** Projects that supported SLM champions experience more robust results attainment and sustainability. Champions were often project staff or beneficiaries, such as local farmers and others at the grassroots level who were open to change or were already adopting change and could lead and inspire others. In the Cuba SLM project, champions were incentivised through awards and public recognition of their SLM achievements, which the evaluation found to have contributed significantly to project results achievement. Farmer-level championship and support also demonstrated results achievement in the Madagascar SLM project.



Source: Local Authority, Kraljevo, Serbia. Photos of a site in Kraljevo before and after SLM measures.

- **Strategically connecting scientists and practitioners.** Projects were particularly successful when there were respectful exchanges and mutual cooperative learning between scientists and the farmers and SLM practitioners in the field. These exchanges occurred through (1) using innovative methodology in cooperative learning, (2) working on a plan to establish a network of communication and support, (3) conducting learning visits, or (4) co-designing and implementing pilot projects on the ground. The Serbia SLM project effectively connected

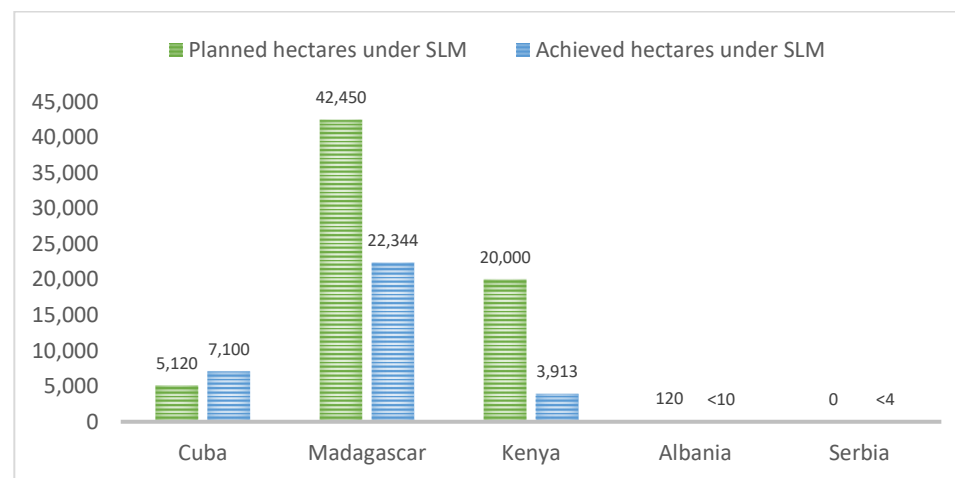
¹For information on each of the projects, see the full portfolio review on <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/43560>. The portfolio full review was conducted by an independent evaluator under the guidance of the Evaluation Office of UNEP.

soil scientists with government practitioners, technocrats, and decision-makers. The evaluation found that this partnership greatly enhanced knowledge sharing and attaining project results.

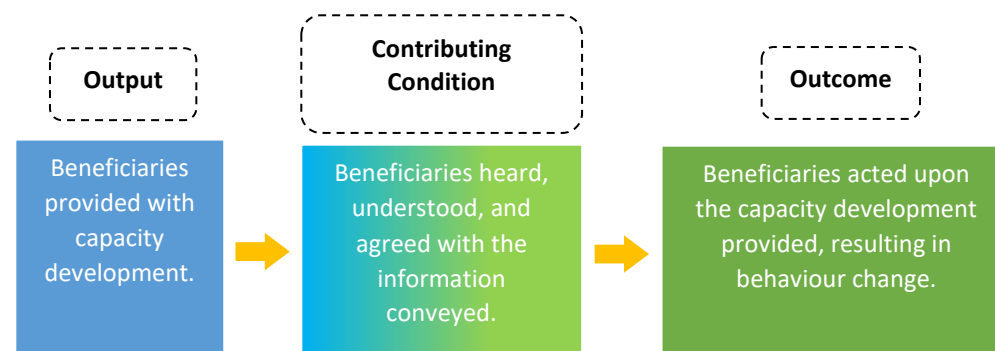
- **Integrating projects into long-term programmes with strong partners.** Projects that worked with strong, long-running partner organizations and programmes had more successful and sustainable results toward SLM and LDN than projects that did not. The Cuba project was integrated into a 10-year programme that included several projects and implementing agencies and, as a result, was found to be successful with sustainable project results. For the Madagascar project, a strong partner with long-running standing in the country also had this effect. The partner prioritized the stability of its staff, improving local institutional capacity, and protecting the ecosystem from land degradation. This resulted in strengthening local SLM committees, reforestation, and several agroecological activities.

Challenges Affecting SLM Interventions

- **Inaccurate and inconsistent use of SLM terms to measure contributions to Global Environmental Benefits (GEB).** There was a lack of consistent understanding and accurate utilization of certain SLM terms. This included inconsistent use of the terms restoration and rehabilitation, and levels of land under SLM. For example, the Albania project used the terms “restoration” and “rehabilitation” interchangeably when they are not synonymous in the context of forest ecosystems. The project title and design spoke of land restoration, but the project implemented rehabilitation. The Kenya project was supposed to work at the “landscape level”, but instead worked at the “micro-catchment level” and downgraded its land area contribution by more than 70 percent.
- **Overly ambitious targets for projects’ contributions to land area under SLM or restored.** Most projects did not attain the land area contributions to GEB and LDN they planned. Some projects downgraded the hectares (ha) of land they originally targeted or downgraded the activity. For example, instead of rehabilitating land, the Albania project only mapped the land. The following graph shows the number of ha under SLM or restored planned and achieved by the projects.



- **Reliance on capacity development as the primary means to change behaviour.** All the projects developed capacity (individual or institutional) in some manner under the assumption that increasing capacity alone would change behaviour, result in the desired actions, or enhance political will. However, in many cases, this capacity was not applied by the beneficiaries nor fully used as intended to catalyze change or sustain long-term SLM results. Additional steps are needed to integrate capacity better towards the desired behaviour change. Namely, project teams should verify that the knowledge or scientific evidence has been heard, understood, agreed with, and acted upon by beneficiaries.



- **Gender not fully integrated.** The projects did not fully integrate gender in the Theory of Change or project activities to adequately reflect and address the nuanced gender dynamics and differences in land management. Some projects included some integrative gender thinking. For example, in Madagascar, workshops were conducted at times when most women were able to effectively participate; and in Albania, a separate workshop for women was organised to discuss women’s access and rights to land and agricultural opportunities. However, these were limited engagements in the grand scheme of the projects.

“I used to be soil, soil and just soil, and now I am concerned with soil, water, forests, livelihoods, biodiversity. My whole view now is of the whole system.”

“We don’t consider ourselves producers anymore, we are instead agro-ecosystem managers.”

Source: Quotes from a farmer and government staff who participated in the Cuba Project.

Key Opportunities for UNEP to Champion

- ★ UNEP has a **comparative advantage** in bringing scientific expertise and practical implementation together and setting the standard for rigorous environmental science. UNEP should consider (a) creating platforms and opportunities for scientists and practitioners to work together on solutions to SLM challenges and (b) identifying key elements that allow for strong, functioning, and sustainable networks to develop and prosper and integrate these into the design aspects of network building as part of project strategies.
- ★ Given UNEP’s role in the SLM sector, its **commitments to LDN** made in the Medium-Term Strategy and within the GEF-8 LDN-related framework, UNEP’s Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit could champion this work by (a) lifting SLM champions, (b) conducting robust technical reviews, and (c) asserting stronger technical oversight of projects.

- **Minimal use of UNEP’s existing SLM tools and methodologies.** The review found that projects did not incorporate tools and methodologies previously developed by UNEP that may have been useful in design or implementation. The evaluation also found that methodologies not developed by UNEP should be carefully vetted and employed with technical support from UNEP. UNEP has developed high-quality SLM-related tools and methodologies through past projects—such as using biochar—but these have not always been mainstreamed after their original projects.

Recommendations for Future SLM Initiatives

- ★ **UNEP’s Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit** should **clarify SLM terms** and ensure their consistent use across projects to measure contributions to GEB accurately. This should include distinctions between restoration and rehabilitation and between different levels of land under SLM (e.g., landscape, catchment, micro-catchment, and small-scale), and clarity on the ha that contribute to LDN.
- ★ **UNEP’s Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit** should maintain an inventory of proven **SLM tools and methodologies** for easy application future projects.
- ★ **Project teams** should set **realistic target contributions** to land under SLM and LDN for greater success in achieving results, and UNEP should provide strong oversight and M&E on the land area contributions to SLM and LDN.
- ★ **Project teams** should ensure that the Theory of Change contains robust causal pathways between **capacity development** and **behaviour change**. This includes developing outcome indicators that effectively measure the desired action influenced by capacity development.
- ★ **Project teams** should move beyond token gestures and ensure that **gender equity** is fully integrated into the Theory of Change and project activities. Teams should take time to understand the gender roles, decision-making dynamics, and identify entry points into subtle and sustainable transitions for empowering women.