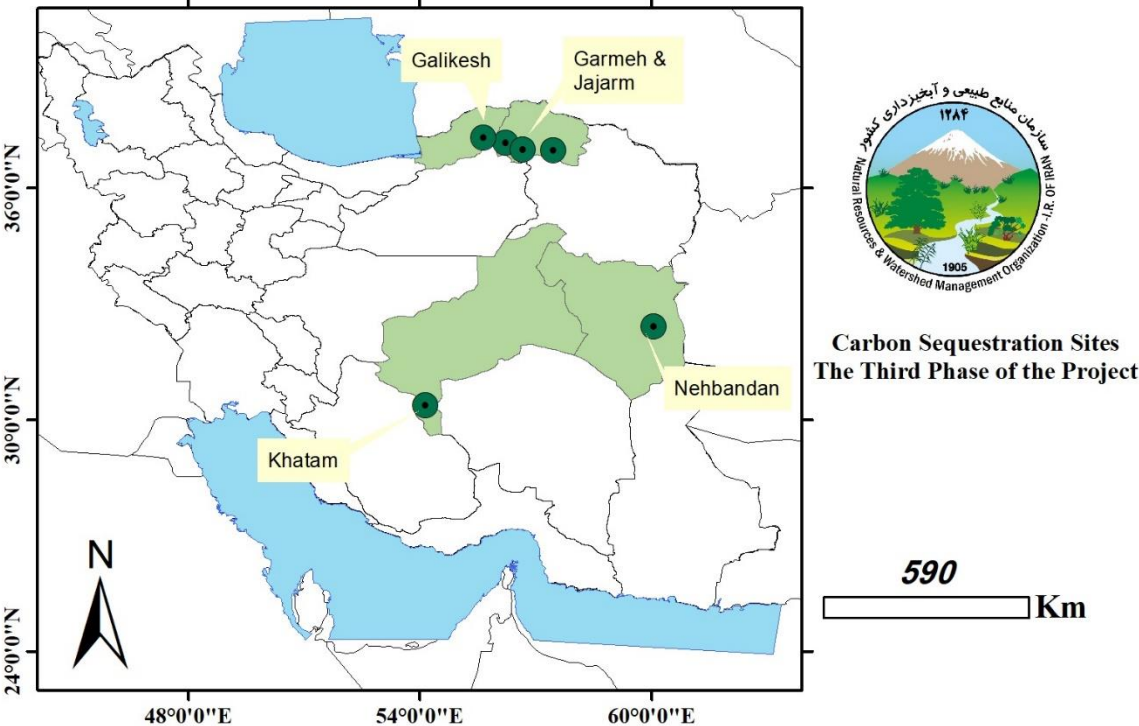


Terminal Evaluation of Participatory Management of Natural Resources and Sustainable Rural Development in line with Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas (CSP - Phase III)



Compiled by:
Ron Mukanya and Hamid Farahani Rad

June 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Terminal Evaluation Report of Participatory Management of Natural Resources and Sustainable Rural Development in line with Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas (CSP - Phase III) was prepared under the support of UNDP Iran.

The report benefited from project progress reports, stakeholder interviews, observations, in person follow up question responses and inputs from four (4) pilot sites in four (4) provinces.

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APPR	Annual project progress reports
BP	Business Plans
CSP	Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas (CSP - Phase III) project
DBA	Desert Bureau Affairs
FRWO	Forest Range and Watershed Management Organization
GIRI	Government of Islamic Republic of Iran
GOs	Governmental Organizations
MCF	Micro-Credit Funds
MoAJ	Ministry of Agriculture Jihad
NPD	National Project Director
NPM	National Project Manager
NRWO	Natural Resources and Watershed Management Organization
PBO	Plan and Budget Organization
PPM	Provincial Project Manager
SCNRPM	Steering Committee of Natural Resources Participatory Management
TE	Terminal Evaluation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VDGs	Village Development Groups
VLPs	Village Level Plans
WLPs	Watershed Level Plans

Contents

- List of Tables..... 4
- List of Figures..... 4
- Executive Summary 5
- 1 Introduction..... 13**
- 1.1 About the Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas (CSP - Phase III) project..... 13**
- 1.2 Description of Outcomes and Outputs 13**
- 2 Evaluation overview 13**
- 2.1 Evaluation scope and methodology 14**
- 3 Evaluation approach and methods 15**
- 3.1 Data analysis 15**
- 3.2 Findings and conclusions 16**
- 3.2.1 Project Main stakeholders..... 16
- 3.2.2 Intended project results outcomes 17
- 3.2.3 CSP outcomes..... 17
- 3.2.4 Outcome 1: Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented..... 17
- 3.2.5 Outcome 2: Local communities further empowered, and their livelihoods improved 21
- 3.2.6 Outcome 3: An effective and efficient project management system is maintained, and project implementation monitored and documented 26
- 3.2.7 Efficiency 28
- 3.2.8 Effectiveness..... 28
- 3.2.9 Sustainability..... 33
- 3.2.10 Cross-cutting: Gender equality 36
- 4 Conclusions and Recommendations..... 41**
- 4.1 Conclusions..... 41**
- 4.2 Recommendations 41**
- 4.3 Lessons Learnt (as appropriate)..... 43**
- 5 Annexures 45**
- 5.1 Annex 1 – Interview Questions 45**
- 5.2 Annex 2 – List of stakeholders interviewed/interacted with in the field..... 47**
- 5.3 Annex 3 – Results framework achieved results and objectives 48**

○ **List of Tables**

Table 1: Summary of three major outcomes achieved and several key activities	6
Table 2: Outcome 1 table	8
Table 3: Summary of Evaluation Ratings	9
Table 4: Executive summary list of recommendations	10
Table 5: Approved and expenditure budget of CSP III	31
Table 6: Ratio of UNDP approved and expenditure budgets to GIRI	32
Table 7: List of lessons learnt	43

○ **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Overview of methodology adopted for this evaluation	14
Figure 2: Governance and Management Arrangements	29
Figure 3: Expenditure report from the Financial Reports	30
Figure 4: Ratios of National and UNDP expenditure to approved budgets	31
Figure 5: National and UNDP Annual Expenditure (2017 – 2021)	32
Figure 6: Gender statistics achieved per province on women’s engagement and empowerment	38

Executive Summary

A. Background

The Carbon Sequestration Project (CSP-phase III) was a multi-purpose initiative devised to mainly replicate a 2003 pioneered project model and lessons learned associated with sustainable land management and natural resources restoration nationwide. The project's working area, land degradation and desertification (*specifically Sand and Dust Storms*), is a main global challenge and a development priority for the Iranian government. The major role of socio-economic causes on the phenomena adds to the complexity of its nature which reminds the necessity of considering all aspects of the issue to approach a consistent solution. To meet its purpose, the project has simultaneously addressed ecological and socio-economic problems at the field level which complies with the integrity of globally agreed goals on sustainable development and the Strategies of the Convention to Combat Desertification. The project was implemented in four (4) sites and aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of the model in new arid sites as well as at a site in humid Hyrcanian zone where its contributing to the development of more effective environmental and Natural Resource Management (NRM) policies, restoring degraded natural resources, improving the socio-economic status of local communities and enhance ecosystem resilience and services.

The first phase of this project was initiated in the South Khorasan Province with support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in 2003. In this phase, the project demonstrated that organic carbon stored in the soil and vegetation amounts to 1400 kg/ha after 5 years to underline the great capacity of arid lands for carbon sinking. It also had great success in the identification of local capacities, improving social and human resources in women's and youth's economic empowerment, and economical community-based restoration of degraded lands. During the 2nd phase, the project was replicated at 18 sites which let it evolve in various environments and different conditions sticking to the principles in applying a bottom-up and integrated approach. Given its success and the willingness of Forest, Rangeland and Watershed Organization (FRWO)¹ now named Natural Resources and Watershed Management Organization (*and referred to as NRWO from here on in this document*) and a considerable number of provincial authorities, in June 2017 a new addendum to the original project document and a Government Cost-sharing Agreement (Phase III) was signed between NRWO and UNDP aiming to achieve participatory natural resources management and sustainable rural development in 5 new pilot sites in 4 provinces, in completion of the previous phases.

As part of Phase III, a Terminal Evaluation was planned, budgeted for and conducted according to the guidance, rules, and procedures established by UNDP. The evaluation is intended to assess the achievement of project results and to draw out lessons that can both improve the sustainability of benefits from this project, and aid in the overall enhancement of UNDP programming.

The methodology for the evaluation covered the following areas²:

- Desk study review of all relevant project documentation (*listed in the main report*);
- Key informative interviews / consultations with multiple stakeholders (*listed in the main report*);
- Observation.

Overall, it must be noted that an assessment of quantitative results solely cannot measure the success factors of the project. So, this evaluation is forward-looking, it captures the successes, challenges, and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project. It also provides information on the nature, extent, and where possible, the results achieved with a focus on the implementation process. In the main report, the evaluation ends with a list of recommendations generated from this analysis, that are aligned to the current UNDP country programme document for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Learnings from this report can also be used for future UNDP programming. However, for the purposes of the executive summary, only summarised high-level findings are captured and listed.

This TE did not only evaluate CSP III per se, but it also considered general trends of land degradation and land rehabilitation to find out how far CSP impact had confronted the extent of existing land degradation trends. To do this the TE kept track of developments within a process.

¹ The name of Forest Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO) has recently changed to Natural Resources and Watershed Management Organization (NRWO).

² The evidence obtained and used to evaluate the results generated by the facility was triangulated from a variety of sources, including verifiable data on the achievement of indicators, existing reports, evaluations and technical documents, interviews with stakeholders and focus groups.

B. Analysis framework

Regarding the TE findings, three facets of analysis have been applied, firstly, local scale. The second pertains to provincial aspects, whilst the third pertains to national-level aspects on the proportionality of the CSP's impact on Iran's national land degradation plans. This framework also takes a step forward and does not merely focus on CSP III in this respect. In addition to the conventional criteria (of relevance, efficiency, ...) which are used for the evaluation of CSP III at pertinent levels, vision criterion is also used – it is a forward-looking criterion. The reason for such a framework is to highlight which aspects need to be strengthened for the future of the project whilst also, reflecting a realistic expectation from CSP.

Summary of findings





There is much insight that has been gained from this evaluation. Overall, the programme is seen by the main local stakeholders as a positive project, with many opportunities for:

- 1) participatory approaches and institutional strengthening
 - a. participatory approaches that involve stakeholders at all levels to improve the livelihoods of local people through their own active participation,
 - b. institutional strengthening of the provincial governate organizations.
- 2) socio-economic and environmental benefits
 - a. women's economic empowerment (*nomadic and rural*) and improving their professional skills to result in boosting poor households' economic status and livelihoods, reducing vulnerability and transferring skills to other groups within communities,
 - b. enhance a systematic approach to the production and marketing of local products produced by the local micro-enterprises.
 - c. reduced pressure on the natural environment because of land rehabilitation and diversified livelihoods.

While this feedback points to the positive results, the purpose of this evaluation was to also build an understanding beyond what worked well, challenges and lessons learnt. But it's also to be forward-looking, to capture lessons learnt effectively, closely examining and providing information on the nature, extent, and, where possible, the results achieved.

It must be noted that the TE was expected to reflect on systematic issues and impacts. However, in some instances the evidence information was not provided to the TE team by CSP, so the outcome evaluation is done at the activity level as the next credible level of impact illustration evidence due to the lack information. The following results as captured in the programme documents and captured in summary in **Table 1** and **Table 3** (*with full detailed achievements* captured of the main report*) have been achieved (**for a detailed outputs breakdown table please see Annex 3 – Results framework achieved results and objectives*). In summary, the following observations were made by the TE Evaluation based on questions identified in the TE's terms of reference, per outcome:

Table 1: Summary of three major outcomes achieved and several key activities

<u>Thematic area</u>	<u>Summary explanation or description of aspect(s) [and whether they are existent  or partially achieved  or not existent </u>
Outcome 1: Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented	<p> There is some evidence that historically there has been a hostile situation between rural people and NRW due to the dispute over ownership of land. Hence, acceptance of the CSP smoothed through development activities, livelihoods and infrastructural delivery. These activities have been entry points for the CSP facilitators to gradually receive trust from the villagers. Therefore, rural development activities have had two complementary functions: 1). gaining trust of the local communities; and 2). reducing pressures on natural resources (<i>please refer to Error! Not a valid result for table. and achieved results and objectives captured in Annex 3, for evidence supporting these findings</i>). However, it seems that there has been an over-emphasis on the development aspect of the project, yet there is a difference between plains and mountainous areas. In mountainous areas (<i>Galikesh and Minoodasht basin</i>) gardening and farming practices have more impacts on soil erosion and land degradation whereas in plains, overgrazing, shrub eradication,</p>

	<p>mines and industrial activities (<i>South Khorasan, Yazd and southern areas of North Khorasan</i>) have caused land degradation.</p> <p>The four sites were selected for Phase 3 and had limiting factors though participatory natural resource management activities were carried out in two areas: 1) the agricultural sector which included both farming and gardening. 2) in the plain and mountainous areas, high-water demanding plants were replaced by low-water intense and drought-resistant plants. For example, Alfalfa was replacing wheat and barley. The prominent one is Ferula (<i>Onghozeh in Persian</i>) which is very resistant to drought and has a high market price. In some areas, especially in Khatam site in Yazd, many farmers applied to cultivate it in abandoned agricultural lands. In Galikesh, the facilitators encouraged some farmers to plant medicinal plants which consume less water and have higher prices – these are just few examples. Although, changing cultivation patterns has not been broadly accepted, it can be expected that other farmers would follow the same path from positive effects observation. Water management was carried out along with all these activities. There was no baseline which can be compared. A continuation of CSP in this respect can lead to more effectiveness of carbon sequestration.</p>
<p>Outcome 2: Local communities further empowered, and their livelihoods improved</p>	<p>● There is some evidence that the CSP III activities enabled local communities to be further empowered and their livelihoods were improved. Social capacities were improved in some respects and through the establishment of Village Development Groups (VDGs) and the provisioning of the required training. The local level social and economic platforms were legalised through the establishment and registration of local cooperatives. The unsustainable farming and gardening negatively affected the land through erosion. However, through CSP III intervention, the farmers have changed the type of plants that they cultivate and the frequency of how often they cultivate the sloppy farmlands to mitigate erosion from agricultural and gardening activities. They're also utilising new machinery for ploughing that does not degrade the soil.</p>
<p>Outcome 3: An effective and efficient project management system is maintained, and project implementation monitored and documented</p>	<p>● The TE analysis framework which was mentioned at the beginning is mainly related to the outcome 3. From a management point of view, local management which mainly related to implementation includes provincial project management and facilitators. They were connectors between communities and provincial and national levels. With respect to the previous experiences of PPM and the capabilities of new facilitators, especially in Galikesh basin, they could manage the activities in such a way that those pioneer villagers who were interviewed, admired the support they received from the project. It was done despite the limiting factors such as drought, rising inflation, shortage of project budget, Covid-19 pandemic. The project local team obtained local coordination and cooperation among governmental and other stakeholders. PPM and facilitators stated that if there were more facilities, more effectiveness would have achieved.</p> <p>While the provincial level provided financial and technical support, different levels of coordination with other governmental offices were observed. In North Khorasan, Jajarm and Garmeh, the Plan and Budget Organization (PBO) was aware of the project activities and their effectiveness, to support the project significantly. All provinces had documented activities and achievements to a satisfactory degree. There were two main deficiencies at the provincial level: 1) an M&E system was not established. The undertaking of site visits, observation of project activities and talking with project beneficiaries by project staff did not help establish a system of monitoring and evaluation for the project; 2) the CSP paradigm requires a new approach, of organizational restructuring and planning and budgeting which was not institutionalized. Such a change was almost not observed in the provincial offices. While on a case-by-case basis internal coordination and cooperation was carried out in offices, a coordinating group was formally formed in the last year of the project only in Yazd.</p> <p>At a national level, the Desert Affairs Bureau was the responsible office of the project from the very beginning. From the beginning of Phase 1 to Phase 2, the project should have gained experience to use for Phase 3, which implies that international project management capacity wasn't institutionalized. in. Although the management and expert staff turnover has caused disparity during CSP III, the lack of an M&E system from the previous phase(s) which continued in Phase 3 prevented adaptive management from being active. Communication and awareness raising programs were not in place.</p>

Table 2: Output 1 table

	Improvement of Agriculture (ha)						Direct land rehabilitation (ha)	Watershed management (ha)
	Medicinal plants	Participatory seedlings	Fruit seedlings	Conservation agriculture	Building of rural garden/croft	Total		
Bojnourd	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,758	722
Birjand	-	-	36,000 seedlings	-	-	-	2,310	-
Yazd	140	55	55	146	0	396	1,291	1,000
Golestan	87	390	381	23.50	7	888.50	70	170

The evaluation assessed the project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation with respect to its contribution to the participatory management of natural resources and sustainable rural development in line with Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas. The evaluation was structured as an assessment in terms of the Relevance of the project and activities, Effectiveness of implementation, Efficiency, Impacts/Results achieved and Sustainability of the results.

The terminal evaluation and its ratings are based on, amongst other things, three (3) important facets: firstly, the impacts of CSPIII and its capacities including financial, managerial, etc., as per the summary table below. However, in comparison with the pace of land degradation, its scale, replication and upscaling did not have enough acceleration as was expected. Secondly, the Desert Affairs Bureau did not develop its capacity in a way that it could effectively play its national coordinator role in managing CSP, both inside NRW and its provincial offices and outside with relevant ministries and organizations. Thirdly, there wasn't a systematic monitoring and evaluation framework put in place nationally to constantly monitor project implementation progress and results, which was a weakness.

The following table provides a summary of the evaluation ratings that were achieved by the project.

Table 3: Summary of Evaluation Ratings

Evaluation Ratings:			
1. Monitoring and Evaluation	Rating	2. IA& EA Execution³	Rating
M&E design at entry	MS	Quality of UNDP Implementation	MU
M&E Plan Implementation	U	Quality of Execution - Executing Agency	MU
Overall quality of M&E	U	Overall quality of Implementation / Execution	MU
3. Assessment of Outcomes	Rating	4. Sustainability	Rating
Relevance	R	Financial resources:	MU
Effectiveness	MU/S*	Socio-political:	ML
Efficiency	MS/S*	Institutional framework and governance:	ML
Overall Project Outcome Rating*	MS	Environmental:	ML
		Overall likelihood of sustainability:	Moderately Likely

Where HS: Highly Satisfactory; S: Satisfactory; MS: Moderately Satisfactory; MU: Moderately Unsatisfactory; U: Unsatisfactory; L: Likely; ML: Moderately Likely; MU: Moderately Unlikely; UL: Unlikely.

Notes: * provincial level rating. However, it must be noted what the TE observed in the provinces is all relying on ad-hoc personal capacities. None of it is happening systematically, and that doesn't rule out some level of weight being given to it as the impact is directly attributable to it in its unsystematic nature. It's also worth mentioning that this evidence suggests that the provincial level seems to be stronger than the national level.

C. Conclusion and recommendations

Stemming from the analysis above, the confirmed findings of the TE based on the evidence observed and reviewed, the evaluators conclude that at this final evaluation stage, it's evident that the rate of land degradation is higher than that of CSP activities implementation. Although the activities in the 3rd phase alone have been effective in the scale of the phase, the expectations over an 18-year perspective have not been met. The goal of the project has been to introduce a paradigm shift that could be internalized alongside a change management modality in a way that land degradation should have significantly reduced. Even in some areas land neutrality has occurred. Since the paradigm shift has been partially implemented in provinces, both in NRW and pertinent GOs, the 18-years expectation has not been realized. Weak performance has also been observed in the Desert Affairs Bureau of NRW and UNDP. Hence the Terminal Evaluation (TE) recommends that the CSP project setup be terminated at this stage once phase-III concludes. If the recommendation by the TE is carried out by the NRW, then a new format of cooperation (i.e., *project set up*) can be implemented that's aligned to Iran's Country Programme Document [*Outcome 3 of the new CPD (2023-2027) which is still draft, but it shows the relevance and alignment beyond 2022*].

Regardless of the CSP III rating, NRW has prepared a new "Comprehensive Management of Watersheds" model based on the experiences of several international projects:

³ the role of UNDP has been a full NIM project (*although CO support to NIM has been envisaged in ProDoc*). However, the CO has had the responsibility for review and approval of payments – mainly in the form of direct cash transfers/NEX Advances.

- MENARID – Institutional Strengthening and Coherence for Integrated Natural Resource Management (2010-2017).
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with NRW⁴ – Rehabilitation of Forest Landscapes and Degraded Land with Particular Attention to Saline Soils and Areas Prone to Wind Erosion Project (RFLDL) ongoing since mid Aug 2011.
- Carbon Sequestration Project (2003-2021).
- Building a Multiple-Use Forest Management Framework to Conserve Biodiversity in the Caspian Hyrcanian Forest Landscape.

The TE is aware of the fact that the new model was prepared in 2014 but can't judge if CSP-III is in-line with this model. It consists of seven steps: 1) establishment of suitable structures of planning in NRW HQ, provinces and watersheds; 2) selection of watersheds; 3) formulation of a watershed strategic plan; executive committee in NRW; 4) provincial working group; 5) coordination of governmental projects, needs and people's activities within the strategic plan; 6) implementation, monitoring and evaluation; and 7) documentation. A guideline has been prepared for each step, wherever necessary. In 2014, CSP and other International projects contributed to developing an organizational model for NRW for watershed management. This model is based on a holistic community approach and institutionalization of people's participation. There is an implementation regulation for the model which is mandatory for all organizational units in NRW HQ and provinces.

In 2018, in the second year of the CSP III, the implementation of the new management model started by NRW. In this regard, the Evaluation team observed that while there is an encompassing model and process of natural resource management in NRW, all the ongoing international projects should be integrated into a new model of management, at least using CSP's lessons learned. In other words, there isn't a necessity that CSP in its current setup should be continued. Given the existence of a model for Comprehensive Watershed Management, the TE suggests that any new initiative with the NRW must be linked and aligned with this model.

Table 4: Executive summary list of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Institutional arrangement and integration of CSP

- Integration of CSP in "Comprehensive Watershed Management Model" of NRW: the new model, which was developed through experiences from other international projects implemented in Iran with NRW involvement, is an opportunity for CSP to be continued within a broader context. At the same time, it can accelerate progress on a larger scale given that CSP has a background of 18 years, and the new model has been implemented in several watersheds already – they can be complementary. In this set-up context, UNDP can join to support technically and financially.
- A new institutional arrangement of NRW based on "Comprehensive Watershed Management Model" including its approach, structure (organizational integration), planning, budgeting and M&E based on programmatic and result-based approach: a new model/paradigm requires the rearrangement of pillars of the NRW, both at central and provincial offices. It is an organizational change that is compatible with the paradigm shift which will result in a new approach, structure, planning and budgeting based on the watersheds and M&E system. The project approach will be replaced by programmatic approach which will strengthen CSP.

Recommendation 2: Strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination, collection and the publication of traditional and scientific knowledge and the utilization of international experiences, especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

⁴ FAO in collaboration with the Forest, Range & Watershed Management Organization, is implementing the 'Rehabilitation of Forest Landscapes and Degraded Land with Particular Attention to Saline Soils and Areas Prone to Wind Erosion' project in the country to remove key barriers to community-based and integrated Sustainable Land and Forest Management (SLFM) <https://www.fao.org/3/cb2474en/CB2474EN.pdf>

- Strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at national, provincial and local levels: TE observations indicated that strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at national, provincial and local levels will speed up the progress of the CSP and consequently the large-scale model. Such an integration at the lower and upper levels will bring about the large-scale social capital to prevent land degradation and accelerate land rehabilitation efforts at scale.
- Strengthening collecting and the publication of traditional and scientific knowledge in combating desertification and land rehabilitation: in a few cases, CSP reflected that the harnessing and utilization of these knowledge sources can escalate both efficiency and effectiveness of farming activities and strengthening this aspect is paramount importance and focus for whatever form, shape and design CSP takes forward beyond CSP III.
- Strengthening the utilization of international experiences, especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation: according to the project document, South-South and Triangular Cooperation, as a technical source could have been pursued as there are many experiences at international level which can support NRW and its national partners to shorten the period required to reach a balanced rate of degradation and rehabilitation. Strengthening this aspect is of paramount importance and focus for whatever form, shape and design CSP takes forward beyond CSP III.

Recommendation 3: Preparation of watershed spatial development plan and formulation of village development plans based on the results of the watershed plan.

- Preparation of watershed spatial development plan: the preparation of watershed spatial development plan will have several positive effects. 1) Decision making will be based on the holistic, strategic and integrative approach rather than on isolated areas; 2) it will create close cooperation between NRW and PBO which can strengthen PBO's spatial development plan; 3) as a result, integrated effective cooperation and coordination amongst governmental entities can be realized.
- Formulation of village development plans based on the results of the watershed plan: with respect to this recommendation, the settlements (*urban and rural ones*) hierarchy plan, which forms part of the spatial plan of watersheds, can create context for appropriate village development plans. This method is scientific and will be effective.

Recommendation 4: Recruitment of present facilitators and training more.

- With respect to the crucial role of facilitators, capacity building and development plans for the stakeholders, this should include the training of facilitators, even amongst the existing talented employees on NRW without solely waiting for new recruits.

Recommendation 5: Diversification of financial resources.

- Regarding the integration of CSP within a large-scale model and the implementation of the abovementioned recommendations also require more and sustained, diversification of financial sources which is an issue of great importance – accessing co-financing from governmental, private sector, community's and international donors is crucial.

D. Lessons learned

- 1) **Engagement of national and provincial main governmental organizations such as Plan and Budget Organization and provincial governor.**

The provincial NRO which has good relations with the provincial Plan and Budget Organization (PBO) had relatively good financial support. CSP needs to receive a budget line item.

2) Facilitators should not be considered as regular employees.

The facilitators work with people, and this does not fit in within the conventional office hours. They connect people with the project, hence many of them were concerned about the discontinuation of their employment status after the project is ended. The recruitment of facilitators by NRWO increases the capacity of the provincial offices and supports a paradigm shift ethos. However, project financial resources have been scarce and not sufficient to recruit local level facilitators. This should be borne by NRWO through revisiting institutional arrangements for INRM.

3) Engagement of private sector

The experiences of Yazd province's CSP Office indicates that engagement of the private sector can enhance the scale of land rehabilitation in a way that takes a shorter time than if it were for the NRWO alone to do it. It can be justified as Corporate Social Responsibility.

4) Capacity development must be taken seriously.

Based on the project document, the Desert Affairs Bureau, had to hire three M&E, financial and technical experts. But it refused to do so, and the existing experts were responsible for this. Capacity shortages in these areas, at a national level, were vivid. Capacity needs assessment is not only required at the beginning stage of the project, but it can also be carried out whenever the project team, at national and provincial, recognizes the need for it.

5) The Project Review Committee (PRC) includes local facilitators, NGOs and academicians.

As the highest decision maker of CSP, the PRC needs to be more active, especially in organizational cooperation.

6) Public awareness and advocacy

Many of the provinces in Iran suffer from sand and dust storms. Therefore, there is suitable context to generate a campaign on land rehabilitation through targeted public awareness and advocacy. This requires the formulation of a communication strategy.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a Terminal Evaluation of Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas Project (CSP-phase III) that has been implemented since June 2017.

1.1 About the Carbon Sequestration in Desertified Areas (CSP - Phase III) project

The Carbon Sequestration Project (CSP-phase III) is a multi-purpose initiative devised to mainly replicate a two-decade-lasting project's model and lessons learned associated with sustainable land management and natural resources restoration nationwide. The project works on land degradation and desertification, which is a main global challenge and a development priority for the Iranian government. The major role of socio-economic causes on the phenomena adds to the complexity of its nature when it reminds necessity of considering all aspects of the issue to approach a consistent solution. To meet its purpose, the project has simultaneously addressed ecological and socio-economic problems at the field level which complies with the integrity of globally agreed goals on sustainable development and the Strategies of the Convention to Combat Desertification. The project was implemented in four (4) sites and aimed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the model in new arid sites as well as a site in humid Hyrcanian zones when contributing to the development of more effective environmental and NRM policies, restoring degraded natural resources, improving the socio-economic status of local communities and enhancing ecosystem resilience and services.

The first phase of this project was initiated in the South Khorasan Province with support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in 2003. In this phase, the project demonstrated that organic carbon stored in the soil and vegetation amounts to 1400 kg/ha after 5 years to underline the great capacity of arid lands for carbon sink. It also had great success in the identification of local capacities, improving social and human resources in women's and youth economic empowerment, and economic community-based restoration of degraded lands. During the 2nd phase, the project was replicated in 18 sites which let it evolve in various environments and under different conditions sticking to the principles in applying a bottom-up and integrated approach. Given its success and willingness of the Natural Resources and Watershed Organization (NRWO) and a considerable number of provincial authorities, In June 2017 a new addendum to the original project document and Government Cost-sharing Agreement (Phase III) was signed between NRWO and UNDP aiming to achieve participatory natural resources management and sustainable rural development in five (5) new pilot sites in four (4) provinces, in completion of the previous phases.

1.2 Description of Outcomes and Outputs

The project's expected results are summarized in three major outcomes and several key activities (Pro Doc):

- **Outcome 1:** Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented
- **Outcome 2:** Local communities further empowered, and their livelihoods improved
- **Outcome 3:** An effective and efficient project management system is maintained, and project implementation monitored and documented.

2 Evaluation overview

This Terminal Evaluation (TE) is an independent review prepared in accordance with UNDP guidelines, of the progress made in achieving expected project outcomes; the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and timeliness of project implementation; the issues requiring decisions and actions; and the lessons learned about project design, implementation and management. The objective of the evaluation was to provide a comprehensive and systematic

accounting of performance, and assess project design, implementation, likelihood of sustainability and possible impacts. The Terms of Reference are presented in Annex 3. A TE Inception Report was prepared and approved by UNDP in mid-April 2022, setting out the approach, methodology, work tasks and schedule.

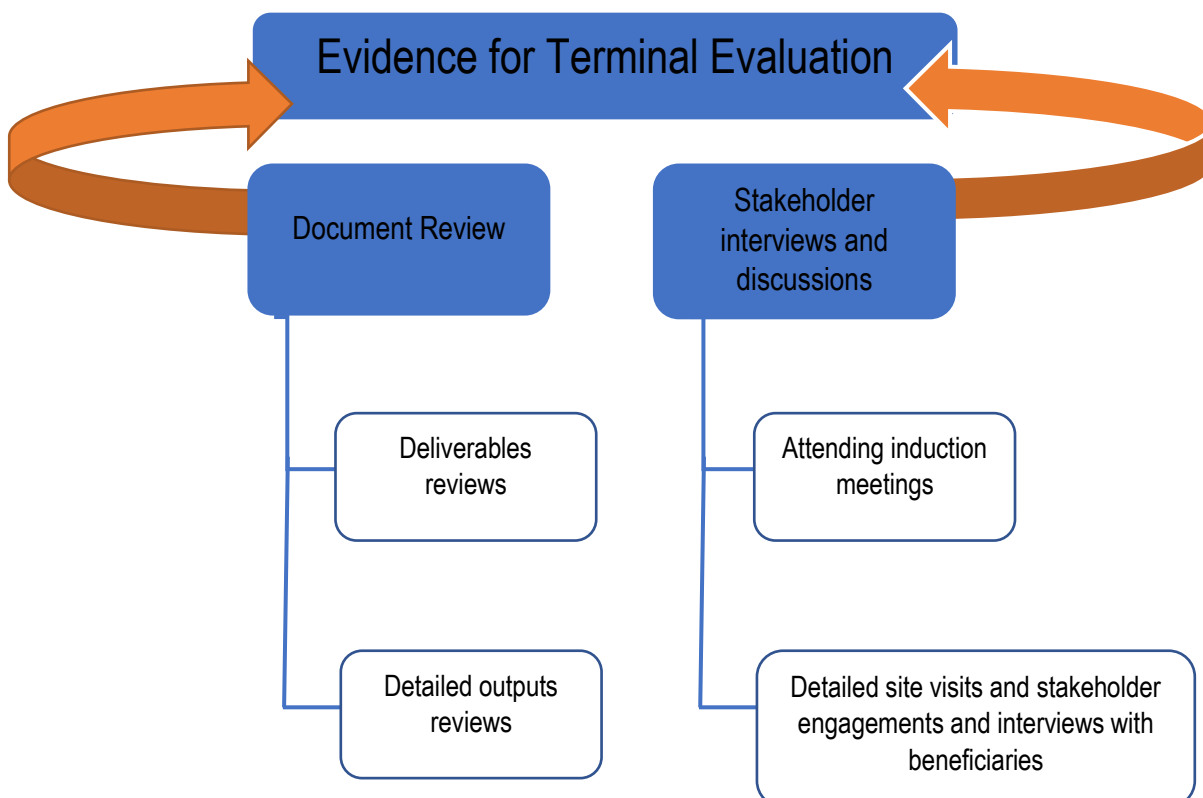
2.1 Evaluation scope and methodology

In assessing the Project and its alignment to the broader Project Document, the TE also examined the following areas: relevance and appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency, impact and sustainability, project design, project management, project implementation and adaptive management, gender equality and COVID-19. The evaluation was conducted through a desk-top review of pertinent documents. It also included site visits with key informant interviews (KIIs) / consultations and some online virtual meetings.

Overall, the evaluation was intended to be forward-looking, it captured lessons learnt effectively and provides information on the nature, extent, and where possible, the results achieved.

The evidence collected by this End-of-Project Evaluation (EPE) was derived from an extensive document review, KIIs / consultations, in-person site visits that included meetings and interviews and virtual meetings/interviews as illustrated in **Figure 1** below. The evaluators believe that the approach taken has given them a fair view of the Carbon Sequestration Project (CSP-phase III).

Figure 1: Overview of methodology adopted for this evaluation



Source: Evaluator's own elaboration (2022)

3 Evaluation approach and methods

3.1 Data analysis

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data and methods to inform its evidence-based findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Specific methods included document review, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, meta-analysis⁵, stakeholder consultation (*key informant interviews / consultations and meetings*), and where applicable results achievement case studies for lessons learned. Specifically, the Terminal Evaluation (TE) approach involved:

Attending the UNDP TE Orientation Meeting

- It did provide a unique opportunity to receive an overview of the Programme and key decision making over Phase III implementation alongside an opportunity to discuss a few points of support, exchange ideas, and meet the UNDP Country Office team in Tehran, Iran.

Document Review (Stage 1)

- Major strategy (*e.g., CSP Phase III Project Addendum Document*) and some M&E documents covering the Programme were provided and a desk review of project documents was completed. This included a review of the Project Document for Phase III, annual reports, deliverables, monitoring reports, progress reports, meeting reports, steering committee minutes and other documents.
- The TE evaluators conducted a comprehensive document review of the components using evidence taken from the shared project document database. The evaluators have undertaken a systematic review of all completed project outputs and delivery reports for the project against a consistent set of results framework/performance criteria in the approved CSP Phase III project document.

Stakeholder interviews and discussions (Stage 2)

- The evaluators conducted interviews and/or site visit responses with/from relevant stakeholders for this TE. The majority of these were from institutional/organizational/process perspectives rather than individualist points of view and have been on an anonymous basis to encourage open and free discussion.
- Based on the review of documents, interviews were also conducted with some representatives from key stakeholder institutions and local project beneficiaries on the ground. Where it was the preferred choice, interviews and follow up questions on information given by respondents, causing some deviation from the original guiding questions script. See the original guiding questions script in Annex 1 – Interview Questions Guide.
- Prior to starting the interviews, the evaluators developed a set of questions against five key themes in an evaluation matrix that guided the TE as follows: 1). Relevance; 2). Effectiveness; 3). Efficiency; 4). Sustainability and 5). Cross-cutting: Gender equality. These can be found in Annex 1 – Interview Questions. In practice, these were used to guide interviews and only certain questions were used in any interview.

Detailed output reviews, analysis and synthesis (Stage 3)

- Project documents and interviews were analysed and synthesized. This was done using line-by-line coding for themes, grouping themes by relevance, and by constructing an outline based on the themes discovered.
- All the three project components in the review have been implemented, the evaluators were concerned at the preponderance of Outcome 3 and wanted to ensure adequate attention to other areas of operations. Hence, the evaluators also led additional reviews on each output against the results framework and evaluation matrix

⁵ The “meta-data-analysis” assessed the findings of each individual key informant interviews and compared them with the findings from all other relevant annual project reports. In evaluation terms a meta-analysis would for example, be a systematic review will focus specifically on the relationship between Poverty Reduction and long-term use of Capacity Development as a tool for Poverty Reduction, while a narrative review may be about Capacity Development. Meta-analyses also try to be quantitative where they can but more rigorous with qualitative type of reviewing.

criteria – these are used to inform this report to make it balanced. The evidence obtained and used to evaluate the results generated by the project was triangulated from a variety of sources, including verifiable data on the achievement of indicators, existing reports, evaluations and technical documents, interviews with stakeholders and focus groups.

Writing (Stage 4)

- The analysis was written in the form of a draft and subsequently reviewed by UNDP through several versions, followed by this final report. Recommendations were drawn out from this process of analysis.

3.2 Findings and conclusions

This section presents the findings of the TE. There are three very important findings/points that are considered in this analysis: 1) the activities, in the 3rd phase at least, have been effective in the scale of the phase, the expectations over an 18-year period perspective have not been met because there lacked a long-term programmatic approach in establishing a collaboration between NRW and UNDP. The goal of the project has been to introduce a paradigm shift that would be internalized and a change management modality in a way that land degradation would be reduced, yet even in some areas land neutrality has occurred; 2) a paradigm shift has been implemented in limited parts of the NRW provincial management, in its pursuit in an effective format that can realize a new paradigm; 3) regarding the weak performance of both Desert Bureau* of NRW and UNDP, the TE recommends that the CSP as a project is terminated at this stage without any further extension, however CSP as a methodology can continue (**Outcome 3 discussed below will address the weaknesses of Desert Bureau*). If the recommendations by the TE are carried forward by the NRW, then a new format of cooperation can be reached.

While the feedback mentioned above points to some positive results, the purpose of this evaluation was also to build an understanding beyond what worked well, and closely examine any challenges and capture lessons learned that can help improve for future programming, so that, going forward, future collaboration on the CSP methodology itself can be improved to maximise results. In addition, future projects can also benefit from any miscalculations or oversight that took place during Phase III.

3.2.1 Project main stakeholders

The project's main stakeholders as verified and confirmed by the TE were:

- the Natural Resources and Watershed Organization; - according to the ProDoc project addendum, the NRW represented by the Director General of its Desert Affairs Bureau as the National Project Director (NPD) – was entrusted with full responsibility for effective and efficient use of project resources, production of planned outputs, and materialization of the intended outcomes. The NPD also assumed full responsibility for the planning and implementation of project activities as indicated in the Results and Resources Framework and Budget
- the Ministry of Interior (*provincial and district governorates and village councils*) - the ProDoc project addendum doesn't specify and specific contribution from this stakeholder. Based on the field visits to project sites, it was evident from the field discussions that the Ministry was represented as a member of the steering committee. However, at the provincial government level, their managers were very supportive of CSP;
- the Ministry of Jihad Agriculture - the ProDoc project addendum doesn't specify any specific contribution from this stakeholder. Based on the field visits to project sites, it was evident from the field discussions that the Ministry itself was not involved in the project, but it was represented as a member of the steering

- committee. However, at a local and provincial level, the agricultural offices cooperated with the project. They worked with farmers and gardeners to improve their practices/activities to make it more sustainable;
- the Department of Environment - the ProDoc project addendum doesn't specify any specific contribution from this stakeholder. Based on the field visits to project sites, it was evident from the field discussions that the department was represented as a member of the steering committee;
 - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - the ProDoc project addendum doesn't specify any specific contribution from this stakeholder. Based on the field visits to project sites, it was evident from the field discussions that the ministry was represented as a member of the steering committee;
 - universities and research centres - the ProDoc project addendum doesn't specify any specific contribution from this stakeholder. Research centres which belonged to the Ministry of Agriculture at provincial level were cooperative with the project with universities trying to orient thesis studies towards CSP from carbon sequestration to rural development research;
 - UNDP - according to the ProDoc project addendum, UNDP provided technical and support services to the project;
 - other assistance providers/partners, including participating local communities, CBOs and others.

In practice, stakeholders at provincial and local levels played more important roles. Besides the above mentioned, at the local level, the facilitators that are not considered as stakeholders as they should by NRW. The evaluators observed a stakeholder group without them, which means existing achievements would not have been realized, especially in Golestan province (Galikesh basin).

3.2.2 Intended project results and outcomes

This section of the report uses the CSP III outcomes' characteristics to discuss whether the project had achieved its intended results. The analysis is focused on the three (3) CSP III outcomes.

3.2.3 CSP outcomes

The **long-term goal** to which the project will contribute is to combat desertification and address land degradation to mitigate the effects of and adapt to climate change (*including mitigation of drivers of sand and dust storms*) as well as to build resilience in local communities.

Objective: to reduce land degradation and manage drivers of sand and dust storms in areas susceptible to desertification through local community empowerment and participation

3.2.4 Outcome 1: Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented

3.2.4.1.1 Output 1.1. Rehabilitation of degraded natural resources planned and implemented at the watershed and village levels through local participation – preparing Watershed Level Plans (WLPs) and Village Level Plans (VLPs)

Based on Project Document? the Watershed Level Plans had to be prepared as a base for rehabilitation of degraded lands through participatory natural resources management. Furthermore, considering the occurrence of drought and most likely steady effects of climate change, the WLPs would support the VLPs as base maps. Yet, in the project document and work plans this relationship was not deliberated upon. The relation between WLPs

and VLPs needed to be specified, mostly from the water allocation for agricultural employment i.e., WLP should be prepared first and the VLPs to dovetail from them. WLP should have been regarded as spatial development plans for the basin that has a strategic nature.

The Village Level Plans (VLP) were formulated for all sites. Consultant companies prepared them through the local community's participation. In general, they were assessed as acceptable for their design and content rather than their results on the ground. Although the VLPs include social and infrastructural investigations as a status quo, they focused on economic aspects in the planning section. That's why the TE suggests changing the term "rural development," which has a broad meaning than "sustainable livelihood," which is consistent with the activities and the results. Sustainable livelihoods lead to social and infrastructural effects at the household and village level, though as indirect ones.

At the outset of the third phase of CSP, convening launching workshops would have clarified all the outcomes, outputs and activities and their mutual relationships for a common understanding which would have led to better results.

There is a significant difference between the concepts of VDG as a development agent and what has been carried out by the project. These groups have been established based on different specialties, gender and family ties. They are related to Micro Credit Funds (MFCs) and very less to the development requirements of the village. Due to the management weakness, lack of systematic M&E and Midterm evaluation, the necessary modifications were not applied. VDGs are mostly associated with VLP.

Nothing was observed by TE in relation to the facilitation of the implementation of Permaculture Activities. This was due to the management weakness, lack of systematic M&E and Midterm evaluation, so this activity was not pursued. Joint meetings of NRWO pertinent national, provincial and county managers, experts and facilitators at the beginning of the phase could have prevented such a deficiency as the project didn't benefit from enough coordination and information sharing measures in general.

3.2.4.1.2 Output 1.2. Application of renewable sources of energy as well as other new technologies introduced and promoted to reduce degradation of natural resources

Exploring feasible options for the introduction and application of renewable energies and other new technologies. Solar energy has been used in local areas since a couple of years ago already, but it has not yet expanded as it should. There is huge potential for solar energy in areas such as CSP sites. During the site visits, a few public and household places were equipped with solar energy installation.

Under this section, the TE found more evidence of activities rather than that of an output nature and the evidence is presented as such. Another activity observation linked to this output is that newly introduced technology pertains to farming and ploughing. Conventionally, after harvesting, ploughing on the farm is carried out. This action damaged the land by lowering the quality of the soil, humidity... etc. Now the new technology does not require to plough the farm. It plants the seeds with the least disruption of the soil. Its benefits are maintaining quality and humidity of soil and improving the yield qualitatively and quantitatively.

Promotion and implementation of renewable energy and other new technologies options.

Among the solar energy technologies, the water heater is the most used one in the observed sites. For a period, especially in the previous phase, CSP provided part of the expenses to locals so that they could buy one. However due to the rising inflation during the 3rd phase, local people cannot afford solar water heaters anymore.

The 2021 and 2022 South Khorasan province progress reports state that CSP supported "163 households out of 597 equal to 27% residing in 8 local villages have been supplied with 50 solar water heaters, 40 water purifiers and 73 gas bakery ovens which far forward than the 5-year target of 5%" plus an additional "15 solar water heaters

were installed in Valiasr and Firoozabad villages”. In North Khorasan province the reports state that the “total numbers of households are 2,254 members in Garmeh and Jajarm. 140 gas bakery ovens and solar water heaters have been given to people and more than 5% of households in pilot villages are covered until now.” They further stated that “30% of the solar water heater and 80% of the gas oven was delivered to women.” In Yazd province the reports claim that “target villages have been recently connected to nationwide CNG network, so solar water heaters were installed in public buildings (mosques) of 4 target villages (Barzegar, Karkhangan, Valiasr and Chenarnaz). Villagers, both men and women, benefit from water heaters installed in the public place (mosque). 2,394 people benefit from solar water heaters, which includes 1,159 women and 1,235 men.” However, this couldn’t be verified during the TE as a mere two (2) cases were observed which were not covered by the CSP.

Producing electricity through solar energy was introduced in Iran as a replacement for burning firewood by CSP II and other projects many years ago in provinces/regions like South Khorasan; North Khorasan; Semnan; Golestan. It’s become expensive that it cannot be bought at a household level or rural scale because of inflation. Years ago, this opportunity to upscale the promotion and implementation of renewable energy was not addressed on time when the technologies were cheaper. In one case, a household spent about US\$ 8,000 to install a system and it sells the electricity to the Ministry of Energy. Half of the income covers loan instalments, and the rest goes to the household budget. The present price is about US\$ 40,000.

3.2.4.1.3 Further evidence was observed by the TE on the following questions/aspects:

- i. What was the interpretation/definition of NRW for “participatory natural resources management” that was used by CSP?

It seems that there is a need to improve the holistic approach by NRW, so that local communities, other stakeholders can contribute towards it. There is a distinction between the approach/paradigm and those who implemented it. If the personality of the managers and experts... are compatible to the paradigm, the process of execution is carried out with the least problems – this means that local communities and other stakeholders would change but the NRW/DAB can remain stable. Another aspect of this pertains to the development activities versus rehabilitation activities. Finally, DAB resists to integrate CSP within Comprehensive Watershed Management whereas CSP can facilitate the implementation in the whole basin.

- ii. To which extent the participatory natural resources management happen?

In the agricultural sector, participatory natural resources management, in the sense of wise use of land and water, can be assessed as more likely to be sustained. It includes those farmers and gardeners who cooperated with the project. Since others observe the results, most of them, logically, pursue the pattern.

- iii. Which pilot sites did better/worse and why?

Due to the results and achievements observed, all of them are categorized as satisfactory. However, Golestan, Galikesh basin, can be given higher rating because they jointly achieved the most results than the others.

- iv. If any rehabilitation of degraded lands happened?

Yes, it did happen and a separate table (*Table 2*) has been prepared and captured this information above.

- v. How the communities and government employ the *sand and dust storm* mitigation measures introduced by CSP? (if any, and if not, why?)

In the plain regions, Government, namely NRW, begun implementing sand and dust mitigation measures decades ago. What has been learned from CSP is to engage communities in land rehabilitation through the

community's workforce and machinery which reduces the high costs associated with sand and dust storm mitigation measures. The participation of the local people generates ownership amongst the villagers which encourages them to protect the rehabilitated land from degradation factors e.g., grazing and overgrazing. The communities learned that cooperation with NRW generates an improved environment, new valuable plants and both perpetual and temporary jobs.

- vi. If there was any evidence of carbon sequestration (either happened on the ground or recorded by the project)?

Although the project had to examine it, no report has been presented of this as evidence. But the prevention of unsustainable farming and gardening, on the one hand, and land degradation in the plain on the other confirms the realization of carbon sequestration in all sites.

- vii. Where and how did the 2 outputs under outcome 1 generate synergies to reach the outcome? Were they enough? If not, what was missing?

Solar energy technologies have reduced bush and tree cutting. However, the rising prices of solar water heaters, and gas ovens have prevented their increased uptake by communities. The introduction of new agricultural technologies generated soil conservation which in turn barred the release of more carbon.

3.2.4.1.4 Outcome 1 Conclusion

Historically, there has been a hostile situation between rural people and NRW due to the dispute over the ownership of land. So, the acceptance of the CSP smoothed through offering rural development activities, livelihood and infrastructure developments. These activities have been entry points for the CSP and the facilitators to gradually receive trust of the villagers. Therefore, rural development activities have had two complementary functions: 1) gaining the trust of the local communities; and 2) reducing pressures on natural resources. However, it seems that there has been an over emphasis on the rural development aspect of the project – this was confirmed by a few provincial NPMs.

Regarding the goal of rehabilitation of degraded lands, it had to have higher priority while in practice, “rural development/sustainable livelihoods” received higher priority, yet the project had to achieve these two objectives in an integrated manner. Its theory of change was designed based on the two pathways of change being integrated natural resources management and development of sustainable alternative livelihoods. With regards to the extension of degraded lands, more effort should have been concentrated directly on the main underlying factors and rehabilitation projects. To make sustainable livelihoods cost-effective and directly related to the reduction of land degradation, an assessment of the jobs created by CSP can be very helpful and suggested by the TE.

The project did not differentiate between activities suitable for plains and those suitable for mountainous areas as there is a difference between plains and mountainous areas. In mountainous areas (like *Galikesh and Minoodasht basin*) gardening and farming practices have more impacts on soil erosion and land degradation whereas in plains area overgrazing, shrub eradication, mines and industrial activities (*South Khorasan, Yazd and southern areas of North Khorasan*) contributed to the land degradation there.

Given that CSP III has an 18-year background, it was expected that more achievements would have been realized in different fields, like exploring and promoting related technologies. The adoption and testing of new suitable technologies and the revitalization of traditional ones have not been done as it should have been. This is the field that the central office should have been active. The expansion of the relations with the Ministry of Jihad-Agricultural and pertinent subsidiary organizations of the Ministry of Energy at national, provincial and county level can lead to significant achievements.

Natural Resources Comprehensive Management which has been initiated by NRW is integrative and it has been launched a few years ago. It has integrated WLPs and VLPs. It also considers a hierarchical management system that is based on the participation of people. This modality is based on the experiences of four international projects which have been performed by NRW.

3.2.5 Outcome 2: Local communities further empowered, and their livelihoods improved

3.2.5.1 Output 2.1: Social capacities improved through establishment of Village Development Groups (VDGs) and provision of required trainings

Prior to examining the impact of the VDGs on the improvement of the social capacity, presenting a definition of the social capacity to communities could have been helpful as there was a significant difference between the conceptions of VDGs for those who wrote the project document and those who implemented it. Social capacity is people's ability to work together to organize public relationships, rather than giving responsibility for those relationships wholly to state actors or the flux of market exchange. In practice, VDGs are mainly related to micro-credit funds (MCFs). They have been formed in terms of gender, neighbourhood, field of work, etc. They do not address development issues of the village as their main tasks. They are in relation to the rural council and village councillor (Dehyar). Although needs assessments have been performed in the target villages, the results are not well-matched to the local development necessities. However, VDGs are part of social mobilization, which functions in line with the general approach of CSP. An assessment by NRW of VDGs can support the next step.

The vocational trainings were adequately offered to VDGs with all provinces overachieving on their target except for Yazd province. Yazd, under achieved and reported zero (0) visits to successful projects nationwide for VDGs and project team conducted training in their annual project progress reports (APPR). There was no evidence from the project about the effectiveness of the trainings, that's what the terminal evaluation couldn't assess this.

- **Planning and implementation of community engagement and facilitation practices**

The project didn't have a community engagement strategy that the TE could assess, however according to the villages that were observed during the site visits, the facilitators of the CSP III in the company of provincial NPMs had started the process of community engagement. Social capacity is a time-consuming process to establish. This aspect suffered from an interruption of the activities due to Covid-19 and irregularity of budget allocation and its amounts, the process of the community engagement took a longer time than originally planned at project design as more people follow those villagers who were practicing CSP trainings. Among the villages, different levels of community engagement were observed. Even monitoring visits to each of participating sites was also negatively impacted by the outbreak of COVID-19. Clearly this aspect of community engagement and facilitation practices was negatively impacted by Covid-19 as people couldn't gather. To overcome this, a variety of adaptive management tools such as observing health protocols, on-line meetings, and distribution of health-related CDs and brochures were undertaken.

At the point terminal evaluation positives can be deduced on the extent to which adaptive management had been used in the project since the core community engagement and facilitation aspects of the project were impacted differently by the aspects mentioned above. However, despite the fundamentally changed operating context due to Covid-19, project results have been achieved to varying degrees which implies that adaptive management (*such as observing health protocols, on-line meetings*) where it was applied has worked well due to proper risk assessment, planning and adequate mitigation measures being put in place timeously.

3.2.5.2 *Output 2.2: Economic capacities improved through establishment of micro-credit funds and provision of required trainings*

During the VDGs development process, needs assessments were undertaken and an inclination indicated by a participant during the process resulted in them undergoing training and capacity building that a participant would benefit from in a particular occupation or job.

Economic capacity is defined as **the amount an economy can produce using its current equipment, workers, capital and other resources at full tilt.**

- The planning and holding thematic training and capacity development workshops (including: MCF rules and regulation, preparing income generation plan: there were five (5)⁶ thematic training and capacity development workshops convened. Almost close to 20 training skills workshops were held many times in the five sites. For instance:
 - in Yazd, vocational and skill trainings have been offered to women e.g., specifically, 10 women attended professional level sewing classes. Women's products marketing has been supported by their attendance to festivals and exhibitions inside or outside Yazd province.
 - in Golestan, the membership of rural women in micro-credit funds (MCFs) resulted in launching over 100 small businesses facilitated by small loans. The participation of women's development groups in establishing a micro-credit fund was also evident.
 - in South Khorasan, MCFs consisted of 132 members (60%) women out of 22 and women consist 70% of loan applicant. It is noteworthy to say that all meetings were coordinated by women.
 - in North Khorasan, in 2020, women consisted 65% of MCFs' members. The presence of women in MCF's sessions was at a high rate of 95% and some accountants of MCFs were rural women. Jobs were created in North Khorasan from which about half of them belonged to women. Training of MCFs was about their functions, management and accounting skills. Some women performed accounting.
- Establishment and maintenance of MCFs: almost in all the villages covered by CSP III, MCFs have been established. Although the high rate of inflation has limited their functions, they still accept new members. The loan that could create a job several years ago, now can solve minor and moderate problems. For the scale of rural life, it is acceptable though the viability of the model is under serious question, however gender mainstreaming is an aspect that strongly evident under this output activity. NRW supports the MCFs and NRW held training workshops on how to run and manage MCFs including giving them accounting software. The facilitators also assisted with linking the MCFs with micro credit lenders.
 - in Yazd, women formed nearly half of MCFs' membership so that included 355 males and 359 females. There was also the presence of women in two (2) MCFs out of eight (8) as the account holder and signatory. Women consisted of 359 members out of 714 and half of the saving belongs to them. 70 out of 136 small loans had been paid to women for setting up Gilimbafi workshop and sewing workshops. By 2022, out of 24 signatories, three (3) were women and 21 were men. Women consisted of 284 members out of 533 and half of the saving and loans repaid belongs to women. Of the 40 VDGs formed in four (4) villages (Korkhengan, Chenarnaz, Khansarf and Valiasr), 210 were

⁶ The following thematic training and capacity development workshops were convened.

- Trainings provided to protect the environment and natural resources by project agents that encouraged local people, especially rural women, to use green energy such as solar water heaters and gas oven.
- Training visits to successful projects nationwide for VDGs and project team.
- Training workshops on MCF management.
- Training workshops for director board.
- Training workshops and sessions on required income generation activities in collaboration with Vocational and Technical organization.

women and 214 were men out of a total of 424 people. Also, 12 account holders, the secretary of Khansarf fund and the chairman of Valiasr fund were women. Amongst the 40 heads of the mentioned funds, 11 heads were women.

- in North Khorasan by 2022, MCFs had been set up with 1,261 members including 763 women, and 498 men. 60% of the fund members were women and most of the women in the village have been able to receive micro-facilities from the fund with monthly savings. Overall, of the 36 fund holders, 25 were women and 11 were men, with women making up 70% of the account holder. In the funds, 80% of the heads were women. In general, out of 99 leaders, 79 were women and the rest were men. In addition, the fund's accountants also included 12 people, of which nine (9) were women and three (3) were men. In fact, 75% of accountants were women in the carbon sequestration project in Jajarm and Garmeh. The payment facilities from the funds included 174 cases, of which 138 cases (*approximately 79%*) were paid to women. So CSP III did a good job.
- in Golestan by 2022, the total number of people in the funds was 1,210 including 726 women and 484 men. The number of signatories was 63 of which 41 were women and 22 were men. The number of debtors was 28 of which 19 were women and nine (9) were men. Women were represented in all funds as account holders and women were represented in 18 funds as the leader. 12 job generation projects were created by funds, which led to the employment of 45 people, including 25 women and 20 men.
- in South Khorasan, by 2022, women consisted of 132 members (60%) out of 22 and women consist 70% of loan applicant in MCFs. It is noteworthy to say that all meetings are coordinated by women.

3.2.5.3 Output 2.3: Local level social and economic platforms are legalized through establishment and registration of local cooperatives

Holding Director Board and General Assembly meetings: these meetings were held mainly in South Khorasan and North Khorasan as per the summarised achievement evidence captured against each province in bullet points below. Facilitators and, sometimes, provincial NPMs took part in them. They are new social mechanism which can increase social capacity. Some women are members of the board.

Registration of the local cooperatives: as per the project document cooperatives have been systematically registered or are being registered as per summarised achievement evidence captured against each province in bullet points below. Their functions are effective for their members. Considering scale of cooperatives, NRW contracted land rehabilitation with them.

Holding required training workshops for the director board: because local cooperatives and its structure was a new concept, formal workshops and informal guidance were held mainly in South Khorasan and North Khorasan as per summarised achievement evidence captured against each province in bullet points below.

- in Yazd, there were four (4) local cooperatives registered with 178 members of the local cooperative, including 101 males and 77 females. The holding of director board and general assembly meetings was constrained due to problems in obtaining the business code, despite all stages of registration of cooperatives having been completed and accomplished.
- in South Khorasan, there was one (1) local cooperative registered with women making up almost 65% of the members of the local cooperative which includes 220 women. Five required training workshops for director board were done and five director board and general assembly meetings were convened.
- in North Khorasan, there were two (2) local cooperatives were established but not registered due to the change in the registration system of cooperatives i.e., the lengthy process of registering a cooperative and rejection of the documents, hence the registration of the cooperative companies is still under pursuit. In addition, previous cooperatives established in the region have failed and people still have a negative view of cooperatives. However, the shareholders of the cooperatives are 302, of which 184 were women and 118 were men. So, women made up 60% of the shareholders. Two required training workshops for director board

were done and one director board and general assembly meeting was convened. Women's participation in buying equities of cooperatives has been relatively good. With the start of the cooperative, the motivation to buy equities will increase.

- in Golestan, there was one (1) local cooperative registered and launched with 96 members (85 men and 11 women). The number of members included 85 men and 11 women, and the cooperative provided employment opportunities for young graduates. Evidence of holding Director Board and General Assembly meetings and training workshops for the director board wasn't available for verification.

3.2.5.4 Output 2.4: Sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives adopted by local communities and required capacities and skills enhanced to reduce pressure on natural resources

- **Development of comprehensive strategy and action plan for sustainable alternative livelihoods as well as required business plans:** VLPs were developed from village development needs studies that were undertaken by consultants and they are related to specific villages. According to the APPRs, BPs were prepared for each village without any written evidence that provides the process of how they were developed which the TE could assess. However, comprehensive strategies and action plans for sustainable alternative livelihoods as well as required business plans have not been developed.
- **Planning and provision of vocational/thematic trainings in support of alternative livelihoods:** as per summarised achievement evidence captured against each province in bullet points below, this is one of the achievements of CSP III. Through governmental and private trainers, the four sites were successful in providing training and knowledge which led to livelihoods which can be sustainable in a way that decrease pressure on nature. There was no data available, so the TE assumed the support of alternative livelihoods supported have a positive impact, for instance:
 - in Yazd, eight (8) types of business plans were developed by the project namely saffron cultivation, Rosewater extraction workshop, compost production, Angooze cultivation (*a medicinal herb, Ferula assa-foetida*), high-yielding livestock breeding, scarves weaving workshop, Rosemary cultivation, Golmahammady rose cultivation of which, 118 people, including 88 men and 30 women, benefited. Nine loans (33%) of the facilities (out of a total of 27) were paid to women to setup small livelihood units for women, including 10 small home knitting workshop.
 - in Golestan, 11 types of business plans (*including cultivation of medicinal plants, sericulture, poultry, forest products, plums, raspberries, jams, jellies, pickles*) with the brand of healthy products "Eglima" were developed by the project, which, 28 people, including 17 men and 11 women, benefited.
 - in South Khorasan, six (6) types of business plans were developed by the project namely pistachio cultivation, rug weaving, carpet weaving, towel weaving, livestock breeding, confectionery, and doll making of which, 175 people, including 59 men and 116 women, benefited. 63 employment loans provided by the Barakat Foundation were paid to applicants of whom 23 are female. On job-creating workshops, 70% of women participated. Meanwhile, in the workshops held, the financial empowerment of rural women has been the goal, which fortunately has been achieved by holding job-creating workshops.
 - in North Khorasan, eight (8) types of business plans were developed by the project namely, rug (Kilim) weaving, horticulture, livestock breeding, tailoring, Saffron cultivation, cultivation of medicinal plants, yarn production and doll making. 71 people, including four (4) women and 67 men, benefited from the permanent and temporary jobs created. Women showed great interest in handicrafts. In addition, orientation sessions were held for the women of Jarbat and Qoli Jajarm villages. In technical and vocational courses 3,166 people were trained. Of those trained 2,206 (70%) were women. It is noteworthy,

to mention that the increasing costs of training courses (*in technical and vocational centers*) by up to 10 times became an obstacle to holding further supplementary courses.

- **Supporting implementation of alternative livelihood initiatives**: based on the needs assessments, an examination of the socioeconomic situation of the villages (VLP) and business plans were prepared. According to the BP, some villagers participated in their favourite courses.
- **Marketing of rural products**: the marketing of local products has been always a challenge for the participatory projects in Iran. In the 3rd phase of the CSP, marketing was the last ring of the improvement of livelihoods which still requires to be solved. In some cases, like in North Khorasan, a socially active entrepreneur works with the women. She trains women on different occupations and sells their products such as carpets, rugs, handicrafts, etc., to the markets. A tailor woman, in the village in North Khorasan, sews different products with high quality. She had constant customers and an expanding market. Similar woman in Galikesh, Golestan province, were observed. However, the number of the producers that are looking for markets is more than the successful ones. There was no reliable information made available to the TE on how many producers failed and what CSP did about them.
 - in Golestan, 22 people from the local communities of the target villages registered on national digital marketing platforms. Also, there are two permanent markets for women entrepreneurs in Owghan, whose products are sold on the Telegram and Instagram channels.

3.2.5.5 ***Output 2.5: Inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation mechanisms established and strengthened at the provincial and local levels to facilitate sustainable rural development***

- **Negotiation with relevant organizations and government entities at the provincial and local levels for development and implementation of WLPs and VLPs**: engagement of pertinent GOs at local levels is very considerable. A variety of them are supporting CSP. This cooperation happened after elucidation of the project objectives by the provincial NPM and facilitators. Since the follow-up of the first meetings is done by facilitators, their contribution is of great importance. Although relevant GOs contribute to and benefit from the implementation of the common projects, the role of the facilitators to connect them to local communities is essential. Among others, county level Jihad- Agricultural office, provincial Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism office, and Technical and Vocational Training Organization are the most important governmental entities which participate in development and implementation of the VLPs. At provincial level, two important entities are Plan and Budget Organization, and NRWO that are responsible for preparation of development plan and budgeting. The level of cooperation between provinces was different as the buy in (*from relevant organisations and government entities*) and human agency behind it were key conditions for success. Where buy in was greater, the provinces managed to secure government funding and where it was least or non-existent then no government funding was secured.
- **Consultation and negotiation with NGOs and other key stakeholders for planning and implementation of development activities**: during the project, there seems to have been a continuous effort on inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation amongst the stakeholders though those efforts didn't yield many positive results.

3.2.5.6 ***Outcome 2 Conclusion***

This outcome has been partially achieved as there is some evidence that the CSP III activities enabled local communities to be further empowered and their livelihoods were improved. Social capacities were improved in some respects and through the establishment of Village Development Groups (VDGs) and provisioning of required training. The local level social and economic platforms were legalised through the establishment and registration of local cooperatives.

3.2.6 Outcome 3: An effective and efficient project management system is maintained, and project implementation monitored and documented

3.2.6.1 Output 3.1: Project effectively managed

- **Recruitment of project staff (including Technical Expert, M&E Expert, Finance & Procurement Officer, UNDP Project Assistant):** UNDP recruited a project assistant based in the UNDP office, but the Desert Affairs Bureau did not hire the other position and instead used its existing experts to implement the tasks in its headquarters and provinces. . As a centrality of CSP, technical expert, just name two tasks, can establish networks among the provincial offices in a way that experiences can be exchanged and generate value added, and preparation of diverse national reports which can be used for communication to national level. This is true proportionally for the finance and procurement officer.
- **Establishment of project offices and procurement of required equipment and services:** all the project offices were established and equipped. Although it takes time, they can bring about identity for VDGs. It supports social capacity as well. **Hamid has info on which offices have been established.**
- **Establishment and holding PRC meetings:** Generally speaking, the Project Review Committee meetings did not meet the expectations. They did not meet the tasks and other than Yazd province whose PRC meetings convened four (4) times a year as planned quarterly, the others didn't. yet, the project design expected a result of PRC meetings at least quarterly.
- **Establishing and maintenance of a project financial management system:** it has not been established at the time of TE, and there is no project management system in place that the TE could verify.
- **Signing of MoAs with relevant stakeholders:** according to APPRs there are considerable MoAs at local level which some of them realized. However, the ProDoc addendum doesn't specify why MoAs are needed.

3.2.6.2 Output 3.2: Progress and impacts of project continually monitored and documented

- **Prepare and implement a comprehensive M&E plan:** there is a monitoring plan in the project document including seven parts: track results progress, monitor and manage risk, learn, annual project quality assurance, review and make course corrections, project report, project review (Project Board). The M&E plan as developed is sound and robust enough as it is. However, it wasn't implemented for lack of funds and not hiring an M&E experts which then created gaps in systematic data collection and documentation. The project was meant to have developed a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) mechanism to be overseen by the M&E Expert and this wasn't done. Monitoring and reporting on substantive progress of the project and achievement of results would have been conducted under the supervision of the M&E Expert – a role that was not filled.
- **Establishing a project planning and reporting system:** by project planning it means project implementation. Annual workplans are prepared based on it as it guides how to reach to the results. At the provincial level, the annual reporting system was acceptable. However, Desert Affairs Bureau did not prepare a reporting system. The absence of M&E Expert meant that project provincial plans were developed and then consolidated by the central office without and M&E Expert. The plans (and reports) were then communicated with UNDP in what seems to be an endless and frustrating looped process of corrections. This bottom-up sequencing way of planning and reporting is only good and strong enough if an M&E Expert existed to coordinate and take full responsibility of the process. However, in this instance that wasn't the case, and this proved to be a major weakness of the project.
- **Provincial annual workplans prepared in four sites based on the needs assessment:** annual workplans were prepared in terms of needs assessments that were performed at the beginning of the Phase III. During the phase, a systematic assessment based on the monitoring of the performances did not take place. The annual workplans also had the annual budget for the annual activities integrated into them.

- **Planning and holding knowledge sharing forums and sessions:** knowledge sharing was performed by the provincial CSP offices. Site visits were arranged on different subjects. These visits were part of three steps of capacity development. First, facilitators explaining the importance of capacity development/building in terms of pertinent activities and benefits that local people can achieve. The second step was observation of the capacities that were acquired by other people in other places. It convinced them that they can produce similar products. Finally, some of them, as pioneers, began to pursue activities. There are lists of the site visits by the provinces. Knowledge sharing through forums and sessions can be developed by the DBA extensively. It can be a mechanism to advance the project further in the next phase.
- **Preparing lessons learned document for the project:** although there are considerable applicable lessons learned, no documents were prepared to address CSP's lessons learned as CSP didn't have a system to keep record of them. Lessons learned are part of the knowledge sharing which has not been compiled. The Desert Affairs Bureau (DAB) had to collect the data from the provinces and disseminate it in a suitable way.
- **Publishing and disseminating project reports and information (brochures, booklets, documentaries...):** this activity is considered as a base for the communication strategy. By communication strategy, the TE refers to who the CSP target groups were in each site; what benefits those groups can receive from CSP; what kind of messages should have been conveyed and how. Four provinces had documented their activities at a satisfactory level. Annual reports, brochures, documentaries, etc. were published. North Khorasan province is the one that had made many documentaries. Golestan (*Galikesh*) province's publications were more result-based oriented. Some brochures were published with 5,000 in circulation.

In general, this activity is assessed satisfactory in provinces. However, at national level, more effort was required to receive support of pertinent national GOs, especially Plan and Budget Organization. Moreover, the public sphere is an important area that should be aware of the deteriorating situation of the lands.

- **Carrying out NIM audit if required:** according to CSP III project document, the "project would continue to be implemented under the National Implementation Modality (NIM) with partial UNDP Country Office Support Services as in the phase II project document and its subsequent addendums, subject to the results of the HACT Micro Assessment of the Implementing Partner (IP). This had been negotiated with the IP and should the result of the Micro Assessment show that the IP is not fully compliant, then the implementation modality will be subject to change to NIM with full country office support or Direct Implementation Modality in accordance with risk mitigation measures driven because of the assessment." The TE was made aware by UNDP of the fact that there was an audit that had been done on the project in 2022.

As the TE findings indicate that the project implementation modality had to be modified during third phase. The Golestan basin is a new mountainous landscape that differs from desert areas. Also, there are sub-basins and rangelands that requires engagement of Forest deputy, Rangeland Affairs Bureau, Watershed and Soil Conservation Bureau. Therefore, a new setup for national management should be devised. The new combination of national management probably could implement the NIM modality at expected level. If UNDP Country Office had performed its support service, the NIM modality could have been implemented as expected.

- **Carrying out final evaluation by independent evaluators:** the final evaluation has been carried out.

Outcome 3 Conclusion

Generally, an effective and efficient management system which could implement, monitor and document the project was not established. The M&E plan as developed is sound and robust enough as it is. However, it wasn't implemented for lack of funds and non-hiring of an M&E experts which then created gaps in systematic data collection and documentation. The project was meant to have developed a comprehensive Monitoring and

Evaluation (M&E) mechanism to be overseen by the M&E Expert and this wasn't done. Monitoring and reporting on substantive progress of the project and achievement of results would have been conducted under the supervision of the M&E Expert – a role that was filled and in this instance that wasn't the case, and this proved to be a major weakness of the project given that overall management of the project had been expected from the central office of the project. The provincial and field level offices were working under NRWO and had less systematic engagement in project management (*not implementation*). Evidence suggests that a part of the agreed workplan of the project as reflected in the ProDoc was also not fully implemented at all due to financial constraints. The TE also notes that they are conflicting claims/views on this issue between UNDP and NRWO which wouldn't have been the case had the M&E system been put in place for the project.

3.2.7 Efficiency

Efficiency – understood as the timely and cost-effective production of outputs and other deliverables has been satisfactory at both local and provincial levels based on their levels of responsibility and accountability, and unsatisfactory at national level. It's worth noting as the overall project management comments were already captured under the Outcome 3 Conclusion above (*which won't be repeated here*), this section should not be read in isolation.

At least three main factors are involved in efficiency: 1). management, 2). resources (*mostly budget*) and 3). project risks becoming a reality – unexpected Covid-19 pandemic happening.

At local and provincial levels, the activities reflected an acceptable degree of efficiency. Government stakeholders claim that this has been done in a situation where the amount of allocated budget was much less than the projected budget and the TE was also alerted to the suggestion that government promised to pay contractors later. Bearing in mind that land rehabilitation and agricultural activities are seasonally sensitive, the allocation of budget had to consider this. Provincial offices and facilitators could mobilize a variety of sources – money, trainers and place for gatherings - from local governmental offices, foundations, local people and private sector to compensate the shortages. According to Government, many of the activities' expenses were meaningfully less than the conventional ones, however, the TE doesn't think that the claimed costs in the original ProDoc were invalid but rather the claims that work was delivered with later contractor payments being promised could be true. From a value for money perspective the cost was inefficient as CSP didn't mobilize significant national resources to achieve maximum results – the cost sharing agreement wasn't honoured.

The Covid-19 global pandemic affected the efficiency of the project by affecting daily life for the entire country. There was a stoppage of the training courses, MCFs and VDGs meetings for a period of close to one year which delayed to realization of some of the project aims. At the national level, CSP III managerial efforts did not meet the efficiency expectation, mostly to coordinate capturing provincial experiences, lessons learned, etc. However, some provinces like North Khorasan office and Yazd managed to capture and document their lessons learned.

3.2.8 Effectiveness

According to the provincial reports, CSP III achieved most of the objectives as captured under 5.4 Annex 4 – Results framework achieved results and objectives. Effectiveness of the CSP III can be categorised in four groups: 1) activities that directly affected land rehabilitation; 2) agricultural activities (*converting plantation pattern, method of plantation, etc.*) which prevented more land erosion and were adaptable to climate; 3) introducing livelihoods which reduced livelihoods reliant on land; 4) introducing jobs related to rural development. Although most project targets were more or less achieved, a question remains as to the percentage of budget allocation that was very low as captured in Figure 3: *Expenditure report from the Financial Reports*, whereas many of the targets have been met. According to the minutes of the last meeting of the Project Steering Committee, the project NPM stated

that CSP III has achieved more than the expected objectives. Therefore, either CSP III objectives from 2017 to 2021 were underestimated or the budget in the project document is overestimated.

Furthermore, the scale of effectiveness of the first three groups is so limited that it cannot compete with the rapid rate of land degradation. It seems that a new project setup is required.

3.2.8.1 Project management structure as outlined in the project document

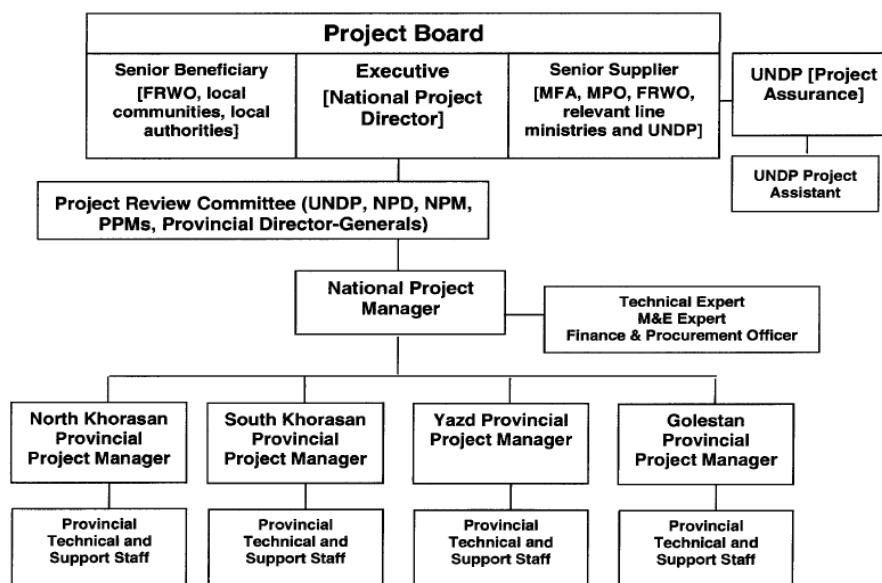
The project management structure as outlined in the project document and illustrated in Figure 2 has not been efficient with inefficiency challenges in generating the expected results. The achievement of the actual/expected results (*outputs and outcomes*) justifying the costs incurred wasn't the full amount as the cost sharing modality wasn't fully observed by government as captured Figure 3, with a high impact on the project implementation owing to reasons of an embargo on Iran.

Project implementation and the achievement of expected results required continuation of close partnership between the national, provincial and local NRW/MoJA authorities, and UNDP, which had been a well-established practice during the previous two phases. However, the assumptions which the project addendum was prepared on are :

- i. Not the same NRW authorities as in CSP Phase II remained in charge of project implementation and assumed responsibility for project results – they also have been staff turnover within UNDP itself. In principle NRW keeping the internal project staff was a good model to retain expertise and institutionalise experiences from previous CSP phases. However, staff turnover for reasons which the TE isn't aware of makes it look like it wasn't a good model to adopt. The UNDP Cost-sharing modality, as described in Section IV and Annex 1 of the project documents, wasn't fully observed. It must be noted that UNDP cost-sharing would have materialised had the Government allocated the whole committed amount of \$7.6 million. From a percentage point of view UNDP has put much more funds than what the Government allocated to the project as captured Figure 3.

It seems that the new CWMP initiative that NRW has started can accelerate land rehabilitation and prevention of land degradation more effectively.

Figure 2: Governance and Management Arrangements



Source: CSP project document

3.2.8.2 Project financial management processes and procedures

The UNDP cost-sharing modality, as described in Section IV and Annex 1 of the project documents, wasn't fully observed by the Government. This negatively impacted the project's cashflow, financial management processes and procedures as it had been agreed that government cost-sharing contributions would be deposited in UNDP accounts in the amounts agreed to as per the time schedule that had been agreed upon. The later happened even though UNDP ensured a sound financial management system was put in place for monitoring the cost-sharing deposits and expenditures and informing the government project team of the due dates of the next instalments in a timely manner. The lack of timely allocations of the national/provincial budgets, led to a delay in the timing of both deposits and amounts. At the project design phase there was a moderate likelihood of this being the case however it became the case, and the impact was high, as project inputs and activities were mainly dependent on these funds. The sanctions imposed on Iran resulted in the government not having much money to allocate to the project.

While the report was being concluded, another table of expenditure was received with different figures from government whose funds didn't get deposited into the UNDP-CSP account. Based on this, the government's expenditure is twice as much as what is written in the project document. It does not conform to the findings of the terminal evaluation. It must be noted that this phase of the project was an extension of the previous projects having been implemented but it proved a major barrier in accessing cost sharing funds without the buy-in of the relevant financing ministry. According to the information accessed by the TE, the amounts of the Government cost-sharing allocated to the project were as follows:

Figure 3: Expenditure report from the Financial Reports

Project Document		Expenditure					
Source of fund	amount USD	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022*
UNDP	380,000	0	0	465.00	7,888.16	5,227.95	38,000
Gov Cost sharing	7,600,000	0	0	96,279.17	1,028.23	100,326.95	0
Total	7,980,000	0	0	96,744.17	8,916.39	105,554.90	38,000
Delivery Rate		3.12%					

Source: Project document information. Calculation assessed by TE team

* there is about "\$38,000 for 2022 from the gain and loss of Government" according to UNDP.

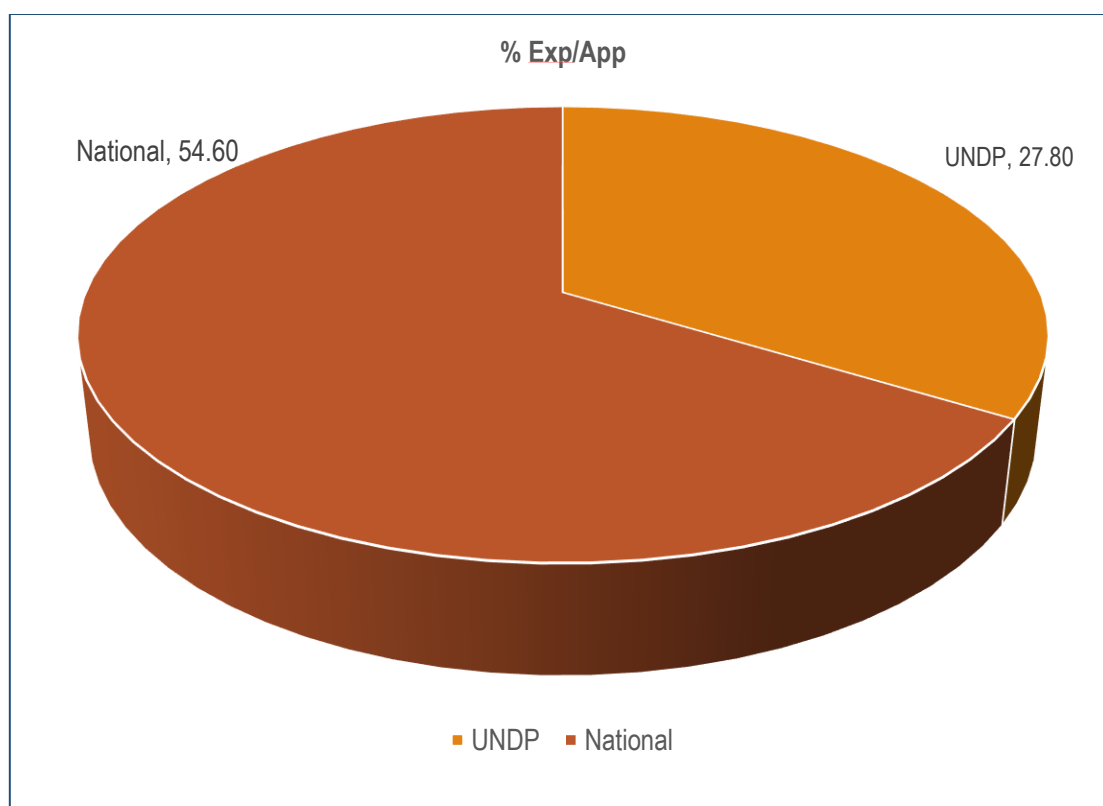
On the other hand, the other scenario which the TE also assessed according to the project document, was that the Government of Islamic Republic of Iran (GIRI) had to fund \$US 7,600,000 equal to 280,000,000,000 IRR. However due to the changing exchange rate, the equivalent of the \$US increased from 280 billion IRR to about 1130 billion IRR. On the other hand, UNDP committed \$US 380,000. **Table 5** shows that GIRI expenditure was 54.6 percent of the approved budget. But the ratio of the UNDP's expenditure to the approved budget is 27.8% which is almost half of the GIRI share, **Figure 4**. It seems that UNDP will support some activities in 2022 which increases its share. Provincial expenditure provided 24.5% of the total expenditure. Cost sharing includes 3.6% of the total budget.

Table 5: Approved and expenditure budget of CSP III

Project Document (\$US)		Expenditure(\$US)					Total (\$US)	% Expenditure/ approved	
		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021			
UNDP	380,000	79,233.70	4,866.50	9,486.40	8,916.40	3071.10	105,574.0	27.80	
National GOV.	Cost sharing	7,600,000	0	0	57,657	0	98,123	155,780	-
	Direct Funding to PRJ pilots	-	804,260	357,970.90	988,001	539,741	260,980	2,950,952	-
	Provincial government budget	-	691,594.60	147,158	116,040	41,205	48,980	1,044,977	-
Sub-total	7,600,000	1,495,854.10	505,128.40	1,161,697.50	580,946.00	408,082.40	4,151,708.50	54.60	
Total	7,980,000	1,575,087.80	509,994.90	1,171,183.90	589,862.40	411,153.50	4,257,282.50	53.30	

Source: Desert Affairs Bureau information. Calculation by TE team

Figure 4: Ratios of National and UNDP expenditure to approved budgets



The ratio of approved UNDP budget to national one is 5% whereas the ratio of expenditure budgets decreases to half, Table 6.

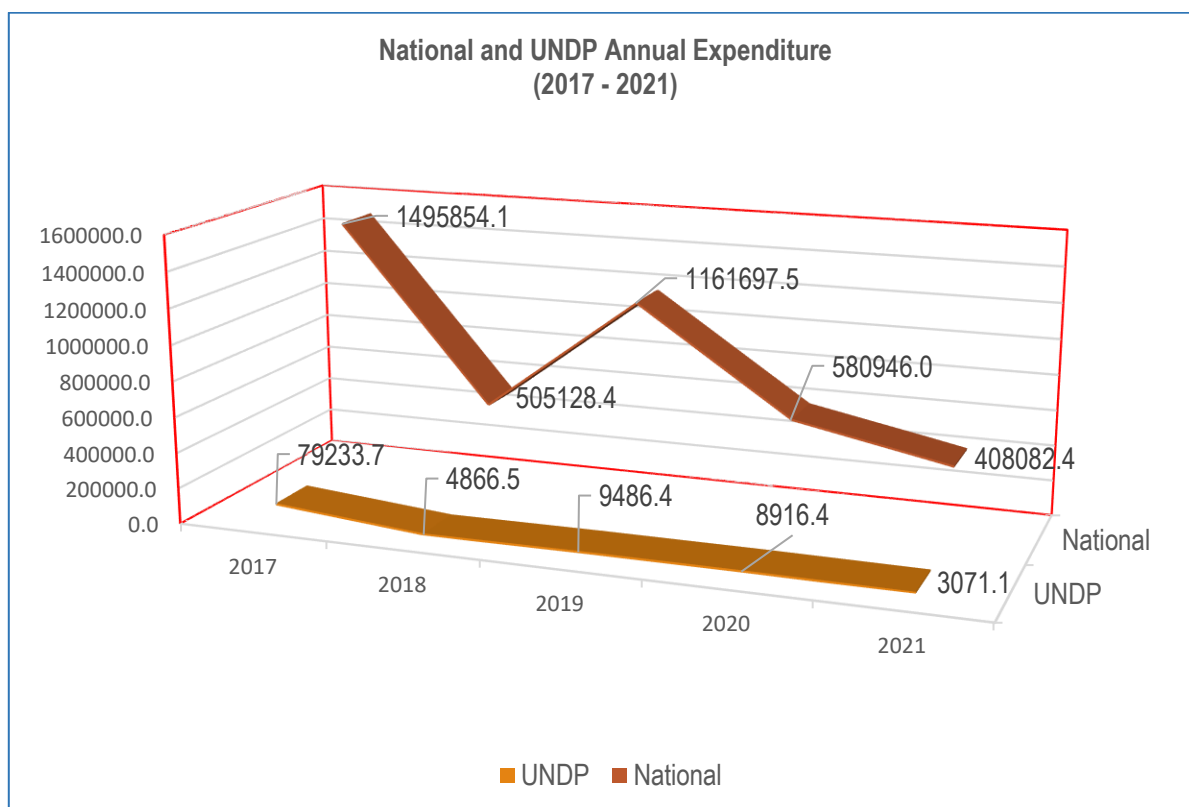
Table 6: Ratio of UNDP approved and expenditure budgets to GIRI

	Approved	Expenditure
UNDP	380,000	105,574
National	7,600,000	4,151,708.50
%UNDP/National	5	2.5

Source: Project document and DAB

According to **Figure 5**, the trend of national expenditure has been fluctuating which influenced activities of the project. Expenditure from 2019 experienced a descending trend and it should be compared with the rising inflation.

Figure 5: National and UNDP Annual Expenditure (2017 – 2021)



Source: Table 5

Financing CSP was of great importance and sustainable financial sources can increase its effectiveness. Due to the sanctions, national income has been essentially limited. Despite of the sanctions, NRWO (national and provincial) has allocated more as much as possible. It's evident that UNDP's contribution had two aspects to it, financial and technical assistance. The first one has been limited so far. However, it can mobilize international sources. From a technical point of view, UNDP has access to the experiences which can accelerate land rehabilitation extensively.

Improvement of relations with provincial and local governmental offices can increase the budget both in cash and in-kind. By the first one, it means pertinent projects which are in line with CSP policies. Also, in-kind support can accelerate CSP achievements, as was observed during TE.

Another financial source is claimed to be Foundations whose contributions the TE didn't get evidence of, and this isn't assumed as government contribution. They have engaged in livelihood development of rural people. Prior to CSP III, there was relatively no cooperation between the CSP and the foundations. Comments from site visits suggest that now it has grown and can be expanded on, and that joint planning can potentially lead to stronger cooperation.

The private sector can provide considerable amount of credit. Yazd and North Khorasan experienced it during CSP III. Local communities' co-financing is the last one. Most of the development projects was co-financed by the people. It decreases governmental financial burden, on the one hand, and generate ownership among the people.

3.2.9 Sustainability

Where project activities have been implemented, the participatory approaches not only facilitated project management but were also very important features for the sustainability of the project model and results achieved. The participatory approaches employed in previous phases of the project had shown that active inclusion of local communities in the decision-making and planning processes leads to a strong sense of ownership and responsibility and contributes to the successful achievement of project outcomes. Through capacity building initiatives and skills-based workshops that were implemented under the project and used in previous phases, local men and women were given the confidence to initiate, design and see-through the rehabilitation activities as well as their own micro-enterprise and income generating activities that contribute to increased livelihoods and reduction of natural resource degradation.

NRWO, Ministry of Jihad Agriculture (MoJA) and their respective provincial offices had been the major implementing partners from the early stages of project implementation in the first two phases. Within these previous phases, comprehensive training and capacity building had been carried out for these entities involving key technical experts and support staff which have allowed them to independently replicate the project in numerous provinces. NRWO doesn't fully seem to have a strong sense of ownership and belief in the project methods and techniques and is not fully engaged in advocating the project model at all levels of government to ensure that lessons learned, and best practices continue to be incorporated in government planning and practice. With the observation above they're a few sustainability challenges that will be further discussed in sections below.

3.2.9.1 Sustainability: Provincial level impacts of CSO

At a provincial level the conventional work on combating desertification has been performed based on a top-down approach for many years. The private sector has been a contractor. The mindset of the Natural Resources experts and managers prevented broader participation and a bottom-up approach. They are used to consider people as destroyers of nature. Since the 2nd phase of CSP in Yazd province for example, the mindset and manner of work commenced to change gradually. First, those experts who worked/work with CSP, experienced new approaches and a paradigm shift. Progressively, more experts became influenced by the implementation of the new paradigm. Those who worked/work with CSP advocated it enthusiastically (*former and present provincial NPM*). Since the last year of the 3rd phase, the paradigm shift has been manifested. Yazd NRO management established a "Steering Committee of Natural Resources Participatory Management". It consisted of the director general and its deputies. The committee addressed three issues: 1) organizational cohesion of provincial natural resources office, 2) engagement of all stakeholders (*ranchers, farmers, miners, industrialists...*, and 3) capacity building and participation of local communities. It was said that the SCNRPM is the initiative of Yazd province and considering that it is a one-year-old entity, its activities on the latter second and third issues are considerable.

The Terminal Evaluation suggests that this Yazd province SCNRPM initiative needs to be promoted by the NRWO to other provinces. A collective assessment of SCNRPM by other provinces is required. The central bureau can assign an expert for facilitation of this initiative for sustainability and scale up reasons.

3.2.9.2 Sustainability: County level impacts of CSO

Isolated cases of a paradigm shift can be observed at a county level, at Khatam watershed as an example. The NR County manager is also the CSP manager at this level. He manages two different work matters, top-down approach and bottom-up approach. He is one of the experts who has deeply comprehended the differences between the two approaches. It was evident that he is trying to replace the conventional non participatory approach with the participatory approach.

3.2.9.3 Sustainability: Private sector impacts of CSO

Another initiative by the CSP in Yazd province was engaging the private sector in CSP and reclamation of the province desert. NRO Yazd signed several MoAs with mineral and industrial complexes. They committed to rehabilitate about 100,000 ha as their Corporate Social Responsibility. Although these areas are not in the CSP sites, it reflects an indirect impact of participatory approach of CSP. The required budget to implement such an area cannot be afforded by the NRWO even during a decade. Engagements of stakeholders can broaden the perspective of the CSP impacts.

Social Banking is another initiative that has been utilized from the second phase. It has increased the financial capacity of the local communities – there was no documented evidence provided to the TE that explains how the social banking happened or what system had been put in place for it nor how NRWO planned to use it in future. . Resalat Bank is not a commercial bank and there was no evidence provided to the TE on what approach CSP had with the bank. Some of the mineral and industrial complexes deposited large amount of money in this bank, the deputy of the bank said that its policy for this year is to enlarge the amount of the loans. He mentioned that Job creation loans are interest-free.

So, if local development groups aggregate their activities, especially in processing of the products, they can keep more share of value added. For instance, rose farmers in Chenarnaz village can build a relatively small workshop to distillate rose flower and offer it in an attractive bottle. In a collective manner, their economic scale reaches to the point that can receive loan from the bank and gain more financial benefit. This is also true for other development groups.

3.2.9.4 Sustainability: Political

Land degradation and its direct impacts on livelihoods is a national social and political stability going concern for local communities and the government. It wasn't clear cut at TE stage if the project had secured any political support and how it had done so. However strong political support would be a strong catalyst for CSP implementation as sand and dust storms are increasingly covering most of the provinces which requires proper management and resources to mitigate potential social and political instability which should be based on a national determination.

3.2.9.5 Sustainability: Environment

There are no environmental risks that affect the sustainability of results, outside of natural disasters such as earthquakes, drought or flash floods that might disrupt the activities as CSP was addressing environmental sustainability issues of desertification, sand and dust storms.

3.2.9.6 Sustainability nexus: Holistic view

Holistically sustainability is both process and objective related ethos. It has four aspects, human, social, economic and environmental. They are interrelated and very contextual. With regards to the processes of sustainability, they are time-consuming, expectations from CSP III were limited at the emerging phase of sustainability formation and based on the TE findings, each of these aspects is addressed as following:

Human sustainability

Human sustainability aims to maintain and improve the human capital in society. Investments in the health and education systems, access to services, nutrition, knowledge and skills are all programs under the umbrella of human sustainability. In this regard, the human city of those villagers who engaged in the CSP activities has

relatively increased. With respect to the short duration of the 3rd phase of CSP, human sustainability was assessed as promising, for instance, the participation of women indicates to capability of the continuation of their efforts to increase skills and economic activities. As an experience, increases of household income usually leads to improvement of education and health situation. Despite the rising inflation, the involvement of the foundations, social banking, and CSP can be attributed to have supported the process of human sustainability. As a result of this, the TE assumes that CSP systematically contributed positively to the migration of villagers giving them an incentive to not leave their villages due to improved human sustainability aspects.

Economic sustainability

This implies that the economic activities generated a more liveable future. It required communities, public and private sectors taking part in the development process. This process provided occupation, a better environment and a better sense of well-being whose examples in the context of CSP would be organic farming, green and micro enterprises. At CSP III sites, sustainable agriculture (*compatible with low precipitation, conservation farming...*), household and workshop products have brought about new economically and environmentally aligned paths which can lead to sustainable livelihoods. Evident experiences from CSP indicated that the mobilization of public, private and the foundations sectors can lead to increased funds needed to accelerate economic development being leveraged – there was no written evidence of measures that were put in place to define, design and ensure sustainability. As much as Iran experienced a turbulent economic situation during project implementation, sustainability has been measured using real net income gains and the economic value chain logic. Economic sustainability also entailed evaluating the environmental impact of economic activity and devising sustainability goals to create a more liveable future whilst learning more about some of the forms these practices can take.

Social sustainability

Social sustainability issues include fair labour practices, living conditions, health, safety, diversity, equity, empowerment, community engagement, philanthropy, volunteerism, cohesion, honesty and the importance of building relationships amongst people. It was encouraged and supported by information and sharing of ideas on equality, rights and laws. At the observed project sites, the growth of relationships amongst people was vivid through MCFs, VDGs and cooperatives. They created new spheres of social networks which led to community engagement, volunteerism, and social cohesion. Social sustainability was a fundamental aspect of sustainability and obviously takes time to be realized. The TE could not any evidence that the project has a formula for this.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability aimed to improve human welfare through the protection of natural capital (*e.g., land, air, water*). Generally, initiatives and programs are defined environmentally sustainable when they ensure that the needs of the population are met without the risk of compromising the needs of future generations. Environmental sustainability places emphasis on how business can achieve positive economic outcomes without doing any harm, in the short- or long-term, to the environment. Any environmentally sustainable activities pursue to integrate all five sustainability pillars, and to reach this aim each one needs to be treated equally. In CSP III outcome areas, the activities were environmentally sound. Some of them were directly pertinent to the land rehabilitation or prevention of land degradation (*e.g., compatible farming and gardening*). Some of the activities have decreased pressure on the environment through increase incomes from non-land-based activities. Although it takes time, improved future environmental sustainability is promising in the observed project areas.

Governance sustainability

The realization of sustainability in governance requires a decision-making process that drives the relationship between social institutions and the public institutions of a given society which is a governance process. It should have features which can enable smooth development of the four other pillars sustainability and itself. According to the United Nations, good governance is measured by the eight factors of participation, rule of Law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus oriented, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability.

Based on the TE findings, governance sustainability is still in its infancy in the short term and the more governance sustainability matures, the more governance can be sustained in the medium to long term. NRW could improve their own governance and establish platforms of engagements like CSP provided them with via the project steering committee.

Financial sustainability

Although financing is also a part of governance, it is addressed separately in this report under the explanations of financial situation in the relevant section (*Project financial management processes and procedures*), as the provision of adequate financial resources will sustain this aspect of the CSP as well.

3.2.10 Cross-cutting: Gender equality

It's evident that one of the notable achievements of CSP relates to the project's ability to engage and enable the participation of local women in the decision-making processes and implementation of sustainable natural resource management whilst also providing employment opportunities i.e., women's empowerment and capacity building at the local level and micro-enterprise generation. The successful establishment of several sustainable alternative livelihoods, as well as the participation of local villagers in cost-efficient rehabilitation and management of degraded rangelands was evidently strong.

Women's empowerment is a key factor for achieving sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. Training and educating women allow them access to resources that can ultimately benefit them, the environment, and the economy creating sustainability. Women who are trained and educated in a speciality or specific skill have access to opportunities and according to interview responses this has led to a sense of empowerment of local women by providing them with an avenue through which they have been able to support their families and be counted as equally productive members of the community through the trainings CSP has provided. Information gathered from the APPR suggest that the project's approach promoted women's empowerment and gender equality and tried to ensure that the interests and needs of both women and men are considered and that the vital and constructive role of women in the development of their communities is recognized and put into action which makes the intervention sustainable. However, the project didn't always ensure that adequate gender analysis is undertaken from an M&E perspective so that gender segregated results continue to be captured as part of the project's monitoring activities.

The provincial APPRs have used differing metrics to record their performance as some have used numerical numbers whilst others have used percentages. As such the TE hasn't been able to provide an overall total number of people that participated in project activities nor attributed a total percentage of women. However, this information is presented in the tables below with province specific details as that was the most reliable evidence the TE has evidence for due to the differing reporting metrics used in APPRs.

South Khorasan	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
VDGs setup members as the leader / trainings	2	5	174	265
Job opportunities	91	74	-	-
MCFs membership	-	-	88 (40%)	132 (60%)
Loan applicants	55%	45%	30%	70%
Employment loans provided	-	-	40	23
Establishment of rural green gardens	40%	60%	-	-

South Khorasan	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Local cooperatives membership	-	-	35%	65%
Implementation of developed BPs	-	-	59	116
Job-creating workshops attendance / technical and vocational courses	-	-	30%	70%

North Khorasan	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Solar water heater/*gas delivery	-	-	70%/*20%	30%/*80%
VDGs setup members as the leader / trainings	-	-	10%	90%
Job opportunities	-	-	-	-
MCFs membership	35%	65%	498 (39%)	763 (61%)
Fund holders			11	25
Loan applicants	-	-	-	-
Employment loans provided	-	-	36	138
Establishment of rural green gardens	-	-	-	-
Local cooperatives membership	-	-	118	184
Implementation of developed BPs	-	-	67	4
Job-creating workshops attendance / technical and vocational courses	-	-	960	2,206

Yazd	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Solar water heater/gas delivery	-	-	1,235	1,159
VDGs setup members as the leader / trainings	214	210	46	18
Job opportunities	Not provided	100	-	-
MCFs membership	355	359	-	-
Fund holders				
Loan applicants	18	9	-	-
Employment loans provided	66	70	249	284

Yazd	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Establishment of rural green gardens	-	-	-	-
Local cooperatives membership	101	77	-	-
Implementation of developed BPs	88	30	-	-
Job-creating workshops attendance / technical and vocational courses	-	10	-	-

Golestan	2020		2021	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Solar water heater/gas delivery	-	-	-	-
VDGs setup members as the leader / trainings	-	-	36	12
Job opportunities	-	-	-	-
MCFs membership Fund holders	-	-	484	726
Loan applicants	-	-	-	-
Employment loans provided	-	-	9	19
Establishment of rural green gardens	-	-	-	-
Local cooperatives membership	-	-	85	11
Implementation of developed BPs	-	-	17	11
Job-creating workshops attendance / technical and vocational courses	-	-	35	25

It must be noted that other than what is listed below, there was no evidence/report of women's participation in NRM. Neither was there and evidence/report that suggested NRW was involved in employment creation.

Figure 6: Gender statistics achieved per province on women's engagement and empowerment

Province	Description of the Gender statistics on women's engagement and empowerment
South Khorasan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ More than 60% of the implementation of rural gardens is done by women. ○ Women and men use alternative energies. In addition, women have been trained to use green and alternative energy in neighbouring villages. ○ VDGs have been set up with 439 members including 265 women, 174 men and 22 joint groups ○ In MCFs, women consist of 132 members (60%) out of 22 and women consist of 70% of loan

	<p>applicant. It is noteworthy to say that all meetings are coordinated by women.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Women make up almost 65 % of the members of the local cooperatives which includes 220 women. ○ A total of 6 types of business plans were developed by the project namely pistachio cultivation, rug weaving, carpet weaving, towel weaving, livestock breeding, confectionery, and doll making of which, 175 people, including 59 men and 116 women, benefited. ○ 63 employment loans provided by the Barakat Foundation were paid to applicants of whom 23 are female. The TE couldn't elaborate on the relationship between CSP and Barakat Foundation as there was no evidence provided at the time of finalising this report to suggest that it was a CSP request for Barakat to provide loans. ○ In job-creating workshops, 70% of women participated. Meanwhile, in the workshops held, the financial empowerment of rural women has been the goal, which fortunately has been achieved by holding job-creating workshops.
North Khorasan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 30% of the solar water heaters and 80 % of the gas ovens were delivered to women. ○ Trainings provided to protect the environment and natural resources by project agents have encouraged local people, especially rural women, to use green energy such as solar water heaters and gas oven. ○ In all saving and accounting training sessions, women's participation was very high, and the funds are managed entirely by the women of the villages. Up to 90% of the heads and account managers of Jajarm's MCFs are women. Due to the high accuracy and enthusiasm of women compared to men, the management of the fund is followed more accurately and successfully with the participation of women. ○ MCFs have been set up with 1,261 members including 763 women, and 498 men. 60% of the fund members are women and most of the women in the villages have been able to receive micro-facilities from the fund with monthly savings. Overall, of the 36 fund holders, 25 are women and 11 are men, with women making up 70 percent of the account holders. ○ In the funds, 80% of the heads are women. In general, out of 99 leaders, 79 are women and the rest are men. ○ In addition, The funds' accountants also include 12 people, of which 9 are women and 3 are men. In fact, Jajarm and Garmeh 75% of accountants are women . ○ Payment facilities from the funds include 174 cases, of which 138 cases (approximately 79%) were paid to women. ○ The shareholders of the cooperatives are 302, of which 184 are women and 118 are men. Women make up 60% of the shareholders. ○ Women's participation in buying equities of cooperatives has been relatively good. With the start of the cooperatives, it is assumed the motivation to buy equities will increase. ○ 71 people, including 4 women and 67 men, benefited from the permanent and temporary jobs created. ○ Women showed great interest in handicrafts. In addition, orientation sessions were held for the women of Jarbat and Qoli Jajarm villages. ○ In technical and vocational courses, 3166 people were trained. Of those trained, 2206 are women, which is about 70%. ○ It is noteworthy, increasing the costs of training courses (in technical and vocational centers) up to 10 times has become an obstacle to holding of supplementary courses.
Golestan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cultivation of medicinal plants and rural gardens has been carried out with the 100%

	<p>participation of women. In other activities, men have done most of the work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Women consist of 12 members out of 48 VDGs as the leader. ○ In addition, the results obtained in relation to women's participation in the target villages of the Carbon Sequestration Project include the following: High participation in job creation and entrepreneurship projects, high presence in the development committee, fund and amount of savings and number of loans, regularity of women in the fund, stronger monitoring system of women than men in group management Fund, explicit opinion of women in meetings, transfer of education to children, timely attendance at meetings, more trust in carbon sequestration plans, having participatory work experience. The main role of women was in preserving natural resources, etc. ○ 60 people participated in the installation of accounting software, of which 35 men and 25 were women: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The total number of people in the funds is 1,210 including 726 women and 484 men ii. The number of signatories is 63, of which 41 are women and 22 are men iii. The number of debtors is 28, of which 19 are women and 9 are men iv. Women represent in all funds as account holders v. Women represent in 18 funds as the leader vi. 12 job generation projects were created by funds, which led to the employment of 45 people, including 25 women and 20 men. ○ Padideh Sabz Galikesh local cooperative company with 96 members (85 men and 11 women) was registered and launched. ○ A total of 11 types of business plans (including cultivation of medicinal plants, sericulture, poultry, forest products (plums, raspberries, jams, jellies, pickles) with the brand of healthy products “Eglima” were developed by the project, which, 28 people, including 17 men and 11 women, benefited. ○ 22 people from the local communities of the target villages opened accounts on the national digital marketing platforms ○ Also, there are two permanent markets for women entrepreneurs in Owghan, whose products are sold on the Telegram and Instagram channels. ○ Women accounted for more than 60% of the participants to approach institutional cohesion and using the capacity of other stakeholders, several meetings were convened, which led to signing 6 memorandums of cooperation with local communities, village administration office, Omid Entrepreneurship Fund and Basij organization.
Yazd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 30% of the medicinal plant's cultivation projects facilitated by MCFs belongs to local women. ○ Villagers, both men and women, benefit from water heaters installed in the public place (mosque). 2,394 people benefit from solar water heaters, which includes 1,159 women and 1,235 men. ○ Women consist of 18 members out of 64 VDGs as the leader. ○ Out of 24 signatories, 3 are women and 21 are men. ○ Women consist of 284 members out of 533 and half of the saving and loans repaid belongs to them. ○ In 40 VDGs formed in 4 villages (Korkhengan, Chenarnaz, Khansarf and Valiasr), out of a total of 424 people, 210 women and 214 are men. Also, 12 account holders, the secretary of Khansarf fund and the chairman of Valiasr fund are women. Among the 40 heads of the mentioned funds, 11 heads are among women. ○ There are 178 members of the local cooperatives, including 101 males and 77 females.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 118 people, including 88 men and 30 women, benefited from the 8 types of business plans that were developed by the project. ○ Nine (9) loans equal to 33% of the facilities (out of a total of 27) were paid to women to setup small livelihood units for women, including 10 small home knitting workshops. ○ For common meetings with local and provincial organizations, agencies and district administrative council, and NGOs and other key stakeholders, 50% of the members are women, and they present in all matters related to the meetings.
--	---

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Stemming from above, the findings of the TE confirm that based on the evidence reviewed, the evaluators conclude that at this final evaluation stage, it's evident the rate of land degradation is higher than that of CSP measures being implemented. Although the activities, at least in the 3rd phase alone have been effective in the scale of the phase, the expectations over an 18-year period have not been met. The project has introduced a paradigm that could be internalized and a change management modality in a way that land degradation is reduced significantly, even in some areas land neutrality has occurred. Since paradigm shift has been implemented in a limited parts of the management, both in NRWO and pertinent GOs, an 18-year expectation has also not been fully realized. The terminal evaluation (TE) recommends that the CSP project in its current set up is terminated at this stage once Phase-III concludes as weak performance has also been observed on the Desert Bureau of NRWO (*at a national level*) and UNDP. If recommendations by the TE is carried out by the NRWO, new format of cooperation can be reached aligned to UNDP Iran's Country Programme Document [*Outcome 3 of the new CPD (2023-2027) which is still draft, but it shows the relevance and alignment beyond 2022*].

During its implementation, the project has served as an important channel to ensure that:

1. Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented.
2. Local communities are further empowered, and their livelihoods improved.

4.2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Institutional arrangement and integration of CSP

- Integration of CSP in "Comprehensive Watershed Management Model" of NRWO: the new model, which was developed through experiences from other international projects implemented in Iran with NRWO involvement, is an opportunity for CSP to be continued within a broader context. At the same time, it can accelerate progress on a larger scale given that CSP has a background of 18 years, and the new model has been implemented in several watersheds already – they can be complementary. In this set-up context, UNDP can join to support technically and financially.
- A new institutional arrangement of NRWO based on "Comprehensive Watershed Management Model" including its approach, structure (organizational integration), planning, budgeting and M&E based on programmatic and result-based approach: a new model/paradigm requires the rearrangement of pillars of the NRWO, both at central and provincial offices. It is an organizational change that is compatible with the paradigm shift which will result in a new approach, structure, planning and budgeting based on the watersheds and M&E system. The project approach will be replaced by programmatic approach which will strengthen CSP.

Recommendation 2: Strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination, collection and the publication of traditional and scientific knowledge and the utilization of international experiences, especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

- Strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at national, provincial and local levels: TE observations indicated that strengthening inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at national, provincial and local levels will speed up the progress of the CSP and consequently the large-scale model. Such an integration at the lower and upper levels will bring about the large-scale social capital to prevent land degradation and accelerate land rehabilitation efforts at scale.
- Strengthening collecting and the publication of traditional and scientific knowledge in combating desertification and land rehabilitation: in a few cases, CSP reflected that the harnessing and utilization of these knowledge sources can escalate both efficiency and effectiveness of farming activities and strengthening this aspect is paramount importance and focus for whatever form, shape and design CSP takes forward beyond CSP III.
- Strengthening the utilization of international experiences, especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation: according to the project document, South-South and Triangular Cooperation, as a technical source could have been pursued as there are many experiences at international level which can support NRW and its national partners to shorten the period required to reach a balanced rate of degradation and rehabilitation. Strengthening this aspect is of paramount importance and focus for whatever form, shape and design CSP takes forward beyond CSP III.

Recommendation 3: Preparation of watershed spatial development plan and formulation of village development plans based on the results of the watershed plan.

- Preparation of watershed spatial development plan: the preparation of watershed spatial development plan will have several positive effects. 1) Decision making will be based on the holistic, strategic and integrative approach rather than on isolated areas; 2) it will create close cooperation between NRW and PBO which can strengthen PBO's spatial development plan; 3) as a result, integrated effective cooperation and coordination amongst governmental entities can be realized.
- Formulation of village development plans based on the results of the watershed plan: with respect to this recommendation, the settlements (*urban and rural ones*) hierarchy plan, which forms part of the spatial plan of watersheds, can create context for appropriate village development plans. This method is scientific and will be effective.

Recommendation 4: Recruitment of present facilitators and training more.

- With respect to the crucial role of facilitators, capacity building and development plans for the stakeholders, this should include the training of facilitators, even amongst the existing talented employees on NRW without solely waiting for new recruits.

Recommendation 5: Diversification of financial resources.

- Regarding the integration of CSP within a large-scale model and the implementation of the abovementioned recommendations also require more and sustained, diversification of financial sources which is an issue of great importance – accessing co-financing from governmental, private sector, community's and international donors is crucial.

4.3 Lessons Learnt (as appropriate)

The main areas where lessons can be drawn out are on are elaborated under the specific thematic area as in Table 4 below:

Table 7: List of lessons learnt

<u>Lessons learnt by thematic area</u>	<u>Explanation or description of lesson(s) learnt</u>
There needs to pay more careful attention to the M&E plan during the Inception Phase and M&E design due diligence	<p>The misalignment of M&E scope and resources and the critical error of a weakened M&E system that effectively did not exist – this highlights the need to conduct a stringent M&E due diligence of the project design</p> <p>A comprehensive M&E plan and tracking during project implementation against indicators and outputs are critical to demonstrate success and to inform adaptive management. As this is already a requirement of UNDP administrated projects, the necessity of this can only be reemphasized to other stakeholders like government.</p> <p>A project that cannot demonstrate tangible progress in terms of the goals, should be stopped.</p>
Scope and resource alignment	<p>Ensure there are adequate financial and human resources assigned or committed to the project for the range of activities planned. The project needed more financial resources committed to it as per cost sharing agreement to have delivered on the full design scope of the project.</p> <p>At least a high-level work breakdown structure and resource allocation should be done to check the realistic delivery of the scope within budget and with the available resources when the costs sharing agreement wasn't being honoured.</p>
Project management and reporting culture	<p>Though the high staff turnover was a factor for various challenges of the project, but reporting was often regarded as an opportunity to present the good progress only and the tendency was to hide or downplay the challenges. A culture should be instilled amongst project managers to use reporting as an opportunity for raising concerns, communicate risks and appeal for assistance, inputs or guidance as necessary.</p>
Stakeholder participation	<p>It is essential to ensure the correct influential stakeholders are identified and involved from the onset; that strong, jointly beneficial partnerships are actively established towards a common goal; and that support is lobbied for throughout the project.</p> <p>Again, this is an extension of the previous projects having been implemented but proved a major barrier in accessing cost sharing funds without the buy-in of the relevant financing ministry.</p>

Co-funding contributions	<p>Cost sharing contributions should be assessed in terms of the realistic and specific contribution it will make towards the project goal and outcomes and alignment with project scope.</p> <p>While this project showed a cost sharing contribution of >US\$7,6million, the designed project implementation scope was mainly limited to the UNDP funding component which significantly impacted the project negatively.</p>
--------------------------	---

5 Annexures

Annex 1 – Interview Questions

Sample – Interview questions / Field interview guiding questions

(Questions can be changed slightly based on the interviewee and can be semi-structured in nature)

This is a reference guide only, intended to assist interviews as needed and in conjunction with the evaluation criteria/matrix. It is not a questionnaire. It serves as an informal aid in prompting discussion during the interviews and will be supplemented with additional questions.

Project Formulation

- From organizational point of view, an aspect of institutional arrangement, placing national project director and national project manager in one bureau prevent hierarchical accountability.
- Did you observe any problems or gaps in the project design or approach that affected project implementation?
- Was there adequate participation of stakeholders and beneficiaries in the project formulation? (How were you involved?)
- Has the project strategy – technical support/empowerment and participatory natural resources management, been effective? How could it have been improved?

Project Implementation

- How effective and efficient was the Project Structure in facilitating project coordination, communications and implementation at national, provincial and local levels? Would you have changed anything in hindsight?
- Has annual work planning and budgeting been effective? Have actual disbursements been in line with annual budgets, work plans and schedules (discuss Fin. Tables)? Were there any delays in administrative processes?
- Have the project management bodies and partners been sufficiently active in guiding and responding to issues? (Examples?)
- Have the project monitoring Indicators been effective and feasible for reporting on progress? Have they provided reliable measures of change?
- What have been the major challenges or issues in implementing the project? Are there lessons for design of future projects?

Project Results

- What aspects of the project have been most successful, and which least successful? Are there specific measures that have affected the potential for replication?
- Can you identify *the Key Factors* that have affected the project results – either positive or negative?
- What has been the most apparent change in empowerment and participatory natural resources management that you have seen from the project? What gaps remain in capacity development?
- What is the most important learning or skill, if any, that you have acquired from the project trainings or demonstrations? Any post-training data?

- How have the empowerment and participatory natural resources management decision support tools been used in decision making? Is there a long-term vision for these tools?
- Are there any expected results that have not been completely achieved or are not fully satisfactory?

Sustainability

- Do you think that the use of empowerment and participatory natural resources management processes will be continued after the project closes? Why? Why not?
- Are there any exit strategies for the project? What actions could be considered to enhance sustainability? How will lessons be shared within Iran and with other countries?

Impact

- Should any further changes in government policy or regulations be considered to assist mainstreaming empowerment and participatory natural resources management into the development strategy of Iran?
- Are there any specific examples of alternative livelihoods empowerment and participatory natural resources management that have succeeded in conjunction with conservation that could provide models for replication?
- Is there any empirical evidence of project impact on government empowerment and participatory natural resources management budgets allocations?

Annex 2 – List of stakeholders interviewed/interacted with in the field

Name & Surname	Organisation	Role/Position	Province
Saber Masoomi	UNDP	Programme Analyst	Tehran
Mohammadreza Khosravi	UNDP	Programme Management Analyst – Head of PSU	Tehran
Jafarian, Vahid	NRWO/ Desert Affairs Bureau	General Director and NPD	Tehran
Abdolhoseini, Mohsen	“	NPM	Tehran
Dehghan, Asad	“	Deputy	Tehran
Mombibie, Maryam	“	Project team	Tehran
Derakhshan, Zahra	“	“	Tehran
Akhoondi, Mohammad	Provincial NRO	General Director	Yazd
Zare, Ali	“	NPM	“
Bazrafshan, Jalal	County NRO	Director	Yazd, Khatam
Zare, Alireza	“	Facilitator	“
Fateh, Gholamreza	County Islamic Council	Manager	“
Chenarnazi, Mehdi	Village Development Fund	Member	“
Yari, Alireza	Provincial NRO	NPM	South Khorasan
Akbari, Reza	Nehbandan County	Facilitator	“
Dousti, Morteza	Local Community	Agriculture	“
Afkham, Reza	University	Professor	“
Saiyari, Zahra	Cooperative	Executive manager	“

Annex 3 – Results framework achieved results and objectives

UNDAF (2017-2021):				
UNDAF Outcome 1.1: Integrated natural resources management: Responsible GOI agencies formulate, implement and monitor integrated natural resource management policies and programmes more effectively.				
UNDP CPD (2017-2021):				
CPD Outcome 1: Responsible government agencies formulate, implement and monitor integrated natural resource management, low carbon economy, and climate change policies and programmes more effectively. CPD Output 1.1: Strategies and measures that promote sustainable and integrated management of natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services are developed and considered for adoption / implementation by the Islamic Republic of Iran.				
UNDP Strategic Plan (2014-2017):				
SP Outcome 1: Growth and development are inclusive and sustainable, incorporating productive capacities that create employment and livelihoods for the poor and excluded SP Output 1.3: Solutions developed at national and sub-national levels for sustainable management of natural resources, ecosystem services, chemicals and waste				
Links to SDGs: SDGs 1, 5, 7, 13, 15				
Objective/Outcome/Output	Indicator	Targets (including annual milestones)	Achieved results at Terminal Evaluation stage	Means of verification
The long-term goal to which the project will contribute is to combat desertification and address land degradation to mitigate the effects of and adapt to climate change (including mitigation of drivers of sand and dust storms) as well as to build resilience in local communities.				
Objective To reduce land degradation and manage drivers of sand and dust storms in areas susceptible to desertification through local community empowerment and participation	Reduction in intensity of desertification in pilot areas	At least 1 class of reduction in intensity of desertification by end of project	No technical reports prepared by the projects	Technical reports prepared by the projects
	Increase in carbon stock in degraded landscapes in pilot areas		No technical reports prepared by the projects	Technical reports prepared by the project
Outcome 1 Participatory natural resources management is further strengthened in target areas to rehabilitate degraded lands and to mitigate drivers of sand and dust storms, with the impacts of rehabilitation activities on carbon sequestration monitored and documented	% of vegetation cover	20% of vegetation cover by end-project	No technical survey on the vegetation cover – only area of plantation is available as captured in Table 2: Output 1 table	Technical survey on the vegetation cover

Output 1.1 Rehabilitation of degraded natural resources planned and implemented at the watershed and village levels through local participation	ha of rehabilitated areas	Reclamation of an average of 250 ha per pilot annually	All four (4) sites achieved the target	FRWO official reports
	Number of participatory watershed and village level management plans	Each pilot has 1 WLP by end year 1 At least 30% of the villages in pilots have VLPs by end-year 3	Each pilot had 1 WLP by end year 1 – not prepared VLPs were prepared	Project reports
Output 1.2 Application of renewable sources of energy as well as other new technologies introduced and promoted to reduce degradation of natural resources	Adoption of renewable energies and other new technologies by households	At least 5% of coverage in pilot villages (households)	TE couldn't find any evidence of CSP supported adoption of at least 5% of coverage in pilot villages?	Project reports
	Number of adopted new technologies	At least 4 new technologies adopted by end-year 3	Solar water heater, Gas oven, method of farming and gardening are new technologies which were used	Project reports
Outcome 2 Local communities further empowered, and their livelihoods improved	Level of socio-economic capitals in project sites	Social capital increased by 40% Economic capital increased by 10%	TE couldn't find any evidence of socio-economic survey; however, the TE assessment measured the progress in both aspects as acceptable	Socio-economic survey of the pilot areas
Output 2.1 Social capacities improved through establishment of Village Development Groups (VDGs) and provision of required trainings	Number of VDGs	At least 1 VDG in each village by end-year 3	11 VDGs established ⁷ across all project villages	Project reports
Output 2.2 Economic capacities improved through establishment of micro-credit funds and provision of required trainings	Number of MCFs	At least 1 MCF in each village by end-year 3	1 MCF in each village established	Project reports
Output 2.3 Local level social and economic platforms are legalized through establishment and registration of local cooperatives	Number of local cooperatives	At least 1 local cooperative per pilot by end-year3	8 local cooperative registered ⁸ across all pilot sites	Project reports

⁷ 8 established and maintained in Yazd province

⁸ Two (2) registered in North Khorasan Province and four (4) in Yazd Province

Output 2.4 Sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives adopted by local communities and required capacities and skills enhanced to reduce pressure on natural resources	Number of adopted sustainable alternative livelihoods (disaggregated by sex)	A minimum of 30 sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives per pilot by end-project	33 sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives ⁹	Project reports
	Number of people benefiting from project livelihood opportunities (disaggregated by sex and province)	At least 120 people benefited from project livelihood opportunities per pilot by end-project	392 people ¹⁰ benefited from project livelihood opportunities	Project reports
Output 2.5 Inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation mechanisms established and strengthened at the provincial and local levels to facilitate sustainable rural development	Number of LoAs signed and working between stakeholders	At least 5 LoAs signed and working by end-year ⁴	TE couldn't find any evidence of this	Project reports
Outcome 3 An effective and efficient project management system is maintained, and project implementation monitored and documented	Delivery rate of the project	Over 95% delivery rate	2.65% delivery rate according to financial reports	UNDP financial reports
	Project Board meetings	At least two Project Board meetings annually (mid-year and end-year)	No evidence of Project Board meetings except the three (3) Project Review Committee meetings ¹¹ with minutes already discussed in Output 3.1.	Minutes of PB meetings
Output 3.1 Project effectively managed	Updates of project risk-logs/issue-logs	Risk-logs and issue-logs updated bi-annually	Zero (0) – no risk-logs and issue-logs supplied	UNDP dashboards and reports
	Project Review Committee meetings	At least quarterly meetings of PRC	Three (3) Project Review Committee meetings and their minutes were provided – one (1) meeting per year in 2019, 2021, and 2022. No quarterly meetings of PRC provided.	Minutes of PRCs
Output 3.2 Progress and impacts of project continually monitored and documented	Project Annual Planning and Reporting Package	PAPRP completed and submitted on-time	Zero (0) – no evidence supplied to TE.	UNDP dashboards and reports
	Annual Project Progress Report	Quality APPR prepared and submitted on time	Eight (8) Annual Project Progress Report (APPR) for 2020 and 2021 supplied.	UNDP dashboards and reports

⁹ 8 types of business plans (Yazd); 11 types of business plans (Golestan); 8 types of business plans (North Khorasan); 6 types of business plans were (South Khorasan)

¹⁰ 175 people, including 59 men and 116 women, benefited (South Khorasan); 71 people, including 4 women and 67 men, benefited (North Khorasan); 28 people, including 17 men and 11 women, benefited (Golestan); 118 people, including 88 men and 30 women, benefited (Yazd)

¹¹ 29 May 2019; 25 May 2021; and 20 Feb 2022

