PORTFOLIO STUDY OF UNEP's RECENT WORK ON GEF-FUNDED SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT

Images (top left to right: Madagascar SLM TE, Cuba SLM TE, Serbia SLM TE, bottom right to left: Kenya SLM TE, Albania SLM TE, Albania SLM TE)

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1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Land resources – soil, water, and biodiversity – are the bedrock upon which the current global economies are built upon. This foundation is threatened by land degradation. The UNCCD Land Degradation Neutrality Fund[1] estimated that by 2021, a total of two billion hectares of land are degraded worldwide, with 12 million hectares of productive land degraded every year. The Global Land Outlook[2] reported that land degradation affects an estimated 20-40% of the total land across croplands, drylands, wetlands, forests, and grasslands, directly affecting nearly half of the world's population. Indeed, more than 70% of the Earth's land area is already transformed from its natural state, causing unparalleled environmental degradation, and contributing significantly to global warming.[3] This threatens the ability of the land to sustain the growing needs and desires for food, water, fuel, and other raw materials, incurring significant costs to society.

Sustainable land management (SLM) is thus an integral part to securing human survival and well-being, particularly in securing basic needs such as global food security and water, as well as laying the foundation to achieving the Global Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals. The UNEP has been at the forefront of sustainable land management interventions including the designing and implementing of SLM projects through its GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit (managed within the Ecosystems Division).

In 2021, a Desktop Portfolio Review was undertaken ex-poste of 8 GEF-funded SLM project evaluations to draw together learning in a synthesised manner to harvest common insights for UNEP.[4] A key finding of this review was that project evaluations could add more value to a thematic perspective if a set of applicable questions were incorporated within a group of relevant project evaluations while they were being carried out. That was the approach applied in this follow-up portfolio review, 2023. As such, this review builds on the Desktop Portfolio Review and they should ideally be read in conjunction.

The primary purpose of this portfolio review is to extract added value from the learning potential of project level evaluations by considering the performance of a group of projects addressing a similar theme (SLM) from the perspective of a set of overarching questions (which in this instance were derived from the 2021 Desktop Portfolio Review). By presenting learning that draws on a number of thematically linked projects, it is hoped to also identify an audience within UNEP that has an interest in taking the common learning further in their project design work.

In short, this review is looking at a cross-section of the portfolio of UNEP's GEF-funded work on SLM. What do we see when we look at this portfolio of work? The aim is to highlight this. Most notably, to look at these evaluations as a whole, learn from them, highlight these learnings and commonalities and provide practical guidance for, specifically, the Biodiversity (BD) and Land Degradation (LD) Unit, and its Land Degradation (LD) Sub-Unit for improving the design and implementation of GEF-8 projects. It also aims to provide guidance and learning as to where UNEP's comparative advantage is within the realm of Land Degradation Neutrality targets and GEF-8 programming priorities, as well as improved alignment to these and UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy (MTS, 2022-2025) priorities.

In terms of UNEP's current MTS, the BD and LD Unit (and the LD Sub-Unit) contributes to Pillar 2, the Nature Action Programme, whose goal is that "by 2030, recovery of nature occurs and is contributing positively to human well-being". The relevant outcomes here include that (1) an economically and socially sustainable pathway for halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity

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[1] Mirova, 2021: Land Degradation Neutrality Fund Impact Report 2021. https://www.mirova.com/sites/default/files/2022-07/Rapport-impact-LDN-2021-EN.pdf

[2] UNCCD, 2021: Global Land Outlook 2; Summary for Decision Makers

[3] UNCCD, 2021: Global Land Outlook 2; Summary for Decision Makers

[4] Braby J (2021) Sustainable Land Management Desktop Portfolio Review: Identifying commonalities and recurring issues to support a more informed portfolio-review strategy based on a desk-based review of selected GEF-funded, UNEP-implemented projects on sustainable land management. The review covered the following project evaluations (by GEF ID): 5750, 4750, 5824, 3822, 2505, 2184, 4806, 5698.

is established, (2) sustainable management of nature is adopted and implemented in development frameworks, and (3) nature conservation and restoration are enhanced. Due to the strong link between SLM and climate change, the Sub-Unit will also contribute to Pillar 1 (Climate Action Programme), whose goal is that "by 2030, government and non-government development actions are compatible with the long-term mitigation and resilience goals of the Paris Agreement", most notably contributing to Outcome 1 ("decision-makers at all levels adopt decarbonization, dematerialization and resilience pathways").

Importantly, this review aims to directly support UNEP in its SLM design and implementation to optimize its comparative advantage towards the GEF-8 Strategy. The overall objective of the GEF-8 Land Degradation Focal Area (LDFA) Strategy is to "avoid, reduce and reverse land degradation, desertification and mitigate the effects of drought" and the vision is to "achieve healthy and resilient ecosystems by promoting SLM and supporting the achievement of land degradation neutrality (LDN)". Four objectives outline the work under the GEF-8 LDFA, namely (1) avoid and reduce land degradation through sustainable land management, (2) reverse land degradation through landscape restoration, (3) address desertification, land degradation, and drought issues, particularly in drylands, and (4) improve the enabling policy and institutional framework for LDN.

The Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit has already outlined its core areas of work under the UNEP MTS and GEF-Strategy (including, *inter alia*, facilitating the formulation, adoption and implementation of policies on LDN; identifying and implementing incentive systems for scaling up innovative tools and technologies on SLM; piloting systems and incentives for transforming food systems to pivot agriculture from being a source of LD to becoming a catalyst for land and soil restoration (i.e. decoupling economic growth from land and ecosystem degradation); enhancing knowledge exchanges and providing platforms for sharing of innovations). This review fully considers these and frames its guidance within these core areas, as well as the LD Sub-Units Theory of Change.

1.2. Scope of the Study

As previously stated, the Desktop Portfolio Review (2021) led the UNEP Evaluation Office to select five projects (Table 1), each addressing sustainable land management and managed within a single GEF Focal Area (Land Degradation) which were completed in 2022, and thus undergoing Terminal Evaluations, to be additionally looked at in terms of a portfolio of work - as part of a "whole" - a thematic contribution by UNEP to a greater goal (SLM and LDN).

The five projects were evaluated as per the standard evaluation guidance for GEF-funded UNEP projects. However, each evaluator was asked to additionally investigate a set of portfolio questions (derived from the Portfolio Review 2021 and validated/added onto by the acting BD&LD Portfolio Manager of the BD&LD Unit) which were provided in a questionnaire format to answer.

Four evaluators reviewed individual projects (with one evaluator reviewing two projects), this group of evaluators consisted of Justine Braby (portfolio reviewer), Giacomo Morelli, Téa Garcia-Huidobro, and Denis Ruysschaert. Nyawira Muthui supported the portfolio review with the preliminary questions development as well as the overall strategy alignment work.

Table 1. Projects identified under the SLM portfolio review (all were LDFA funded, relevant to SLM and closing in 2022)

Title	GEF Grant and Expenditure	Start and End	IA	EA	TE date and rating
Scaling Up Sustainable Land Management and Agro-Biodiversity Conservation to Reduce Environmental Degradation in Small-Scale Agriculture in **Western Kenya** GEF ID 5272	3,583,800 (3,172,573)	Nov 2016 - 31 July 2022	UNEP GEF BD and LD Unit	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO)	Sep 2022 - Feb 2023 Highly Unsatisfactory
Capacity Building for Information Coordination and Monitoring Systems/SLM in Areas with Water Resource Management Problems of Country Pilot Partnership Program on Sustainable Land Management (Project #2 of CPP) (**Cuba**) GEF ID 8003	2,444,500 (2,414,443)	21 Sep 2015 - 20 Dec 2021	UNEP GEF BD and LD Unit	Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA)	Sep 2022 - Feb 2023 Highly Satisfactory
Participatory Sustainable Land Management in the Grassland Plateaus of **Western Madagascar** GEF ID 5354	1,584,932 (1,324,344)	Dec 2016 - Dec 2021	UNEP GEF BD and LD Unit	Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development (Ministère de l'environnement et du développement durable - MEDD) and National Association for Environmental Actions (ANAE)	June - Dec 2022 Satisfactory
Enhanced Cross-Sectoral Land Management through Land Use Pressure Reduction and Planning (**Serbia**) GEF ID 5822	661,644	7 Oct 2015 - 30 June 2020	UNEP GEF BD and LD Unit		June - Nov 2022 Satisfactory
Promoting SLM in **Albania** through Integrated Restoration of Ecosystems GEF ID 9477	950,000 (800,047)	23 Oct 2017 - 30 Dec 2021	UNEP GEF BD and LD Unit	UNEP Vienna Programme Office Ministry of Tourism and Environment in collaboration with Kolonja Municipality	June - Nov 2022 Moderately Satisfactory

1.3. Methodology and Data Collection

Each evaluator (a) was provided with the portfolio questions (in the format of a questionnaire, see Annex 1 for the questionnaire), (b) participated in an interview during the inception of their evaluation to discuss the scope and aim of the portfolio study, (c) answered the questionnaire at the drafting stage of their evaluation, and (d) participated in an interview to elaborate on any answers and to discuss the evaluation with the portfolio reviewer. The portfolio reviewer conducted individual Terminal Evaluations for two of the projects (Table 1).

The **portfolio questions** posed by each evaluation were:

1. Level of continuity, integrative learning and growth of SLM projects at design phase.
    a. Why did UNEP choose this project?
    b. Were learnings from Terminal Evaluations of previous projects absorbed into this project's design?

2. Level of sharing of project results and learnings among the UNEP project teams (within the LD Unit, but even across the Sub-programmes, if relevant) of technically relevant projects [5] being implemented at the same time.
    a. Were the task manager and the project team at UNEP (of the project you are evaluating) aware of the other SLM projects being implemented at the same time? If yes, were there any opportunities to share information?

3. The extent to which project teams (UNEP and Executing Agencies) are working within a common technical framework towards SLM.
    a. What was the level/nature of practitioner-scientist interface?
    b. Were (a) tools or methodologies previously developed by UNEP used/upscaled, or (b) were UNEP tools and methodologies developed that could be used in other SLM work (within or beyond UNEP)?
    c. Are there any particular innovations and best practices coming from the project and how is UNEP sharing these (was the project connected to any networks (e.g. WOCAT [6]) and knowledge management platforms for sharing)? (Were there any gaps or potentials in innovation not realized?)
    d. To what extent did the success of the project depend on gender equity and/or considerations of gender roles[7]? Were there any particular innovations the project was able to achieve in addressing gender equity?
    e. Did the project address human rights and human well-being (e.g., access to land and resources, human health, rights to healthy environment)?

4. Project contributions to a common vision for SLM based on the global strategic priorities for land degradation neutrality.
    a. Did the project focus on the most degraded areas or areas of high value (in terms of its global importance and human dependence)? How much of the degraded land has been improved (was it measured in ha)? (Please provide your comment also on the quality of improvement (e.g. actual rehabilitation or restoration, or at land use plan level?)
    b. How were project partners who stood out as champions supported and empowered? Were the best partnerships leveraged (also sustained, both in terms of the project, and in terms of UNEP's network toward SLM)?
    c. In what ways did the project ensure that increased scientific evidence/knowledge or capacity led to changed behaviour/decision-making (if at all)? Were the most appropriate stakeholders targeted?

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[5] For instance, between the five projects that were all coming to completion in 2021 and are part of this review, or any UNEP projects relevant to the specific project under evaluation.
[6] WOCAT is a global network on Sustainable Land Management (SLM) that promotes the documentation, sharing and use of knowledge to support adaptation, innovation and decision-making in SLM. https://www.wocat.net/en/
[7] Considering the significance of gender issues in SLM, especially at the land-use level.

d. How much of the success of the project depended on production and consumption cycles and the economic system and how much influence did the project have on this? (decoupling economic growth from land and ecosystem degradation)

e. How did the project address its <u>key</u> assumptions/drivers (included at design or noted by the evaluator at TE)?

f. Are there any <u>key</u> factors that contributed to the sustainability of project results and impacts (any highlighted examples of transformative effects, innovation and social uptake, championship and changed behaviour, financial and institutional commitments)?

5. Are there any other considerations coming from the Terminal Evaluation of this project that you would like to highlight for the portfolio review?

Primary data was compiled into a table, synthesised, and analysed for commonalities. This data was supplemented by the interview discussions. Discussions were held with the Evaluation Office and the acting BD&LD Portfolio Manager; these too were included as well as built into findings from the Desktop Portfolio Review. Based on these, key lessons for uptake were derived.

2. Key Lessons for Uptake into SLM/LDN Project Design and Implementation

A summary of primary data gathered in response to the portfolio questions are presented in Annex 2. The study found some useful lessons from which to draw some practical recommendations which the LD Sub-Unit might consider applying into its project design processes for the GEF-8 programme, themed as technically specific to SLM. Below that are themed categories for UNEP as an adaptive leader in environment, and for project cycle management improvement in general for GEF-projects development for GEF-8. It is important to note that the projects reviewed were diverse, from evaluations that put results in doubt to others that showed overperformance. The findings, therefore, do not apply equally to all projects but are based on observations from the majority of the cohort.

2.1 Technically Specific to SLM (Findings 1 - 7)

(i) Common vision and LDN priority

FINDING 1:

Projects were not accurately defining, measuring and/or delivering their contributions to Global Environmental Benefits (GEBs) and global LDN (in terms of ha under SLM/ restored/ rehabilitated) as planned or agreed.

Elaboration:

<u>Measuring results</u>: most of the projects did not attain the land area contribution they had planned to make, and in some cases, the validity of these contributions were questioned in the evaluation (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Targets in terms of land area "under SLM" or "restored" for each of the SLM projects

Project	Target Planned (ha)	Target Achieved (ha)	Notes
SLM Cuba	5,120	7,100	The project focused on the most degraded areas, which led to a number of replication sites emerging. A total of 7,100 ha across both demonstration and replication sites are reported as applying SLM measures with emphasis on improved water management, of which 2,605.35 (36.7%) have been recognised as "initiated in SLM", with one farm reaching the "advanced" category. At these sites, SLM indicators are pointing to increases in agro-diversity and wildlife, yields, and efficiency in water management, all of which contribute to the well-being of local communities.
SLM Madagascar	42,450 (land restored with SLM practices) 8,508 (under SLM)	22,344 (land restored with SLM practices)	The land chosen for intervention in the Bongolava region in Madagascar is highly degraded. However, these areas are of high value, as ecosystem restoration and sustainable land use management is possible, with services of high value for humans: water supply for rice fields, wood from reforestation, fruits from agroforestry, seeds for small breeding. A total tangible impact consisted in 22,344 Ha of land restored with SLM (just over half of what was planned).
SLM Kenya	50,000 (under SFM) 20,000 (under SLM) 150,000 (project area - landscape level)	10,000 (under SFM) 3,913 (under SLM) 21,927 (project area)	The original project aimed to "go beyond demos" and work at the landscape level, but the project ambition was arbitrarily downgraded from 150,000 ha to 21,927 ha and was kept at the "demo level" within micro-catchments - the area was identified as the most degraded area - the Kakamega and Nandi forest. The evaluation doubts the validity of the numbers provided by the project at farm level (61,600 farmers adopting SLM practices covering 4,461 ha). The Kenya Forest Service adopted SFM plans developed by the project for 7,628 ha, which was considered effective.
SLM Albania	20,000 (integrated land use planning) 120 ha (restored) 86,400 (project area)	20,000 (*only* mapping of degraded areas) 120 (site management plan *only*) <10 ha (rehabilitated, of which most failed)	The project focused on the Kolonja municipal area (which was an area of 86,400 ha and they targeted 20,000 ha through integrated land use planning and planned to conduct rehabilitation efforts on 120 ha of the most degraded land) which was considered highly degraded and of high importance re human dependence. Of course, the ultimate ha under SLM due to the project was found to be rather negligible - they only mapped degraded areas in the 20,000 ha and then did rehabilitation for less than 10 ha and had site management plans for 120 ha. The last activity under the output that was to deal with the 20,000 ha under SLM planning and management (and 120 ha rehabilitation) was to facilitate the Kolonja Municipality (and the NFA) in developing improved management plans. Specific site plans for 120 ha of degraded forest in Kolonja Municipality was drafted and approved by both Kolonja and the NFA, with the intention of replicating this model in other future oriented municipalities in Albania. The evaluation found that resources were restricted to do this and while the intention is there, the replication will likely not happen unless external funding becomes available.
SLM Serbia	N/A	<4 ha	We are dealing with remediation of contaminated land, no land was remediated although a cadaster of contaminated land was developed - gave a number of 270,687 ha under "spatial coverage of integrated natural resource management practices in wider landscapes" in the GEF tracking tool under the justification that this was the spatial coverage of the two municipalities in which trade off measures were applied to less than 2 ha each, the evaluator would not count this as a GEB.

SLM concepts: The review additionally found that there seems to be some confusion and a lack of harmony when it comes to the understanding of certain terms around SLM as well as the efficacy of the land area contribution to LDN. This has led the reviewer to find that UNEP is not being consistent in terms of its framing of concepts around SLM - this is important to keep scientific rigour. **These concepts are in fact well-defined and perhaps the UNEP BD and LD unit should have clear common defined understanding of these**, e.g., the extent of SLM geographically speaking (landscape level versus catchment versus micro-catchment versus small-scale), restoration versus rehabilitation.

For instance, for the Kenya SLM project, the scientific rigour of the claims was seriously questioned by the evaluation. As mentioned in Table 2 above, the project was supposed to go beyond the demo level and work at the landscape level, but instead worked at the micro-catchment level and downgraded its land area contribution by more than 70%. The evaluation also doubted the validity of the numbers of farmers adopting the SLM practices, as well as the validity of the SLM practices themselves. In Albania, an important note was made at the Mid-Term Review regarding whether the project was in fact dealing with restoration (as claimed and written into the title of the project) or rehabilitation (which was what was being implemented). The project design documentation used these terms inter-changeably but they are not synonyms in the case of forest ecosystems.

It is important to have a common understanding of what UNEP defines as "good SLM practice" including agreed working definitions of SLM-related terms, especially when speaking about land areas "restored" under "LDN" or "SLM". It is also important to reflect on the project ambition and be realistic about what can be achieved in terms of the GEBs - how are projects actually contributing in real numbers and are these being accurately defined and measured?

Lesson 1: Clearer definitions and common understanding on the GEBs and realisitic contributions to LDN can set up a project for greater success at the results level.
Recommendation 1: Improve common understanding and scientific rigour behind restoring, rehabilitating and managing human interactions (SLM) with land - be clear about the hectares that are considered to be LDN - be realistic with designing and measuring this throughout, UNEP to provide strong technical oversight and M&E on the land area contributed.

FINDING 2:
The assumption that providing scientific evidence and/or capacity development (mostly through workshops) changes behaviour rarely held.

Elaboration:
All of the projects developed capacity (speaking specifically to training) in some way or another. In many cases though, this capacity was not applied - nor did the knowledge or scientific evidence get fully used as intended to catalyse change or sustain longer-term results. While in most projects some foundations were laid, the Cuba SLM project was the only one in which results were integrated into action fully (this is mostly due to the longer-term programmatic approach of the project and the fact that the Government was fully committed with long-term staff in place). In all cases, the assumption was made that increasing capacity *alone* would change behaviour, result in the desired action, or enhance political will. Steps need to be taken to integrate capacity better towards application and to distinguish between the specific types of capacity most likely to drive the Theory of Change. These steps include: whether something that has been written or said, has been heard, understood, agreed with, acted upon and whether this action has become sustainable.

Lesson 2: Understanding the link between capacity development and behaviour change (and resultant action, i.e., application) is key in the development of the project's Theory of Change and results framework. Developing outcome indicators that properly measure the actual action that the capacity development aims to influence would improve the results framework, project implementation and sustaining of results.

Recommendation 2: Improve causal links between capacity development, behaviour change through integrating "learning by doing" and applying capacity into projects - through more in-depth work in the Theory of Change, which fully articulates the causal pathway by which demo/pilot projects bring about change, as well as stronger Outcome-level indicators to measure behaviour change.

FINDING 3:

Current mainstream economic incentives underpin most of SLM in terms of <u>limiting</u> the sustaining and catalysing of results and achieving larger GEBs.

Elaboration:

While many of the global strategies claim to work on mainstreaming regenerative agriculture, they also claim to do so "while also increasing yield productivity" and enhancing wellbeing. The reviewer does not believe that regenerative agriculture will always lead to increasing yield productivity (not in the way industrial agriculture does), unless starting from a low-performing non-industrial system. In fact, increasing yield productivity (in terms of a single, mono-crop yield increase) is not an entirely effective strategy (especially when crop yield is not the key problem in the system - food waste is). What is more important is to safeguard plant genetic diversity, increase nutritional value of crop production through increasing diversity and redundancy, seeking water efficiency and dealing with the farm-to-fork value chain (predominantly dealing with food waste). Doing this effectively means addressing the economic system around which food is produced. Decoupling land degradation from economic growth is important and UNEP already has a strong comparative advantage through its leading work on TEEB (the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity), most notably TEEB AgriFood, also its economic valuation and measurement work (System of Environmental-Economic Accounting - Experimental Ecosystem Accounting (SEEA EEA)).

Lesson 3: Decoupling land degradation from economic growth (as outlined in the UNEP MTS as well as the Land Outlook and the LDN strategy) is of utmost importance.

Recommendation 3: Work with countries demanding GEF LD-related funding to more fully understand the leverage points for change towards LDN, what are the current economic incentives that are encouraging LD, and what would be possible incentives that could encourage SLM, with UNEP supporting through its comparative advantage in its work on economics an ecosystems. Given that healthy land provides for improved well-being (through food security, health, and other benefits), UNEP could champion and support Governments in actually putting value on increasing human well-being through SLM.

(ii) Common frameworks/approaches

FINDING 4:

Practitioner-scientist interfaces proved to be valuable in sustaining project results when done strategically, although this is not always the case.

Elaboration:

UNEP has comparative advantage in bringing scientists and practitioners together, integrating scientific vigour, and setting the standard for rigorous environmental science. In the projects where such interactions were done strategically and with purpose (e.g., Cuba SLM, Madagascar SLM, Serbia SLM) capacity was shared, mutually built, and in most cases, sustained.

This was also found and elaborated in more detail as a UNEP strength in the Desktop Portfolio Review (2021):

"Projects were particularly successful where there were respectful exchanges and mutual cooperative learning between scientists and the farmers and SLM practitioners in the field. Usually planned at design

and thus an integral part of the project design, these exchanges were either through using innovative methodology in cooperative learning, or through a plan to set up or strengthen a network of communication and support, through learning visits and co-designing and implementing pilot projects on the ground. For instance, in SCI-SLM, where social dispersing of community-level SLM initiatives were conducted through a robust methodology, or in the Biochar project where the top Biochar scientists worked with farmers through mutual learning - in some cases using an innovative methodology of cooperative learning upon which an entire Biochar network was enhanced and strengthened. These two projects, despite having the smallest budgets among all projects, were found to have achieved more than expected because (a) networks and champions were fostered, and (b) there was mutual respectful co-learning and sharing."

Lesson 4: Bringing scientists and practitioners together provides for powerful mutual learning and catalysing project results.

Recommendation 4: UNEP's scientific rigour and connection to practitioners and mutual learning should be taken advantage of. This is something that UNEP has particular strength in and comparative advantage over other Implementing Agencies. As recommended in the 2021 Portfolio Review: (a) create platforms, networks and opportunities for scientists and practitioners to work together on solutions to SLM challenges, (b) Identify the key elements that allow for strong, functioning, and sustainable networks to develop, prosper and integrate these into the design aspects of network building and strengthening that forms part of the project strategy.

FINDING 5:

There was not much use of UNEP's <u>existing</u> tools and methodologies.

Elaboration:
The Desktop Portfolio Review (2021) covered this as below:

"This may not come as a surprise to an institution whose core mandate is the generation of reputable and robust scientific knowledge, but UNEP has been quite successful in producing robust tools, methodologies, and knowledge not only through its programmes outside of GEF (e.g. GEO, Global Biodiversity Outlook, TEEB reports), but also through its various GEF projects (e.g. Landscapes for People, Food and Nature, SLM-CCMC carbon benefits project, and various tools and methodologies as part of more hands-on projects like SCI-SLM, Biochar project and Tea Production project). The majority of tools and methodologies developed through UNEP implemented projects have been of high quality, but some have not been further championed beyond the project."

This review found that project design and implementation has not taken up tools and methodologies that may have been useful that had already been developed by previous projects. For example, the Kenya project promoted a methodology that had been developed and tested by a partner. The Kenya evaluation found that there should be a careful exercise in that using methodologies that have not been developed by UNEP should be vetted and provided with focused technical support from UNEP.

Lesson 5: Building on, and using, tools and methodologies that have worked may strengthen and catalyse results of projects.

Recommendation 5: The LD Sub-Unit should have an inventory of tools and methodologies already developed for easy application and use in future projects.

FINDING 6:

Champions, when empowered and incentivised, provided stronger results attainment and sustainability.

"The most successful and sustainable outcomes were contingent on two main things: (a) championship of project partners, and (b) elevating and supporting those who are open to change or actually already doing change and thus allowed to lead and inspire others."

In this review, particularly in the Cuba SLM project, champions were incentivised through receiving awards and recognition on their SLM achievements (e.g. within the project staff those with best performance were empowered, project beneficiaries who achieved one of the project's SLM categories were given formal recognition at a public ceremony as well as in the production of documentaries and TV interviews in addition to meetings and exchanges with high-level politicians), 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.

Lesson 6: Champions can be powerful forces in catalysing project results, UNEP empowering and supporting these champions is an important contributor.

Recommendation 6: UNEP should integrate stronger empowerment, incentivisation and provide stronger platforms for leadership to SLM project champions, through using examples from e.g., the Cuba project and lifting through heightened recognition and partnership.

FINDING 7:

Gender equity and mainstreaming generally seemed more of a 'tick-box' or hindsight activity than fully integrated.

Elaboration:
The UNEP MTS 2022-2025 states that "women are responsible for 60-80 per cent of food production in developing countries. However, women, are often excluded from land ownership and decisions, as prevailing traditional, religious and customary laws and practices in 123 countries limit their freedom to claim and protect land assets". However, there is little really done in projects other than trying to get "equal quotas" of women into project interventions or identifying female champions. Some examples included some more integrative gender thinking, e.g., in Madagascar, where workshops were conducted at times when most women were able to effectively participate, or in Cuba, where women were provided specific opportunities in agricultural entrepreneurship and leadership, or in Albania, where a separate workshop for women was organised to discuss details on access and rights for women to land and agricultural opportunities. However, these are "side-events to the main story" and gender should have been more integrated into a Theory of Change and more strategic thinking of the projects, which leads to differentiated project activities and approaches that reflect the differentiated sources of power, means of engagement and differentiated effects of diverse groups.

Lesson 7: Gender integration is a key but often overlooked and misunderstood aspect to SLM intervention.

Recommendation 7: Go beyond the "tick-box" to understand the nuances in gender relations at the project level (during the PPG phase) and do more TOC transformative work to lift and empower women. During the design phase, take time to understand the gender roles, decision-making dynamics, and identify entry points into subtle and sustainable transitions for empowering women.

2.2 UNEP as an Adaptive Leader in Environment, bringing results (Findings 8 - 11)

FINDING 8:

In most cases, project outcomes and impacts had to be rephrased at evaluation to a) meet international and UNEP results definitions and b) to represent a coherent range process. The results

frameworks were not strong enough to form the basis of an assessment of results-focused performance.

Elaboration:

In accordance with international standards[8], UNEP guidelines (2019) define an outcome as "the use (e.g., uptake, adoption, application) of an output by intended beneficiaries, observed as a change in institutions or behaviours, attitudes and conditions". As such, they are actionable. In several cases, outcomes were not phrased as such, and evaluators had to revise these for reconstructed Theory of Change. More focus needs to be put into design in terms of the development of the Theory of Change, building the Results Framework from this departure point.

Lesson 8: A more thought-through problem tree, Theory of Change and resultant Results Framework can set the project up for a stronger understanding by the implementers and for better measurement of the attainment of results.

Recommendation 8: Linked to recommendation 4, put in place a more strategic visioning processes at project design, developing a more robust Theory of Change and derive outcomes that are actionable, with SMART indicators. Ensure all outcomes have actionable verbs and are specific to intended beneficiaries and/or stakeholders.

FINDING 9:

Sustainability and SLM mainstreaming and integration was stronger when projects were integrated into a longer-term and well-designed programme.

Elaboration:

In the case of the Cuba project, a 10-year programme that entails several projects and implementing agencies (UNEP, UNDP, and FAO) in partnership, it was found to have had much stronger success and project results sustainability. For Madagascar, a strong partner with long-running standing in the country also had this effect. In Kenya, despite the long-running standing of the partner, it was less the case because the partner's project approach was not considered technically strong by the evaluation. For GEF-8, UNEP should think about building longer term and well-designed programmes with sub-projects in order to build longer-term sustainability, working with strong technical partners and SLM champions.

Lesson 9: How UNEP chooses who it works with, what it focuses on and how it learns from previous projects can go a long way in catalyzing movement towards LDN.

Recommendation 9: Build on projects and do more programmatic work that takes time and builds in long-term processes and sustains results.

FINDING 10:

UNEP oversight was not strong enough in some projects.

Elaboration:

In some cases, e.g., Madagascar, weaker oversight turned out well because the executing partner was strong and could be fully trusted to implement the project in the best way. In Kenya, however, weak oversight (among others) resulted in the failure to attain basic project results. While choosing a strong technical partner is important (and has already been alluded to in empowering champions under Finding 6 above), technical oversight by UNEP is equally important. In the case of GEF funding, this oversight as Implementing Agency, is critical.

The strength of the partner is outlined in the two examples below:

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[8] e.g. OECD-DAC and UN Evaluation Group definitions etc.

In the Madagascar SLM project, the evaluation highlighted how the project benefited from its partner's good reputation and its long experience. The partner undertook the project with a philosophy of caring in three dimensions: firstly, the project cared about its own staff, with stability during the years in the employment before and during the project. This stability allowed the nurturing of exchanges, building institutional memory, and proposing adaptive activities. This was fundamental when instability around the project prevailed. Secondly, the project cared about the people at local level focussing on improving their institutional capacity and their well-being. Thirdly, the project cared about the environment and more exactly the ecosystem with land degradation as the main threat. These three dimensions of care in the project positively nurtured each other helping to develop practical, tailor-made, motivated and adaptive activities. It also allowed the establishment of a conducive process that provided lasting impact. Overall, this process allowed the strengthening of local SLM committees, reforestation, and provided a number of agroecological activities. UNEP put trust in this process and did not provide a strong oversight.

For the Kenya SLM project, the evaluation described the relationship as follows: the role of UNEP and the executing partner overlapped to a great degree. In reality, the executing partner became the implementing partner, and a sub-contractor became the executing partner. The role of UNEP was to supervise and provide technical guidance to the executing partner, who in turn supervised and provided technical guidance to the sub-contractor. Either the executing partner or UNEP were a superfluous step within the management set-up of the project. UNEP participated in PSC meetings, while the executing partner participated in both project meetings and PSC meetings. At field level, neither UNEP nor the executing partner implemented any activity. The two organizations took part in field visits. There was little adherence to what was written in the project document, with significant changes made without consideration of formal approval mechanisms. The evaluation made practical recommendations on how UNEP could have improved its technical oversight.

Lesson 10: Stronger oversight by UNEP as Implementing Agency can greatly improve project implementation quality and achievement of results.

Recommendation 10: As implementing agency, UNEP should be the technical expertise and oversight- lifting champions, conducting robust technical reviews and have stronger oversight of projects. This includes supporting "from behind" but holding projects accountable for project results and adhering to project design. This could be done through (a) more regular check-ins with implementing partners, (b) robust reviews of project deliverables[9] (including e.g., through a scientific review panel, which has been used in many previous projects, see the Desktop Portfolio Review (2021)), and (c) more support in developing detailed project updates as per results framework.

FINDING 11:
Lack of sustaining results and limited application of capacity developed was often a result of staff turnover and/or changes in government leadership.

Elaboration:
In the case of Cuba, where long-term staff positions support the integration of project results, project results were sustained. In other cases, e.g., Serbia, Albania, staff turn-over meant that any capacity built was lost institutionally. Staff turn-over and changes in leadership are common practice at government level in most democratic governments and thus UNEP should be better prepared for this at design stage to avoid the investment into capacity being lost (inclusive of financial, time and human resources).

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[9] From the combined experience of the evaluators, it seems that often UNEP officers are not always aware of final output quality, and that even, in some cases, do not have access to all technical reports produced within their own projects. For effective monitoring, UNEP should always be quality checking outputs and deliverables. UNEP staff are generally overloaded, and a more effective split between administration and management aspects and technical/quality assurance could support a better oversight mechanism. This is why sometimes a scientific peer review panel can be an effective technical quality oversight solution.

> **Lesson 11:** Putting in place stronger success management at design of capacity development interventions, along with stronger application procedures embedded at institutional level can improve the application of capacity and sustaining of project results.
>
> **Recommendation 11:** Support stronger succession management, lifting champions who are there long-term, picking the right champions, doing better about cost-sharing and encouraging stronger commitment and ownership from country partners - be more targeted about capacity development and expect better application results (learning by doing and application learning rather than expecting workshop outputs to automatically change behaviour, as per recommendation 2).

2.3 Project cycle management (Findings 12 and 13)

FINDING 12:

Investment at PPG did not seem to improve design quality in some of the projects.

Elaboration:

For Albania and Kenya, the investment into project development was questioned in the Terminal Evaluations (USD 45,662 GEF PPG for Albania, USD 80,000 PPG for Kenya). The PPG for Madagascar was USD 100,000, yet the project design was rated as Moderately Satisfactory (while this was not questioned specifically by the evaluation, it is still a large investment for its design rating). For Cuba, the PPG was USD 55,000, it had a Satisfactory design rating but on the other hand it was part of a larger programme and had significant baseline information from Project 1 (the Cuba SLM project was Project 2 in the programme). For Serbia, the PPG was USD 27, 397. Given that there are several issues that were picked up due to weak design processes (e.g., assumptions not well analysed, not enough attention to the Theory of Change, weak results frameworks with outcomes that needed revising and insufficient outcome-level indicators), UNEP should be placing more effort into project design given the matching financial investment.

In addition, all projects underwent no-cost project extensions. This has been elaborated on in the desktop Portfolio Review and only further strengthens the justification for recommendations 12 and 13.

> **Lesson 12:** Putting stronger accountability on design processes could improve and provide better return on PPG investment.
>
> **Recommendation 12:** Improve accountability in project design investment - improving results framework as to what is realistic and setting up the project inception to review this based on any changes to country context and leadership and commitment.

FINDING 13:

Weak inception processes resulted in the project having to be revised at MTR, or worse, resulted in failure to produce outputs and attain outcomes.

Elaboration:

Having a proper inception workshop (e.g., in the case of Albania, where this was an opportunity missed) to identify whether the project, at onset of implementation, is still realistic in its ambitions, if the right partners are still around, if there is commitment from the partners, and also to already strategize about sustainability is of utmost importance. It is also a good opportunity to align to the UNEP MTS through its results framework to see the actual contributions the project is making (this has been further elaborated in the Desktop Portfolio Review (2021)).

> **Lesson 13:** A strong inception process can provide a good opportunity to review and revise the project document and its results framework based on any changes since design.

3. **Conclusions**

UNEP's Medium Term Strategy for 2022-2025 acknowledges that biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation undermine the resilience of economies globally and many critical product value chains, which is likely to ultimately prevent progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and human well-being.[10] Furthermore, the international community has pledged to restore one billion hectares of degraded land by 2030[11], in order to preserve nature's life-support services and safeguard the productivity of land resources sustainably; 128 countries have committed to land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets.[12]

UNEP has been leading work on LDN through prioritising its work around the UNCCD Strategic Framework 2018-2030 (including reducing and reversing land degradation through adopting and scaling out sustainable use and management practices) and can further improve on its leadership through the GEF-8 LD-focused programming to avoid and reduce LD through SLM, reverse LD through land restoration, and enabling the policy framework for LDN.

Given the current state of knowledge, practice, and strategic objectives of the framing documents (UNCCD Strategic Framework 2018 – 2030, the UNEP MTS 2022-2025, the GEF 8 Programming Guidelines), UNEP's LD Sub-Unit in particular could be at the forefront of cutting-edge SLM work by focusing its role in the sector and learning from its previous GEF-phase projects with the LD focal areas and SLM in general. In fact, the recommendations coming from this review speak directly to the LD Sub-Unit's Theory of Change and goals (which include *facilitating the formulation, adoption and implementation of policies on LDN; identifying and implementing incentive systems for scaling up innovative tools and technologies on SLM; piloting systems and incentives for transforming food systems to pivot agriculture from being a source of LD to becoming a catalyst for land and soil restoration (i.e. decoupling economic growth from land and ecosystem degradation); enhancing knowledge exchanges and providing platforms for sharing of innovations).*

Given UNEP's role and comparative advantage in the sector, its commitments made in the MTS and within the GEF-8 LDN-related framework, UNEP and its LD Sub-Unit could champion this work through improved technical visioning that is grounded on scientific rigour, commitment to the results it aims to achieve within the one billion ha under LDN and the GEBs under the global strategies, as well as improved investment in supervision (as an Implementing Agency) in its GEF LD-related projects. The foundation for this is already there, and with the recommendations and learnings coming from this review, the next phase of projects could vastly improve toward more strategic and sustainable outcomes.

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[10] UNEP, 2022: Medium Term Strategy.

[11] UNCCD, 2021: Global Land Outlook 2; Summary for Decision Makers

[12] LDN is the overarching concept of the UNCCD, defined as "a state whereby the amount and quality of land resources necessary to support ecosystem function and services and enhance food security remain stable or increase within specified temporal and spatial scales and ecosystems"