Independent Evaluation Office
United Nations Development Programme

EVALUATION OF UNDP SUPPORT TO ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

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FOREWORD

Our relationship with nature has never been in a more precarious position, as decades of biodiversity decline and ecosystem destruction threaten the resources that we rely on for our well-being and survival. The messages from our scientific bodies provide a stark warning about the quality of our remaining forest, water, and soil resources, and the future existence of declining plant and animal species. Indigenous People have, for a long time, given us a first-hand account of this decline, and signalled the threats they experience to their rights, health and culture as they act as custodians.

This evaluation takes into consideration UNDP's support in promoting healthy ecosystems and biodiversity through inclusive natural resource management and is the first global independent evaluation with an in-depth focus on the organization's work in this area. The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has assessed support provided under the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plans, spanning from 2018 to 2024, while taking a longer-term view of the lessons from the organization's approaches.

UNDP promotes the vision that human development and environmental improvement are mutually beneficial and has supported countries to implement this vision in a diverse range of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. The evaluation highlights particularly valuable support that expands the potential of protected areas and shows how the organization's governance initiatives have improved environmental planning and enhanced enforcement.

We know that in several places the context has become more hostile to Indigenous People and environmental advocates working to protect the environment. The evaluation points to the work that UNDP has done to build recognition of indigenous conservation, but there is still a long way to go if we are to leave no one behind. The report also reminds us that conservation initiatives need careful and inclusive planning if they are to benefit from indigenous knowledge and, crucially, avoid further restricting people's rights.

Faced with continued biodiversity loss, new ideas and approaches are now required to restore our natural environment. It is no longer enough to conserve what we have left – we have to tackle the root causes that lie in our demand for natural resources and fossil fuels, which go hand in hand with our propensity to over-consume, waste and pollute. UNDP has provided important support to help governments identify harmful subsidies, and we encourage the organization and its partners to make greater use of these critical interventions.

The IEO undertook this evaluation as UNDP launched its Nature Pledge, and the recommendations are designed to assist the organization as it expands its ambition and supports countries to tackle new and more challenging areas. We encourage all parts of UNDP to take ownership of the Pledge so that it can benefit from the organization's global reach, as well as the strengths of its governance, climate and gender work. We also recommend that the organization intently focuses on strategies for replicating environmental practices that have proven successful so that we can urgently stem the decline in biodiversity and establish a sustainable relationship with nature.

Isabelle Mercier
Director
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Access and benefit sharing
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIOFIN	Biodiversity Finance Initiative
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CONAFIPS	National Corporation of Popular and Solidarity Finance
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	Civil society organization
EbA	Ecosystem-based adaptation
EMBC	Ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GFCR	Global Fund for Coral Reefs
GWP	Global Wildlife Program
ICCA	Indigenous and community conserved area
IEO	Independent Evaluation Office
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFI	International financial institution
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWT	Illegal wildlife trade
LDC	Least developed country

LDN	Land degradation neutrality
METT	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODA	Official development assistance
OECM	Other effective area-based conservation measures
PA	Protected area
PADDD	Protected area downgrading, downsizing and degazettement
PES	Payment for ecosystem services
REDD+	Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries
ROAR	Results-oriented annual report
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SES	Social and Environmental Standards
SGP	Small Grants Programme
SLM	Sustainable land management
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
TNFD	Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures
WEF	World Economic Forum
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This is the first global independent evaluation of the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) environmental support since 2011, and the first evaluation by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) with an in-depth focus on the organization's support for terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity. The evaluation covers UNDP's strategic approaches since 2012 and support delivered over the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plans covering 2018 to 2024. It considers UNDP strategies and programming aimed at accelerating the implementation of global, national and local measures to promote healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

The evaluation provides an overarching set of findings and conclusions on UNDP support for protection, restoration and sustainable use of ecosystems and the conservation of biological diversity. The findings suggest that UNDP offers important support for many national partners working towards these objectives, but delivering the ambition of the Nature Pledge will require transformative change.

This evaluation forms a part of UNDP's accountability towards its Executive Board, development partners and local populations by assessing the relevance and results of the organization's support. It provides recommendations to strengthen the work of UNDP, to build on successes and improve its contribution to sustainable development.

CONTEXT

The diversity of biological species and the natural processes that occur within ecosystems provide essential services to human life, providing clean water, nutritious food, and medicines, regulating diseases, pollinating crops, supporting soil formation, and offering cultural, recreational, and spiritual benefits. Certain areas of the planet hold critical importance to the world and would be extremely difficult to recover if lost. Thirty-six regions with unique and irreplaceable endemic plant populations are designated as biodiversity hotspots, and have already lost at least 70 percent of their primary native vegetation. The pace and scale of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss have accelerated over past decades. One third of all freshwater species are at threat of extinction and freshwater itself is becoming a scarce commodity.

In 2010, at the tenth Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), governments agreed on 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, all of which were missed by 2020. In the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), governments agreed on a further set of targets for 2030. There have been successes in restoring areas to ecological health, protecting intact areas, increasing the levels of certain species, and in technological advances for ecosystem management. The financial resources available to protect and improve

biodiversity increased between 2010 and 2020, but not to the level required to achieve conservation at scale. Furthermore, this increase was "swamped by support for activities harmful to biodiversity".[1]

The number of protected areas (PAs) for controlling ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss expanded in the past decade, and nearly half of freshwater, terrestrial and mountain biodiversity areas have some form of legal protection. However, less than a quarter of the global terrestrial PA estate has adequate staffing and budget. It is estimated that Indigenous Peoples safeguard 80 percent of the earth's remaining biodiversity, manage lands that contain over 33 percent of the planet's irrecoverable carbon stores. In many countries, Indigenous People and local communities are not afforded land rights, and experience a range of negative impacts from the continued expansion of non-indigenous developments into their ancestral territories.

Faced with major drivers of ecosystem destruction, conservation initiatives on their own are no longer considered sufficient to prevent the decline in biodiversity levels before 2050. Changes in land use remains the leading cause of loss, mostly driven by agro-industrial activity and the conversion of forests for large scale cropping or livestock production. Global economic systems have encouraged over-consumption and excessive waste, and externalized the cost of pollution and the decline of natural resources. The international production, transport and wastage of food, for example, are responsible for 70 percent of biodiversity loss on land and 50 percent in fresh water. The impacts of climate change, which disrupt habitats, breeding and migratory patterns, are projected to become the most significant cause of biodiversity loss in this century. In light of these major threats to planetary and human health, environmental organizations call for more transformative changes to address the underlying causes and value systems that drive destruction and degradation.

UNDP RESPONSE

The UNDP 2012–2020 Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework framed the organization's support over the past 13 years. Under an overall objective to "maintain and enhance the goods and services provided by biodiversity and ecosystems in order to secure livelihoods, food, water and health, enhance resilience, conserve threatened species and their habitats, and increase carbon storage and sequestration", the Framework included three Signature Programmes:

1. Integrating Biodiversity into Development
2. Unlocking the Potential of Protected Areas
3. Mitigating and Adapting to the Effects of Climate Change.

1. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) Global Biodiversity Outlook 5. Montreal.

UNDP's ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation (EMBC) portfolio over the 2018–2023 period was delivered through approximately 602 projects with a total expenditure of over $1.5 billion across 134 countries. The largest number of interventions and the highest expenditure were in Africa (25 percent), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (24 percent), and Asia and the Pacific regions (17 percent), while fewer projects were delivered in the Arab States region (7 percent) and Europe (6 percent). Headquarters teams delivered 22 percent of the overall expenditure, over 80 percent of which through the Global Environment Facility's (GEF) Small Grants Programme (SGP).

Photo Credit: UNDP Malawi

The largest proportion of funding for UNDP's support for EMBC between 2018 and 2022 came from vertical trust funds (62 percent), of which over 90 percent came from the GEF; other government and multilateral contributions made up 18 percent of UNDP's funding in this area. National government contributions and UNDP regular resources contributed 5 and 4 percent of the total budget, respectively.

In October 2023, UNDP launched its Nature Pledge to accelerate its support to countries to meet and implement their nature and biodiversity targets under the new Global Biodiversity Framework. The Pledge continues UNDP's aim to catalyse policy, economic and social shifts that are beneficial to the environment, promotes ecosystem management and biodiversity approaches within a broader environment objective, and offers support for communities at every level.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

The evaluation is guided by five evaluation questions designed to gauge the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, coherence and sustainability of UNDP EMBC interventions. The evaluation used mixed methods and followed a theory-based approach, considering UNDP's role in the identified pathways to results through the principles of contribution analysis.

The evaluation covered all countries in which UNDP has implemented ecosystem and biodiversity initiatives since 2018 through a systematic desk review of internally reported results in the results-oriented annual reports (ROARs) and project evaluations; 42 countries were selected for greater focus, of which 13 were selected for in-depth case studies.

The evaluation methods included a detailed portfolio analysis, a meta-synthesis of 641 independent programme and project evaluations, 640 semi-structured key informant interviews, focus groups discussions and site visits. The Geographic Information System (GIS) was used to assess the geographic relevance of UNDP's support to the most critical areas for biodiversity and human development. The evaluation paid particular attention to the experience of Indigenous People and local communities in UNDP's programming, and with a focus on women.

FINDINGS

Strategic relevance of UNDP support

UNDP made a strategic shift in 2012 towards emphasizing the opportunities that biodiversity and natural ecosystems offer to human wellbeing. This positive approach has enabled governments and local stakeholders to adopt a range of initiatives that have dual benefits for the environment and development. Nevertheless, UNDP's combined offer of finance and capacities has not been enough to encourage comprehensive approaches to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.

UNDP has lacked an organizational strategy for tackling the drivers of biodiversity degradation, creating a gap in guidance for the most challenging but impactful initiatives. Although many UNDP projects aim to alleviate localized pressures on ecosystems, UNDP's approach to biodiversity and land use, pollution, invasive species and climate impacts at the global or regional level was not fully defined. While UNDP has covered a vast array of ecological areas and species, including within difficult operating contexts, it has not systematically targeted its ecosystem and biodiversity support to areas where the interaction between environmental stress and human wellbeing is most acute.

Governance frameworks and mechanisms

UNDP has provided widespread support for the preparation of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and has pioneered the localization of NBSAPs at a sub-national level in Asia. It has also been successful in supporting governments to expand the area under legal protection; however, most expansion has occurred in countries that still have a low percentage of PA coverage, and larger questions remain about the strength of legal protection. In a smaller subgroup of countries, processes have been started to enable the recognition of community efforts in conservation and to attain enhanced land security.

UNDP has provided notable support for the governance mechanisms that enable landscape initiatives and improved connectivity between ecologically important areas. This support has been effective in the transboundary management of water resources and species protection, such as migratory birds and snow leopards. UNDP has acted as a convenor in ambitious projects striving for collaborative governance of biodiversity corridors, and there are many examples of support for community management of corridors. UNDP has also made important national contributions towards action against illegal wildlife trade, although it has not fully leveraged its governance expertise or its global presence to challenge the persistent demand for illegal goods and issues of corruption that undermine enforcement.

Effective management of ecosystems and biodiversity

UNDP employs a set of measures to increase the management effectiveness of PAs. While efforts at the national level have been promising, capacity gaps and financial constraints at the sub-national level remain with potential to undermine the sustainability of these efforts. It has promoted the use of technology and innovations in support of building management effectiveness and strategic spatial planning. Through the United Nations Biodiversity Lab, UNDP provides users access to rich global and national spatial datasets for conservation and sustainable development. Its comparative advantage in the partnership with United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the CBD Secretariat is its 'maps of hope' approach, which identifies where nature-based actions can safeguard essential life support areas to maintain key biodiversity and ecosystem services. They provides an important potential resource to governments, although a limited use of the maps is made by UNDP country offices.

Empowerment and inclusion

UNDP has supported important advances in promoting Indigenous Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs) as an alternative to government- or private sector-led conservation. Supporting Indigenous People and local communities to access funding has led to ecosystem and livelihood improvements but has not yet reached a point of community-managed funding or regularized payment for ecosystem services (PES). UNDP landscape projects have also successfully engaged local communities around alternative livelihoods, but ensuring that they are sustainable has proved difficult. Promotion of ecotourism as an alternative livelihood for communities has had mixed success. Projects that have succeeded in improving community livelihoods continue to be vulnerable to third-party resource grabs where effective enforcement is not in place for land tenure and other resource rights.

EMBC support from UNDP has enabled improved legislative and policy frameworks to ensure benefits to specific communities from the Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) of genetic resources. Yet, ABS has grown increasingly complex at a time when internal support has declined, and there are few demonstrable outcomes for biodiversity and ecosystems.

The evaluation finds that UNDP has taken steps to incorporate improved gender strategies within its ecosystems and biodiversity programming. However, this has not yet resulted in substantive empowerment or equality gains because most of the projects limit themselves to women's participation in projects rather than on processes that can be gender-transformative.

Financing, valuing nature, and disinvestment

The Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) has been highly successful and expects to reach 132 countries in 2024. BIOFIN has scaled up by using a standard process that allow ministries of finance to select the tools that are the most relevant to their contexts. UNDP has a useful advisory role to governments and has innovated in areas of sovereign and municipal bonds, although terrestrial bond finance for EMBC is at an early stage. While BIOFIN demonstrates the importance of combining analysis of finance gaps with policy solutions, it remains primarily focused on public sector financing.

BIOFIN has succeeded in identifying harmful subsidies as drivers of biodiversity loss in many countries, and is now working with a sub-set of countries on the difficult task of repurposing subsidies. Developing countries were initially reluctant to work on subsidy reform, but interest grew following UNDP's presentation of its technical analysis that showed that subsidies were not delivering their intended purpose and that there was a potential to increase cost-effectiveness of public finance. Through these efforts, BIOFIN had become a leading voice on disinvestment from environmentally harmful subsidies.

UNDP has developed innovative EMBC projects with private sector participation in many countries and played a key role in founding the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD). However, UNDP lacks sufficient specialized capacity to make better use of private sector expertise to improve the offer to private sector EMBC investors.

Integrating ecosystems and biodiversity into development planning

Support from UNDP has generally led to the incorporation of NBSAPs into national, medium-term development plans, but this has not yet translated into a systematic integration of ecosystems and biodiversity into funded sector plans. The lack of cross-sectoral government work required to mainstream biodiversity conservation into national development planning has been a major constraint.

Sub-national development planning has often been supported by components of landscape-level UNDP projects. These are valuable components of large, complex projects that reflect a decade or more of investments in building context-specific solutions. The process of scaling by adding successor projects is therefore slow.

When analysing EMBC within the broader UNDP portfolio, it emerged that there had been a missed opportunity to encourage the systematic use of EMBC in national climate action plans. The organization has also only partially made use of its wider portfolio on green growth, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) mainstreaming and crisis recovery to enable more comprehensive and effective approaches for improving ecosystems and biodiversity.

UNDP has enabled almost 130 countries to adopt national targets for restoring degraded and abandoned lands. Yet, most UNDP sustainable land management (SLM) initiatives have typically lacked a holistic and strategic approach to address the key drivers of unsustainable land use, and despite an increase in support, UNDP has a comparatively small portfolio of SLM projects addressing land degradation. A lack of a strategic partnership between UNDP, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) at the country level has hindered the mainstreaming of biodiversity and development into agriculture, and at the global level has reduced the agencies' ability to offer combined solutions that scale up support.

UNDP institutional arrangements

The evaluation finds that UNDP support can be strengthened by more effective partnerships with specialized agencies in the United Nations system, the private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs), international and regional research institutions, and international financial institutions (IFIs). For example, UNDP has put in place mechanisms for IFI collaboration on climate action but not specific initiatives for ecosystems and biodiversity. A wide range of UNDP staff interviewed felt that much more engagement with the private sector was needed but they expressed justified concerns about UNDP's reputation risk of 'greenwashing'.

Around 80 percent of UNDP EMBC support was provided through interventions with expenditure under $3 million, commensurate with providing policy support combined with field-level demonstrations. Although there are many instances of follow-on projects, and initiatives sustained through national budgets, the overall trend is of single projects with uncertain sustainability. This constrains moving from a focus on PAs to broader landscapes in which community stewardship is vital. Gaps between projects and loss of momentum reduced efficiency and effectiveness.

There has been progress in the use of Social and Environmental Standards (SES) in UNDP projects since 2015, though their consistent application across the projects remains a challenge. The low completion rate of the safeguard screening process underscores gaps in compliance and effectiveness of the SES system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. UNDP should prioritize building ownership of the Nature Pledge in regional bureaux and country offices, and enhance collaboration with key partners. Given the continued declines in biodiversity, the action plan for the Pledge must intently focus on strategies for scaling and replication of EMBC practices that have proven successful and include milestones to assess projections periodically.

The Nature Pledge has the potential to galvanize collective efforts needed to address global and local drivers of the biodiversity decline and sustain comprehensive conservation. Internally, regional bureaux and country offices should integrate the Pledge's three 'shifts' into their respective regional strategies and country programme documents (CPDs), and contextualize the Pledge's principles and priorities. Headquarters should consider the development of a 'Nature Seal' that guides and recognizes substantive efforts by regional bureaux and country offices to incorporate environmental and development priorities. The action plan should include mid-term milestones and targets to systematically assess the likely contribution of different approaches used by UNDP towards the achievement of Nature Pledge goals and revisit these projections periodically. Externally, UNDP should use the Pledge to build United Nations system and IFI work through issue-based coalitions and provide a clear statement of UNDP's intent and capacity to bilateral, philanthropic and other donors. While ecosystem and biodiversity are highly context-specific, it is imperative for UNDP headquarters to strengthen and share learning on what works in which contexts.

Recommendation 2. UNDP senior leadership should create a global taskforce to target the drivers of biodiversity loss. The taskforce would galvanize a whole-of-UNDP response to fill a critical gap, and bolster country office support for economic transitions.

Despite the threat to human development, there are no significant initiatives that aim to shift the international demand and supply processes that drive biodiversity loss and ensure that countries are ready to benefit from such transitions. UNDP's response to changes in international trade policy for palm oil, co-founding of the TFND, and its BIOFIN engagements at the national level, demonstrate that it can offer valuable support in this area. A taskforce led by the Executive Office should formalize this experience into a UNDP approach and focus on creating opportunities across key sectors and in a greater number of countries. This would require further engagement at global and regional levels with organizations who can incentivize change in private sector behaviour in partner countries, and coordinated support to country offices on environmental governance and harmful subsidies (see Recommendation 3). The taskforce should draw together various parts of the organization with relevant expertise in governance, environment, food systems, climate, chemicals and waste management, inclusive growth and gender. It should dovetail with external initiatives to identify plausible pathways to 'bend the curve' of biodiversity loss, such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' (IPBES) modelling, scenarios employed by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) under the Global Land Outlook, and the UNEP-led Global Environment Outlook 7.

Recommendation 3. UNDP should intently promote harmful subsidy reform as a key organizational offer.

UNDP is a key player in this emerging field, and its relationships with governments could unlock a significant amount of national financing that is currently working against biodiversity and sustainable development. As successful examples of subsidy reduction are demonstrated, UNDP headquarters and regional bureaux should publicize them widely to encourage replication. Sectoral subsidies, such as in agriculture or infrastructure, will require specialized agencies and partners, and UNDP has the convening power to bring these into discussion with government. As harmful subsidies are removed, UNDP should work with governments to channel the resources towards sustainable development, thus helping to alleviate official development assistance shortfalls and growing sovereign debt.

Recommendation 4. UNDP should develop a list of priority geographic areas for addressing the environmental and poverty nexus, and work with country offices in the most at-risk areas to create context-specific strategies.

The identification should make use of UNDP's Maps of Hope and Essential Life Support Areas approach to identify the most impactful areas to intervene within the national context. This may involve targeting already degraded lands that have a higher value to poorer groups, thereby reducing downstream pressures on more ecologically rich areas, or critical areas for water security. Earlier stage capacity building may be required for least developed countries (LDCs) and fragile contexts. To expand the targeting criteria, UNDP may need to mobilise resources to complement vertical funding that prioritize environment criteria (see Recommendation 4) and/or embed environmental criteria into criteria for TRAC allocation and non-vertical fund projects.

Recommendation 5. UNDP should engage with the current reshaping of international finance mechanisms to develop a combined UNDP-IFI offer of support to governments on ecosystems and biodiversity. This will require coordinated actions between headquarters and at country offices.

UNDP headquarters should seek to tailor partnerships on ecosystems management and biodiversity conservation to individual IFIs and create additional opportunities for country-level collaboration (e.g. delivery of different project outputs) as well as better integration of UNDP project scaling and IFI lending. This will help accelerate the implementation of UNDP-supported government policy on biodiversity and strengthen project sustainability. IFIs can provide types and scale of finance that UNDP cannot including key components for UNDP-supported processes such as debt-for-nature swaps. The institutional partnerships between UNDP and the IFIs should aim to streamline their respective administrative processes, so they do not slow joint delivery at the country level.

Recommendation 6. UNDP should develop guidance and invest in human resources capacity development at the regional and country levels to enable country offices to offer governments integrated support for ecosystems, biodiversity, climate and green growth agendas.

Stand-alone biodiversity and ecosystems projects are too often seen as positive action on their own, without making the case for broader approaches. By providing governments with joined-up support across multiple sectors to address national priorities, UNDP can provide a sustainable approach to integrate biodiversity and ecosystems into inclusive growth and climate

agendas. UNDP should retain its focus on context-specificity with different combinations of instruments that allow more effective linkage to governance, green growth and climate agendas together with new and stronger partnerships with other United Nations agencies and IFIs and more efficient and effective sub-national and private sector engagement. There is an opportunity for UNDP to promote an integrated approach as it rolls out the portfolio approach. This will require investment in human resources capacity in the regional bureaux and potentially in the country offices to support this.

Recommendation 7. UNDP has the opportunity to build on its comparative advantage with sub-national governments and seek opportunities to reduce transactions costs and barriers to scaling.

Sub-national work is critical to deliver improved ecosystems and biodiversity at scale but often presents the most difficult challenges as capacity is spread thinly, there are many stakeholders, and perceived investment risks are high. Many organizations cannot work effectively in this context, but UNDP has demonstrated important strengths. Working with partners at scale to harmonize sub-national regulatory frameworks and build institutional capacity will be required. UNDP should collect and share its experience in this area, and identify other countries that may offer quicker wins through ongoing decentralization processes. In its global engagements, the organization should promote the value of working at the sub-national level for ecosystem services and seek to develop new funding lines.

Recommendation 8. UNDP country offices and regional bureaux should undertake more systematic capacity building of indigenous and local institutions, rural communities and ethnic minority groups. This provides an opportunity to support women and minorities-led groups to advocate for their needs and rights, and to be able to meaningfully participate in relevant negotiation spaces.

UNDP should identify opportunities to progressively build the leadership skills and capacity of indigenous and local institutions representative groups, rural and local institutions, and ethnic minority groups to monitor and effectively address threats, advocate for their needs and rights, participate in negotiations, and manage larger amounts of funding. Developing novel financing models and incentives for ecosystem services not only values the intrinsic worth of these ecosystems but also motivates stakeholders to invest in their long-term health. To reinforce this, UNDP should provide leadership on the steps that remain to fully integrate Indigenous People and local communities into OECM and collate lessons on approaches that contribute meaningfully to biodiversity conservation.

Photo Credit: Melanie Pisano/UNDP

Chapter 1

EVALUATION RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Rationale, objectives and scope

Evaluation questions

Evaluation methodology

This evaluation covers the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation and was conducted by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of UNDP during 2023. The evaluation will be presented to the UNDP Executive Board at its annual session in June 2024. This chapter presents the rationale and objectives of the evaluation, its scope and key questions, as well as the methodology applied.

Photo Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder

RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

This is the first global independent evaluation of UNDP's environmental support since 2011, and the first IEO evaluation with an in-depth focus on the organization's support for ecosystems and biodiversity. The evaluation covers UNDP's environmental strategic direction since 2012 and the support delivered over the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plans (spanning 2018–2024).[2] It considers UNDP strategies and programming aimed at accelerating the implementation of global, national and local measures to promote healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

The evaluation provides evidence to promote organizational learning for improved effectiveness, based on the IEO's assessment of UNDP approaches and contributions to EMBC globally. The evaluation takes a forward-looking view, providing recommendations to inform the strategic and programmatic direction of the organization's support over the remaining years of the UNDP Strategic Plan 2022–2025, the organization's recently launched Nature Pledge, and the 2030 Global Biodiversity Framework. The evaluation contributes to UNDP's accountability towards its Executive Board, development partners and local populations by assessing the relevance and results of the organization's support.

The main objectives of the evaluation are as follows:

- Assess UNDP's contribution to the protection, restoration and sustainable use of ecosystems and the conservation of biological diversity.
- Assess the extent to which UNDP's support to governments and other stakeholders has led to improved EMBC, and the extent to which improvements are leading to positive environmental and social outcomes.
- Review the evolution of organization's work in the sector and its strategic positioning and preparedness to deliver effective environmental initiatives in line with advances in environment science, the evolution of international agreements, and changes in development landscape and priorities.
- Identify the factors that have impacted UNDP's contribution.

Programme coverage: The evaluation assessed all forms of UNDP support intended to improve and strengthen the management processes that relate to terrestrial ecosystems and biological diversity. The evaluation focused on UNDP's support for the legislation, norms, capacities, finance, tools and technologies that influence decision-making and the delivery of interventions for the improvement of defined ecological conditions, services and biodiversity levels. The evaluation also included UNDP's work in mitigating the drivers of ecosystem degradation, and its work with national partners on the achievement of greater environmental protection.

2. All reported portfolio figures date from 2018 onwards. Where data allowed, the evaluation considered earlier UNDP projects, dating back to 2011, to check trends and assess sequential UNDP support in specific contexts.

Geographical coverage: This was a global thematic evaluation and covered all regions of UNDP operations (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Latin America and the Caribbean). This also included LDCs, middle-income countries, and countries in conflict. The evaluation included countries where UNDP provides important ecosystem and biodiversity support, but also assessed countries that have degraded ecosystems or extensive biodiversity loss but have received limited support from UNDP and other international support (Annex 6). The evaluation assessed the support that UNDP provides at the country level, and through its regional offices and headquarters.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation addressed the following overarching questions:

1. How relevant was UNDP's support in addressing the most pressing environmental and development challenges at the global, national and local levels?

2. How coherently did UNDP use its strategies, resources, corporate tools and processes to promote ecosystems and biodiversity conservation, and development planning?

3. How effective was UNDP's support in enabling governments and other stakeholders to protect, manage and value ecosystems and biodiversity?

4. To what extent has UNDP's support led to improvements in the natural environment?

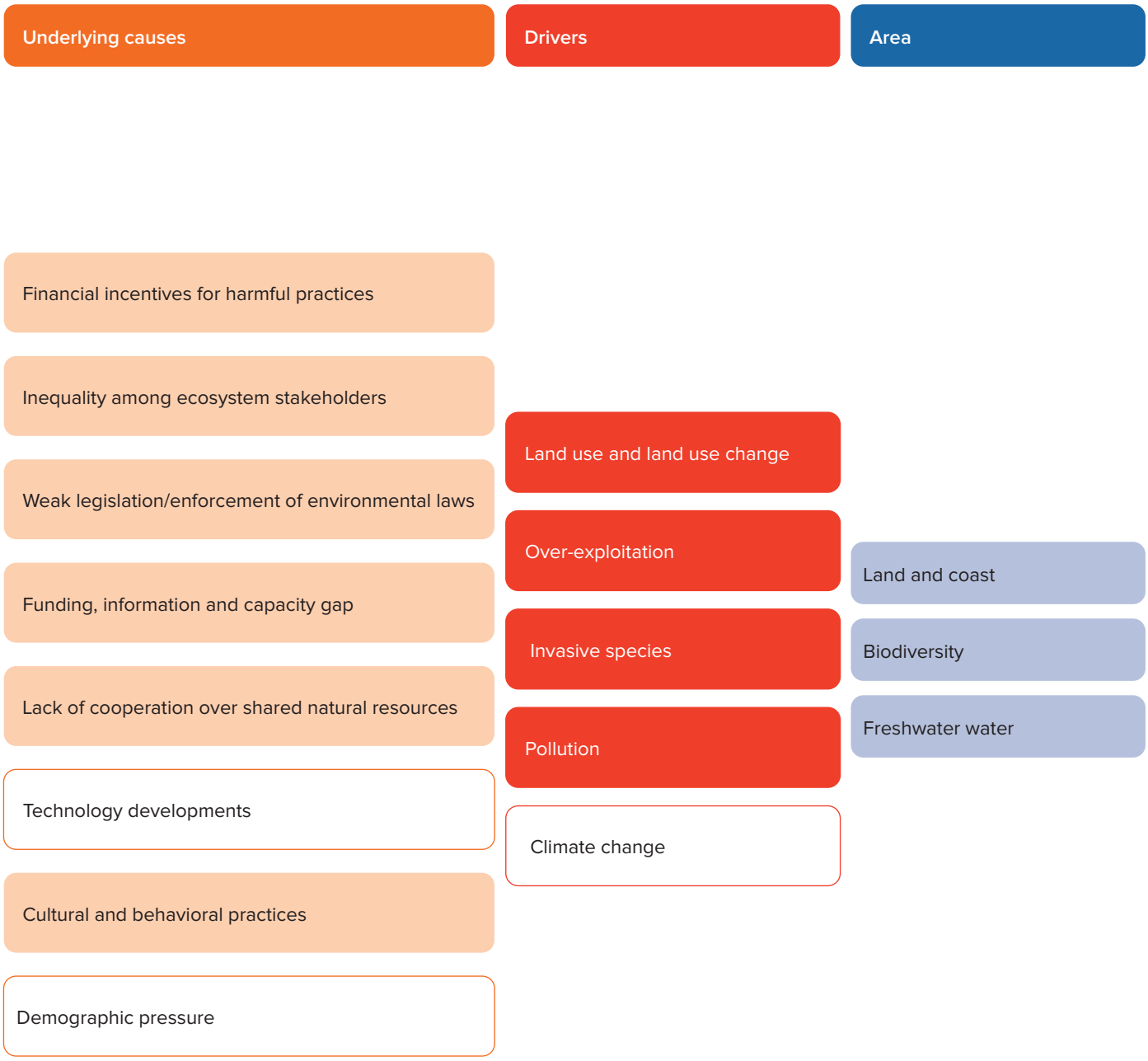
5. To what extent has UNDP contributed to institutional capacities and mechanisms that are likely to sustain ecosystems and biodiversity gains in the medium to long term?

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation assessed UNDP's support to EMBC using five criteria of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC): Relevance; Coherence; Efficiency; Effectiveness; and Sustainability. A detailed evaluation matrix was developed to tailor the criteria and overarching evaluation questions to an assessment framework consisting of sub-evaluation questions, method of assessment, and data sources (Annex 3). A theory of change was outlined to structure the range of UNDP support within the objectives of the organization's EMBC offer, the solutions it sought to provide, and major pathways and assumptions implied (Table 1). The theory of change was used to assess whether UNDP has delivered relevant and coherent support, and to develop intermediary-level theory on the factors that influence its effectiveness, and sustainability in different contexts.

Primary and secondary data relating to UNDP's performance and its operating environments were gathered and analysed in a series of steps described below. Further details on all components of the methodology are provided in Annexes 1–11.

Table 1: Abridged theory of change



Source, UNDP IEO

UNDP intervention areas	Intermediate outcomes	Outcomes
Capacities for management effectiveness – Science and research; National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans; Skills; Tools and technologies; Social and environmental safeguards; Monitoring, evaluation, learning; Finance plans; Organizational capacity	Increased number of ecosystems and species under improved and collaborative protection and management	
Demonstration for scale – Field-level interventions for: Conservation; Restoration; Land-use; Species protection; Native genome collection; Threat reduction; Wildlife-human conflict management; Carbon sequestration; Resilience.	Improved policy, legislative and planning processes implemented	
Empowerment and inclusion – Advocacy; Policies; Multistakeholder dialogues; Inclusive planning; Local finance mechanisms; Promotion of local knowledge; Human Rights; Access and Benefit Sharing agreements; Gender approaches	Increased amount of finance and a diverse funding portfolio allows predicable, long- term and improved ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation and enforcement at multiple levels	Regeneration of degraded and/ or destroyed ecosystems
Mobilizing and channeling finance – Identification; Innovations; Readiness; Distribution mechanisms	Improved resource rights, land tenure, decision-making power for Indigenous Peoples and local communities	Improvements to biodiversity levels
Governance mechanisms – International-to-local protocol alignment; Legislative/policy improvements; Protective areas designation; Bio-cultural community protocols; Financial accountability; Law and trade-rule enforcement; Reporting	Businesses, local communities and government planners switched from harmful practices to improved techniques, and report illegal activities	Intact ecosystems preserved
Cooperation and connectivity – Fostering relationships and management of interdependent ecosystems: transboundary zones, corridors, migratory routes, trafficking and poaching	Greater understanding of the value of ecosystem and biodiversity, matched with improved integration of science, local knowledge for with continual learning	Improved ecosystem services
Integrating ecosystem and biodiversity into development planning – Valuation; Multi-sector planning and engagement; Land and seascape planning; Integration in climate action, national budgets, poverty reduction plans, crisis-recovery plans and the Sustainable Development Goals		Inequality reduced among ecosystem stakeholders
Productive sector and markets – Business case for biodiversity; Improved land and resource use techniques; Off-setting; Product enhancement; Diversification; Traceability, verification and certification schemes; Value chain development; Job creation	Improved business/livelihoods return increased incomes and profit, especially for women	

Sampling for in-depth study: The evaluation covered all countries in which UNDP implemented ecosystem and biodiversity initiatives between 2018 and 2023, a systematic desk review of internally reported results in the ROARs, and, where existing, project evaluations. 42 countries[3] were selected for greater focus using the criteria and guidance in Annex 4. Of the 42 countries, 13 were selected for in-depth a case studies[4] using criteria[5] to ensure that the data collection covered a significant proportion of the regional expenditure on EMBC, geographic and contextual diversity, and examples of success, limitations or innovation for UNDP. In addition to the country focus, the evaluation covered UNDP's regional and headquarters EMBC initiatives through key informant interviews and document reviews.

Figure 1: Evaluation methodology and coverage

3. UNDP's financial database with data from Atlas and Quantum was used to identify projects with EMBC components as their primary objective and spending between 2018 and 2023.

4. The sample includes Ecuador, Costa Rica, South Africa, Senegal, Tanzania, Egypt, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Bangladesh. Bangladesh was conducted as a virtual case study.

5. Each of the 13 selected countries was mapped against the following six elements, and the list was reviewed to avoid gaps and limit clustering: Size of UNDP expenditure; Key approaches in the theory of change; Type of ecosystem/biodiversity species; Sub-regional variety in cases; Length of UNDP engagement; and type of UNDP partnership.

Data collection: The evaluation methods included a detailed portfolio analysis, meta-synthesis of independent programme and project evaluations, semi-structured key informant interviews, focus groups discussions, and site visits. Geographic Information System (GIS) data were used to assess the geographic relevance of UNDP's support to the most critical areas for biodiversity and human development. The evaluation paid particular attention to the experience of Indigenous People and local communities in UNDP's programming, with a specific focus on women. Protocols were developed for each method listed below and used to ensure rigour in data collection and analysis, as well as audience suitability and adherence to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.

Portfolio analysis: UNDP's portfolio of EMBC projects since 2018 was established from project databases using key word searches across all Signature Solutions (See Annex 4 for full methodology). The portfolio was analysed to determine the extent and type of UNDP's support over the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plans, together with the main funding source and recipient patterns. Projects were classified by type of ecosystem or biodiversity supported (where described), and the major outputs of UNDP's interventions were tagged evaluation's theory of change.

Meta-synthesis: Information related to UNDP EMBC support was extracted from 641 evaluations (independent and decentralized) conducted between 2011 and 2023. These evaluations were identified based on a key word search (in English, French and Spanish) of the IEO's Evaluation Resource Centre (ERC) (https://erc.undp.org) and IEO Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics (AIDA) platform (https://aida.undp.org/landing) (Annex 9). This information was used as evidence and for the triangulation of UNDP's performance and the factors effecting its support, and synthesized by theme and intervention area to identify common themes. A meta-analysis of project performance scores was conducted to identify strengths and weakness areas in UNDP's GEF-funded EMBC projects.[6]

Case studies: The case studies provided empirical evidence of UNDP's support for EMBC in 13 countries (Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Egypt, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Lao PDR, Philippines, Senegal, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania and Türkiye). All case studies used the same structure of inquiry (Annexes 7 and 8), enabling the evaluation to identify shared themes across the 13 cases. Each case study assessed UNDP's work in relation to the major components of the theory of change and to the ecology and biodiversity of their respective national and/or transboundary contexts. The case studies also assessed how EMBC was integrated into UNDP country office work. Each assessment was based on: triangulated secondary and primary data collected through a desk review on national indicators, policies and programmes; and key informant interviews with environmental stakeholders, UNDP staff, partners and non-partners. Findings from the case studies were linked to the results from their respective regions and thematic areas in order to build a broader understanding of UNDP's work (Annex 8).

Key informant interviews: In total, 640 people were consulted during the evaluation. This comprised 170 UNDP staff (136 at the country level, 8 at the regional level and 26 at headquarters); 233 UNDP partners, 47 non-partners and 190 community members at the country level. In addition, written feedback was also obtained from key stakeholders, including regional bureaux and partners.

6. This accounts for 291 EMBC GEF evaluations since 2016. Additional 118 evaluations were considered for the 2011–2015 period to better illustrate trends in project scores. Systematic scoring for projects funded through other modalities is not available.

Limitations: The evaluation was able to develop a representative overview of the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of UNDP support for EMBC using the methods described above. Comprehensively assessing UNDP's impact on environment or social indicators was beyond the scope of this evaluation, and challenged by the lack of a globally available database for improvements or losses in biodiversity or ecosystem services. Efforts to detect change in environmental conditions through GIS were challenged by a lack of extant time-series data for the geographic

Photo Credit: Julio Roberto Díaz

areas covered and by the limited range of environmental indicators tracked by projects. The report triangulates data from independent project evaluations, country statistics and UNDP results reporting to estimate UNDP's contribution to these higher-order objectives, wherever possible. The evaluation consulted Indigenous People through their representative groups, the literature and public statements as well as at the project level; however, the deployment of methodologies for this evaluation was limited in scope.

Chapter 2

ECOSYSTEMS AND BIODIVERSITY

Ecosystem and biodiversity services and challenges

This chapter provides a brief overview of the importance of ecosystems and biodiversity. It outlines the core concepts and components used in responding to these problems, and the common challenges countries experience in delivering ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. Major contextual differences and institutional approaches are described throughout.

Photo Credit: Lanquen, Guatemala alexander-schimmeck

ECOSYSTEM AND BIODIVERSITY SERVICES AND CHALLENGES

The diversity of biological species and the natural processes that occur within ecosystems provide essential services to human life, providing clean water, nutritious food, and medicines, regulating diseases, pollinating crops, supporting soil formation, and providing cultural, recreational and spiritual benefits. In the current Anthropocene era, the services of biodiverse ecosystems are increasingly considered critical to human survival. The retention of carbon in organic matter, for example, plays a significant role in limiting greenhouse gas emissions, and the release of this 'irrecoverable carbon' from rich sources by draining peatlands and logging/burning of mangroves and intact/pristine natural forest poses a threat to our ability to limit global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius.

International cooperation to protect ecosystems and biodiversity is primarily framed within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), established in 1992 and expanded in the subsequent decades. The Convention assigns responsibility for protecting biodiversity to sovereign states (Box 1) and prescribes the forms of support provided by the international community. Biodiversity and ecosystem management work also contributes directly to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and other multilateral environmental conventions.

In 2010, at the tenth Conference of the Parties to the CBD in Nagoya, governments agreed to the 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets. None of the targets were achieved by 2020, and partial achievement was registered under only six targets – i.e. the identification and prioritization of invasive species, the proportion of land and ocean designated as PAs, the operationalization of the Nagoya Protocol (a legal instrument on access and benefit sharing for genetic resources), the development of national biodiversity strategy and action plans (NBSAPs), the generation and sharing of knowledge on biodiversity, and increases in financial resources for biodiversity.[7]

The Post-2020 Development Agenda is framed by the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF),[8] in which governments agreed to 23 targets for 2030 and four goals for 2050. Broader momentum is channelled through the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030), whose strategy intends to, *inter alia, finance restoration on the ground, promote leadership, set appropriate incentives, shift behaviour, invest in research and build capacity.*[9] These initiatives dovetail with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which sets 12 targets for terrestrial biodiversity improvements under SDG 15.[10] In July 2022, the United Nations General Assembly introduced a landmark resolution recognizing the human right to a healthy environment, which further compels countries to take action.

7. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) Global Biodiversity Outlook 5. Montreal.

8.See Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, last accessed November 2023: https://www.cbd.int/gbf

9. UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration strategy, last accessed November 2023: https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/strategy

10. SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Box 1: National actions under the Convention of Biological Diversity

- Identifying and monitoring the important components of biological diversity that need to be conserved and used sustainably.
- Establishing protected areas to conserve biological diversity while promoting environmentally sound development around these areas.
- Rehabilitating and restoring degraded ecosystems and promoting the recovery of threatened species in collaboration with local residents.
- Respecting, preserving and maintaining traditional knowledge of the sustainable use of biological diversity with the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- Preventing the introduction of, controlling, and eradicating alien species that could threaten ecosystems, habitats or species.
- Controlling the risks posed by organisms modified by biotechnology.
- Promoting public participation, particularly when it comes to assessing the environmental impacts of development projects that threaten biological diversity.
- Educating people and raising awareness about the importance of biological diversity and the need to conserve it.
- Reporting on how each country is meeting its biodiversity goals.

Source: Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, April 2000.

Despite several international environmental governance agreements, the pace and scale of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss have accelerated over the past decades. Nearly 10 million hectares of forest are destroyed each year,[11] and 1 million species are currently at risk of extinction.[12] One-third of all freshwater species are at threat of extinction, and freshwater itself is becoming a scarce commodity.[13]

Although healthy ecosystems offer benefits to their localities, certain areas hold critical importance to the world and would be extremely difficult to recover if lost. Thirty-six regions of the planet that have a rich, unique and irreplaceable endemic plant populations, and that have already lost at least 70 percent of their primary native vegetation are designated as biodiversity hotspots. More than 16,000 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) have been mapped to date, indicating sites that contribute significantly to the global persistence of different taxonomic, ecological and thematic subsets of biodiversity.[14] Rates of biodiversity decline were discussed in a flagship report launched at the World Economic Forum in 2023, which signaled a 'Code Red' for the planet and humanity based on the current trajectories.[15]

Successes have been registered in restoring areas to ecological health, protecting intact areas, and increasing the levels of certain species, and in technological advances for ecosystem management. However, recent analysis shows that, faced with major drivers of ecosystem destruction, conservation initiatives are no longer sufficient on their own to prevent the decline in biodiversity levels before 2050, and more transformative changes are required to address the underlying causes.[16]

Harmful drivers: The major drivers of ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss have been well-known for some time. Changes in the way land is used remain the leading cause of loss and are mostly driven by agro-industrial activity; 90 percent of deforestation, for example, is caused by the conversion of forests for large-scale cropping or livestock production.[17] Direct exploitation is the leading cause of loss within marine systems due to overfishing, but is also prevalent in terrestrial systems through harvesting, logging and mining.[18] The impacts of climate change, which disrupt habitats, breeding and migratory patterns, have been registered in all principle biomes, from rainforests, wetlands, deserts, coastal areas and deep oceans, and are projected to become the most significant cause of biodiversity loss within this century.[19] The direct drivers

11. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Global Forest Resources.

12. IPBES (2019) Global assessment report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Brondízio, E. S., Settele, J., Díaz, S., Ngo, H. T. (eds). IPBES Secretariat, Bonn, Germany. 1144 pp.

13. GCEW (2023) The What, Why and How of the World Water Crisis: Global Commission on the Economics of Water Phase 1 Review and Findings. Global Commission on the Economics of Water. Paris.

14. IUCN (2016) A Global Standard for the Identification of Key Biodiversity Areas, Version 1.0. First edition.

15. WWF (2022) Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a nature-positive society. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M., Juffe Bignoli, D. & Petersen, T. (eds).

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. IPBES (2022) Thematic Assessment Report on the Sustainable Use of Wild Species of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. M. Fromentin and others (eds.).

19. Pörtner, Hans-Otto, and others (2021). Scientific outcome of the IPBES-IPCC co-sponsored workshop on biodiversity and climate change (Version 5). Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5101125

of ecosystems loss are the product of several underlying and interdependent causes. Global economic systems have driven over-consumption and excessive waste, and externalized both the cost of pollution and the decline of natural resources.[20] The international production, transport and wastage of food, for example, is responsible for 70 percent of biodiversity loss on land and 50 percent in fresh water.[21]

Ecosystem management: The number of designated 'protected areas' (PAs) for controlling drivers of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss has expanded in the past decade, and nearly half of freshwater, terrestrial and mountain biodiversity areas currently have at least some form of legal recognition for their protected status.[22] As of March 2023, over 267,000 PAs covered terrestrial and inland waters (16 percent of the global total), and there were almost 18,500 protected marine areas (8 percent of the global total).[23] Over 65 percent of Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) have some form of protected status, though this leaves one-third of terrestrial and inland water KBAs without any form of coverage, matched by one-third of marine and coastal KBAs that are currently without protection.[24] Most important connectivity areas[25] are still unprotected,[26] and it remains challenging to identify the extent to which important ecosystem services are covered.[27] The number of PAs has expanded alongside the identification of important and endangered areas and species; however, studies have shown a global bias towards sites that are less subject to human pressure over areas of importance for conserving biodiversity.[28]

20. IPBES (2019) Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Brondizio,E.S., J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (eds.). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. 1148 pp.

21. WWF (2022) Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a nature-positive society. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M., Juffe Bignoli, D. & Petersen, T. (Eds).

22. Ibid.

23. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2023) Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) and World Database on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (WD-OECM) [Online], March 2023, Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN.

24. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2021) Protected Planet Report 2020. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN: Cambridge UK; Gland, Switzerland.

25. Ecological connectivity is the linkage between areas and habitats that facilitates the movement of animals and plants within a landscape, such as migratory corridors or access routes to water or for pollination. Connectivity can be diminished when ecosystems become fragmented through human-driven developments.

26. Brennan, A. and others. (2022) Functional connectivity of the world's protected areas. *Science*, June 2022 Vol. 376, Iss 6597, pp. 1101-1104 DOI: 10.1126/science.abl8974

27. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2021) Protected Planet Report 2020. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN: Cambridge UK; Gland, Switzerland.

28. Venter, O. and others. (2018) Bias in protected-area location and its effects on long-term aspirations of biodiversity conventions in Conservation Biology, February 2018, Vol. 32, Issue 1 and Joppa, L. and Pfaff, A. (2009) High and Far: Biases in the Location of Protected Areas. *PLoS One*. 14 December;4(12):e8273. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0008273. PMID: 20011603; PMCID: PMC2788247.

Table2. Protected areas and other conservation measures by region

Regions	Protected areas (n)	Other Effective Area-based Conservation measures (n)	Terrestrial & inland waters under protection	Management effectiveness evaluations (n)	Green Listed areas (n)
Asia and Pacific	35,474	178	15	2,825	4
Africa	8,788	344	14	1,101	6
Europe	176, 679	10	14	14,558	4
Latin America and the Caribbean	10,111	57	24	1,291	7
Polar	35	0	41	3	1
North America	52,725	231	13	127	0
West Asia	379	0	7	64	4

Source: Compiled from UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2023) Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) and World Database on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (WD-OECM) [Online], March 2023, Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN.

Evidence that PAs can resist the negative effects of anthropogenic pressure remains mixed, and studies have suggested their effectiveness is subject to conditions both in the immediate surrounding landscape and in the macro governance and economic contexts.[29] Effective management of these areas has been challenged by under-resourcing of conservation initiatives, human encroachment from surrounding areas, continued illegal activity, climate uncertainty,[30] and an increased use of legal measures to weaken the protected status, driven largely by approvals for industrial scale resource extraction.[31] Only 61 PAs (0.1% of the world) have so far been assigned

29. Geldmann, J. and others. (2019) A global-level assessment of the effectiveness of protected areas at resisting anthropogenic pressures in PNAS October 2019 Vol 116, No. 46. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908221116

30. Climate change introduces new considerations in determining the ecological conditions to be achieved through restoration and conservation and can require a balance between adaptation and mitigation opportunities. See: Ranius, T. and others. (2023) Protected area designation and management in a world of climate change: A review of recommendations. *Ambio*, 50, 60–80 (2023).

31. Golden Kroner, R. and others. (2019) The uncertain future of protected lands and waters. *Science*, May 2019 Vol .364, Issue 6443 pp. 881–886.

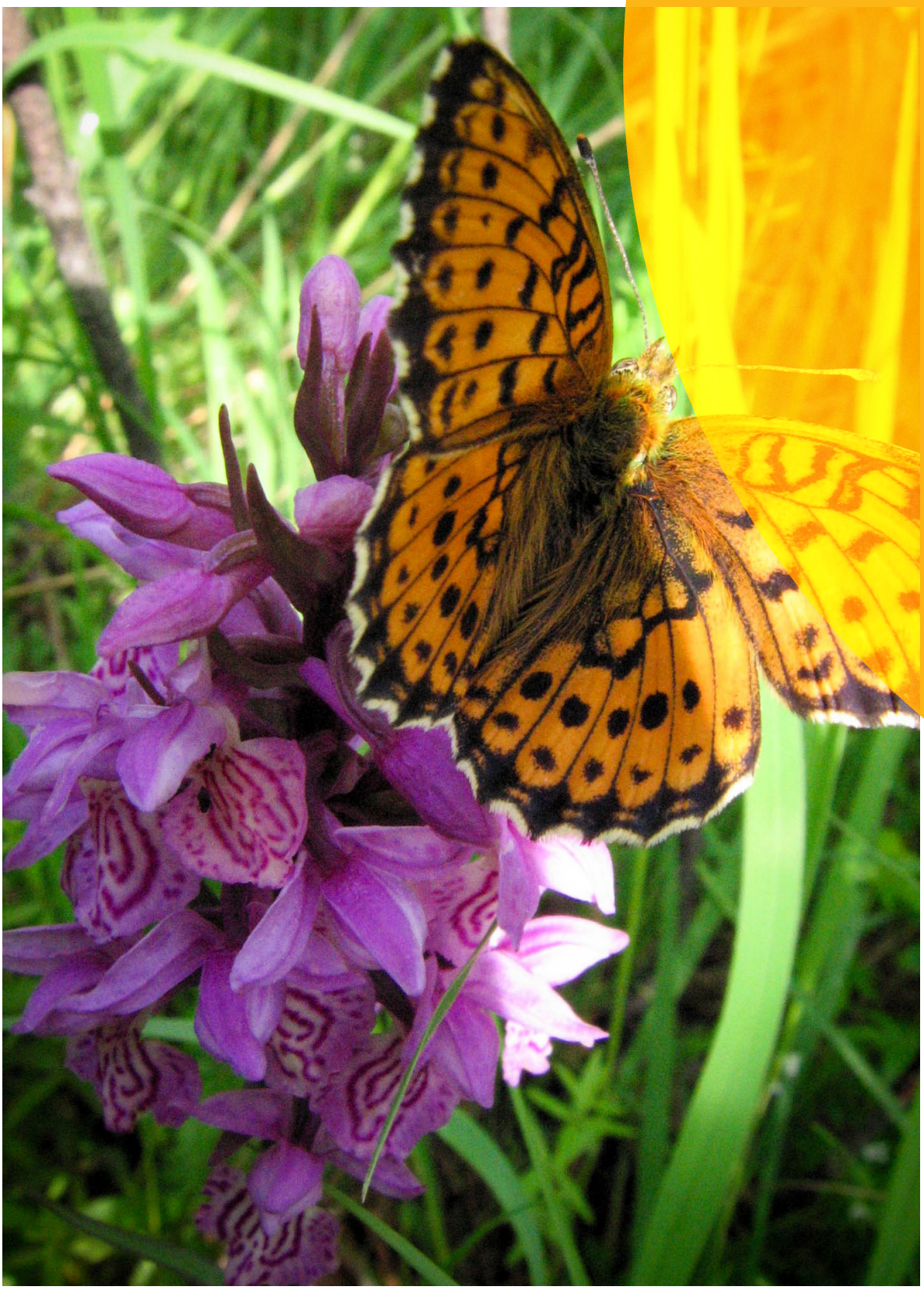


Photo Credit: Southern Russia - Clima East Programme - EU funding

Green List status, which indicates that the area has met the global standard for governance arrangements, design and planning, and management, and, importantly, has achieved successful conservation outcomes. Assessments of management effectiveness through the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tools (METT) have been applied in approximately one-fifth of protected terrestrial areas,[32] and assessments repeated over time have reported improvements in planning, resource user rights, enforcement and monitoring; however, there were no clear connections to improved environmental outcomes or stakeholder engagement.[33]

The CBD enshrines the "development of participatory, ecologically representative and effectively managed national and regional systems of PAs, where necessary stretching across national boundaries", providing a framework for cooperation between governments, donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities. Incorporating localized mechanisms, such as watershed, rangeland and forest committees, conservation groups and community anti-poaching units, into multi-level environmental governance is a recognized approach for combining site-specific conservation initiatives with local development priorities, although systematic evidence on the scale and equity of the results is limited.[34]

Indigenous People are acknowledged in global policy fora both for their custodianship of natural resources[35] and for the negative impacts they have experienced since the expansion of non-indigenous developments into their ancestral territories.[36] It is estimated that Indigenous Peoples safeguard 80 percent of the earth's remaining biodiversity,[37] and over 33 percent of the planet's irrecoverable carbon stores are found in areas managed by Indigenous People and local communities.[34] Their usage of the natural environment is often based on indigenous or local knowledge, value systems, languages and customary law, which non-indigenous equivalents have struggled to align with, and in certain cases, come into conflict.[39] In many countries, Indigenous People and local communities are not afforded land rights for the areas they live on.

Value systems: Building greater recognition of the benefits that humans derive from nature is a prominent approach in international environmental mechanisms. Efforts have been made to define economic values for ecosystems services to prevent the widespread treatment of nature as a free

32. Stolton, S. and others. (2019) Lessons Learned from 18 Years of Implementing the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT): A Perspective from the METT Developers and Implementers in Parks, November 2019, Vol. 25.2

33. Geldmann, J. and others (2015) Changes in protected area management effectiveness over time: A global analysis, Biological Conservation, Vol. 191, pp. 692–699.

34. Bork K, and Hirokawa, K (2021) 'Trends in Local Ecosystem Governance' in Frontiers in Climate, (2021) Vol 3.

35. CBD (2020) Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2: The contributions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and to renewing nature and cultures. A complement to the 5th edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook.

36. United Nations Department for Social and Economic Affairs (2021) State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 5th Vol.

37. World Bank (2008) The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation: Last accessed 16 January 2024: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/995271468177530126/pdf/443000WP0BOX321conservation01PUBLIC1.pdf

38. Noon, M.L. and others. Mapping the irrecoverable carbon in Earth's ecosystems. Nat Sustain (2021).

39. United Nations Department for Social and Economic Affairs (2021) State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 5th Vol.

Photo Credit: UNDP Mongolia/Nicolas Petit and Climate Change Research and Cooperation Centre (CCRCC) of Mongolia

and renewable resource,[40] and to demonstrate both the urgency and the economic returns from investing in environmental measures, including in developing countries.[41] At the local level, economic incentives and compensation have been deployed through payment for ecosystem services (PES) approaches, which, in certain countries, cover large areas and populations. In 2018, there were 550 active PES programmes globally, with an estimated $36–42 billion in annual transactions, although their effectiveness remains under-evidenced[42] and challenged by non-environmental subsidies.[43]

40. FAO estimates the global value of ecosystem services at $125 trillion, and highlights that these assets are inadequately accounted for in political and economic policy. The World Economic Forum estimates that over half of the world's total GDP is moderately or highly dependent on nature. See: Nature Risk Rising, Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy (2020), World Economic World Economic Forum in collaboration with PwC.

41. Johnson, J. and others. (2021) The Economic Case for Nature: A Global Earth-Economy Model to Assess Development Policy Pathways. World Bank, Washington.

42. Salzman, J. and others. (2019) The global status and trends of Payments for Ecosystem Services in Nature Sustainability, Vol1, March 2018 136–14

43. Kelsey Jack, B. (2008) Designing payments for ecosystem services: Lessons from previous experience with incentive-based mechanisms in PNAS, 15 July 2008, 105 (28) 9465-9470

Financial valuations of ecosystem services have been critiqued, including concerns that pricing overlooks the many benefits that are impossible to quantify and increases the likelihood that biodiversity will become commodified.[44] In response, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) promotes a pluralistic approach to the valuation of nature, which seeks to combine economic priorities with ecological, cultural and social valuations in a model for addressing power relationships across stakeholder groups.[45]

Finance and funding instruments: In general, the financial resources available to protect and improve biodiversity have increased between 2010 and 2020, and national governments form the greatest part of financing. However, amounts available remain far below the level required to achieve conservation at the scale intended by the CBD Strategy for the decade, and increased support has been "swamped by support for activities harmful to biodiversity".[46] Achievement was

Photo Credit: SGP/UNDP Iran

44. Schroter, M. and others. (2014) Ecosystem Services as a Contested Concept: a Synthesis of Critique and Counter-Arguments in Conservation Letters. Nov/Dec, Vol 7, Issue 6, pp 514–523.

45. Pascual U. and others. (2017) Valuing nature's contributions to people: the IPBES approach, Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, Vol. 26–27 2017, pp. 7-16.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2016.12.006

46. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) Global Biodiversity Outlook 5. Montreal.

partly slowed by weaknesses and geographic disparities in the identification of funding needs, the development of national finance plans, and assessments of biodiversity values.[47] The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) notes that "to preserve and restore ecosystems alone, the required investment globally is estimated at $300–400 billion per year, whereas only $52 billion is invested annually in such projects".[48] In 2020, Colombia was the top recipient of official development assistance (ODA) for biodiversity ($475 million), followed by India ($326 million), Brazil ($170 million), Indonesia ($151 million) and Ethiopia ($123 million). The five largest providers were Germany, which committed $2,316 million in 2020, followed by European institutions ($1,127 million in 2020), the Netherlands ($613 million), the United States of America ($578 million) and France ($434 million).[49] Overall, most public finance is directed to the conservation of terrestrial areas and freshwater conservation.

47. Ibid.

48. Bankable Nature Solutions (2020) WWF. https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/bankable_nature_solutions_2__1.pdf

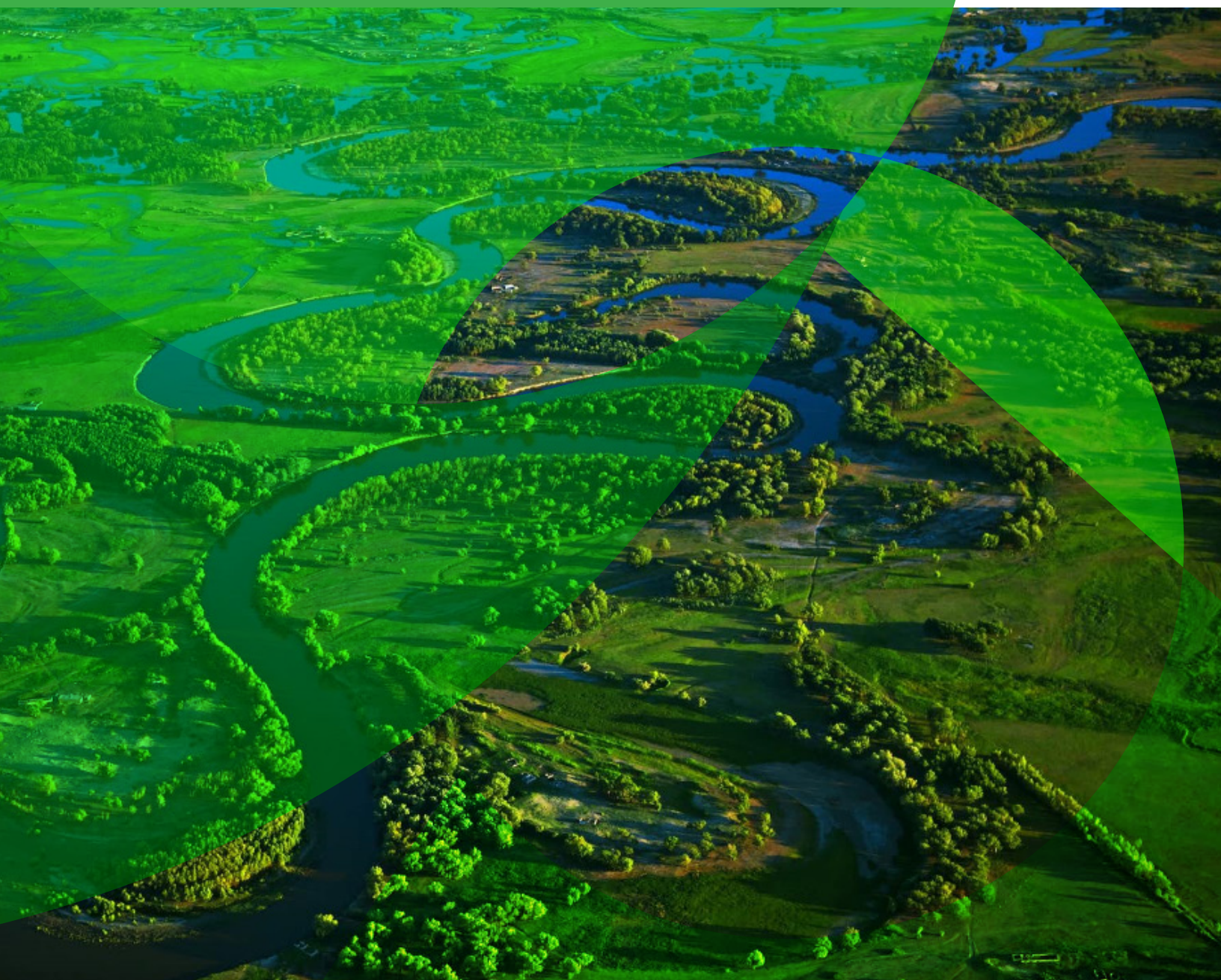
49. The latest available data are for 2020. OECD Statistics on External Development Finance Targeting Environmental Objectives Including the Rio Conventions (2023).

Chapter 3

UNDP APPROACH AND PORTFOLIO

UNDP global strategy and approach to ecosystem management

Photo Credit: UNDP China



UNDP'S GLOBAL STRATEGY AND APPROACH TO ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT

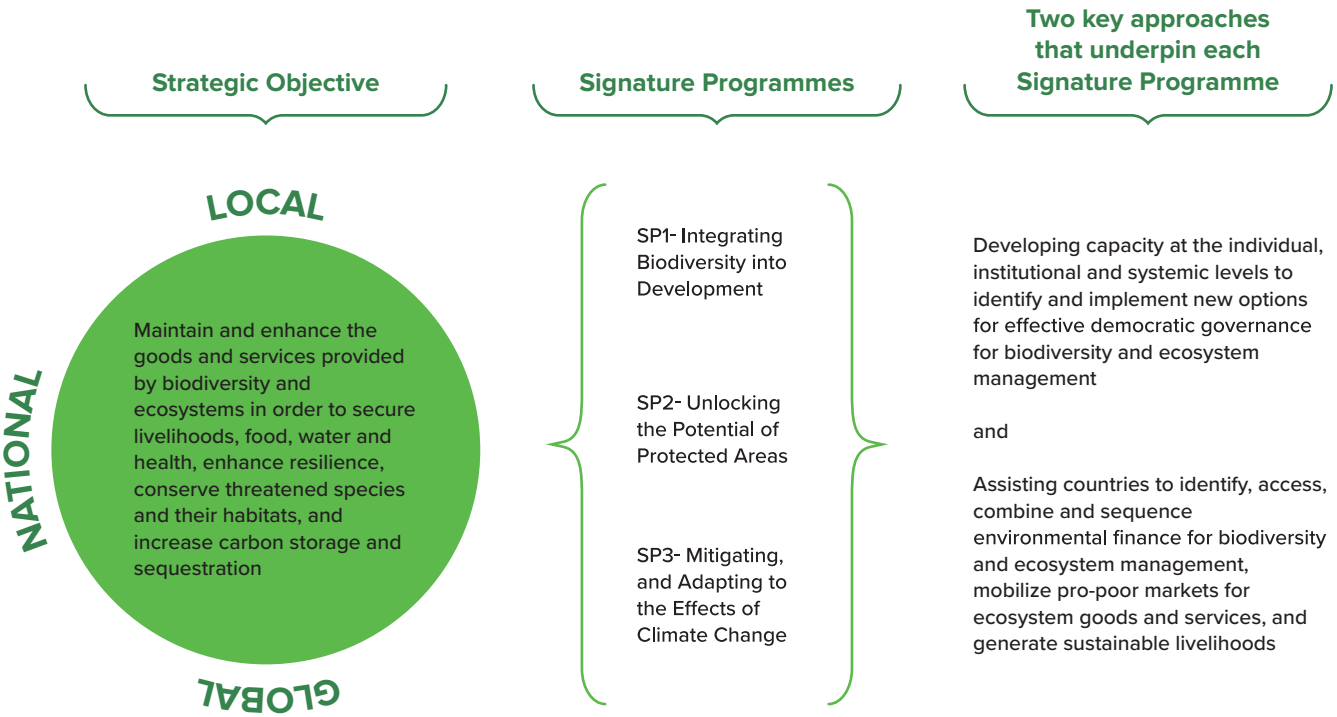
UNDP's support for ecosystems and biodiversity dates back to the early years of the organization's formation in 1966, and evolved from individual country projects tackling specific environmental threats to addressing strategically important global biodiversity issues; support for nature was integrated into the organization's broader development assistance and designed to address other challenges such as climate change.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 expanded UNDP's role in global environmental governance, with Agenda 21 emphasizing UNDP support in the implementation of international policy on sustainable development. UNDP was designated as a lead agency for coordinating United Nations system efforts to build capacity for implementing the Rio agreement through local, national and regional actions, and became a key partner of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the financing mechanism for the CBD and several other United Nations environmental conventions. In this role, UNDP supports public institutions in building capacity to manage biodiversity and ecosystems, and supports the work of local NGOs and CSOs through the GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP). UNDP remained the largest programmer of GEF funding at the end of the last GEF replenishment cycle in 2021.

UNDP's Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework 2012–2020 framed UNDP's support for the past 13 years under an overall strategic objective to "maintain and enhance the goods and services provided by biodiversity and ecosystems in order to secure livelihoods, food, water and health, enhance resilience, conserve threatened species and their habitats, and increase carbon storage and sequestration". It included three Signature Programmes (Figure 2) and identified over 70 activities that UNDP could support.

The framework aligned with the outputs of the CBD, the Rio +20 Summit and the Aichi Targets, as well as the strategies under the biodiversity and land degradation focal areas of the GEF and developed to scale up environmental action and make it more effective. In October 2023, UNDP launched its Nature Pledge to accelerate support to countries to meet and implement their ambitious nature and biodiversity targets under the new global biodiversity framework. The Pledge continues UNDP's intention to catalyse policy, economic and social shifts that are beneficial to the environment, promotes ecosystem management and biodiversity approaches within a broader environment objective, and offers support for communities at every level, including Indigenous People. In the two Strategic Plans covered by this evaluation, UNDP's Ecosystem Management and Biodiversity Conservation (EMBC) support was framed by Signature Solution 4, which aims to put nature and the environment at the heart of national economies and planning, and thereby help governments to protect, manage and value their natural assets.

Figure 2: UNDP's 2012–2020 Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework



Source: UNDP's Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework 2012–2020

PROGRAMME PORTFOLIO

UNDP's EMBC portfolio over the 2018–2023 period was delivered through 602 projects, with a total expenditure of over $1.5 billion across 134 countries (see Table3, and Annexes for further details). The largest number of interventions and the highest expenditure were in Africa (25 percent), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (24 percent), Asia and the Pacific (17 percent), while fewer projects were delivered in the Arab States (7 percent) and Europe (6 percent). Headquarters teams delivered 22 percent of the overall expenditure, a significant proportion (82 percent) of which was the expenditure of the GEF SGP. Figure 3 highlights the annual breakdown of the EMBC expenditure by UNDP regions.

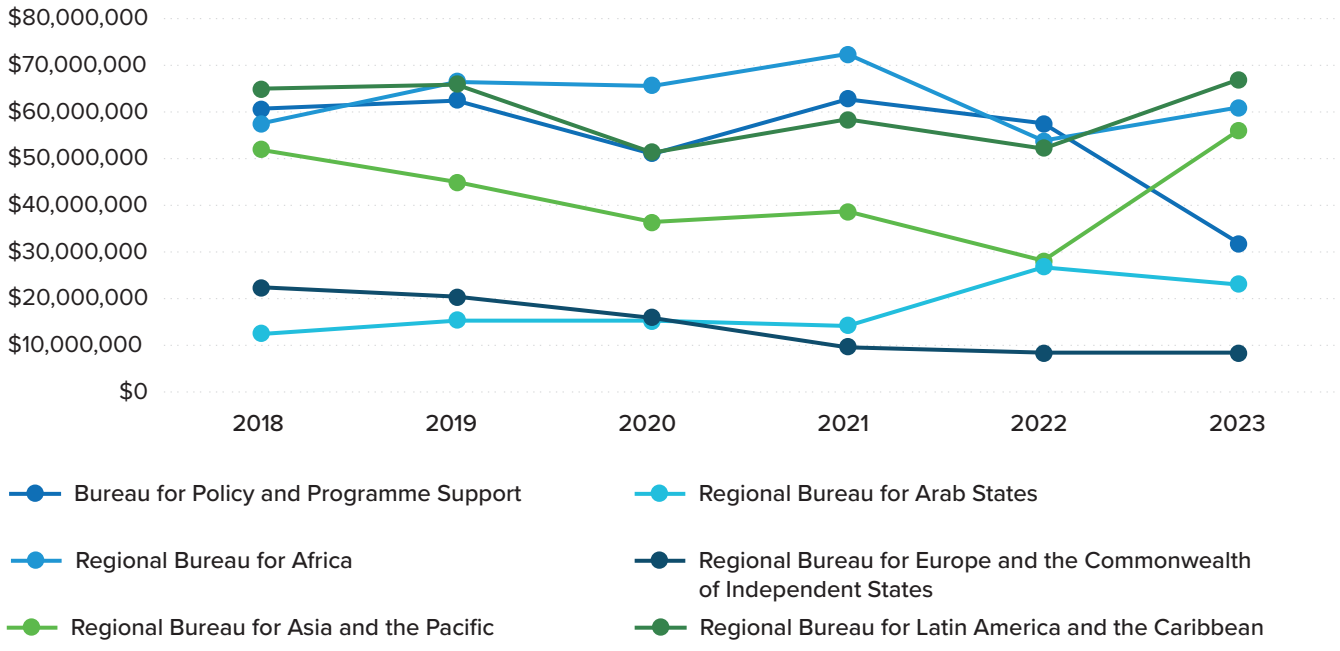
Table 3: Regional breakdown of UNDP's ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation portfolio

Region	Total no. of projects	Total budget (2018-2022) in US$ million	% of total budget	Total expenditure (2018-2023) in US$ million	% of total expenditure
Latin America and the Caribbean	155	437,115,287	25.41	359,468,361	23.83
Africa	177	418,963,250	24.36	376,662,204	24.97
Arab States	39	98,061,604	5.70	106,572,679	7.06
Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States	80	97,961,571	5.70	84,516,242	5.60
Asia and the Pacific	165	287,651,511	16.72	255,551,374	16.94
Global/HQ-managed projects	21	380,317,096	22.11	325,981,384	21.61
Total	602	1,720,070,320	100	1,508,752,244	100

Source: IEO analysis based on data downloaded from Atlas and Quantum in November 2023. Financial amounts have been rounded to the nearest million

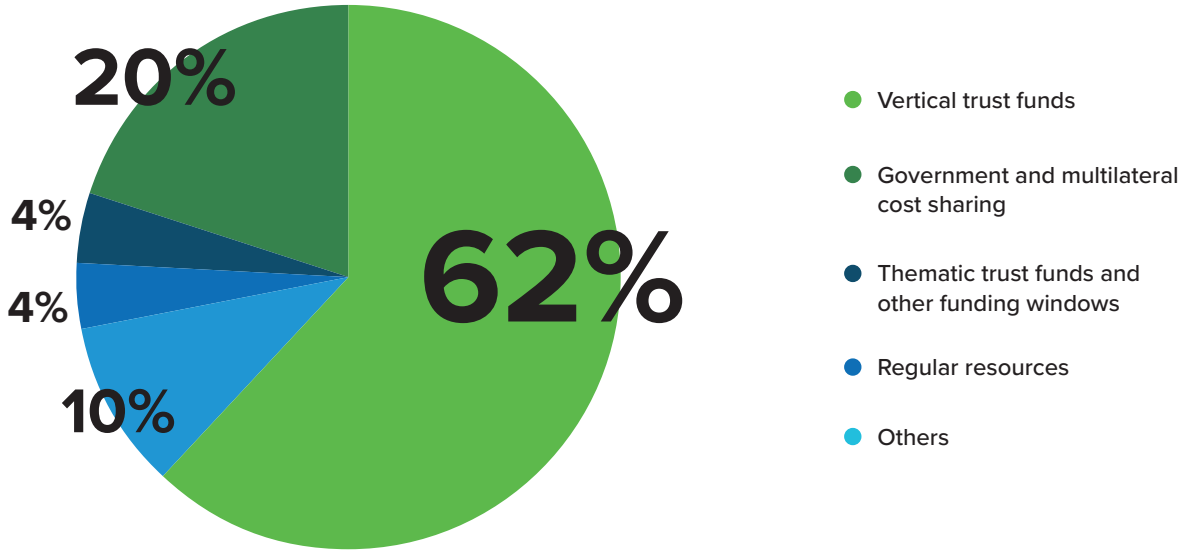
The largest proportion of funding for UNDP's support for EMBC since 2018 came from vertical trust funds (62 percent) and other government and multilateral contributions, including from thematic trust funds (20 percent), followed by national government contributions (4 percent). UNDP regular resources contributed 4 percent of the total budget, and 10 percent of funds came from other sources. The GEF provided 92 percent of vertical trust funds expenditure, followed by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) with 6 percent.

Figure 3: UNDP's ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation expenditures, by region and year



Source: IEO analysis based on data downloaded from Atlas and Quantum on November 2023.

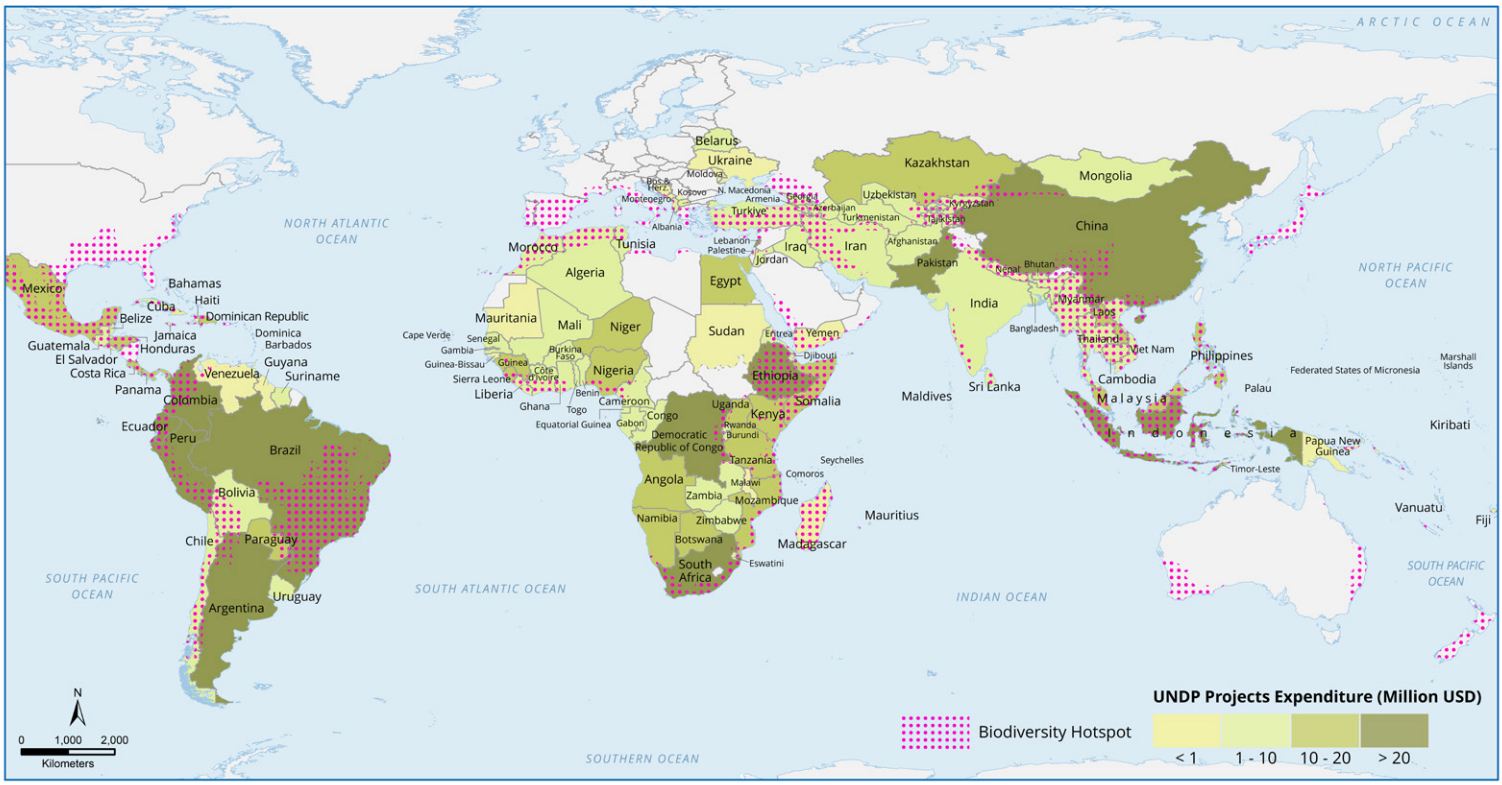
Figure 4: UNDP EMBC expenditure by fund categories



Source: IEO analysis based on data downloaded from Atlas and Quantum in November 2023.

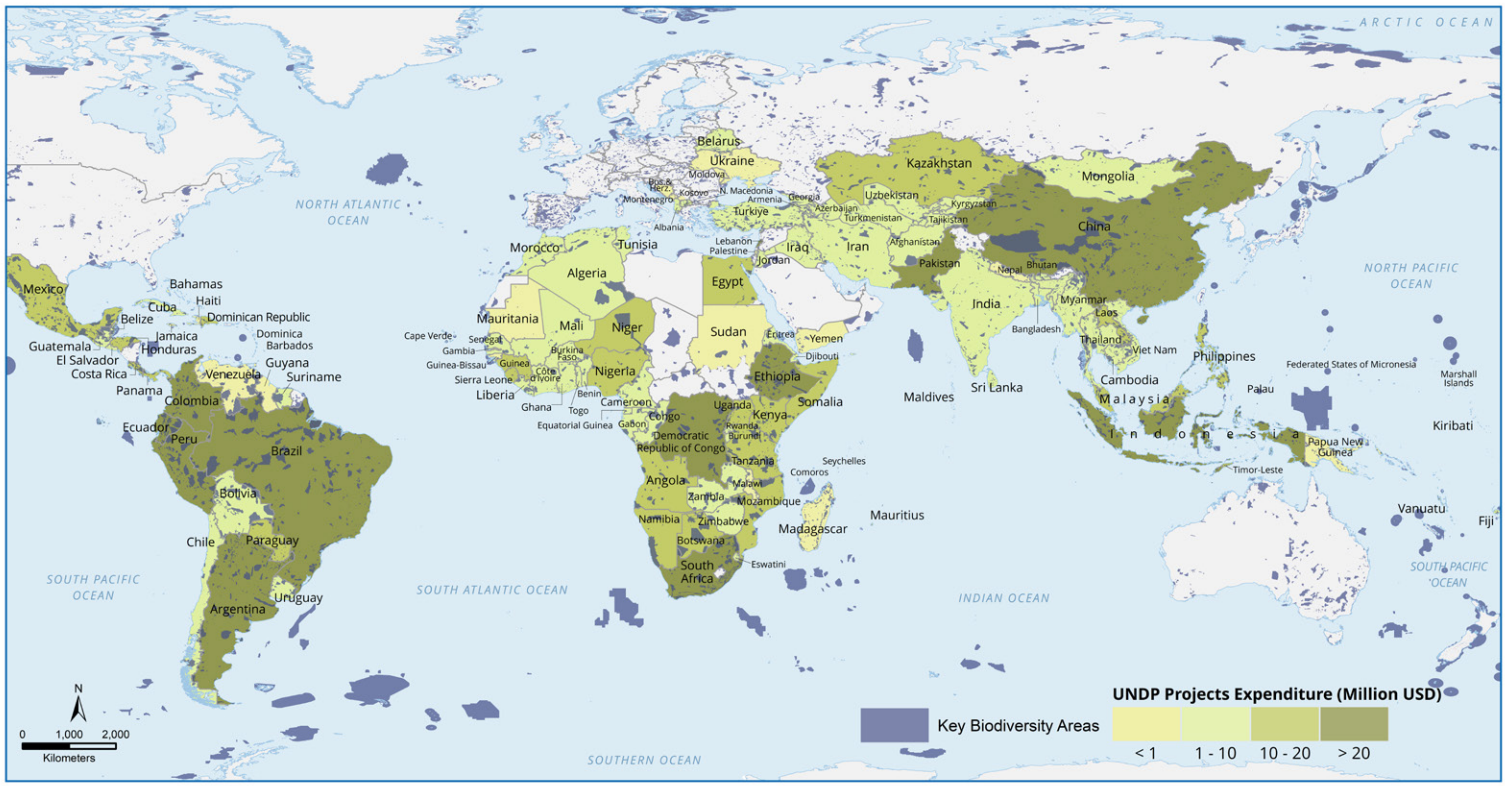
Figures 5 and 6 map UNDP's relative levels of EMBC expenditure (green) since 2018 for biodiversity hotspots (Figure 5) and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: UNDP project expenditure, biodiversity hotspots and Key Biodiversity Areas



Source: UNDP IEO

Figure 6: UNDP project expenditure in Key Biodiversity Areas



Source: UNDP IEO

Chapter

4 FINDINGS

Strategic relevance of UNDP's support

UNDP contribution to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation

This chapter presents the key findings of the evaluation, assessing the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNDP support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, as well as the major contributing factors. It starts with an assessment of UNDP's global approach to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, and the distribution of its support. Section 4.2 covers the results of UNDP's contribution in this area, and the section closes with a discussion of the organization's institutional arrangements for providing support.

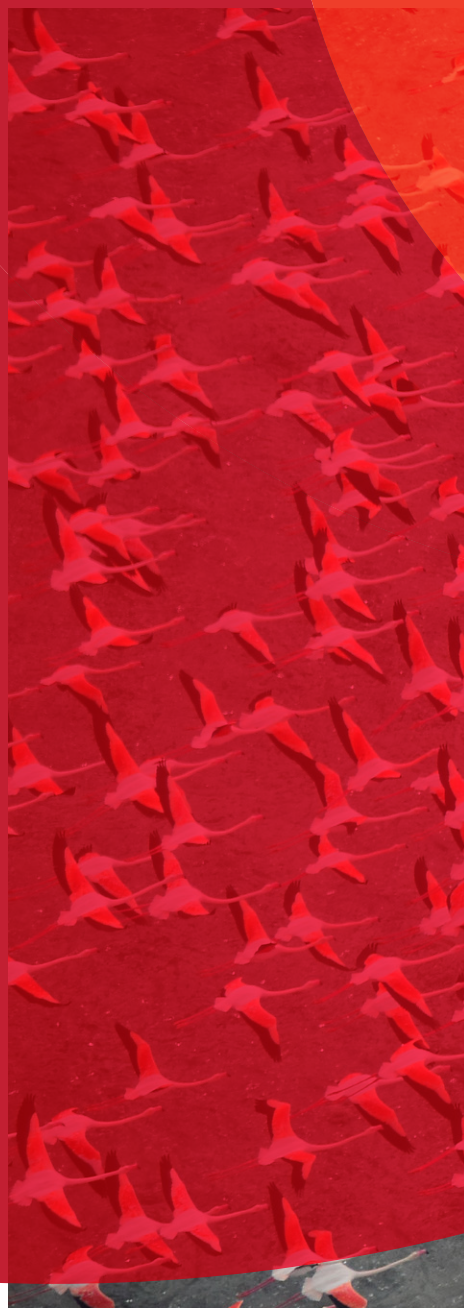


Photo Credit: UNDP Kazakhstan / Victoria Kovshar

STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF UNDP'S SUPPORT

UNDP's global approach to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation

UNDP made a strategic shift in 2012 through its Global Biodiversity Framework towards emphasizing the opportunities that biodiversity and natural ecosystems offer to human wellbeing. This positive approach enabled governments and local stakeholders to adopt a range of initiatives that had dual benefits for the environment and development.

UNDP's support for ecosystems and biodiversity was guided by three Signature Programmes within its 2012–2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, which was in effect until October 2023. Within this Framework, UNDP provided some form of support for ecosystems and biodiversity in over 130 countries since 2018, making it the largest provider of such assistance and unlocking significant amounts of national government funding for these initiatives. This enabled governments and other stakeholders to implement relevant initiatives that connect development and environmental objectives through a variety of mechanisms, including: integrating biodiversity into national budgets and development plans; identifying natural areas essential for supporting human life; expanding the concept of PAs; promoting the role of Indigenous People; issuing grants for local organizations and communities; and working with the private sector as potential employers or to promote value chains for eco-friendly products. Although the need to connect development and ecological action is widely accepted in the environmental sector, UNDP's support stands out for providing practical solutions for its implementation, which has leveraged the organization's broader portfolio in sustainable development, governance, planning, institutional strengthening and non-governmental participation. UNDP has also promoted environmental principles in the development sector, and government counterparts consulted through this evaluation referred to the need to incorporate development objectives as a prerequisite for taking environmental action.

Globally, UNDP contributed to conservation efforts across a broad spectrum of biomes and ecoregions since 2018 and has enhanced wildlife conservation across 27 countries (see Finding 4). In certain contexts, UNDP's offer enabled a focus on ecological factors where there was low prioritization of EMBC within government. This often involved demonstrating the link with economic recovery and livelihoods or disaster risk reduction to engage sector ministries. Lebanon, for example, has historically had very little ecotourism, but as the Government considered domestic tourism in its recovery from the COVID-19 and the financial crises, UNDP introduced support for ecotourism and local decentralized development implementation such as hiking trails in nature reserves and links with historical sites being part of a coherent design linked to a national strategy. In Liberia, UNDP developed a portfolio of support that embedded EMBC in a sustainable agriculture-based growth programme. Since the peace accords in the Bangladesh Chittagong Hill Tracts, UNDP has provided a stream of support to strengthen traditional forest conservation and agroforestry systems among Indigenous communities, which in turn increased the protection of regionally important watersheds. In response to national initiatives on the concept of sufficiency economy in Thailand, UNDP led the development of a bio-circular economy model for the green growth strategy. These examples are particularly valuable since

recent economic crises and predicted mass extinction events have increased interest in more intensive development or conservation approaches that risk undermining each other. In a small number of ecologically important countries, UNDP faced challenges in maintaining a strong EMBC focus due to hostile political sentiment toward environmental action.

Signature Programme 1: Integrating biodiversity and ecosystem management into development planning and production sector activities to safeguard biodiversity and maintain ecosystem services that sustain human wellbeing. This programme was highly relevant for moving ecosystems and biodiversity issues beyond an environmental or forestry silo to a cross-government consideration, where the implications of various planning decisions can be examined in light of their likely impact on nature. A key strategic success has been the evolution of UNDP's financing support from a focus on individual PAs to landscape and national financing. At the country level, this broadened the number of government departments engaged in biodiversity planning as UNDP engaged ministries of finance, agriculture and planning, and treasuries, as well as CSOs in national review processes. Through the BIOFIN programme, to date, UNDP helped 38 countries to identify EMBC funding gaps and potential solutions, and plans to reach 91 countries by 2025. UNDP also supported governments to map the critical ecosystem services that local populations depend on, though it has not consistently used these analyses to direct its support for landscape plans and field-level interventions.

The organization's focus on the productive sector remains relevant for improving local livelihoods and reducing the negative impacts of commercial interests on threatened ecosystems. UNDP projects have helped to bridge the perceived dichotomy of production or protection in several landscapes, and demonstrated that community development plans and livelihoods can support conservation. Beyond some innovative and early-stage national engagements on palm oil, beef and soy production, UNDP has not had an effective strategy to incentivize the private sector, which is the most significant natural resource user, employer and polluter, and to replace harmful practices. These gaps were not exclusive to UNDP and are common in the wider sector, which has struggled to alter the incentive structures for logging, clearing and other practices. More broadly, UNDP has not significantly drawn on its organizational strengths in health, social protection and energy, and its more advanced gender approaches[50] to further improve its national support for ecosystem planning. This is a missed opportunity because in few contexts have the financial benefits of ecologically positive development been sustained at a sufficient scale to reduce the attraction of unsustainable models, and deep poverty remains among Indigenous People, and Indigenous women in particular. The organization's funding model has been a significant factor in the limited integration between these areas of UNDP's support, though the new portfolio approaches offer the potential to increase the development offer within environmental initiatives.

Signature Programme 2: Unlocking the potential of protected areas, including indigenous and community conserved areas, to conserve biodiversity while contributing towards sustainable development. Through Signature Programme 2, UNDP worked towards the Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) principles and has supported important gains in the recognition of Indigenous People and local communities in ecosystem management. UNDP had a relevant engagement strategy

50. UNDP-UNEP Poverty Environment Initiative and subsequent Poverty Environment Action for SDGs (PEA) projects specifically targeted the poverty-environment linkage. Gender gap analysis and budgeting within climate action (Rwanda, Malawi, Tanzania, Indonesia) were some of the most successful projects. UNDP-UNEP Poverty Environment Action for Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons Learned Report, 2022.

of working on empowerment and livelihood issues with Indigenous People and local communities, which are interlinked, and has contributed to an international movement of often isolated groups by convening knowledge- sharing across communities. Indigenous People's rights were one of the few areas where UNDP has directly engaged in issues that are politically sensitive in many countries,[51] though progress toward tangible rights has been slowed by constraints in national legislation, which in certain countries has become more hostile towards Indigenous People and local communities since 2018. UNDP's support for Indigenous People will be critical as countries work towards the GBF target of assigning protected status to 30 percent of global territories by 2030. The expansion of PAs to Indigenous territories has created risks and limited benefits for Indigenous groups,[52] making it vital that their rights and economic rewards are met wherever it occurs. At least 32 percent of global land and inland waters is already governed and managed by Indigenous People and local communities, and at least 50 percent of the world's forests are under varying levels of land stewardship by traditional communities,[53] though only 10 percent of their land has statutory recognition.

UNDP has successfully broadened the concept of PAs by demonstrating that human development and ecological protection can be symbiotic in the peripheries or buffer zones of conservation areas. UNDP helped change the focus of area-based planning by introducing science-based landscape planning, allowing PAs to be managed not only based on specific species, but also on ecological services such as water availability. UNDP has also enabled conservation work beyond the boundaries of national parks and within the wider landscape, such as in high ecological value pastoralist and livestock rangelands, transboundary watersheds, and biosphere reserves. Newer pilot projects indicated good viability for upscaling, and evaluations demonstrated that UNDP used its comparative advantage in the negotiating skills and incentive systems required to generate multi-stakeholder cooperation through co-management schemes. The sustainability of good practices promoted by UNDP remains a challenge; much depends on repeat funding and the community's continued motivation, which rests on establishing recognition of their stewardship role, markets for their products and greater security of tenure. At a broader level, sustainability of good practices remains an endemic issue due to the competing interests and agendas in recipient countries, with strategies and activities lacking sufficient capital and faced with weak regulatory and enforcement capabilities.

Signature Programme 3: Managing and rehabilitating ecosystems for adaptation to, and mitigation of, climate change. The need for improved approaches to ecosystems and climate change has become increasingly urgent in the past decade as critical biomes and the populations that live within and near them experience extreme natural events. UNDP extensively promotes the use of natural assets for disaster mitigation and/or carbon sequestration, the proportion that promote adaptive capacities and biodiversity levels through an ecosystem lens was smaller and predominantly in RBLAC. UNDP has supported global knowledge on ecosystem-based adaptation and played an important role in framing and building awareness of the concept among development

51. UNDP IEO (2021) Formative Evaluation of the Integration by UNDP of the Principles of Leaving No One Behind.

52. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2022). "Protected areas and Indigenous Peoples' rights: the obligations of States and international organizations", presented to the United Nations General Assembly, July 2022.

53. IPBES (2019) The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services.

and environmental practitioners.[54] Although a range of stakeholders have implemented thousands of grant-financed ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA) projects globally, uptake of EbA as a specific approach by national or subnational governments has been slowed by conceptual and funding challenges, which have prevented its application from reaching a scale commensurate with climate threats.[55,56] In this regard, UNDP's field projects have been important for establishing local relevance where others have not promoted the approach, although only in a small number of countries has the organization made use of its comparative advantage to support national integration of EbA through policy development, multi-level capacity strengthening, cross-sectoral planning or financing (Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Haiti, Peru, Seychelles). In line with the literature on EbA uptake,[57] UNDP's examples demonstrate that more comprehensive approaches are needed because the benefits of ecosystems can take time to restore, opening a window in which land or areas may be claimed for alternative uses. At a global level, UNDP's Climate Promise and the organization's biodiversity approaches do not significantly draw on each other. This has caused a missed opportunity to increase the levels of climate finance that reach locally led conservation work, and to bring the perspectives and knowledge of Indigenous People and local communities into national adaptation and mitigation planning.

UNDP has channelled global and national resources to areas of significant ecological need, but its combined offer of finance and capacities has been insufficient to encourage national governments to take comprehensive approaches to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.

Under its 2012–2020 Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework, UNDP defined two cross-cutting areas of support to be delivered under each Signature Programme: support to mobilize long-term and reliable finances for conservation; and support to the individual, institutional and systemic capacities to remove barriers to, and identify new options for, effective democratic governance for biodiversity and ecosystem management. These areas remained appropriate to the barriers faced by conservation activities in most countries, and their continued relevance is an indication that further strategies for nationally driven conservation were required to meet the Aichi Targets and to deliver the Global Biodiversity Framework.

UNDP's work in **financing** was relevant for addressing the barriers in the sector, and delivered two major strategic successes that have added transparency to biodiversity funding. The first success was achieved through support to enable governments to publish their levels of biodiversity financing, which allowed global expenditures to be calculated for the first time. This showed that public biodiversity investments steadily increased to an average of $121 billion annually from 2008 to 2017,[58] and the information has been used to calculate the finance gap for biodiversity

54. Interviews with external and internal staff, triangulated with document review of global EbA materials.

55. UNEP (2022). Harnessing Nature to Build Climate Resilience: Scaling Up the Use of Ecosystem-based Adaptation.

56. Swann, S., L. Blandford, S. Cheng, J. Cook, A. Miller, and R. Barr. 2021. "Public International Funding of Nature-based Solutions for Adaptation: A Landscape Assessment." Working Paper. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. https://doi.org/10.46830/ wriwp.20.00065

57. UNEP (2022). Harnessing Nature to Build Climate Resilience: Scaling Up the Use of Ecosystem-based Adaptation.

58. Seidl, Kelvin Mulungu, Marco Arlaud, Onno van den Heuvel, and Massimiliano Riva (2020) Finance for Nature: A global estimate of public biodiversity investments. *Ecosystem* Services, Vol. 46, 2020.

at approximately $711 billion per year,[59,60,61] and to develop national biodiversity finance plans in various countries around the world. The second, more recent success was achieved through UNDP's support in identifying the harmful subsidies that drive biodiversity loss in many countries, on which it is now working with a sub-set of countries to repurpose. Subsidies that harm biodiversity amount to over $500 billion a year,[62] are the largest contributor to the biodiversity financing gap, and are approximately four times larger than finance for biodiversity conservation. These achievements demonstrate UNDP using its trusted status with governments and adding value to the economic quantification of ecosystem services provided by other agencies. UNDP has a significant role to play in enabling governments to screen subsidies for their impact on nature, although it has faced challenges in offering strategic support because it does not directly provide financing on the scale required for national implementation.

Box 2: Subsidies harmful to biodiversity and the environment

In a review of national assessments on harmful subsidies, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights risks from a variety of sectoral support for agriculture, water, fisheries, energy and mining, transport, forestry and infrastructure. These include incentives for certain agricultural inputs, purchase agreements that promote overfishing or the expansion and intensification of crop or livestock production, and tax incentives for construction that lead to urban sprawl. The impacts of harmful subsidies may be localized or may spread over larger landscapes and internationally.

Source: OECD (2022) Identifying and assessing subsidies and other incentives harmful to biodiversity: A comparative review of existing national-level assessments and insights for good practice. Environment Working Paper No. 206. Paris.

59. OECD (2020) A Comprehensive Overview of Global Biodiversity Finance. Paris.

60. The Paulson Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and the Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability, (2020) Financing Nature: Closing the Global Biodiversity Financing Gap.

61. Bloomberg NEF (2023) Biodiversity Finance Factbook. https://assets.bbhub.io/professional/sites/24/Biodiversity-Finance-Factbook_COP28-Edition.pdf

62. OECD (2020) A Comprehensive Overview of Global Biodiversity Finance. Paris.

UNDP's support to generate adequate and predicable funding for conservation, restoration and ecosystem management has been insufficiently catalytic, and there remains a large gap between existing financing for biodiversity and the amounts required to meet the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets. UNDP's support in this area remains heavily dependent on channelling ODA from the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+) programme, in which biodiversity gains are only a possible co-benefit;[63] GEF, and increasingly GCF,[64] and very few country offices have supported governments with alternative and domestic biodiversity financing models. According to a systematic analysis of ROAR reports for 2018–2021, financing, valuing nature and disinvestment was active in only six country offices, and a maximum of 13 countries have integrated biodiversity finance into government planning. Projects have developed innovative solutions with national and local government and Indigenous communities, but effective engagement with the private sector remains relatively rare; there was mixed success in generating tangible and sustainable financial flows at local levels. UNDP has applied relevant tools such as results-based budgeting, used widely in other sectors, and has heavily adapted others to EMBC, such as ecological fiscal transfers, but they have not been widely promoted as a UNDP approach.

UNDP's work to strengthen **capacities for environmental governance** has been relevant in expanding the range of stakeholders that participate in ecosystem management, and in supporting governments to adopt practices that require legislation and enforcement. Evidence suggests that integrating EMBC and governance work within country offices has been an effective means to influence national and sub-national landscape planning where appropriate conditions were in place, and many country offices offer government broader support through the integration of economic and social analysis with conservation and protected area expertise. Linking EMBC with national governance agendas (e.g. solutions to conflict resolution in Peru and the Philippines) has leveraged stronger political backing than traditional biodiversity work with ministries of the environment. There have been notable collaborations with UNDP's governance and environmental expertise in headquarters on issues relating to Indigenous Peoples, although less advanced support for environmental justice. In practice, UNDP has supported a much broader set of capacities than those used for environmental governance, and has promoted knowledge on a range of technical areas and to large and diverse audiences through global platforms such as the Learning for Nature massive open online course and the Nature for Life Hub.

A significant proportion of UNDP's support since 2018 has built government capacity to use specific conservation management tools, and a less proportion for the underlying institutional factors that shape environmental governance. This has enabled governments to contextualize leading science from the IPBES and guidance from the CBD and UNCCD to the ecological conditions of their countries, but less so to their institutional circumstances. In large parts of Asia and Africa, projectized capacity-building support has struggled to expand historical command-and-control models for responding to specific environmental problems into broader planning approaches that recognize ecosystem services and inclusive management. UNDP has made a valuable contribution to building local context-specific capacities, but this has mostly been sustained in countries

63. IUFRO (2022) Forests, Climate, Biodiversity and People: Assessing a Decade of REDD+. Vienna.

64. UNDP has successfully supported the Governments of Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Indonesia to access forest-sector climate finance worth $320 million, and Côte d'Ivoire to develop a new REDD+ strategy.

where capacities were already high, and many countries rely on project funding to sustain them. In part, this challenge arises from the limited environmental funding available for building nascent or core institutional strengths, and was more pronounced in LDCs that do not have globally important biodiversity.

UNDP lacks an organizational strategy for tackling the drivers of biodiversity degradation, which has created a gap in guidance for the most challenging but impactful initiatives.

Recent analysis shows that conservation initiatives are no longer sufficient on their own to prevent the decline in biodiversity levels before 2050, and more transformative changes are required from governments and the private sector to address the primary drivers of ecosystem destruction.[65] While UNDP vertical projects frequently aim to alleviate local pressures on ecosystems, there has been limited articulation of a UNDP approach to comprehensively tackle the source of the pressures in national economies or regional and international markets. UNDP's Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework 2012–2020 put forward few approaches to directly engage in the causes of "rapid demographic changes, overconsumption, the use of technologies that damage the environment, now combined with climate change", and there has

65. WWF (2022) Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a nature-positive society. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M., Juffe Bignoli, D. & Petersen, T. (Eds.). Gland.

been limited articulation of a UNDP approach to biodiversity and land use, pollution, invasive species and climate impacts at the global or regional level. UNDP has developed relevant and more advanced projects and workstreams, including on food systems, mining, and chemical and waste management, but they do not explicitly signal the critical threats of biodiversity loss or make use of UNDP ecosystem analysis and approaches. UNDP's most promising initiative was Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) Phase II, which has broadened national government attention to harmful subsidies by bringing ministries of finance and the environment and other stakeholders together to systematically identify policies and finance to address the negative drivers; however, this does not preclude the need to explicitly address the drivers within the larger framework of UNDP interventions.

In all countries visited and reviewed for this evaluation, ecosystems remain threatened, including where UNDP has supported significant progress. Costa Rica and South Africa exemplify this, as two of the more advanced countries on biodiversity action globally and countries in which UNDP has provided long-term and effective support. UNDP has worked on environmental issues in South Africa since the early 2000s and has supported the Government and communities with a series of valuable legislative, capacity and community interventions. The country's important biospheres,

however, remain threatened by conflicts within the landscape, with substantial areas overlapping with high-value agricultural land, which is experiencing significant water extraction, industrial and household pollution, settlement expansion, illegal logging and sand mining. Costa Rica is a global leader in biodiversity planning, but its agro-exportation strategy has led to the excessive use of chemicals and pesticides, making it the world's largest consumer of these products per capita and per hectare. UNDP has recently advised legislation to prohibit 16 of the most harmful agrochemicals as well as pollution from mining, the first initiative of its kind in 50 years. A UNDP/GEF project helped to strengthen the National Environmental Information System through the development of the Land Use Change Monitoring System within Production Landscapes, increasing the ability of public and private actors to monitor the key drivers of deforestation; however, this covers only a small part of the country and the effects of urban expansion have eclipsed the biodiversity gains in rural conservation areas.[66]

UNDP has not engaged in modelling scenarios to identify plausible pathways to 'bend the curve' of biodiversity loss, despite these being well established in climate policy. There remains considerable need for quantifiable plans for achieving global biodiversity targets, in tandem with socioeconomic objectives such as climate mitigation and the eradication of hunger. While UNDP projects frequently aim to alleviate localized pressures on ecosystems, the drivers themselves were not consistently monitored or incorporated into logical frameworks, and ecosystem health was often not tracked, raising questions about the effectiveness of the organization's approaches. Studies have shown that the ability of PAs to limit the impact of human pressure varies with socioeconomic and management circumstances, so there is a need to ensure that the quality of management is better measured.[67]

Internal and sectoral stakeholders acknowledge the critical need to tackle the major drivers of biodiversity loss and ecosystems destruction but recognize that this draws multilateral agencies into sensitive areas of national economies, international markets and population dynamics. The greatest opportunities for UNDP to support a significant shift away from harmful drivers have come through changes in international trade policies, to which UNDP has responded well in a certain number of contexts.[68] However, the organization has not had an organizational strategy to seek out or to encourage similar transformative policies, and to expand the number of countries in which it supports local preparedness. Few UNDP country offices have attempted to comprehensively engage in these issues, and several expressed the need for support and regional action. It has been observed that most UNDP projects and even transboundary initiatives have not had a significant focus on invasive species,[69] endangered plant species, illegal timber,

66. UNDP Costa Rica (2022) Conserving biodiversity through sustainable management in production landscapes in Costa Rica.

67. Geldmann, J., A. Manica, N.D. Burgess, L. Coad, L., and A. Balmford (2019) A global-level assessment of the effectiveness of protected areas at resisting anthropogenic pressures. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(46), 23209-23215.

68. For example, UNDP supported the Government of Indonesia to respond to the European Union's (EU) ban on palm oil imports, and Costa Rica to comply with the EU's deforestation-free policy.

69. Invasive alien species (IAS) contribute to 60 percent of recorded global extinctions and are the only driver in 16 percent of the documented global animal and plant extinctions. In 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) assessment report estimated the global annual costs of biological invasions to exceed $423 billion.

multinational mining and chemicals, and food and agricultural commodities; this is a missed opportunity for UNDP to work with other United Nations agencies and development partners that specifically focus on these areas.

UNDP has covered a vast array of ecological areas and species, including within difficult operating contexts. It has not systematically targeted its ecosystem and biodiversity support to areas where the interaction between environmental stress and human wellbeing is most acute.

Evidence from UNDP's project evaluations shows that the organization's bottom-up approach to project design, combined with technical input and quality assurance from regional bureaux and headquarters, has ensured the local relevance of the organization's terrestrial EMBC projects and, overall, their effectiveness in meeting project targets, albeit with regional variation.[70] While UNDP conducts limited global mapping of its initiatives to ecologically important areas per se, most of its initiatives were aligned with the GEF's Global Benefits Index for Biodiversity (GBI_{BD}) and cover a vast array of important ecological areas and species. In Asia, UNDP has successfully supported de jure and de facto: protection of the glacier landscapes and alpine forests of the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region; the deciduous and evergreen forests of the Western Ghats, India; the temperate coniferous and broad-leaved forests of Yunan, China; the limestone forests of Viet Nam; deciduous forest and flooded forests in the Mekong region; the dipterocarp rainforests in Archipelagic South East Asia; and landscapes devoted to networks of community-based forestry programmes and traditional agroforestry gardens, such as those in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. In Africa, UNDP has worked across diverse landscapes, including the islands of Madagascar and Zanzibar in the east, to Ghana, Mali and Senegal in the west, the Congo basin, Eastern Afromontane and Horn of Africa, Eastern and South African ecosystems. UNDP's work in Latin America and the Caribbean encompasses forests, rivers, coastal zones, drylands, páramos and urban areas. Notable emphasis was given to REDD+ and biodiversity management, with forest management also being a key focus. UNDP has facilitated enhancements of wildlife conservation by addressing the unsustainable and illegal trade of wildlife, and human-wildlife conflict across 27 nations in Asia, Africa, and the Latin America and the Caribbean region. These efforts were focused on the safeguarding of various species, including snow leopards, tigers and the Asiatic cheetah.

UNDP provided analytical innovations to help countries identify the most critical ecosystem services for human life. However, it has not widely used these or other models to target its ecosystem and biodiversity support to areas of acute need. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, UNDP interventions have not been commensurate with the predicted impact that a collapse in ecosystem services would have on GDP[71] or the already deep levels of poverty among rural populations and forest-dependent communities.[72] In Africa, agricultural expansion and overgrazing by livestock have led to the disconnection of natural plant and wildlife habitats within larger ecosystem networks. In addition, high levels of poverty among populations living on degraded land have

70. Triangulated evidence from (i) a meta-analysis of UNDP GEF project scores (see Annex 11); (ii) a document review of UNDP EMBC project evaluations; and (iii) case study visits.

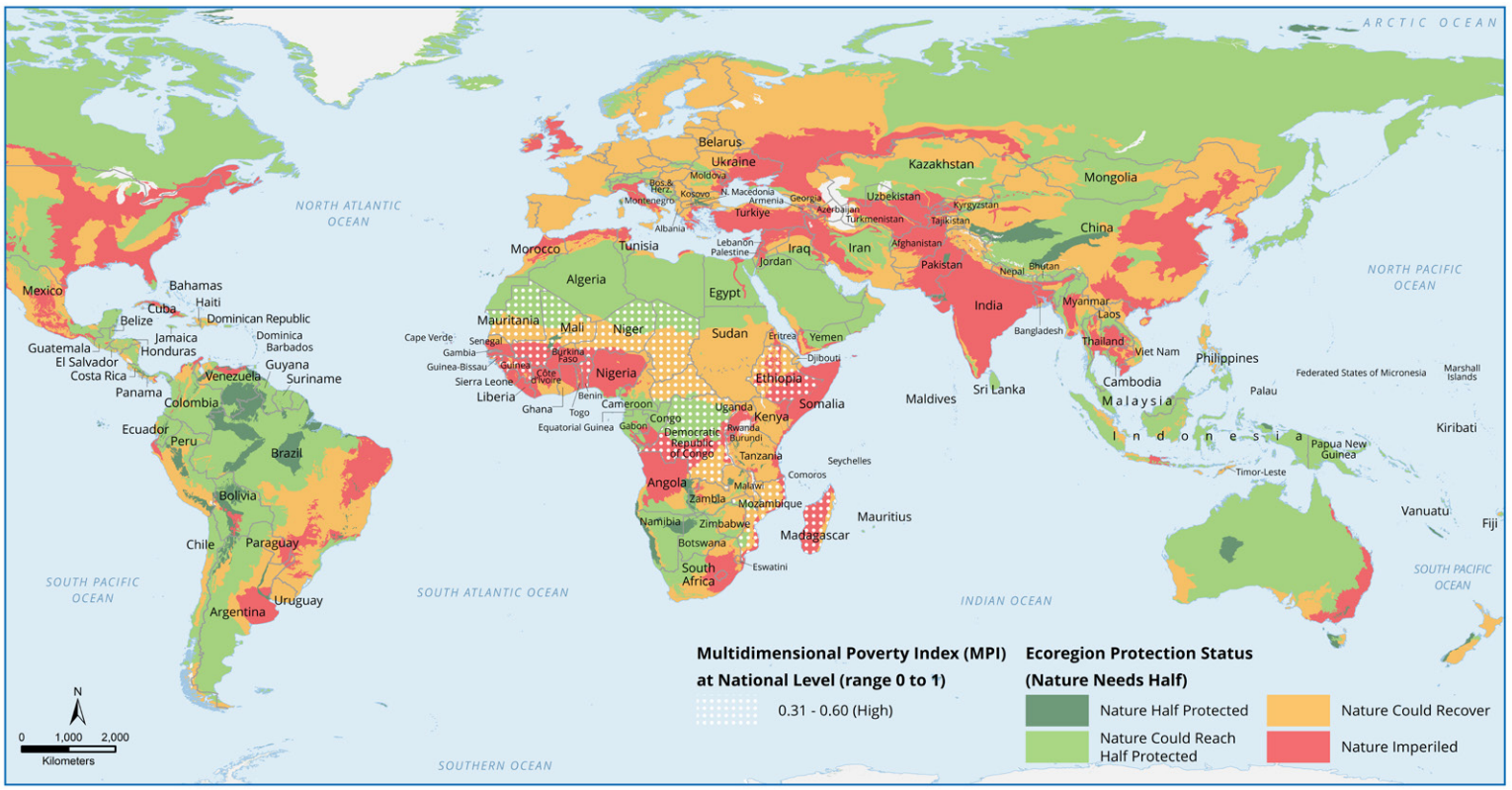
71. Modelling indicates that a collapse in ecosystem services could result in annual GDP losses of 9.7 and 6.5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, respectively, by 2030. World Bank (2021) The economic case for Nature, A global Earth-economy model to assess development policy pathways, Washington, D.C.

72. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). 2020. The State of the World's Forests 2020: Forests, Biodiversity and People. Rome: FAO. https://doi. org/10.4060/ca8642en

Photo Credit: Diego Mendonça - ISPN Archive

contributed to pressures on remaining biodiversity and urban expansion. There was no overarching regional strategy to support the integration of biodiversity conservation into sustainable land use practices. Most UNDP projects were only moderately successful in linking biodiversity conservation into sustainable land use practices (see Finding 27), and in several areas, UNDP was working to reduce population pressures on small remaining areas of high-value biodiversity areas rather than the source of the problem in much larger degraded lands. As demonstrated in Figure 5, there remain large areas of the earth's surface where nature is imperilled, across ecosystem and countries; for example, Africa's drylands and grassland ecosystems require intensive restoration, especially in the Sahel region where multidimensional poverty is highest and ongoing conflicts have undermined progress. UNDP has made advances through community-level action with national policy support work in Burkina Faso, Chad and South Sudan, but has faced significant challenges in institutionalizing initiatives. A tendency towards country-centric approaches in UNDP support was in part influenced by the GEF strategic directions and the System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) allocation system, through which host countries determine how GEF funds are locally allocated; however, this has not precluded UNDP from providing transboundary support in important contexts (see Finding 9).

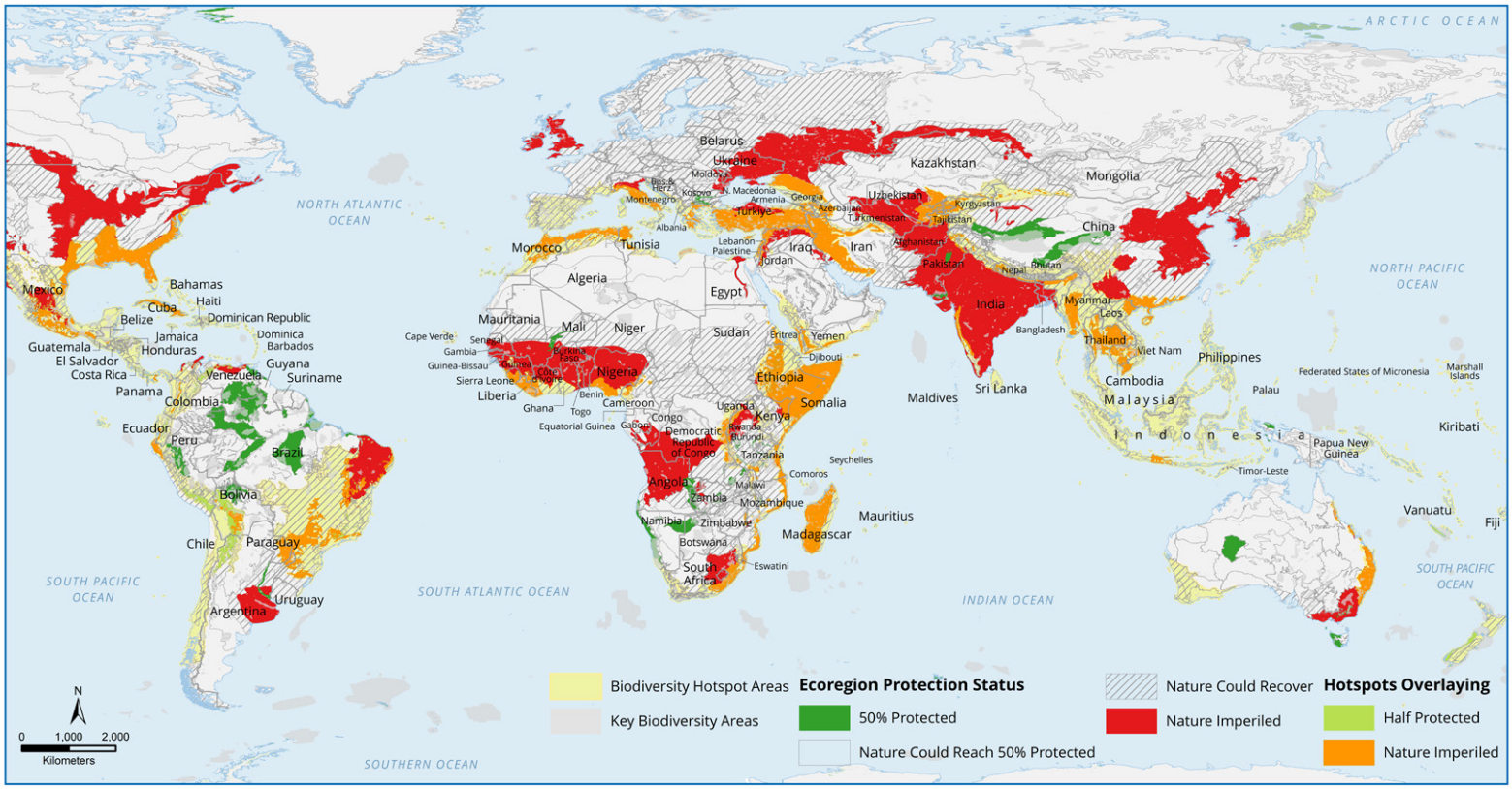
Figure 7: Global MPI index and ecoregion protection status (Nature Needs Half)



Source: UNDP IEO

Evolved sloping land agroecosystems embedded in KBAs and headwaters of river basins in Asia were of particular ecological concern and areas in which UNDP has only provided limited support. Large-scale examples are the hilly agroecosystem in Archipelagic southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia), Montane Southeast Asia (Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Thailand and Myanmar) and lower montane slopes of the Himalayas (northeast India and Nepal) (Figure 6). These are the interphases between natural forest ecosystems and agroecosystems, and diminishing pockets of traditional agroforestry systems host remaining agricultural gene pools that are important for long-term food resiliency. These agroecosystems are becoming significant social concerns because of: rapid encroachment into remaining primary forests; a higher propensity to wildfires due to climate change; massive soil erosion and sedimentation of water systems; agricultural chemical pollution; and even the cultural heritage of many traditional communities that depend on them. These issues occur as traditional ecologically benign multiple cropping systems rapidly give way to massive monocultures to satisfy cross-border food industries and international markets. In UNDP's earlier SLM, country offices generally approached this with 'one shot' SLM projects to deal with supply-side interventions, with limited follow-through. More recent initiatives consider foot systems and the root causes of land degradation resulting from food and agriculture commodity expansion.

Figure 8: Ecoregion protection status, biodiversity hotspots and key biodiversity areas



Source: UNDP IEO

In a few countries, UNDP has offered support to help governments address the connected challenges of biodiversity loss, water management and climate threats in urban areas and their surrounding watersheds or coastal areas. UNDP's support through the United Nations Biodiversity Lab highlighted the importance of urban drainage basin management, which is vital for reducing flood risks and enhancing water security; the organization has supported water catchment areas above Lima, Peru in a successful demonstration that was transferred to other areas in the Amazon but has not engaged in similar support elsewhere. There remain many mega-cities that face water supply challenges, including: Sao Paulo, which suffered a severe drought in 2014–2015; Beijing, which relies on the South-North Water Transfer Project to meet its growing water demand; and Mexico City, which relies on the Cutzamala and Lerma water supply systems. Within Africa, at least five cities (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, Luanda, Lagos) are highly or extremely vulnerable to climate change.

UNDP CONTRIBUTION TO ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

This section covers the results of UNDP's support and is structured by the theory of change underlying UNDP's ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. Each sub-section discusses the outputs of UNDP's interventions areas and the intermediate outcomes, as well as the relevance of the major assumptions underpinning UNDP's support. Sub-section G discusses the various pathways in UNDP's approach and describes the organization's contribution to environmental outcomes.

Governance frameworks and mechanisms

Enhancing the governance of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation has been a cornerstone of UNDP support to countries. UNDP has supported aspects of the governance framework for EMBC in at least 90 countries, in all regions, between 2018 and 2023. This involves support for: international-to-local protocol alignment and reporting; PAs designation; legislative/policy improvements; and financial accountability. Overall, UNDP support for governance frameworks accounts for at least 5 percent of overall expenditure in the portfolio, though typically involves less resource-intensive activities than other areas of the portfolio.

Preparation and implementation of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs): UNDP provided widespread support for the preparation of NBSAPs and has pioneered the localization of NBSAPs at a sub-national level.

In partnership with the Secretariat of the CBD and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with financial support from the GEF, UNDP provided extensive support to National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) – the core document for country planning on biodiversity. This typically involved co-facilitating and providing expert input in a multisectoral dialogue for the preparation of the strategy, and in many countries was the result of engagement over several rounds of reporting. In Asia, UNDP pioneered support for the localization of NBSAPs at the state level (e.g. India, Malaysia, Pakistan) and the province level (Viet Nam, Philippines, Indonesia), which integrated well with broader government decentralization programmes (Indonesia and the Philippines). In Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, UNDP support to the NBSAPs was largely at the national level. UNDP provided effective support for 64 countries preparing their 6th National Report under the CBD, and early action support for the GBF is being implemented in 138 countries.

Progress in the implementation of the NBSAP has been mixed. Only 19 Parties reported the percentage of achievement of the previous NBSAP's objectives, projects or activities, while 50 parties reported specific achievements during the period. The most cited achievements were forest rehabilitation, the development of new policies and legislation and/or the improvement of institutional frameworks, the establishment of new conservation programmes, and increased

PA coverage or improvements in their management. The main implementation barriers were listed as insufficient financial resources, weak mainstreaming in national and sectoral policies, inadequate monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and lack of communication with other departments or agencies. Only 25 countries have a resource mobilization plan for their NBSAP. In Costa Rica, this was created as a result of its engagement in the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN). UNDP-GEF projects were designed to provide 'proof of concept' for the reforms advocated by NBSAPs and inform sector ministry-led policy reform. Project reports and interviews indicate varying levels of buy-in, but there were many successful examples in landscape planning (Malaysia,[73] Indonesia[74]), forestry (Türkiye, Bangladesh, India,[75] Philippines[76]) and tourism (Sri Lanka,[77] Bhutan[78]). UNDP-supported NBSAPs have also progressively become accepted as a lens for measuring country performance and were included in the reporting exercise for CBD.

NBSAPs are intended to be 'whole-of-government' policies, thus facilitating the mainstreaming of biodiversity into all sectors of government and decision-making. The nature of this policy instrument varies from country to country, and it was difficult to determine to what extent adoption resulted in the mainstreaming of biodiversity in sectoral and cross-sectoral policy and practice. The CBD Secretariat's most recent assessment[79] notes that a total of 73 NBSAPs have been adopted as 'whole-of-government' instruments. Of the countries that received UNDP-GEF support to complete their NBSAP, 36 percent took a whole-of-government approach. UNDP has missed opportunities to encourage governments to build gender considerations into the NBSAPs as it does for Nationally Determined Contributions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). A global evaluation assessing UNDP and UNEP support in this area of work in 24 countries found that "countries stated gender and women as a general idea in their NBSAP, without designing related concrete actions or comprehensive strategies".[80]

Legal designation of PAs: UNDP has been successful in supporting governments to expand the area under legal protection; most expansion has occurred in countries with still-low percentage coverage of PAs, and larger questions remain about the strength of legal protection. In a smaller sub-group of countries, processes have been started to enable the recognition of community efforts in conservation and to attain enhanced land security.

73. UNDP Malaysia (2020) Terminal Evaluation of the Enhancing Management Effectiveness and Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas in Malaysia. Terminal Evaluation of the Enhancing Management Effectiveness and Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas in Malaysia.

74. UNDP Indonesia (2021) Enhancing the Protected Area System in Sulawesi (E-PASS) for Biodiversity Conservation. Terminal Evaluation.

75. UNDP India (2012) Greening rural development in India.

76. UNDP Philippines (2016) New Conservation Areas in the Philippines (NEWCAPP) Terminal Evaluation.

77. UNDP Sri Lanka (2019) Mid Term Review of GEF Small Grants Project.

78. UNDP Bhutan (2021) Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan. Press release.

79. CBD/COP/15/9/Add.1 17 October 2022.

80. UNDP and UNEP-WCMC (2019) Support to GEF Eligible Countries for Achieving Aichi Biodiversity Target 17 through a Globally Guided NBSAPs Update Process.

Through its GEF initiatives alone, since 2018, UNDP has supported over 2.3 million hectares to be placed under improved management.[81] Notable examples were found in half of the evaluation case study countries (Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, United Republic of Tanzania, South Africa, Malaysia, Lao PDR and the Philippines). UNDP's work in the Western Tian Shan Mountain ecosystems of Kyrgyzstan delivered significant results by integrating interventions at national to local levels. These include the creation of two new PAs[82] and a novel form of demand-led smaller PAs in buffer zones. Other significant achievements include Afghanistan, where four PAs were declared, covering a total area of 1,238,902 ha.

The proportion of land designated as PAs was below the missed 2020 Aichi Target 11,[83] and remains far from the increased ambition of the GBF, which calls for 30 percent of national territories to be protected by 2030.[84] Mapping the protected status of various ecoregions in which UNDP already has environmental interventions suggests a need for improved targeting of UNDP PA support (see Annex 4). The extent of PAs is limited in vast territories, such as Central America, the Mekong River Basin, and the Malay Archipelago, which encompasses Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In South America, there is also a particular need for enhanced ecosystem management effectiveness in the Andes region from Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to Argentina, which contain crucial biodiversity hotspots. Case studies have documented the establishment of some new PAs in these areas and show that UNDP was supporting national governments as they seek to balance the use of these mechanisms with local resource access and customary land rights.

Legally designating areas as protected requires careful planning and is of limited value if not followed up with subsequent action. UNDP created a significant public good by producing 200 country reports which offered comprehensive insights into each country's progress and challenges in meeting the Aichi Biodiversity Target 11.[85] These reports, a collaboration between UNDP and the CBD Secretariat, are rich with geospatially explicit data and analyses of PAs, detailing aspects such as coverage, management type and equity considerations. They offered actionable recommendations to enhance biodiversity conservation, such as enhancing the protection of KBAs, expanding protection for ecosystem services, and improving PA management effectiveness, and recording PAs in the world database. Despite the value of the data and analysis provided, the recommendations were not consistently reflected within UNDP country portfolios, or its broader strategic frameworks.

81.Further expansion is reported by UNDP country offices via results-oriented annual reports, although this information is not validated to the same extent as GEF-funded initiatives.

82. Alatai (56,826 ha) and Kan-Achuu (30,497 ha). PA land has increased from 3.9 percent to 7.6 percent in six years with a series of UNDP GEF-funded projects.

83. Aichi Target 11 called for at least 17 percent of terrestrial and inland water to be conserved through PAs and other effective area-based conservation measures.

84. UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2021) Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) and World Database on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (WD-OECM).

85. Aichi Target 11: By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 percent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes.

UNDP has also assisted in reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of national PA systems (Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Egypt, Serbia, Moldova, Georgia, Dominican Republic, United Republic of Tanzania, Ukraine). In China, for instance, UNDP helped the National Forest and Grassland Management Administration to operationalize a reform of the protected area system, harmonize strategies and operating guidelines of all PA work under multiple ministries, and to incorporate the CBD's principles and standards into the national system. UNDP has placed little focus on preventing the systematic weakening of the legal status of PAs, which has increased significantly since 2000 and has occurred in countries where UNDP was active.[86] Notably, nature-imperilled areas in Central Asia and the trans-Himalayan regions witnessed significant encroachment, which required restorative actions at their peripheries to achieve near-natural habitat conditions. CSOs such as Conservation International and WWF are leading efforts to monitor the protected area downgrading, downsizing and de-gazettement (PADDD), but systematic tracking does not occur.

PhotoCredit: Ab Rashid

86. Analysis of 3,749 PADDD events in 73 countries showed that 519,857 km^2 were removed from protection and regulations were tempered in an additional 1,659,972 km^2 . Most PADDD events (78 percent) have occurred since 2000.

In related efforts, especially with the promotion of the concept of OECM by the CBD, a smaller group of countries supported by UNDP, for example India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, and some countries in the Pacific Islands have increasingly worked with traditional community-based conservation approaches to provide recognition of these custodial systems as de facto components of national PA systems. Interventions were carried out as components of medium to large landscape-oriented GEF projects or as part of the GEF SGP.

Development and enforcement of environmental laws: UNDP has been instrumental in supporting member states with a variety of legal instruments, including environmental laws, legal frameworks and policy reforms. Most UNDP support has been delivered through specific projects, and frequently builds on earlier projects implemented by the organization. Progress has been slow in legal reforms addressing the drivers of ecosystems and biodiversity loss.

UNDP has supported the development, introduction or revision of environmental laws in the vast majority of countries in which it operates, providing support for forest management, biodiversity conservation, chemical regulation, land use and the rights of Indigenous communities, and aligning biodiversity with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The level of influence varies, with direct legislation observed in Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan and Costa Rica, and policy guidelines in Indonesia and the Philippines. UNDP support ranges from creating and amending legal frameworks, to proposing policy reforms and providing strategic support for national development plans.

Changes in environmental legislation require a suitable enabling environment to produce environmental outcomes. For example, UNDP's work on landscape projects (with case study examples from Costa Rica to the Philippines) has sought to bring policy and capacity-building components together, typically requiring multiple project cycles. However, there were many examples where post-project follow-up to provide funding and capacity building has not been available. There were examples of UNDP country offices overcoming this constraint; for example, in India, a small 10-year policy support unit has facilitated continuing discussions with the Government on policy work beyond the individual project life. Where country offices have built substantial EMBC technical capacity and long-term engagement in this area with the government, this has influenced regional agreements or even global agreements (e.g. the Costa Rica Country Office's work with the Government on the draft global targets 22 and 23 of the GBF).

There were a few examples of UNDP's support where environmental legislation has addressed the drivers of biodiversity loss (Costa Rica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lao PDR). Work on tackling damaging subsidies is underway in Kyrgyzstan but has faced challenges in the political environment. There are other examples of UNDP's work on multi-country initiatives to reduce the drivers of deforestation, but evidence on policy implementation was limited. As climate change rapidly becomes a leading driver of biodiversity loss, various stakeholders[87] have signalled the need for transformative policies that shift from sectoral to cross-sectoral paradigms, and from 'command and control' environmental response to decentralized participatory management modalities.

87. World Resources Institute (2019) Six Barriers to Protecting and Restoring Forests – and Strategies to Overcome Them; FAO (2022) Responsible Governance for Tenure. Rome. https://www.fao.org/3/i2801e/i2801e.pdf; ICCA Consortium (2019) In Defense of Land Rights.

UNDP has promoted transformative policy reforms and has made achievements where the co-operation framework with the government has encouraged such a vision. This pace of reform in many countries has, however, not matched the level and urgency of structural reforms needed in the environmental sector. In addition, reformist policies take some time to promulgate and longer to be financed and enforced.[88] Several UNDP projects have supported successful policies but faced discrepancies between national and subnational regulations.

Landscape planning and connectivity: UNDP has provided notable support for the governance mechanisms that enable landscape initiatives and improved connectivity between ecologically important areas. This typically involved complex convening of stakeholders at multiple levels and developing funding models for collaborative governance of biodiversity corridors.

UNDP acted as a convenor in ambitious projects striving for collaborative governance of biodiversity corridors, with examples in Kenya within the wider Amboseli landscape,[89] in Bhutan[90] and Myanmar[91] (improving effective corridor management), in China[92] (strengthening and mainstreaming the PA system in Gansu province), in Malaysia (addressing the growing fragmentation of the central forest spine), in Colombia (the Amazon),[93] in Indonesia[94] (Kalimantan's lowland and montane areas in the face of growth and development of estate crops), in Iran (in participatory governance and improved agricultural practices around the Lake Urmia basin) and in the Philippines (piloting institutional convergence towards management of 19 biodiversity corridors at the national and subnational levels). UNDP also supported community management of corridors through the SGP, with innovative landscape-level initiatives in the Philippines, Indonesia, Ecuador and Bolivia. Challenges noted related to technical complexity (e.g. coherence across competing land uses such as forests, wildlife and riparian corridors, agricultural and grazing areas), transaction costs of working across multiple sub-national contexts with multiple partners, and engaging and incentivizing the private sector.

In Türkiye, the Sustainable Forestry Management project resulted in significant achievements in policy and governance, pioneering an integrated approach to forest management within landscapes, which led to the development of 28 forest management plans that integrate biodiversity, non-timber forest products and ecotourism. A shift in forest management was also evident, with the General Directorate of Forestry producing around 100 additional plans. The transition was further strengthened with the introduction of new by-laws and the groundbreaking creation of legislation on ecotourism, a first for Türkiye.

88. Examples include the protracted period it took for the Cambodia UNCCD national action plan to be promulgated, and the long delayed implementation of a promulgated policy on agricultural land use planning in the Philippines. See also Aggarwal Safia, and others. (2021) Tenure reform for better forestry: An unfinished policy agenda Forest Policy and Economics.

89. UNDP Kenya (2021) Enhancing Wildlife Conservation in the Productive Southern Kenya Rangelands through a Landscape Approach Kenya, 2017–2021.

90. UNDP (2023) Independent Country Programme Evaluation, Bhutan. Independent Evaluation Office. New York.

91. UNDP Myanmar (2020) Strengthening Sustainability of Protected Areas Management in Myanmar. Terminal Evaluation.

92. UNDP China (2021) Enhancing conservation of globally significant biodiversity through protected area system strengthening in Gansu (China-Protected Areas System Reform – C-PAR 2). Mid-term review.

93. UNDP Colombia (2021) Connectivity and Biodiversity Conservation in the Colombian Amazon (Sustainable Amazon for Peace). Mid Term Review.

94. UNDP Indonesia (2021) Strengthening Forest Area Planning and Management in Kalimantan (KALFOR). Midterm Evaluation.

In Papua New Guinea, UNDP assisted the Government in its environment sector reforms to strengthen the PA policy framework, which has the potential to secure more stable funding flows for the biodiversity agency through increased financial autonomy of the biodiversity agency and use of non-conventional strategies such as biodiversity offsets, carbon offsets and support to heritage.[95] In 2022, UNDP facilitated the establishment of the PNG Biodiversity and Climate Fund to ensure long-term sustainable financing for PA management and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Transboundary cooperation: UNDP has provided effective support for transboundary management of water resources and species protection, such as migratory birds and snow leopards. Country offices with shared ecosystems have coordinated 'science diplomacy' to develop areas for collaboration, even between countries that have unresolved disputes. However, the negotiation process in transboundary water management projects often results in limited prioritization of ecosystem health considerations, which risks overlooking existing biodiversity loss.

Since 2018, UNDP has supported some form of cooperation and connectivity for ecosystem management and biodiversity in 17 ecosystems that cross national boundaries and has engaged approximately 20 countries in these cooperation initiatives. This support ranged from cooperation on transboundary zones in both terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, to conservation of migratory bird routes and protection of snow leopard habitats.

UNDP played an important role in supporting governance arrangements and building technical skills for transboundary water projects in many regions, including areas with unresolved disputes. In Ecuador, UNDP was instrumental in supporting integrated water resources management projects that span neighbouring Peru and Colombia. In South Africa, UNDP has been part of strategic action programmes such as Orange-Senqu River Commission and the Limpopo River Basin project, which involve multiple countries from the region. In the Balkans, particularly Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, projects focus on integrated water resources management in the Drin Basin; UNDP supported similar work for Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's Vrbas River Basin. Water diplomacy events were included in GEF 7 projects in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to strengthen the capacity of national politicians involved in the regional water negotiations and to advance water related cooperation in the Aral Sea Basin and the associated river basins (e.g. the Amu Darya River) for sustainable development and adaptation to climate change. UNDP Cambodia and Lao PDR also collaborated to promote integrated water resources management among climate vulnerable cities along the Mekong River.

While these projects have significant implications for ecosystems, the evaluation found only one example from Cubango-Okavango River Basin in Angola that makes transboundary ecosystem health an explicit objective with a holistic focus on water quality, biodiversity, habitat and other ecosystem services, stepping away from the dominant and narrow focus on basin hydrology. This oversight may lead to disregarding existing environmental degradation in dependent ecosystems and undermine the sustainability of their ecosystem services. Additionally, a narrow focus risks overlooking existing biodiversity loss. Furthermore, UNDP transboundary projects typically focus

95. UNDP PNG (2020) Ridge to Reef Strengthening the Management Effectiveness of the National System of Protected Areas. Terminal Evaluation.

on water resources and not on transboundary ecosystems from where the water is derived. For example, land degradation is one of the critical ecological issues in the Aral Sea Basin, presenting the loss of ecosystem function (including the production of water resources) and decreasing the productivity of agriculture and livelihoods. Land degradation is caused by anthropogenic (e.g. water abstractions for irrigation) and climatic factors. From 1982 to 2015, 66.6 percent of the water area and 11.68 percent of forest area had been converted to barren land and shrubland in the basin.[96] However, these 'upstream' linkages were not directly supported by UNDP programming, and hence were left as the responsibility of national land use planning departments and environmental ministries to follow up; needed actions often 'fall through the gaps', leaving critical degradation drivers unattended.

UNDP has been instrumental in supporting the conservation of migratory soaring birds under a GEF-funded umbrella programme in the Rift Valley/Red Sea flyway. This is the second most important flyway in the world, used by over 1.5 million birds of at least 37 species (including five globally threatened species) for travelling between their breeding grounds in Europe and West Asia, and wintering areas in Africa each year. The aim was to mainstream migratory soaring bird considerations into the productive sectors along the flyway in seven of the 11 countries within the flyway, namely Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Progress has included influencing country sector policies, such as Jordan's signing of the Raptor Memorandum of Understanding, and the establishment of the Centre of Environmental Excellence for Renewable Energy Projects in Egypt. In Egypt, UNDP's multisector engagement has led to increased protection for birds from polluted wastewater in lagoons and the adaptation of wind farm management to minimize bird mortality during the migration seasons. Another project is currently assessing biodiversity considerations in the wind energy sector to minimize harm to birds and bats in Argentina.

In other efforts to protect snow leopard habitats, which spans 12 countries and approximately 1.8 million km^2 of mountain ecosystems across Central and South Asia, UNDP has played a key role in strengthening transboundary cooperation between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.[97] The project identified knowledge gaps related to the design, planning, implementation and monitoring of transboundary landscape management, and used the results to inform the development of an information sharing mechanism. Close coordination between country offices enabled UNDP to engage in 'science diplomacy' and support countries with political disagreements to engage on a technical issue of joint interest.[98] UNDP provided technical support and convened individual government agencies in joint meetings and conferences. and provided information to underpin the Protocol signed in 2018 between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on establishing transboundary cooperation. In 2021, UNDP supported the development of a Memorandum of Understanding for the conservation of snow leopard, its prey and habitat in the West Tien-Shan and Pamir Alai, which was signed by all four countries. This led to a unified position for Central Asian countries at the United Nations Climate Change COP 26. It has also provided a unifying framework for successful national UNDP snow leopard conservation projects.

96. Frontiers (2023) Identifying Land Degradation and its Driving Factors in the Aral Sea Basin from 1982 to 2015.

97. UNDP Kyrgyzstan (2020) Transboundary Cooperation for Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Conservation, Terminal Evaluation.

98. Interviews and Ruffini, P. B. (2020) Conceptualizing science diplomacy in the practitioner-driven literature: a critical review. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7(1), 1–9; Nye Jr, J.S. (2016) "Soft Power: the means to success in world politics". In Hunt, A. (2016). Public Diplomacy: What it is and how to Do it. Geneva, UNITAR.

While these national and transboundary water and biodiversity conservation initiatives were important, there was, however, a strong need for an increased focus on integrated ecosystem management. The design of these initiatives is often complex, as is their effective management and implementation. Yet building these capacities remains critical to the long-term sustainability of these ecoregions.

Illegal wildlife trade: UNDP made important national-level contributions towards action against illegal wildlife trade, although it has not fully leveraged its governance expertise or its global presence to challenge persistent demand for illegal goods and issues of corruption that undermine enforcement.

Since 2015, UNDP has made concerted efforts to tackle the illegal wildlife trade (IWT). UNDP was the largest implementor under the GEF-funded Global Wildlife Program (GWP), supporting 20 projects in 18 countries, with a total budget of $117.2 million.[99] These projects have enabled various forms of action against IWT and promote wildlife-based economies for resilient development. In Indonesia, enforcement capacities to combat IWT have been enhanced over three related projects, which have supported 20 legal cases ranging from deforestation and forest encroachment to illegal mining and enabled the drafting of a national roadmap for tackling IWT including guidelines on using Indonesia's money laundering regime to combat wildlife crime. Implementation to date has shown a need to better address the socio-economic dimensions of IWT at the grassroots level to tackle both push and pull factors that make IWT attractive.[100]

Several other UNDP projects under GWP are in progress with early results. In Thailand, the "Kind Dining" campaign aims to reduce wild meat consumption and the associated risk of disease transmission from wildlife to humans, while the "Mercy is Power" campaign focuses on reducing demand for the use of ivory and tiger products, such as amulets. Both campaigns have resulted in a better understanding of the consumer demand for wildlife products, which is required to change behaviours, and recommendations for other projects to thoroughly analyse the root causes of demand and focus on campaign design quality.[101] Ethiopia strengthened its collaboration with four neighbouring countries (Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya) to combat illegal trade across national boundaries and strengthened the capacity of customs and police units, leading to an increase enforcement actions.[102] Similar initiatives have been implemented in Mozambique (aligning with the Southern African Development Community's Wildlife Law Enforcement and Anti-Poaching Strategy). Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Gabon have integrated elephant and rhino migration corridors into land use plans. Mozambique operationalized an anti-poaching coordination centre, which brought together key agencies and the private sector across the region to combat IWT, contributing to a decrease in poaching from 200 incursions per month in 2015 to five per month in 2022, contributing to an uptake in tourism.[103] Encouraging early results were reported by ongoing jaguar conservation projects in Ecuador and Belize.

99. The World Bank is the lead agency for the GWP, formally known as the Global Partnership on Wildlife Conservation and Crime Prevention for Sustainable Development; World Bank (2022) Global Wildlife Program Annual Report. Washington, D.C.

100. UNDP Indonesia (2021) Combating Illegal and Unsustainable Trade in Endangered Species in Indonesia. Mid-term Review.

101. World Bank (2022) Global Wildlife Program Annual Report. Washington, D.C.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

Although effective in strengthening national enforcement, UNDP's country focus has limited its contribution to efforts targeted at the demand side of illegal trade. A 2018 evaluation[104] found the Global Wildlife Programme lacked the multi-country coordination needed to address the international market for illegal products. Although the global programme was managed by the GEF and the World Bank, UNDP is the largest implementor and has a presence in the key countries driving demand, or used as transit, for illegal wildlife trade, which could help to overcome the isolated country focus of GWP. The evaluation also identified that the role of political will and corruption had been overlooked by GWP; indeed, it should be noted that only three UNDP projects (the same number as IFI initiatives) addressed corruption, given the organization's limited experience in this area. Beyond GWP, UNDP's multi-country project on snow leopard conservation developed a sophisticated IWT database in collaboration with Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network (TRAFFIC), International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), Environment Investigation Agency (EIA) and the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) to document and track poaching and trade activity. Within the United Nations system, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the focal agency for the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the United Nations Convention against Corruption, as well as a partner agency of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC).[105] However, there has been limited collaboration with UNDP.

Photo Credit: Enjojo Wildlife Foundation

104. GEF (2018) Evaluation of GEF Support to Combat Illegal Wildlife Trade.

105. The partner agencies to ICCWC are the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Secretariat, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Bank and the World Customs Organization (WCO).

Effective management of ecosystems and biodiversity

UNDP has provided a range of interventions to improve capacities for the effective management of ecosystems and biodiversity in at least 75 countries in the 2018–2023 period covering all areas of conservation and natural resources management. Overall, these account for at least 125 projects out of 602, and around 10 percent of overall expenditure.

Management effectiveness: UNDP employed a set of measures to increase the management effectiveness of PAs, including training, patrolling, monitoring and data management, and financing. While its efforts at the national level have shown promise, persistent capacity gaps and financial constraints at the sub-national level could undermine the sustainability of these efforts.

Less than a quarter of the global terrestrial PA estate has adequate staff and budget.[106] Globally, UNDP helped to introduce a range of capacities, innovations and finance models to strengthen PA management. At a national level, UNDP-supported NBSAPs have progressively become accepted as a lens for measuring country performance. Some support for biodiversity capacity building has come from National Capacity Self- Assessments (NCSAs), but they can sometimes be dated and have built-in biases in the self-assessment process. In addition, UNDP employs a set of measures to increase the management effectiveness of PAs, including training, patrolling, monitoring and data management, and financing.

UNDP widely used the METT, a GEF requirement, and other results-based management (RBM) tools to enhance the effective management in PAs and for species monitoring. These tools have been institutionalized in several countries. For example, a project in Indonesia extended Resort Based Management activities in various parts of the PAs of Sulawesi.[107] It conducted training to enhance capacity for the implementation of RBM, effective anti-poaching, biodiversity monitoring and the inclusion of lowland forest under conservation management. In South Africa, a project institutionalized METT as the official monitoring tool. Improvements to management effectiveness were widely acknowledged as among the most important impacts of the project, bringing the METT to a next level, which facilitated the transformational change aimed at cost-effective PA expansion and management.[108] Between 2015 and 2018, there were significant improvements in PA management and conservation measures in United Republic of Tanzania; this capacity was beginning to be demonstrated at a country level through additional investments across different ecosystems and regions. The Government of the United Republic of Tanzania strengthened and instituted new oversight arrangements with agencies responsible for PAs in the country, and established the national Wildlife Management Authority. UNDP's support in Malaysia has resulted in the establishment of a PA Working Group for better coherence and lesson sharing between Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. In addition, UNDP transformed the Government's Institute of Biodiversity into a Centre of Excellence for PA and wildlife management through the

106. Coad, L., and others (2019) Widespread shortfalls in protected area resourcing undermine efforts to conserve biodiversity. Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment, 17(5), 259-264

107. UNDP Indonesia (2020) Enhancing the Protected Area Network in Sulawesi for Biodiversity Conservation (EPASS) Terminal Evaluation.

108. UNDP South Africa (2022) Management Effectiveness of the Protected Area Network, South Africa. Terminal Evaluation.

provision of certified training modules, training of trainers, GIS software and computers, with a view to enhance the quality of PA managers and rangers in the country. At the individual PA level, METT has been internalized by all key PA management authorities in Peninsular Malaysia as part of the standard operating procedure, representing a first step towards performance-based management. More widely, there remain concerns about the quality of the assessment process, and projects highlight the risks inconsistent application across PAs.[109]

While UNDP efforts at the national level to strengthen management effectiveness have had success, capacity gaps and financial constraints remain at the sub-national level which have serious implications on the sustainability of these interventions. UNDP's long-term support watersheds linked to Lake Urmia in Iran has established Provincial Governmental Working Groups within wetland sites designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, and succeeded in building institutional capacities across national to local governance structures. Elsewhere, results were mixed. In Botswana, the quality-of-service delivery for environmental conservation and protection has improved within the Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism, but are unlikely to be sustainable due to capacity gaps at the village and local administrative levels.[110] In Uganda, where a project was initiated to build resilience on wetland and catchment management, insufficient trust and understanding of the project by local communities remain a challenge.[111] In Guatemala, UNDP implemented a project on the sustainable management of ecosystems; however, there was little capacity for environmental management in the department of Huehuetenango where the project was implemented, since the region remained isolated until recently.[112] In Algeria, while a UNDP programme contributed to strengthening the capacities of actors involved in the sustainable management of ecosystems at the national level, efforts need to be made in local development, where technical support through the mobilization of specific expertise and financial resources was lacking.[113] Similarly, in Senegal, UNDP provided local communities with plans for the management and development of community nature reserves, supported reforestation and soil restoration, and reinvigorated local ecosystem management authorities; however, this has not been sufficient to improve the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity due to funding problems, the lack of support for protected reserves, and the limited autonomy of local natural resource governance bodies.

Species monitoring and patrolling: UNDP's support has contributed to species recovery in certain contexts through enhanced monitoring capacities combined with community engagement in poaching control. The sustainability of these efforts depends on effective ownership to maintain specialized equipment and local interest, and not enough has been done to promote their use at the scale needed.

109. See, for example, UNDP (2022) Conservation and sustainable use of Pamir Alay and Tien Shan ecosystems for snow leopard protection and sustainable community livelihoods. Terminal Evaluation. For a wider discussion on using METT, see Stolton, S., N. Dudley, A. Belokurov, M. Deguignet, N.D. Burgess, M. Hockings, and L. Young (2019) Lessons learned from 18 years of implementing the management effectiveness tracking tool (METT): A perspective from METT developers and implementers. *Parks*, 25, 79–92.

110. UNDP Botswana (2021) support to the Cubango-Okavango river basin strategic action programme. Mid-term review.

111. UNDP Uganda (2022) Building Resilient Communities, Wetland Ecosystems and Associated Catchments in Uganda Project. Mid-term review.

112. Guatemala (2018), Final Evaluation Project on Sustainable Management of Forests and Multiple Global Environmental Benefits.

113. Algeria (2021), CPD 2016–2020 Final Evaluation.

Evidence from case studies in Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia and United Republic of Tanzania show that it was possible to reverse and stabilize mammal decline through well-informed and equipped anti-poaching task groups. In United Republic of Tanzania, UNDP support contributed to an increase in elephant and rhino numbers after years of decline linked to poaching. In Indonesia, UNDP's flagship Tiger conservation project succeeded in integrating data-driven decision-making and a common system for monitoring tiger, prey and forest habitat in five targeted PAs. The project introduced training and guidelines that led to the institutionalization of the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) patrol system and the use of monitoring data in park as well as provincial development planning. Evidence from Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park attributes the increase in tiger density in Gunung Leuser National Park since 2019 to the project.[114] Strong leadership and enthusiasm in the respective PAs was a success factor, and post-project institutionalization was increased by the National Director of PA Management.

Digital technologies have been employed to good effect in enforcement initiatives (Azerbaijan, Kenya, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Mozambique, Tajikistan, South Africa) and are being developed elsewhere (Indonesia, Malaysia, Zimbabwe). In Tajikistan, significant increases in effective management scores for two mountainous PAs were directly attributed to the combination of the SMART anti-poaching patrolling and monitoring system, human resources support to government rangers, and community benefit-sharing schemes in areas adjacent to the PAs.[115] Similarly, in Mozambique, UNDP supported wildlife law enforcement staff to increase patrols using data from collars fitted on elephants, lions, vultures, leopards and antelope, although it was also noted that poachers were utilizing new technologies that rival those used for enforcement. To be useful, ecological monitoring data must be housed in an effective management system; UNDP projects have provided effective support in this area. In Kyrgyzstan, UNDP supported the strengthening of the Environmental Information Monitoring and Management System (EIMMS) and the building of consensus among all partners for information management and sharing.[116] Other successful examples were seen in Türkiye and Costa Rica. A key lesson was that capacity has to be built for the use as well as the generation of data. In Uzbekistan, the SMART patrol system generated too much data for the implementing government agency to process; the transfer of data was on an ad hoc basis; and the use of data for research was not being undertaken, even although a protocol was in place.[117]

UNDP has contributed to improved poaching control by supporting rangers and to including communities, women and Indigenous Peoples in patrolling efforts (Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Guinea Bissau), and its results were in line with a number of studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of anti-poaching patrols.[118] Many UNDP initiatives involved strong partnerships with

114. UNDP Indonesia (2022) Transforming Effectiveness of Biodiversity Conservation in Priority Sumatran Landscapes (Tiger Project). Terminal Evaluation; and case study interviews.

115. UNDP Tajikistan (2022) Conservation and sustainable use of Pamir Alay and Tien Shan ecosystems for snow leopard protection and sustainable community livelihoods. Terminal Evaluation.

116.UNDP (2019) Strengthening of institutional and legal capacities to enable improvement of the national monitoring system and management of environmental information. Terminal Evaluation.

117. UNDP Uzbekistan (2022) Sustainable natural resource use & forest management in key mountainous areas important for globally significant biodiversity. Terminal Evaluation.

118. Delpech, D., Borrion, H., & Johnson, S. (2021) Systematic review of situational prevention methods for crime against species. *Crime Science*, 10(1), 1–20.

PAs and law enforcement agencies, and international conservation NGOs. Project interventions have been based on local needs and range from promoting peer learning and networking between rangers and park managers in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak[66] to many examples of facilitating rangers from local and Indigenous communities. The Women Forest Rangers Community Partner programme in Sumatra, which has expanded to Sulawesi, fostered a sense of empowerment and pride in women participants.[119] With support from UNDP Malaysia's Orang Asli programme, over 800 Indigenous People have been appointed as rangers. This led to an increase in community awareness that encouraged others to become rangers and has led to a reduction in snares.[120] While adapted to different local needs, the above enforcement interventions have reduced poaching. The Kyrgyzstan case study suggests that there have been notable increases in the numbers of deer, boars, lynxes, bears and wolves in the PA over the past five years.

A recent assessment estimates that the GBF target to further expand coverage of PAs and OECM by 2030 would require an additional 1.25 million rangers (or ranger equivalents) to cover 2.43 million hectares of terrestrial PAs and OECMs.[121] Painting a comprehensive picture of PA ranger coverage is difficult because information is often considered sensitive; data are often not collated or are dispersed among multiple agencies; there are difficulties in differentiating non-PA from PA

Photo Credit: Risto Božović / UNDP Montenegro

119. UNDP Indonesia (2021) Women in Action; Defenders of Indonesia's National Park in Biodiversity Haven, Sulawesi. Blog post.

120. UNDP Indonesia (2022) Transforming Effectiveness of Biodiversity Conservation in Priority Sumatran Landscapes (Tiger Project). Terminal Evaluation.

121 Ibid.

personnel; there are different definitions of rangers; and inconsistencies exist in the reported number and sizes of PAs.[122] The challenge of policing large and difficult terrain has limited effective enforcement, which has occurred in UNDP's portfolio in contexts such as Mozambique, Myanmar, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In this regard, UNDP could have made greater efforts in packaging its field-level ranger support with its governance and financing experience into a more sustainable and transferrable model. New options for a more strategic support recently opened up with the launch of the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA), a coalition of conservation organizations supporting and promoting the International Ranger Federation to build a network of well-supported, professional and capable rangers.

Innovation and technology: UNDP has promoted the use of technology and innovations in support of building management effectiveness and strategic spatial planning. These initiatives have significant resource potential for countries; however, the awareness level remains low.

The UNDP-supported United Nations Biodiversity Lab provides users with access to global and national spatial datasets for conservation and sustainable development. Over a 150 geospatial layers are available for analysis on the platform and include socioeconomic and environmental characteristics (forests, agriculture, land cover, biodiversity, PAs, etc.), which contributes to GBF

122. Appleton, M. R., and others (2022) Protected area personnel and ranger numbers are insufficient to deliver global expectations. *Nature Sustainability*, 5(12), 1100–1110.

Target 1.[123] UNDP's comparative advantage in partnership with UNEP and the CBD Secretariat was its 'Maps of Hope' approach, through which it convenes national stakeholders and scientists to share and access new data tailored to each country's priority policy commitments, and, through a four-step process, identifies the country's Essential Life Support Areas. The strength of the approach is that it adds coherence to the large number of available but unconnected data sets on environmental and development issues, a problem noted in interviews and several evaluations (Bolivia, Cambodia, Chad, Grenada,[124] Mongolia[125]). This initiative has significant potential to provide an important resource to government, although awareness of the Lab was low, and UNDP country offices made limited use of the maps.

UNDP support at the country level has led to enhanced spatial planning in a number of countries. In Costa Rica, the state-of-the-art Monitoring System for Use Change in Production Landscapes was adopted by the Government for use in the entire country. The tool will assist the Government with live-monitoring of agriculture sector's use of ecosystem services and enable them to control habitat destruction and deforestation.[126] In Türkiye, adaptive management of the Sustainable Forest Management project led to the incorporation of a remote sensing component, which expanded into an innovated AI-enabled remote sensing fire-fighting system, with follow-on funding from Amazon.

UNDP's projects have supported the use of digital technologies for environmental management in over 40 countries, promoting a diverse set of uses, from creating environmental baselines (Peru, Brazil, Costa Rica), monitoring water (India, UNDP Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People [PAPP][127]), making efforts to monitor carbon stored in peatlands (Thailand, Malaysia), and raising revenues for PAs through e-payment systems (Egypt), to digitalizing mining registries in Zambia.[128] The introduction of digital capacities in these projects has created results that range from increased evidence of environmental issues (Brazil, Thailand, Tuvalu, PAPP, Peru[129]) to improved environmental management (Azerbaijan, Costa Rica, Kenya,[130] Lao PDR,[131] Myanmar, Mozambique, Tajikistan, South Africa). In most cases, the UNDP project has helped government

123. Target 1. Ensure that all areas are under participatory, integrated and biodiversity inclusive spatial planning and/or effective management processes addressing land- and sea-use change, to bring the loss of areas of high biodiversity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity, close to zero by 2030, while respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

124. UNDP (2021) Implementing a "Ridge-to-Reef" Approach to Protecting Biodiversity and Ecosystem functions within and around Protected Areas in Grenada. Terminal Evaluation.

125. UNDP Mongolia (2020) Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions in the Construction Sector in Mongolia.

126. UNDP Costa Rica (2022) Conserving biodiversity through sustainable management in production landscapes in Costa Rica. Terminal Evaluation.

127. UNDP IEO (2022) Independent Country Programme Evaluation: PAPP.

128. UNDP IEO (2019) Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Zambia.

129. UNDP IEO (2021) Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Peru.

130. UNDP IEO (2021) Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Kenya.

131. A GIS study conducted early in the project identified illegal logging, enabling management to adapt and increase support for patrols. See UNDP Lao (2022) Sustainable Forest and Land Management in the Dry Dipterocarp Forest Ecosystems of Southern Lao Project. Terminal Evaluation.

departments to expand their digital capacities by adopting a digital innovation used in other countries, although in some cases, the project laid the foundational infrastructure for the digital capacity (Cuba,[132] Georgia,[133] Tuvalu, Philippines, Viet Nam[134] and Zimbabwe). In Tuvalu, for instance, the Ridge2Reef project made a significant contribution to national GIS capacity by establishing facilities and human capacities in the Central Government and in nine islands, which were then used to produce the country's Biodiversity Rapid Assessment and identify priority protection species in both marine and terrestrial areas.

The completed projects show that the introduction of digital capacities to environmental programmes requires careful planning because the systems may be complex (Thailand[135]) and often produce data that require validation at the field level (Botswana, Guatemala,[136] Malaysia,[137] Uzbekistan) or highlight sensitive issues (Botswana, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Myanmar). The community engagement approach used in Botswana to underpin the Land Use Conflict Identification System (LUCIS) was considered critical to prevent conflicts that may have arisen if a fully digital and remote process for land-use planning had been used. Despite creating a valuable tool, the project had not promoted its use to relevant agencies or created a plan for communities and NGOs to update the information.[138] In Tuvalu, Island Officers were trained by an environment data specialist, and subsequently enhanced awareness at the community level by jointly collecting data that fed into the first biodiversity surveys. Certain projects have overly focused on the technological component to the exclusion of human and institutional factors that support their use (Barbados, Brazil, India, Mauritius, Thailand, Suriname). In Brazil, for example, the UNDP-GEF project used detailed satellite imaging to establish a national Mangrove Atlas, recalculating the country's proportion of global mangroves, and highlighting their neglect in protected area and government planning.[139] However, the project had no impact on environmental management at the time of its final evaluation because resources were not made available to protected area councils to use the tools. In India, UNDP supported the creation of GIS land use and land cover maps, and carried out sectoral gap analyses, but lacked a coordinated stakeholder strategy, leaving it unclear which state or district government entity would own the land use plan.[140]

132. UNDP Cuba (2021) Evaluación medio término del proyecto Infogeo. Mid-term Review.

133. UNDP Georgia (2021) Harmonization of information management for improved knowledge and monitoring of the global environment in Georgia (CCCD in Georgia). Terminal Evaluation.

134. UNDP Viet Nam (2020) Improving the resilience of vulnerable coastal communities to climate change related impacts in Viet Nam. Mid-term review.

135. UNDP Thailand (2021) Maximizing Carbon Sink Capacity and Conserving Biodiversity and through Sustainable Conservation, Restoration and Management of Peat-Swamp Ecosystem. Terminal Evaluation.

136. UNDP Guatemala (2018) Project on Sustainable Management of Forests and Multiple Global Environmental Benefits. Terminal Evaluation.

137. UNDP Malaysia (2009) Conservation and Sustainable Use of Tropical Peat Swamp Forests and Associated Wetland Ecosystems Terminal Evaluation.

138. UNDP Botswana (2018) Improved Management Effectiveness of the Chobe-Kwando Linyanti Matrix of Protected Areas. Terminal Evaluation.

139 UNDP Brazil (2018) Effective Conservation and Sustainable Use of Mangrove Ecosystems in Brazil. Terminal Evaluation.

140. UNDP India (2023) India High Range Landscape Project. Terminal Evaluation.

Empowerment and inclusion

UNDP has had projects with an explicit objective to empower and include Indigenous People and/or local communities in at least 33 countries between 2018 and 2023, although the principles and participatory methods feature widely throughout its programming and all projects are expected to consider gender equality and empowerment. The support involves projects where local and Indigenous communities play a prominent role, including in community-led organizing, ecological education and in the promotion of local knowledge and support for ABS agreements. Support was provided in all UNDP regions.

Indigenous People and local communities engagement in ecosystem management: UNDP has supported important advances in promoting Indigenous Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs) as an alternative to government- or private sector-led conservation. Supporting Indigenous People and local communities to access funding has led to ecosystem and livelihood improvements, but has not yet reached the point of community-managed funding or regularized payment for ecosystem services.

UNDP has played a key role leading to the recognition of Indigenous People and local communities-led conservation. Its support for the creation of a registry of ICCAs has been a global achievement, increasing the potential for indigenous areas to become OECM and cover important areas outside PAs. At a global level, the ICCA programme has offered technical support to strengthen ICCAs as a viable mechanism, and to enable Indigenous People and local communities groups to achieve registration. It also involves country projects in Belize, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Guatemala, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Peru, the Philippines and Senegal. These projects indicate the growing international interest in ICCA good practice.

In a smaller sub-group of countries (e.g. India, Nepal, Indonesia, the Philippines, Costa Rica and Ecuador), where a higher level of recognition has been accorded to Indigenous Peoples, processes to formally recognize community conservation and, in some cases, to enhance their land security have started. In the Philippines a project has strengthened legal and institutional frameworks, as well as the capacities needed to effectively identify, map, recognize and support the governance and management of ICCAs.[141] Similar success was reported by SGP in Malaysia, and UNDP projects have also facilitated the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in NBSAPs (Panama). Globally, UNDP supported 348 community-based national and sub-national projects over 30 years as well as a sequence of UNDP projects ultimately supporting 16 ICCAs.

In Panama, the UNDP Country Office involved Indigenous Peoples in dialogues regarding the formulation of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. Consultations were held in the territories of the Ngäbe Bugle Region and the Naso and Teribé groups. Traditional authorities such as the Ngäbe Bugle Congress and Indigenous women's organizations participated, as did NGOs that promote the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. In Papua New Guinea, UNDP supported eight ICCAs covering approximately 450,000 hectares, demonstrating the application of a policy framework that recognizes traditional customary rights to land, and included prior con-

141. UNDP (2019) Strengthening National Systems to Improve Governance and Management of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas and Territories. Terminal Evaluation.

sent provisions before customary lands are included in investment proposals. During GEF 5 and GEF 6, consultations were held in Ecuador with eight Indigenous groups, four of which became ICCAs. Subsequent activities focused on adaptive landscape management through collaboration with bio-enterprises to reduce habitat fragmentation. In Costa Rica, UNDP's focus has been on ecotourism. SGP does not work on land security or ownership with Indigenous groups in LAC, possibly due to political sensitivity.

Beyond the ICCA support, a large number of UNDP projects contain participatory components focused on improving national PAs with contributions from Indigenous People and local communities stewardship. UNDP has recently supported conservation outside of PAs through a system of ecologically sensitive areas being pioneered in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. These areas involve multiple stakeholder actions usually among private landowners to support delineated production landscapes (e.g. biodiversity-rich portions of flood plains) with high ecological values that are experiencing degradation. The current pilots indicate good viability for upscaling, but also a strong need for negotiating skills and incentive systems to generate multi-stakeholder cooperation although co-management schemes. Research suggests that, in South Africa, the biodiversity conservation sector currently dominates stewardship practice through the biodiversity stewardship tool, however, catchment management and SLM, which are represented, for example, by the Departments of Water, Agriculture and Land Affairs and of Rural Development, are also important sectors for stewardship.[142]

In Peru, UNDP helped develop a new model of multi-stakeholder engagement to strengthen participatory governance at the landscape level around PAs, where local populations previously did not have the capacity to engage in PA management. UNDP supported community-based organizations and the Government (represented by the Park Service) to sign conservation and development agreements, and work in clusters to drive sustainable development at the landscape level. The model aligns community plans with landscape plans, and the clusters are used link communities to ministries for education, health and welfare services. The cluster also provides a means of incorporating community economic priorities linked to cocoa and non-timber forest product value chains, and the opportunity for private sector producers to address constraints from poultry production to ecotourism, which has incentivized their involvement. The extra resources accessed by the cluster have supported the community's engagement in landscape management and PAs. In 2019, the Prime Minister's Office, with UNDP support, replicated the cluster model to Loreto, a region with limited government presence and historic conflict between communities, and oil and gas companies. Although a budget of $1.4 billion was allocated for national scaling, it has not been implemented due to political instability.

UNDP also provides support to Indigenous People and local communities through its Equator Initiative, and an evaluation of a decade of this work in 2020 found that the Initiative provides relevant services and products such as nature-based solutions to its beneficiaries and responds to and evolves with the changing needs of the Indigenous People and local communities policy landscape as well as to those of its beneficiaries. The Equator Initiative has had a strong focus on gender inclusiveness, knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer learning and exchange with networks well established among Indigenous People and local communities, particularly in Africa, LAC and

142. Cockburn, J., G. Cundill, S. Shackleton, and M. Rouget (2019) The meaning and practice of stewardship in South Africa. S Afr J Sci.: 115(5/6), Art. #5339,10 pp.

the Asia/Pacific regions. However, Sungai Utik's hard-won achievements of land rights to ensure the protection of the territory for future generations in Indonesia proves to be an exception rather than a rule, and demonstrates the longer-term sustainability of Equator Initiative's work. The Equator Initiative's evaluation found that the Initiative requires greater focus on scaling up, a more robustly resourced management team and staff with local knowledge, as well as a more diverse range of international partnerships to ensure that its more recent focus on nature-based solutions is more widespread and has a sustainable impact.

One of the key inclusion benefits of the GEF SGP is that it purposefully targets Indigenous People and local communities, and accepts grant proposals submitted in local languages or presented in alternative media. Since the inception of the SGP, UNDP has supported Indigenous People and local communities in at least 94 countries, which is shown in many examples of indigenous inclusion in ecosystems and biodiversity management at the grassroots level. The current programme phase is particularly focused on production landscapes. In most countries in Asia, SGP has produced a country programme forged by National Steering Committees that support Indigenous People and local communities' capacities to craft and implement their own small projects for biodiversity conservation, SLM and climate change adaptation. Biodiversity is the single largest SGP theme[143] and accounts for approximately 40 percent of the portfolio, with projects aiming for multiple benefits (e.g. biodiversity, livelihoods and disaster risk reduction). Evaluations of the SGP find that has consistently delivered of environmental results at the local, national and global levels, and generated economic and social benefits, although it has not sufficiently measured the sustainability of the support.[144] Scaling up successful SGP projects remained a challenge in the examples reviewed for this evaluation. In some cases, other programmes have been inspired by other SGP projects (Orang Asli Fund in Malaysia[145] and the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority in Thailand), but there was little evidence of systematic replication. The SGP has introduced a strategic partnership window to allow $150,000 rather than $50,000 grants, but recognizes the need to build the capacity of Indigenous organizations to manage these larger funds.[146]

Establishing effective payment for ecological services (PES) schemes has presented challenges for many countries,[147] and UNDP has not extensively offered support under this component of its 2012–2020 Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework. Initiatives with mixed levels of progress were found in Bhutan, China, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Argentina, Serbia, Madagascar, Morocco, Malawi and Fiji. Ecuador was the most successful example and has secured results-based payments for communities across 28 local governments in the Amazonia. From 2017 to 2023, the initiative[148] disbursed just under $2 million, while REDD+ invested over $2.6 million in the development of territorial or land use plans for the 28 local governments.

143. UNDP and GEF (2021) Third Joint GEF-UNDP Evaluation of the Small Grants Programme.

144. Ibid.

145. UNDP Indonesia (2022) Final Evaluation (TE) of the Orang Asli/Asal MicroGrant Facility for Conservation and Livelihood (OA MGF), 2019–2022.

146. Key informant interviews.

147. Salzman, J. and others. (2019) The global status and trends of Payments for Ecosystem Services. *Nature Sustainability*, Vol. 1, March 2018. 136–14.

148. Socio Bosque is a national programme, initiated in 2008, that provides financial incentives for ecosystem conservation, impacting over 1.5 million hectares and benefiting 170,000 individuals while promoting community-based bio-enterprises.

Similar to the success factors identified by recent reviews of PES practice globally,[149] this evaluation's case study shows that UNDP has invested a significant amount of time in consultative design with stakeholders at all levels and buy-in from the Ministry of Agriculture as well as the Environment. The high levels of country office and government capacity and commitment in Ecuador enabled an ambitious project design, and significantly more time and preparatory work may be needed in countries at earlier starting points. UNDP's cross-cutting work from the national to local levels suggests that it has the requisite capacity to support governments and communities to apply the lessons of PES schemes, which highlighted that the participation of stakeholders was required to ensure that schemes were effective and suitable for local conditions "often require[ing] a long process of negotiation, where the role of intermediaries is key".

Improved livelihoods: UNDP landscape projects have successfully engaged local communities in alternative livelihoods, but ensuring that they are sustainable proved difficult. The promotion of ecotourism as an alternative livelihood for communities has had mixed success.

Photo Credit: UNDP Malawi

149. See IPBES Policy instrument. https://www.ipbes.net/policy-support/tools-instruments/payment-ecosystem-service

UNDP landscape projects include many successful components that have offered sustainable livelihood opportunities for poor and marginalized communities neighbouring PAs. Prominent examples include projects in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, Madagascar, Malawi, Peru, Philippines and South Africa, although results were found in all regions. While successful projects interventions have been replicated in new landscapes, typically it was the field-level intervention that was replicated in a new site and not the governance component, which would legislate wider and systemic adoption. An important exception was UNDP's work in Peru, which has mainstreamed biodiversity in a governance project focused on community- to national-level development planning and has gone to scale in certain areas. Similarly, UNDP projects in Bangladesh,[150] Cambodia,[151] and Viet Nam, within UNDP's inclusive growth and participatory governance portfolios are promising routes to scale community-based conservation initiatives.

Through BIOFIN, UNDP supported the development of Costa Rica's first indigenous tourism incubation initiative, which aims to foster sustainable income and biodiversity in Indigenous communities. The programme successfully integrated indigenous communities into sustainable tourism and biodiversity activities in seven territories, with infrastructure developed and plans for future expansion. Key enabling factors include participatory decision-making and multisectoral support. However, the initiative faces financial constraints and has struggled to build trust after past negative experiences, and the need to respect non-commercial sacred sites and traditions. A project in Lao PDR began with assumptions about the immediate viability of ecotourism potential. Although the groundwork for tapping ecotourism potential was laid, this had not matured into actual business investments at the end of the project because UNDP had not engaged the business sector in design stage.[152] In Kyrgyzstan, the highly effective Western Tien Shan project established new PAs with local communities gaining from ecotourism revenues and small eco-businesses.

The evaluation's case studies identified gaps in post-project financing that threaten sustainability, and note that investment is required to develop park infrastructure to secure an increase in visitors, and eco-businesses had no access to blended finance to grow. More generally, for GEF environmental projects, several evaluations noted that maintaining and scaling up interventions were often in question and a need for a more defined exit and scaling strategy with attention to funding issues is typically highlighted as an issue.[153]

Supporting appropriate and alternative nature-based livelihoods for forest-dependent communities has been considered an important premise to stem poverty-driven degradation of natural resources. There were many successes associated with community-oriented components of UNDP's large GEF projects as well as the SGP. This perceived correlation between reduced poverty and sustained forests, however, has faced limitations. Incremental policy reforms towards social forestry tend to prevent using the forest for livelihood benefits. For instance, while tenure reforms have focused on private, household-level reforms, equivalent reforms securing property

150. SDG Localization and Financing Project (ID: 00118242).

151. Final Evaluation of Cambodia Country Program Action Plan (CPAP) 2016–2018.

152. UNDP Lao PDR (2022) Sustainable Forest and Land Management in the Dry Dipterocarp Forest Ecosystems of Southern Lao Project. Terminal Evaluation.

153. UNDP IEO (2021) Rapid Evidence Assessment of the UNDP environment support through the Global Environment Facility and other vertical funds.

rights to communal customary lands have been slow.[154] Sites allocated for community forestry tend to be degraded, and the period for tenure security tends to be relatively limited (15–35 years).[155] There were cases where mature community efforts in forest protection were penalized by excessive regulation on smallholder forest utilization efforts or being unable to access voluntary carbon facility that focus degraded lands.

Indigenous People and local communities biodiversity work also involves practical challenges including long learning curves to gain capacity to participate effectively in value chains, and striking a balance between the volume of products needed by the market and respect for traditional systems that avoid unsustainably intensifying output. Other challenges common to EMBC work with communities were ensuring that the supply chain is biodiversity-friendly (e.g. that carrying capacities are observed and inappropriate waste generation avoided), ensuring gender sensitivity and accountability, and enabling effective benefit-sharing mechanisms. These require consistent guidance and monitoring over a longer period than a project life and need to be mainstreamed in technical support agencies.

Indigenous People and local community rights – Projects that have succeeded in improving community livelihoods continue to be vulnerable to third-party resource grabs where effective enforcement was not in place for land tenure and other resource rights.

Evidence from this evaluation and wider research demonstrates that communities practising custodial roles without statutory tenure in KBAs, or areas adjacent to PAs, remain vulnerable to land competition and incursions by entities who have greater ability to engage with government to acquire land. This has reportedly become more problematic as governments seek to attract foreign direct investment to support economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of secure land tenure is a widespread barrier to community stewardship, and a lack of competitive sustainable livelihoods has been a particular problem in Africa.

UNDP projects have often sought to strengthen local community land tenure, and many UNDP landscape projects have elements that improve enforcement, especially throughout Eastern and Southern Africa.[156] UNDP's experience in Malaysia presents a partially successful case in which UNDP used its neutrality and historical presence to liaise between the state government and Orang Asli communities, which have been in considerable conflict over the latter's customary rights in land and forests. Based on the success of UNDP's pilot projects, the organization was invited to lead the formulation of the national policy blueprint for Orang Asli. Within the wetland areas surrounding the Kinabatangan River in Sabah, Malaysia (a site designated as having international importance under the Ramsar Convention), UNDP has trained women in non-destructive fishing practices; however, there was no restriction on the fishing practices of

154. Aggarwal, S and others. (2021) Tenure reform for better forestry: An unfinished policy agenda Forest Policy and Economics.

155. RECOFTC (2020) Experts reflect on decade-long effort to boost social forestry. https://www.recoftc.org/projects/asfcc/stories/experts-reflect-decade-long-effort-boost-social-forestry-southeast-asia-0

156. Examples include: Gorongosa Restoration Project and the Wildlife Conservation Society, Mozambique and United Republic of Tanzania: Combating Poaching through an integrated approach, 2019–2026; Namibia: Strengthening the capacity of the protected area system to address new management challenges. 2014–2018; and Ethiopia: Protected Area Management and Illegal Wildlife Trafficking Enforcement Ethiopia, 2018–2023. 157 World Resources Institute (2021) Undermining Rights: Indigenous Lands and Mining in the Amazon. Washington, D.C.

people from outside of the villages. Even where there is formal protection, lack of enforcement can lead to similar problems. UNDP has initiated multiple projects to strengthen livelihoods and alleviate environmental pressures in the Amazon, such as the Amazonía Sostenible para la Paz in Colombia, ProAmazonia in Ecuador, and Paisajes Productivos in the Peruvian Amazon. Nevertheless, a recent study shows that legal and illegal mining activities now extend over more than 20 percent of Indigenous territories, posing a threat to numerous Indigenous communities and vital ecosystems, spanning an area of 450,000 square kilometres.[157]

In Senegal, UNDP initiated the establishment of community natural reserves, which are distinct from national PAs yet recognized in the Forestry Code. Communities are engaged in management activities for the reserves, combining productive with restoration activities, such as sand dune stabilization to prevent coastal erosion, mangrove and forest restoration. Stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation confirmed that the reserves relieved pressure on natural resources and were beneficial for communities. However, there was pressure from outside sources wishing to exploit natural resource in the reserves, and enforcement capacity was weak. More generally, the *State of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Lands and Territories* (2021) recommends that Indigenous People and local communities be empowered by creating capacities to monitor and effectively address encroachment from third parties as a way to reduce threats.[158] UNDP also supported Ecuador's largest Indigenous Peoples' association, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), in strengthening their law enforcement capacities, making smaller Indigenous communities independent in their demand for enforcement.

UNDP has also made efforts to displace practices that infringe on community rights by helping governments to convene partnerships with businesses willing to engage with more sustainable EMBC practice. UNDP has used a promising regional approach in '"Promoting Responsible Business Practices through Regional Partnerships", which covers seven countries, including four in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam) and three in South Asia (Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka).[159] This aims to better enable governments, civil society and the business sector to support the rights of communities that are vulnerable to the entry of land-based investments (e.g. in plantations). These areas sometimes include KBAs and areas adjacent to PAs. UNDP engagement has influenced the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to embrace business and human rights concepts as a priority area.

Access and Benefit Sharing: UNDP has ensured that improved legislative and policy frameworks provide benefits to specific communities. However, this has not translated into demonstrable outcomes for biodiversity and ecosystems, reflecting weak monitoring as well as limited follow-up and resourcing of Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) policy.

157. World Resources Institute (2021) Undermining Rights: Indigenous Lands and Mining in the Amazon. Washington, D.C.

158. World Wide Fund for Nature, UN Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre, GEF Small Grants Programme, ICCA-Global Support Initiative, LandMark Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, Wildlife Conservation Society, UNDP Equator Prize, International Land Coalition Secretariat, Conservation Matters LLC and International Union for Conservation of Nature. (2021). The State of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Lands and Territories: A technical review of the state of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' lands, their contributions to global biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, the pressures they face, and recommendations for actions. Gland.

159. UNDP RBAP (2021) Promoting Responsible Business Practices through Regional Partnerships. Mid-term review.

The Nagoya Protocol is an international agreement that aims at sharing the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable manner. Since 2018, UNDP has supported 30 countries to comply with Nagoya Protocols, with an expenditure of at least $16 million, and support regional biodiversity reports in Asia and Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The expectation that ABS would lead to the conservation of biodiversity rests on the assumption that awareness of the economic value of biodiversity is sufficient to channel economic gain from ABS to conservation, or that the creation of incentives that lead to conservation would rely on the negotiation of each bilateral agreement.[160] However, despite its central role in the policy language of ABS, conservation has faded from the practice of ABS and now receives limited attention.[161] ABS originally focused on the collection and exchange of physical material, but today, bioprospecting relies heavily on the use of genetic sequence data. As a result, the global community has faced significant challenges retrofitting a mechanism designed for physical samples to digital sequence information (DSI).[162] The controversy around DSI threatened to stall the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework at CDB Conference of the Parties (COP)15 in 2022.[163] However, CBD Decision 15/9 established a multilateral mechanism for benefit-sharing from the use of DSI on genetic resources, including a global fund. It also established a fair, transparent, inclusive, participatory and time-bound process to further develop and operationalize the mechanism.[164]

UNDP-supported projects have led to the formulation of legal and policy frameworks for ABS, as well as benefits for local communities. An ABS project in South Africa undertook a process to ensure that the rightful traditional knowledge holders of rooibos, the Khoikhoi and San peoples, receive benefits from the its commercial utilization.[165] In Colombia, UNDP's support to ABS promoted the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the Chocó region by developing the science and technology to transform an extract of the Jagua fruit, *Genipa americana,* into a blue dye, with applications for the food, cosmetics and personal care industries. Value chains of non-timber forest products were developed together with small-holder farmers who otherwise had no access to regional or national markets.[166] In Malaysia, ABS was largely embedded within a legal and institutional framework.[167] The first ABS agreements in Malaysia (concerning oil from *Litsea cubea)* involved Indigenous communities in Sarawak. Case study interviews confirmed the relevance and positive results from this project and noted that working with UNDP has increased their global visibility. Funds from UNDP and a targeted approach to the use of technology have encouraged youth to return from towns by creating livelihood opportunities from the distillation of essential oils in their communities.

160. Sirakaya, A. (2022) Is the Nagoya Protocol designed to conserve biodiversity? *Plants, People, Planet*, 4(1), 68–75.

161. Scholz, A.H., J. Freitag, C.H.C. Lyal, and others. (2022) Multilateral benefit-sharing from digital sequence information will support both science and biodiversity conservation. *Nature Communications*, 13(1), 1086.

162. Laird, S., R. Wynberg, M. Rourke, F. Humphries, M.R. Muller, and C. Lawson. (2020) Rethink the expansion of access and benefit sharing. Science, 367(6483), 1200–1202.

163. Greenfield P. (2022) "Biopiracy row at U talks in Geneva threatens global deal to save nature". The Guardian.

164. Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity Fifteenth meeting – Part II Montreal, Canada, 7–19 December 2022 Agenda item 11 - Decision Adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity 15/9. Digital sequence information on genetic resources. https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-15/cop-15-dec-09-en.pdf

165. UNDP (2021) Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing: Theory to Practice under the Nagoya Protocol.

166. UNDP (2018) ABS is Genetic Resources for Sustainable Development.

167. UNDP Malaysia (2019) Developing & Implementing a National Access & Benefit-Sharing Framework in Malaysia. Terminal Evaluation.

Demonstrable biodiversity benefits of UNDP's ABS projects were few: the Malaysia example provides a case in point. The terminal evaluation found that technical support for in situ conservation or village-based propagation was weak, with continued extraction and off-site plantation being preferred. The ABS legislation had weaknesses from a biodiversity conservation perspective, assuming that resource extraction under ABS is benign. This raises the question about whether ABS agreements are 'biodiversity conservation- friendly'.[168] In Viet Nam, a project supported Ta Phin commune to develop a community protocol on biodiversity conservation and assisted the community with management of 65 ha of forest. However, there are still important gaps in terms of specific financial regulations guiding the ABS implementation, such as mechanisms to reinvest ABS monetary benefits in biodiversity conservation.[169] One positive example was seen in Ecuador, where the *Amphibian* project succeeded in setting up two conservation areas and establishing wildlife management plans and protocols for access to information and the community-led and participatory management of genetic resources.[170]

UNDP's programme of work on ABS included the Global ABS Community, which incorporated a community of practice and knowledge repository alongside the Global ABS Legal Clinics, developed originally to support Indigenous People and local communities involved in the negotiation of ABS contracts and agreements, and the Global ABS Business Facility, which provides support to researchers, private companies and industry leaders seeking to access and use genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge. However, the Global ABS community was closed due to lack of follow-on funding. In addition, there has been no follow-up on successful interventions that were taken to market. This was not confined to UNDP; a recent review of key ABS issues and research gaps identified the lack of best practice examples where the outcomes of ABS have led to successful commercialization and quantifiable benefit sharing (both monetary and non-monetary).[171] The ABS landscape has grown increasingly complex at a time when internal support for ABS has declined.

Gender equality and women's empowerment: UNDP has taken steps to incorporate improved gender strategies within its ecosystems and biodiversity programming. This has not yet resulted in substantive empowerment or equality gains because most of the projects were focused on women's participation in projects rather than processes that can be gender-transformative.

UNDP 2012–2020 Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework lacked a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, and its only tangible proposal to include gender lens in UNDP's nature portfolio was through the Social and Environmental Screening Tool (SESPs). In later years of the Framework, UNDP biodiversity work improved its approach to gender, integrating advances made by the wider organization and the GEF 2018 requirements for each project to undertake a gender analysis. UNDP also supported the CBD to develop a gender plan of action

168. Ibid.

169. UNDP (2021) Capacity Building for the Ratification and Implementation of the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing in Viet Nam ABS. Terminal Evaluation.

170. UNDP (2021) Independent Country programme Evaluation, Ecuador. Independent Evaluation Office, United Nations Development Programme, New York.

171 Morrison, C., F. Humphries, and C. Lawson (2021). A Regional Review of Genetic Resource Access and Benefit Sharing – Key Issues and Research Gaps. *Environmental Policy and Law*, 51(5), 273–296.

in 2020. The 2023 UNDP Nature Pledge represented a much greater evolution of UNDP ambition and launched targets to support at least 140 countries to integrate nature into their national and sectoral plans and practice with a gender-responsive approach, and support 100 countries to promote women's leadership and decision-making in natural resource management and closing gender gaps in access to and control over natural resources. The step change has occurred through good collaboration between the former Nature, Climate and Energy (NCE) and gender teams, although due to the scale of UNDP biodiversity activity, ensuring consistent quality application has been beyond the capacity of a small number of specialized individuals.

The adoption of gender approaches in the implementation of EMBC projects has not yet caught up with the advancements in the strategic direction. Approximately 40 percent of UNDP's gender-related results since 2018[172] were achievements in which UNDP ensured a balance in the number of men and women participants in project activities. Many project evaluations note that women were included as participants in training, but often without a clear rationale on their role or experience. Around 25 percent of projects achieved a further step by responding to differentiated needs of men and women participating in these activities and/or benefiting from the results. In the Himalayan ecosystems, UNDP has expanded beyond targeting approaches by working with women's groups as agents of change, and was encouraged to incubate early livelihood successes to ensure that they would be sustained beyond the project.[173] A limited number of UNDP projects contributed to a change in the conditions that hold gender disparities in place, which include enabling women to reclaim urban biodiversity corridors as free of gender-based violence in Costa Rica, and support for female rangers in Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan and Guinea Bissau. Tangible results for women's leadership were only present in projects designed to be gender-responsive or -transformative.

The most consistent examples of UNDP supporting Indigenous women's roles in EMBC were in the SGP (Guatemala, Senegal, Ecuador, Morocco, Iran, Namibia, Mexico). In Peru and Panama, UNDP opened space for the participatory consultation on women's unequal access to land, and the latter's Country Office helped to overcome women's barriers to participation in the formulation of the NBSAP by holding consultations in Indigenous territories. In Peru, UNDP supported Indigenous communities in the titling of their lands, of which 47 percent of new landowners were Indigenous women. These were outliers, however, and there were examples in which projects overlooked the need for land ownership as a pre-requisite for engaging in protected area support. Overall, the trend was for a more ad hoc approach to gender, in several cases taken in response to a mid-term evaluation recommendation.

172 The evaluation team applied the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale to better understand gender-responsiveness of results in evaluations, evaluating a total of 102 projects evaluations in 47 countries in 2018–2023. For the methodology, see: https://erc.undp.org/pdf/GRES_English.pdf

173. UNDP India (2023) Mid-term review report: UNDP-GEF Project Securing Livelihood, Conservation, Sustainable Use, and Restoration of High Range Himalayan Ecosystems.

Financing, valuing nature, and disinvestment

Between 2018 and 2023, UNDP delivered 53 projects in 63 countries,[174] with the primary objective of mobilizing and channelling finance for environmental initiatives. Total expenditure amounted to $219.6 million (15 percent of the portfolio expenditure), which included preparatory or 'readiness' support and the finance delivered through the mechanism. Of these, REDD+ and GCF-related projects accounted for $137.5 million of expenditure (23 projects) and BIOFIN for $35.4 million (two projects, Phase I and Phase II, 38 countries). Projects with individual country offices accounted for most of the remaining $22 million expenditure over this period.

Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN): BIOFIN has been highly successful, with significant growth over the years. While it demonstrates the importance of combining analysis of finance gaps with policy solutions, it remains primarily focused on public sector financing.

BIOFIN is a highly successful UNDP initiative that has seen significant growth over the years, growing from 12 countries in 2012 and scheduled to reach 132 countries in 2024. The BIOFIN approach demonstrates how important it is for UNDP to combine analysis of financing gaps with policy solutions and for working with ministries of finance. Furthermore, BIOFIN uses a highly scalable model of a centralized structure with a bottom-up process to facilitate country ownership. While the successful implementation of finance plans developed through BIOFIN remains to be seen, interviews confirm that it was limited primarily to public rather than private sector financing. Further, the country case studies undertaken during the evaluation indicate that BIOFIN projects can involve high transactions costs and were low-revenue options (small project sizes in most countries) for UNDP country offices.

BIOFIN phase 1, which started with 12 countries in 2012 and reached 30 in 2018, identified barriers for countries to advance financing for biodiversity, and piloted a new methodology for national finance planning. Phase 2 has nine donors funding 41 countries, while a related GEF programme supports 91 additional countries. BIOFIN incorporates lessons from UNDP's Poverty Environment Initiative work on demonstrating the value of ecosystem services to engage ministries of finance (rather than traditional ministry of environment partners), and concludes that valuation has to be combined with practical solutions and advice to access finance. BIOFIN has also enabled rapid scaling by using a standard process[175] for countries to work through, with ministries of finance selecting tools they found most relevant for their context.

Interviews with BIOFIN managers suggest that initially, governments were focused on established instruments such as PES and user fees. Countries are now particularly interested in innovative funding such as green bonds, and a Tiger landscape conservation bond is being developed in at least four countries in Asia. Debt-for-nature swaps are also now emerging as a key issue due to post-COVID-19 sovereign debt distress and biodiversity breakdown.[176] Relatively large-scale debt-for-nature swaps that have had a meaningful impact on sovereign debt in Belize and Ecuador

174. The number of countries is higher than the project number because BIOFIN includes 38 countries under one project initiative.

175. TUNDP (2018) BIOFIN Workbook.

176. UNDP (2023) (Re)orienting Sovereign Debt to Support Nature and the SDGs: Instruments and their Application in Asia-Pacific Developing Economies. New York.

(countries in which natural capital has a high-profile link to tourism) have increased interest in many developing countries.[177] Repurposing subsidies that damage nature (e.g. helping farmers to maintain incomes when a subsidy that makes water for agriculture artificially cheap is removed) was also being prioritized (joint work in 27 countries and the OECD). Support for finance solutions has started to produce results, for example, in Costa Rica (NBSAP resource mobilization plan), Botswana (PA user fee increase) and Guatemala (municipal budgets for biodiversity). BIOFIN projects can also add value to traditional, landscape-focused projects. In Ecuador, the National Corporation of Popular and Solidarity Finance (CONAFIPS) provides a means of finance for farmers to adopt more biodiversity-friendly practices in target landscapes. However, other country offices noted that the UNDP funding model required them to secure large projects to fund technical staff. yet BIOFIN projects, although small, required significant reporting to donors.

Public finance instruments: Biodiversity bond finance constitutes a small but growing component of green bond finance. UNDP is playing a useful advisory role to governments.

UNDP has been an innovator in areas of sovereign and municipal bonds, and the Sustainable Finance Hub has supported a range of financial frameworks of relevance to ecosystems and biodiversity, such as SDG financing and a variety of thematic bonds. Although the global market for sustainable bond issuance fell from $1.05 trillion in 2021 to $882 billion in 2022, green bonds remained by far the largest component ($493.1 billion).[178] The vast majority of this component was dedicated to greenhouse gas mitigation, followed by climate adaptation. The categories of "sustainable management of living resources ($22.9 billion)" and "terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity conservation ($12.7 billion)" constituted 4.7 percent of use of proceeds of green bonds in 2022.[179] Terrestrial conservation was just part of this 4.7 percent, but the volume of finance was significant in monetary terms and is projected to grow.[180] UNDP is a founding partner and implementer of the management of the Secretariat for the Global Fund for Coral Reefs (GFCR). GFCR is a multi-donor blended finance funding mechanism designed to unlock private sector capital and action to protect and restore coral reef ecosystems. Together with UNCDF and UNEP, UNDP managed the GFCR's Grant Fund, while Pegasus Capital Advisors Inc. managed the Investment Fund.

UNDP's work on terrestrial bond finance for EMBC is at an early stage. In Indonesia, UNDP provided support to the Government of Indonesia, through the Ministry of Finance, to issue the very first sovereign green *sukuk* (Islamic bond), reaching an amount of $1.25 billion in 2018. Interviews suggest that this has generated biodiversity financing of approximately $2.5 million. An ambitious UNDP financial instrument (with a potential size of $50 million -- $200 million) currently under discussion is the Tiger Bond, based on the World Bank's Rhino Bond. The aim is to procure blended finance for landscapes and communities.

UNDP is also supporting a number of countries interested in debt-for-nature swaps. In Kyrgyzstan, UNDP has an important role in supporting the Government to put in place the legal and institutional framework required by international investors. UNDP can also draw on significant capacity

177. Ibid.

178. KfW (2023) Sustainable Bonds Insight 2023.

179. Ibid.

180. Ibid.

in and experience with PAs to advise on what can be traded. The key constraint to debt-for-nature swaps was the availability of guarantees, which can only be provided by IFIs or sovereign governments with a strong credit rating.

In addition, UNDP has enabled increased access to public finance using tools such as results-based budgeting[181] and ecological fiscal transfers (EFTs), which have been strongly adapted for EMBC (Box 2).

Box 2: UNDP support for Ecological Fiscal Transfers

UNDP has successfully supported ecological fiscal transfers (ETFs) [182] – a form of intergovernmental fiscal transfer where revenues are redistributed among levels of government, from the national to the state government based on ecological criteria such as maintaining or expanding protected areas (PAs) – in a number of countries. Evidence from India suggests that ecological outcome variables, such as moderately dense forest cover, are positively correlated with subnational ecological spending and that the intergovernmental fiscal transfers are more influential than states' own income in determining the ecological expenditure at subnational levels. Evidence from Indonesia (Kalimantan Forest Project, KALFOR) also suggests that UNDP support to distribute ETFs to villages is a promising means of financing local communities to enable forest protection. Given the critical stewardship role of local communities for ecological management and biodiversity conservation, UNDP brings extremely valuable experience in working with the complex range of sub-national stakeholders and the ability to link with provincial and national government. Scaling up from three pilot districts remains a challenge and will need continued engagement because regulations must be tailored to each district's needs. It is also critical that a financial return can be demonstrated.

181. Supported by BIOFIN in countries including China, Georgia, Guatemala and Bhutan.

182. Kaur Amandeep & Mohanty, Ranjan Kumar & Chakraborty, Lekha & Rangan, Divy (2021) "Ecological Fiscal Transfers and State-level Budgetary Spending in India: Analyzing the flypaper effects in India." Working Papers 21/332, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy. UNDP Indonesia (2021) Ecological Fiscal Transfers – sharing revenues to improve the lives of millions in Indonesia's forest areas. UNDP Indonesia (2020) Strengthening Forest Area Planning and Management in Kalimantan (KALFOR) Project. Mid Term Review.

The private sector: UNDP developed innovative EMBC projects with private sector participation in many countries and played a key role in founding the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD). UNDP lacked sufficient specialist capacity to effectively leverage private sector opportunities and engage investors.

UNDP has supported governments to work with industry representatives that must meet legal requirements and are committed to introduce practices that improve EMBC. UNDP is working with the GEF-funded Good Growth Partnership (GGP), a global programme of five projects working simultaneously on production, demand and finance in Brazil, Paraguay, Indonesia and Liberia to enable sustainable development in three global commodity supply chains: soy, beef and palm oil. UNDP BIOFIN is working with the Government and mining industry in the Philippines to mainstream biodiversity conservation and protection in mining activities to access around $3.8 billion in mining fund commitments in place.

Support to multiple agreements between sub-national governments and local private companies presents a significant challenge. This is due to the greater human resources required to provide this support, which can be met, in principle, by partnering with other organizations. However, where context differs between localities or where a standard template cannot be applied, the increase in transactions costs for UNDP support rises very sharply. In Indonesia, UNDP helped

Photo Credit: Jaquelino Magno/UNDP Timor-Leste

establish the Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil Platform[183] and facilitate dialogue between government, smallholder farmers, market actors and civil society organisations, which resulted in a national plan. This successfully created an opportunity for the private sector and Ministry of Agriculture to address sensitive issues. Nonetheless, supporting work with small companies at the district level has been time-consuming because the government staff turnover rate was high and UNDP has to rely on projects to rebuild capacity while small companies wait for the district government to commit to the plan before engaging. The 2022 EU regulation has produced strong incentives for producers for this engagement,[184] but extending UNDP support beyond Indonesia and Malaysia has proven challenging.

There were examples of innovative UNDP projects developed with the private sector to generate funding for EMBC. The Lionshare Fund, established in 2018, aims to secure 0.5 percent of expenditure on advertisements that feature animals into a fund for wildlife conservation, but has had limited success. In South Africa, BIOFIN has supported the Government to establish the Biodiversity Sector Investment Portal, which promotes bankable investment opportunities and facilitates matching with appropriate investors. In the Philippines, BIOFIN has supported a fintech app that encourages sustainable shopping to grow trees. This has raised $300,000 and planted more than 1 million trees. However, these types of projects were not widespread, and this is still a new area for UNDP, with BIOFIN and the Pretoria Sustainable Finance Hub largely working with public sector finance.

The most widespread UNDP EMBC engagement with private businesses occurred through landscape projects that involve community-based businesses in areas surrounding PAs. Typically, these projects include a small grants component to support livelihood diversification. In the Kyrgyzstan Western Tien Shan project, for example, UNDP encouraged emerging honey and ecotourism businesses in communities surrounding a newly established PA to bid for small grants. It emerged from field visits that these businesses had sound business plans, considerable demand, and significant potential to grow but very little access to post-project finance. UNDP country office and BIOFIN work with CONAFIPS in Ecuador illustrates a solution to this kind of problem. CONAFIPS is a public bank that grants financing lines to savings and credit cooperatives, and mutuals, with the aim of contributing to the economic and social development of the members and clients of these financial organizations. In September 2022, following UNDP's advice and capacity building, they launched green credits for small-scale farmers and producers with favourable fees for those contributing to green economy. This involved CONAFIPS developing software that enables mutuals to calculate credits by evaluating environmental risks attached to the proposal. As of late 2023, 380 out of 420 mutuals are now obliged to offer green financing, valued at $580 million. The model of concessionary lending to incentivize biodiversity-friendly agriculture (or other business) has potential, given that unsustainable land management is a major driver of biodiversity loss. There has been considerable interest in the CONAFIPS model from other lending institutions in Latin America and Europe. Ecuador's enabling conditions made the success of the project more likely: CONAFIPS is a state-owned financial institution that provides

183. UNDP IEO (2020) Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Indonesia; and Indonesia ROAR 2018–2022.

184. In 2022, the EU agreed to a new regulation that bans the sale of palm oil and other commodities linked to deforestation unless importers can show that production of their specific goods has not damaged forests.

86 percent of credit to mutuals and could therefore insist on scheme conditions. The UNDP Ecuador Country Office has particularly strong EMBC capacity, and the Resident Representative has built a good relationship with CONAFIPS.

In 2020, UNDP was one of the four founding organizations behind the TNFD and remains on the Stakeholder Board. The TNFD was established to encourage and facilitate a shift in the mindset and behaviour of companies and financial institutions through enterprise and portfolio risk management and mainstream corporate reporting. This is the leading forum for corporate engagement on nature-related financial disclosure for large companies interested in taking action in this area. For example, the September 2023 Recommendations of the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures was produced by 40 taskforce members, holding $20.6 trillion in assets. While UNDP has played an important role as a co-convenor of this forum, several rights holders and CSOs that UNDP traditionally works with have strongly complained about being excluded from this process.[185]

UNDP projects developed sustainable national finance for PA work with ministries of finance and planning. Such activities were typically new areas for these ministries, outside of regular priorities, and required significant capacity and engagement, sometimes over multiple project cycles. The Enhancing Effectiveness and Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas in Malaysia project[186] faced challenges regarding institutionalization since there was limited government understanding of GEF processes at the outset and an over-reliance on UNDP. Nonetheless, this project built interest and capacity within the Ministry of Finance on new approaches to financing PAs. UNDP Malaysia reached out to the Regional Hub in Panama for examples and prepared a policy brief with best practices, localized with entry points in Malaysia. This led to a major success: the Government's introduction of the Ecological Fiscal Transfer with the 2023 national budget allocating MYR 100 million (approximately $21.5 million) to its states based on their coverage of PAs.

BIOFIN has succeeded in identifying harmful subsidies as drivers of biodiversity loss in many countries and is now working with a sub-set on the difficult task of repurposing them.

OECD 2019 data[187] on the most harmful subsidies for biodiversity indicate global agriculture subsidy costs of $451 billion and forestry subsidy costs of $55 billion;[188] these figures exclude fossil fuel subsidies. The environmental costs of subsidies dwarf the $124–$143 billion of 2019 financial flows into biodiversity conservation, compiled from BIOFIN data in the 2020 Financing Nature report.[189] The aim of GBF target 18 is: "Identify by 2025, and eliminate, phase out or reform incentives, including subsidies, harmful for biodiversity, in a proportionate, just, fair, effective and equitable way while substantially and progressively reducing them by at least $500 billion per year by 2030, starting with the most harmful incentives, and scale up positive incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity."

185. Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (2023) Joint open letter to the TNFD: Your work is undermining the real solutions to the nature crisis.

186. UNDP Malaysia (2020) Enhancing Management Effectiveness and Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas in Malaysia. Terminal Evaluation.

187. OECD (2020) A Comprehensive Overview of Global Biodiversity Finance.

188. The Paulson Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and the Cornell Atkinson Centre for Sustainability (2020) Financing Nature: Closing the Global Biodiversity Financing Gap.

189. Ibid.

UNDP BIOFIN phase 1 recognized the damaging role of subsidies, and the Biodiversity Finance Policy and Institutional Review (PIR) tool aims to quantify their role as drivers of biodiversity loss in each participating country. Interviews suggest that many developing countries were initially reticent to work on subsidies linked to environmental harm because they considered this an issue for industrialized countries; however, when presented with technical evidence that existing subsidies were not delivering their intended purpose, ministries of finance became interested in reforms as a means to increase the cost-effectiveness of public spending. In doing this, BIOFIN and UNDP have become leading voices on the issue of disinvestment from environmentally harmful subsidies at the country level but also globally, and have collaborated in this area with FAO, UNEP[190] and OECD.[191] More broadly, the evaluation notes that, in many countries, subsidies are currently not screened for their impact on nature, in part due to gaps in social and environmental impact assessment and screening.

BIOFIN phase II work on removing harmful subsidies is highly country-specific, with political, institutional and policy contexts determining coalitions for and against change. In Kyrgyzstan, work with partner Ministries of Finance and Agriculture showed that an existing fertilizer subsidy was costly and ineffective, and proposed three scenarios for reforming – limited, partial, and full reimposition of value added tax (VAT). Although the Government recognized the importance of the analysis, the proposal was placed on hold due to concerns about current shortages of fertilizer in the country and potential impacts on the consumer price. Due to political sensitivities, it may be more realistic to build coalitions to repurpose rather than remove subsidies for small-scale agriculture, and projects may need to develop less sensitive entry points. The Philippines provided an interesting strategy of 'starting small' in order to demonstrate the feasibility of transitioning from subsidies for a sub-set of farmers working on sloping lands, and supporting the Government to develop a multi-year transition plan to minimize the disruption of incomes.

Integrating ecosystems and biodiversity into development planning

UNDP's support has generally led to the incorporation of NBSAPs into national medium-term development plans, although this has not yet translated into a systematic integration of ecosystems and biodiversity into funded sector plans. Linkage with finance (BIOFIN) and integration with governance mechanisms (ICCAs in particular) have strengthened the national and sub-national landscape-level development plans. Sub-national government capacity, sectoral coordination, sustainability and replication of project-inspired strategies, and replicating good practices remain challenges.

UNDP support in at least 80 countries in 2018–2023 involves initiatives aimed at extending the principles and practices of EMBC to other sectors, predominately through landscape planning projects, climate action, and green economy planning. Overall, this accounts for at least 136 out of 602 projects, and 21 percent of EMBC portfolio spend. UNDP support to integrate ecosystems and biodiversity into development planning was both direct (projects incorporating this

190. FAO, UNDP and UNEP (2021) A multi-billion-dollar opportunity – Repurposing agricultural support to transform food systems.

191. BIOFIN phase II collaboration with the OECD on building coalitions to change subsidies.

with planning ministries or sub-national government planners) and indirect (ecosystem and biodiversity plans that influence development planning). The methods of support also range from planning-focused (e.g. support for NBSAPs) to EMBC projects that have a planning component (e.g. landscape conservation involving local government). UNDP has traditionally been most engaged with ministries of the environment, although almost all UNDP EMBC projects involve a range of line ministries and development/planning agencies. UNDP's whole-of-government support for international commitments (NBSAPS and nationally determined contributions, or NDCs) have often not been adequately delivered by national economic plans. Mainstreaming of biodiversity in local development plans is still not commonplace.

One of BIOFIN's four outcome areas supports participating countries to develop a framework for mainstreaming biodiversity into national development and sectoral planning. This evaluation found direct impacts on development planning in four of the 13 case studies where it was active. In the Philippines, for example, BIOFIN helped two provincial governments prepare local NBSAPs, and mobilized resources for them. Prior to the support, the sub-national governments had limited ability to develop plans without clear routes to national financing sanctioned by the ministry of finance. BIOFIN's work with the Governments of Indonesia and in Malaysia (on the Ecological Fiscal Transfer) also illustrates how making the economic case for biodiversity while identifying funded policy options can open space for biodiversity in development planning. Non-BIOFIN projects that mainstream EMBC into development planning were also seen in Cambodia (micro-watershed planning that builds on earlier SDG mainstreaming in local planning) and Indonesia (micro-watershed planning). In Ecuador, PROAmazonia mainstreams biodiversity conservation into a multilevel governance project spanning provincial, cantonal and parish levels. In Costa Rica, Monitoring of Land Use Change in Productive Landscapes involves local communities in biodiversity monitoring and land use planning, and has secured collaboration across 15 institutions. The 6th GEF-SGP has financed numerous multi-stakeholder landscape governance platforms with important links with ICCAs across Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines. Indirect impacts on local development plans via UNDP-supported NBSAPs have also been observed.

Sectoral ministries that implement the NBSAP have tended to work in silos rather than mainstreaming biodiversity conservation across the various ministries involved in national development planning. This has created challenges even where policies were supportive (e.g. Côte d'Ivoire) and constrained implementation, particularly where different levels of government administration were involved (as found in Nigeria and Ethiopia). The BIOFIN phase 1 terminal evaluation[192] recommended that "projects provide support to appropriate institutions to encourage decentralization of or augment their efforts to decentralize NBSAPs processes to a sub-national level (to provincial levels or regional landscapes)". Government capacity at the sub-national level is often limited, and UNDP country offices also have limited capacity to provide multi-sectoral support at the sub-national level.

192. UNDP (2019) Terminal Evaluation of UNDP-BMU Project: Building Transformative Policy and Financing Frameworks to Increase Investment in Biodiversity Management – Phase I (BIOFIN).

Sub-national development planning: UNDP landscape-level projects often have components that support sub-national development planning. These were valuable components of large, complex projects that reflect a decade or more of investment to build context-specific solutions. These projects draw on technical teams with environment, governance and socio-economic skills, and have been able to identify ecosystem and livelihood benefits to motivate partners and work effectively at national to community levels. Replication in country is possible and desirable but the process of scaling by adding successor projects is slow.

Most of the 13 country case studies undertaken during this evaluation provide examples of highly successful landscape-level projects that incorporate PAs and their surrounding zones with sub-national land use planning components. UNDP has a strong record of working with a complex mix of stakeholders over multiple project cycles at the national, sub-national and community levels to make this possible. In Bangladesh, three consecutive UNDP projects in the Chittagong Hill Tracts supported ecosystems protection and restoration strategies in 20 watersheds, working with local governments and ethnic groups on land use and management in forest and upland agricultural lands as well as micro watersheds. In Kyrgyzstan, the Western Tien Shan project involved national and sub-national government and community-level activities. At the municipal level, the project worked with local government to develop a land management planning module. This allowed local users to create GPS maps of farmland to avoid land conflict, and provided equipment and training for estimating the amount of forage available for grazing animals. The Municipality identified where overgrazing was occurring and introduced local development planning to manage herd sizes. In Indonesia, 18 multi-stakeholder landscape governance platforms were established through the 6th GEF-SGP Programme. These platforms focus on various issues, such as ecotourism in Nusa Penida, energy generation in Gorontalo, organic farming, water and forest management in Semau, and marine PAs and organic fertilizers in Wakatobi.[193]

Urban green economy planning is a new area for UNDP with considerable scope for international replication where there is local demand and capacity. Costa Rica provides the most advanced example through the Transition to an Urban Green Economy and Generation of Global Environmental Benefits project, whose objective is to decarbonize the greater metropolitan area of San Jose through fiscal and political reform and integrated sustainable urban planning. Its environmental benefits are expected to include 2,000 ha of restored lands, 17,402 ha of improved urban landscapes, and 1,947,539 tCO2-eq of mitigated greenhouse gases over 20 years. Pilot initiatives were developed to intervene in the biological corridor through the creation of recreational and natural parks, as well as green spaces such as boulevards and tree-lined streets; the introduction of green walls and potted plants to attract pollinators; and an inventory on flora and fauna developed through participatory biological monitoring. Work at the sub-national level has so far proven to be resource-intensive as the Greater Metropolitan Area of San Jose comprises 32 municipalities, each with the autonomy to set its own territorial regulations.

193. UNDP Indonesia (2022) Sixth Operational Phase of the GEF SGP in Indonesia. Terminal Evaluation.

Climate and biodiversity planning. There were several successful projects that integrated climate action and EMBC planning, but this has not translated into systematic use of EMBC in climate action plans. This has been a missed opportunity for UNDP and more broadly for initiatives on EMBC.

Although the importance of nature-based solutions is increasingly referenced in the countries Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement, there are far fewer countries with specific and measurable actions.[194,195] This evaluation found few examples of UNDP biodiversity-focused support relative to the large numbers of countries where UNDP supports relevant climate adaptation and mitigation plans. Good examples do exist: with BIOFIN support, Bhutan carried out a comprehensive review of existing policies, legislation and strategies using a biodiversity and climate lens to determine implications for investments and financing in biodiversity conservation and climate change. The review showed that biodiversity- and climate-related expenditures overlapped, which led to an Integrated Biodiversity and Climate Expenditure Review. The Scaling up Climate Ambition on Land Use and Agriculture through Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans (SCALA) programme addresses climate change impacts on agriculture and land use. Led by UNDP and FAO, the EUR 20-million initiative (2021–2025) assists 12 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Recent promising examples of portfolio projects in Ecuador and Liberia illustrate a potential pathway to integrate EMBC within key national climate and green growth agendas (Finding 29, Box 3).

UNDP's Climate Change Adaptation programme includes ecosystem-based adaptation as one of seven thematic areas. There have been successful, innovative projects under this programme: in Cuba to reduce coastal flooding; in Bhutan, a NAPA project strengthening the climate resilience of people, forests and wildlife; climate resilient water management practices in Columbia; and mountain ecosystem-based adaptation in Peru. Across case study countries, UNDP had offered limited support in areas that were challenged by biodiversity loss and the need to build adaptive capacity for dealing with climate stressors. The Evaluation of UNDP support for Climate Adaptation[196] found that, while there had been positive impacts in terms of the restoration and protection of natural habitats such as mangroves, riparian vegetation and native forests, many projects were unclear about expected biodiversity benefits and struggled to integrate relevant ecosystem components. There were a number of factors for the limited integration of EMBC into climate action plans, some of which were beyond the control of UNDP. These include the challenge of tracking the plurality of possible indictors for ecosystem services and biodiversity outcomes;[197] and the relative lack of financing options for EMBC (partly associated with the measurement challenge).

UNDP has only partially made use of its wider portfolio on green growth, SDG mainstreaming and crisis recovery to enable more comprehensive approaches for improving ecosystems and biodiversity.

194. Comparative analysis of NDCs available on the Nature Based Solutions Policy Platform, Oxford University. https://www.nbspolicyplatform.org

195. Seddon, N., S. Sengupta, M. García-Espinosa, I. Hauler, D. Herr. and A.R. Rizvi (2019). Nature-based Solutions in Nationally Determined Contributions: Synthesis and recommendations for enhancing climate ambition and action by 2020. Gland, Switzerland and Oxford, UK: IUCN and University of Oxford.

196. UNDP IEO (2020) Evaluation of UNDP Support to Climate Change Adaptation.

197. Certain countries have made progress using the United Nations' System of Environmental Economic Account (SEEA) natural capital accounts. See Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (2023) Findings of a high-level scoping study exploring the case for a global nature-related public data facility.

Despite the potential to integrate ecosystems services and biodiversity in green agriculture, sustainable tourism, waste management, and Green Economy Action Plans, UNDP's support to governments in this area has not led to a higher profile for EMBC in national green growth planning. The Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) helped to create a more supportive policy framework for broader environmental planning in 20 countries,[198] but struggled to establish a strong focus on biodiversity within these plans.[199] In Kyrgyzstan, PAGE supported the Prime Minister's Office to adopt a plan to integrate green economy approaches by 2023, addressing climate change, green agriculture, transport, energy, education, sustainable procurement, finance and fiscal policy. This increased interest in green growth, but the low profile of biodiversity in the action plan is reflected in calls to open PAs for new hydro-power infrastructure and mining. PAGE faced broader challenges to "balance the macro-economic/upstream focus of PAGE and support for downstream [...] interventions".[200] The lack of practical example was a concern for stakeholders in Africa and Arab States interviewed for this evaluation, despite the call from COP27 for governments to identify mechanisms that work for biodiversity conservation within a green economy approach, and is also found in other projects. The Terminal Evaluation of Mainstreaming Incentives for Biodiversity Conservation in the Climate-Resilient Green Economy Strategy (CRGE) of Ethiopia highlights the need for participatory processes that allow community PAs to gain formal involvement with government CRGE implementation. Challenges also lie on UNDP's side. This evaluation found few country offices that recognized the potential to promote biodiversity in PAGE, and the capacity of environment teams in certain country offices was overstretched to develop relevant initiatives.

UNDP's support to SDG mainstreaming has generated direct and indirect benefits for EMBC. UNDP has used its convening role as an active partner in the United Nations Common Approach to Biodiversity, which committed to system-wide efforts on 15 medium-term objectives for integration of biodiversity, in partnership with governments, business and civil society. There were also many project examples that explicitly identified the link between EMBC and the achievement of multiple SDGs. The country case studies in Asia provide examples of how SDG mainstreaming created space for community-based organizations to work more effectively in EMBC (e.g. micro-watershed planning in Cambodia and Indonesia, and GEF-SGP support to CSO local land use planning). However, there is limited evaluation evidence on the importance of SDG 13 (Climate action) in UNDP SGD mainstreaming work. What exists comes from assessment of Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) missions carried out in 2016-2018 in the Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (ECIS) region.[201] Country teams and the regional issue-based coalitions have focused on social issues, with a relatively limited focus on the long-term global negative effects of not tackling climate change, or not investing in disaster risk reduction. SDG 13 and EMBC more broadly are not explicitly mentioned.

198. Countries include Mongolia, Peru, Senegal, Ghana, Mauritius, Burkina Faso, China, South Africa, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Uruguay, Guyana, Barbados, Argentina, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Thailand, Cambodia and Rwanda. The PAGE 2021-2030 Strategy envisages engaging a further 10 countries.

199. UNEP IEO (2023) Evaluation of the Implementation of the Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) Interagency Programme 'Operational Strategy 2016–2020'.

200. Ibid.

201. UNDP Istanbul Regional Office (2019) Summary of findings from SDG mainstreaming, acceleration, and policy support mission reports.

Ecosystems and biodiversity have typically had a low profile in UNDP crisis recovery plans. Nonetheless, the example of green earthquake recovery in Türkiye, and support for sustainable tourism in Lebanon and Sri Lanka illustrates innovative thinking about the role that EMBC can play. One of the five principles guiding the UNDP-led Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment was to 'employ green, nature-friendly solutions for a sustainable future', and four of the 31 large projects proposed by UNDP relate specifically to EMBC. In Lebanon, the economic crisis led the Government to focus on domestic tourism and provided the entry point for UNDP work (with funding from the Government of Italy), linking economic recovery with biodiversity and nature. This was based on ecotourism that supports communities and linking natural capital valuation with local development, such as hiking trails in nature reserves and links with historical sites.

Land use and agroecosystems planning: UNDP facilitated the adoption of national targets for restoring degraded and abandoned lands in nearly 130 countries. However, most UNDP sustainable land management (SLM) initiatives have lacked a comprehensive and strategic approach to tackle the root causes of unsustainable land use.

Scientific evidence[202] suggests that the regeneration of tropical forest can restore soil quality after about 10 years, and soil structure and function (enablers of ecosystem processes) after about 25 years, but it takes around 120 years for biodiversity to fully return. Protecting tropical forests is therefore particularly important for biodiversity conservation. The single largest driver of deforestation is commodity-driven agriculture, and the degradation of agricultural land is also a concern for UNDP because it threatens the SDGs and is often a gradual process receiving limited public attention. Indigenous People and local communities who often undertake custodial roles of forests are also farmers, and are negatively impacted when their food and agricultural systems are jeopardized.

UNDP increased its support for SLM and restoration following the endorsement of SDG Target 15.3 on land degradation neutrality (LDN) as the guiding principle for the implementation of the UNCCD. UNDP provided vital support to the UNCCD voluntary land degradation neutrality target setting process in almost 130 countries, which involved convening stakeholders from the agricultural and forestry sectors to enhance country contributions, and offered logistical and technical support to the Convention and national governments through its country offices. The subsequent roll-out of the target has been mixed because countries lack the type of guidance on LDN targets that the CBD provides for the Global Biodiversity Framework, and there has been limited use of the LDN framework in UNDP's EMBC work. UNDP has supported the UNCCD at the country and project levels through three main mechanisms: the Drylands Development Centre, the Equator Initiative and the SGP, though there is little evidence of impact of these different initiatives at the subregional or regional scale.

UNDP's policy development and guidance on land degradation was led by the Global Policy Centre on Resilient Ecosystems and Desertification (GC-RED) in partnership with several international institutions, including the UNCCD, the Stockholm Resilience Centre, the Natural Resource

202. Poorter, L., and others. (2021) Multidimensional tropical forest recovery. *Science* 374,1370-–376(2021). DOI:10.1126/science.abh3629

Institute and the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. The Centre provided evidence on policies and good practices in SLM and restoration that optimize livelihoods, jobs and food security. One of the four policy initiatives currently supported by GC-RED directly relates to biodiversity, i.e. the Biodiversity and Ecosystems Network (BES-NET), a capacity-building network managed by UNDP to promote dialogue between science, policy and practice for more effective management of biodiversity and ecosystems, thus contributing to sustainable development.

Despite the increase in support, UNDP has a comparatively small portfolio of SLM projects that address land degradation, particularly in agricultural areas. In Indonesia, the conservation of peatlands was supported through the development of the Peatland Restoration Agency, for which the Government issued a moratorium on land clearing in peatlands. This included the devolution of peatlands restoration tasks from the Central Government to provinces, and the development of

Photo Credit: SGP Eritrea

an ecosystem restoration plan in each of the targeted provinces. SLM projects that incorporated LDN concepts and expanded their orientation to include climate mitigation and adaptation were demonstrated in China and the Philippines, while some natural resources management, watershed and biodiversity-oriented projects demonstrated community engagement to encourage agroforestry (Pakistan, Cambodia) and agrobiodiversity (Bangladesh and Western Ghats in India). Increased threats from climate change and food insecurity have generated an increased need to identify the most effective interventions, share knowledge and build strategic partnerships to scale successful projects.

UNDP SLM projects have typically lacked a holistic and strategic approach to address the key drivers of unsustainable land use. Through the Ridge to Reef project, UNDP supported governments to address concerns about forest, land and water ecosystems under threat from climate change in the Pacific Islands. However, project delays limited the ability to introduce the governance

reforms required to tackle the practices that drive land-based degradation and urban pollution.[203] At the country level, most progress has been achieved where UNDP aligned strategies with other development partners, such as Ethiopia's SLM approach, and in Mozambique and Kenya, where UNDP has worked with international NGOs who have strong field-level presence. Evidence suggests that cross-sectoral alignments and integration were not achievable within a five-year project lifespan. In some cases, the limitations were due to an insufficient timeframe to embed new practices and technologies, as well as issues of scale (e.g. Senegal and southern United Republic of Tanzania). In these and other countries, the benefits that communities derived from landscape practices were too low to adequately compensate for lost livelihood opportunities, even after a five-year project cycle.

More recent approaches have included transforming commodity-driven agricultural systems to become more biodiversity-friendly through an integrated intervention on forest and agricultural land use and addressing local and global market drivers. An example is the GEF-funded Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) project in Indonesia, a collaborative undertaking of the World Bank, FAO, UNDP and other partners. The holistic approach taken by FOLUR provides an opportunity to address key drivers of unsustainable land use, such as commodity-driven industrial agriculture, climate change and food insecurity. This is a very different approach from UNDP's regular SLM projects, and has important lessons for creating more comprehensive approaches through cross-agency collaboration.

UNDP'S INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Partnerships: UNDP support can be further strengthened by more effective partnerships with specialized agencies in the United Nations system, for example, FAO, IFAD, UNODC, the private sector, CSOs, international and regional research institutions and IFIs. To make this possible, UNDP needs to re-visit its partnership strategy, institutional procedures and mechanisms and tailor its approach to create the required enabling conditions.

International financial institutions: There is considerable opportunity for UNDP to complement IFI work on biodiversity, by coordinating to scale successful demonstration projects and for joint implementation in some areas. UNDP has put in place mechanisms for collaboration on Climate Action, but not specific initiatives for ecosystems and biodiversity. IFIs typically do not fund UNDP activities, but the work of these institutions has high relevance as complementary activities to the support UNDP offers to government, and vice versa. For example, there is UNDP climate promise collaboration in 15 countries with the World Bank and African Development Bank on NDC financing and Integrated National Financing Frameworks. UNDP signed memorandum of understandings with several IFIs, but how they are used in practice depends on having a joint action plan on a particular theme. Three priority areas identified for joint action are: climate action and green sustainable energy, sustainable finance, and crisis response; EMBC has a *potential role* in these but it is not specifically identified.

203. UNDP Pacific Center (2022) Implementing a Ridge to Reef Approach to Preserve Ecosystem Services, Sequester Carbon, Improve Climate Resilience and Sustainable Livelihoods in Pacific Islands. Terminal Evaluation.

In Türkiye, UNDP undertook a successful GEF-funded sustainable forestry management project leading to widespread adoption of sustainable forestry management plans that incorporate biodiversity conservation.[204] Financing to implement improved practice at a national scale was not part of the project and for a few years post-project, on-the ground capacity has not matched policy ambition. Interviews suggest that a large climate-resilient forestry sector loan recently agreed with the World Bank will allow this need to be met. However, this may be an example of where more coordinated support to the Government could have delivered improved planning together with financing for implementation.

Through the EIB partnership with UNDP on sustainable finance, UNDP de-risks investment by providing governance support**.** Although the EIB is relatively narrowly focused, the principle of UNDP offering de-risking could be extended to other IFIs and ECMB. Interviews with UNDP staff suggest that the issue of complementarity is well worth exploring, but that the UNDP offer has to be tailored to each IFI, and a number of enabling conditions for partnerships need to be in place. These include: broad partnership agreements with action plans and standardized financing plan tools in place; support from the United Nations Resident Coordinator and close country office engagement; and support to country offices from regional bureaux to ensure that proposed partnerships reflect institutional agreements.

The private sector: A wide range of UNDP staff interviewed felt that much more engagement with the private sector was needed given the role of business in driving biodiversity loss and as the major source of funding to tackle this. There are two flagship facilities, i.e. GFCR and the new Nature Facility, which actively target private sector engagement to support the transformation of high-impact sectors away from degradation and dependency on fragile natural resources, and to scale up innovative finance and investment into nature-based solutions. Interviews suggest that there are some more general barriers that UNDP must overcome in order to play a significant role in EMBC work with the private sector. First, the timeframes and requirements of UNDP processes often differ from those of the private sector. There are justified concerns about reputational risk to UNDP from 'green washing' and associating the organization's name with specific interests. In the Philippines, UNDP and Unilever struggled to align their respective regulations and were unable to agree on a partnership model within the project timeframe. And Indonesia experienced a two-year delay establishing a partnership smallholders' engagement. Also, there was little connection between UNDP private sector development capacity and UNDP EMBC work. One example is that the UNDP Nature Hub Regional Team and UNDP Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development (IICPSD) are both based in Istanbul but there is limited collaboration between the two entities.

Civil society organizations: UNDP's work with CSOs created positive outcomes and partnership challenges. The evaluation found four main avenues of UNDP-CSO partnership with CSOs: (i) global initiatives, such as the Biodiversity Credit Alliance, and country-level strategic planning through United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) consultations, as well as themed engagements or technical working groups (e.g. the collaboration with Panthera, WWF and Wildlife Conservation Society on jaguar conservation in LAC, and global NBSAP planning and preparation); (ii) project- and programme-level collaboration, in which CSOs are sub-contracted parties; (iii) the SGP; and (iv) the Equator Initiative.

204. UNDP Turkey (2020) Integrated Approach to Management of Forests in Turkey, with Demonstration in High Conservation Value Forests in the Mediterranean Region. Terminal Evaluation.

Both the GEF-funded SGP and the multi-partnered Equator Initiative are well-respected and recognized for their valuable partnerships with locally based self-help CSOs, including Indigenous organizations. Since both initiatives are demand-driven and allow for controlled risk-taking by organizations that have limited capacity or face other exclusions, they provide a unique opportunity to promote technical, institutional, legal and social support, and innovation.[205]

Most CSO engagement takes place at a local level where the CSO field-level capacity supports a range of activities, such as tiger monitoring in Southeast Asia or micro-watershed planning in Cambodia and Indonesia. Evidence from discussions with CSOs in United Republic of Tanzania and Egypt suggests that UNDP's approach to engagement with CSOs in larger projects tends to be through small sub-contracted actions, with each CSO providing specific technical expertise and/or community-level linkages within a wider intervention landscape. The engagement did not always run efficiently: in South Africa and elsewhere CSOs reported the long timeframes involved in UNDP project design and development processes, with CSO staff drawing on internal resources throughout such inputs. Despite these limitations, most CSOs consulted through this evaluation valued their engagement with UNDP because it raised the profile of their own work and enabled them to reach higher-level decision makers. During periods of unplanned upheaval (e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic and other moments of insecurity) certain CSOs appreciated that UNDP's approach was more flexible that of government in enabling responsive planning and budgeting to sustain community-level development actions.

The United Nations system: UNDP and UNEP have collaborated on several important global actions over the period, and led system-wide efforts such as the Common Approach to Biodiversity and the High Impact Initiative on Nature Driving Economic Transformation. Global partnerships were established with UNEP for the global Poverty Environment Initiative,[206] and subsequent Global Poverty Action, with FAO for SCALA, and with FAO and UNEP for the 2021 Repurposing agricultural support to transform food systems report, as well as collaboration at the country level. These global partnerships have produced synergies and innovative approaches: the Poverty Environment Initiative encouraged UNDP to work with ministries of finance, for example, and influenced the design of BIOFIN. The SCALA programme is at an early stage, is primarily focused on UNDP's Climate Promise, and builds on UNDP and FAO's successful Integrating Agriculture in National Adaptation Plans (NAP-Ag) programme by establishing partnerships between sectors for adaptation planning and budgeting. In mid-2023, UNDP co-produced a guide for improving food systems with UNEP and FAO, consolidating a broad range of tools for system assessments and multi-stakeholder collaboration into a practical resource[207] While a useful follow-on from the United Nations Food System Summit in 2021, this type of collaboration represents a small part of the EMBC portfolio and is not yet driven towards systematic collaboration on food systems at the country level.

205. UNDP GEF (2021) Third Joint GEF-UNDP Evaluation of the Small Grants Programme

206. UNDP (2019) Lessons on Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development from the Poverty-Environment Initiative.

207. UNEP, FAO, and UNDP. 2023. Rethinking Our Food Systems: A Guide for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration. Nairobi, Rome and New York. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6325en

Photo Credit: Javad Yaghoubzadeh SGP/UNDP Iran

A lack of a strategic partnership between UNDP, FAO and IFAD at the country level has hindered mainstreaming of biodiversity and development into agriculture, and at a global level has reduced the agencies' ability to scale up support towards the 4.5 billion hectares of land that, according to UNCCD estimates, require restoration. Missed opportunities were observed in Türkiye, Kazakhstan and India. Although UNDP and FAO have joint EMBC projects in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Senegal, Lao PDR, Liberia and Tunisia, these are exceptions amidst larger questions about organizational mandates in the agriculture and forest sector and competition for project funds. Liberia is the best example of a portfolio project in which UNDP has been able to add value to FAO agricultural work by positioning this within a bigger sustainable growth narrative.

Regional entities: Findings in this report cover the need for effective EMBC work on several issues that have a regional dimension: desertification, illegal wildlife trade, transboundary wildlife corridors and transboundary water resource management. UNDP is well-placed to further support sub-regional EMBC initiatives that are important for transnational partnerships. In Southern Africa,

UNDP has been particularly active in supporting and strengthening the work of the Benguela Current Commission over multiple GEF phases and provided support to Okavango River Basin Water Commission. In principle, capacity building to support this can be provided by the countries concerned, if there is sufficient national training capacity, which is not the case in many LDCs and some middle-income countries. Moreover, regional capacity building in all regions has potential for economies of scale and scope in building specialist areas of expertise and share lessons. This underpins strategic regional capacity-building initiatives such as ASEAN's Regional Capacity Building Roadmap for Competition.

There is potential for UNDP partnerships with stakeholders providing regional capacity support, such as the College of African Wildlife Management in United Republic of Tanzania and Cameroon, and the African School of Wildlife Leadership in Rwanda. UNDP has been involved in the pan-African AFR10022 forest restoration initiative via the South Africa Country Office. In Asia, UNDP country offices have engaged regional organizations, and UNDP headquarters and regional hubs have agreements with international centres such as International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and ASEAN's Biodiversity Centre and the Working Group on Water Resource Management. Given the importance of scaling up the use of improved agricultural and land techniques, there may be further opportunities for cooperation with international and regional research groups and institutions within the Consultative Group for International Agriculture Research (CGIAR).

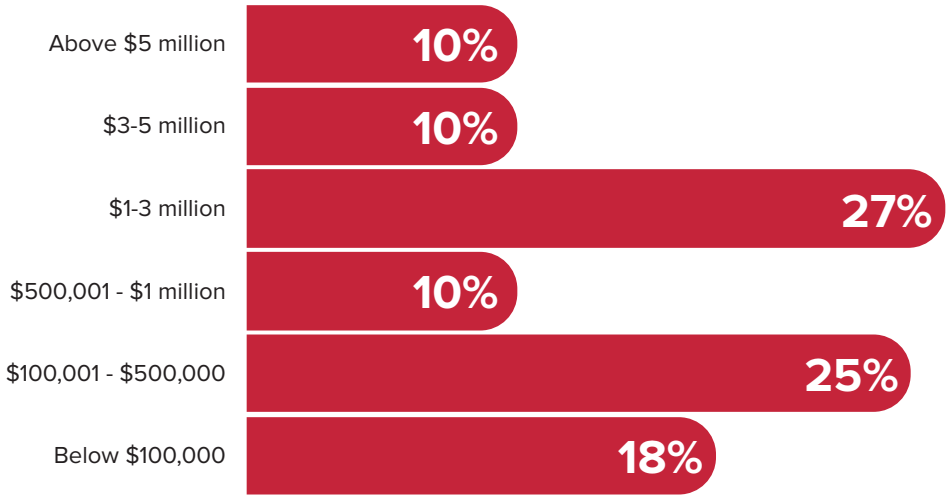
Project modality: UNDP's most significant achievements have developed over a series of projects. The siloed nature of this support is a serious constraint to post-project follow-on capacity building and knowledge management.

Around 80 percent of UNDP EMBC support was provided through interventions with expenditure under $3 million (Figure 9), which is commensurate with UNDP's model of providing policy support combined with pilot demonstrations at the field level. Although there are many instances of follow-on projects and initiatives sustained through national budgets, the overall trend is for single projects with uncertain sustainability. The challenges of UNDP's projectized approach are well documented[208] and not unique to EMBC. However, these presented a particular threat in moving from PAs to broader landscapes in which community stewardship is vital. Gaps between projects and loss of momentum reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of reform processes initiated by the interventions, and often have a significant impact on CSO partners who may lose the trust of local communities.

The segmented nature of UNDP support has been a serious constraint to post-project follow-on capacity building and knowledge management. Country offices and regional technical advisers often have a strategic vision to support government in the development and enforcement of environmental law, recognizing that the timescale for demonstrating improvements and securing cross-sectoral agreements is longer than a single project. In countries such as India and Pakistan UNDP has developed a policy support facility that has bridged project gaps by providing partner governments with ongoing analysis.

208. MOPAN (2021) MOPAN Assessment of UNDP.

Figure 9: Distribution of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation projects by expenditure scale



Source: IEO analysis based on data downloaded from Atlas and Quantum in November 2023.

UNDP has recent examples of promising portfolio projects that situate EMBC within a multisectoral approach to tackling national priorities such as climate action (PROAmazonía in Ecuador) and green growth (Liberia) (Box 3). In Ecuador, the Country Office is widely recognized for its capacity and expertise in EMBC and natural resources management, which accounts for a large proportion of total country office project spend. Working strategically, the Country Office used GEF and GCF funds to bring agriculture and environment ministries together to work towards reduced deforestation with improved agriculture and decentralization objectives. In Liberia, the Country Office started from a much weaker position and decided to form an inclusive green growth country team to bring together country office staff working on youth and women in the informal economy, agricultural value addition and ecosystem management initiatives. Support from the regional technical adviser was vital in building on this integration to develop a $20 million GEF Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) project on climate-resilient agriculture. While early in the project cycle, this process of holistic, systems-thinking illustrates both the significant potential for making EMBC relevant to key national agendas, which increases the potential for accessing sustainable funding and scaling up, and the substantial commitment required by the Country Office to follow this integrated approach and the need for regional capacity to support it.

Although UNDP has enhanced its regional and HQ capacities in various specializations, interviews and case studies suggest that there is varied access from country offices, and under-utlization of certain Hubs. Country Offices that have stronger EMBC capacity are better positioned to request support, and projects without GEF funding often struggle to build a line of support for governments. Increasing demands on regional bureaux for more complex, integrated interventions and portfolio projects will require additional resources. There was widespread interest to improve headquarters guidance on private sector engagement in EMBC.

Box 3: UNDP portfolio projects in Ecuador and Liberia

PROAmazonía in Ecuador. Originating in response to the Paris Agreement, the project underscores Ecuador's commitment to align with international policy frameworks. A distinguishing feature of the initiative is its emphasis on strengthening multi-level governance spanning provincial, cantonal and parish levels. Regarding policy, notable milestones include the formulation of the National Agricultural Policy and the National Biodiversity Policy. Additionally, 28 local governments have rejuvenated their territorial planning while communities have been empowered to draft their 'life plans', laying down the roadmap for future conservation efforts. The project also witnessed the pivotal involvement of both the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. This collaboration has led to policy directives on sustainable production and practices devoid of deforestation. The addition of Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Global Environment Facility (GEF) funding sources incentivized and supported the integration of plans, multisector joint working and local government engagement.

Inclusive green growth in Liberia. While the Country Programme Document (CPD) aligned with Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and the National Development Plan, especially the potential and promise of harnessing Liberia's vast natural resources for inclusive green growth, most country office projects within the inclusive growth theme operated in isolation, detached from ecosystem management and biodiversity initiatives, and lacked the synergy for enhanced development outcomes. In response, the Country Office formed an inclusive green growth country team and, with the Regional Bureau's support, integrated thematic areas (ecosystems enhancements with youth and women in the informal economy); connected ecosystem management initiatives with those driving inclusion and value addition, fostering cohesion across stakeholders and their financing; and integrated local economic development-level efforts with the macro-environment for inclusive green growth.

Social and Environmental Standards: UNDP has increased its capacity for incorporating Social and Environmental Standards (SES) in programme designs, and made progress since the policy came into effect in 2015. The uneven application of SES outside of the vertical fund portfolios remains a challenge, and the low completion rate of the safeguard screening process underscores gaps in the compliance and effectiveness of the SES system.

There are discrepancies in SES data completeness and varying degrees of safeguard incorporation in both the project design and implementation stages. Compliance with the SESP requirements was higher and significantly easier to track for vertical funded projects, where 84 percent of relevant projects have some form of SES assessment. In the non-vertical funded projects, the rate is lower, and the lack of a single repository for this complicates the process of monitoring the degree of compliance at the central level. Very few projects updated their safeguards throughout the project cycle, which could have helped deal with challenges that arise after the design phase, although UNDP requires projects to update their assessment only if the activities are extensively modified. Documents such as targeted assessments, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) and Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESAs) and associated management plans could not be identified during evaluation. Furthermore, despite project evaluations that recommend reviewing the SESP tool at designated project phases, there have been several instances of significant delays in carrying out these reviews.

The projects in the evaluation's sample are almost uniformly registered as 'moderate' risk. This trend was broadly aligned with the proportion of policy development and capacity-building components in UNDP's portfolio, which have indirect and long-term risk profiles, compared with direct downstream interventions, which typically carry more immediate and identifiable risks. However, most Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU) cases for EMBC projects are within projects classified as low or medium risk, or with no classification, and point to issues in the way projects assess their risk. A review of all completed assessments indicates several knowledge gaps and procedural ambiguity in the application of the SESPs. For example, in Armenia, projects demonstrated limited awareness of how the SESP integrates with other project documents, including risk tables, gender analyses and action plans. In Paraguay, the risks triggered by certain queries were not classified, resulting in their exclusion from the total project risk profile. Another example showed that, in Albania, there was a misclassification of the overall project risks, i.e. the classification did not correspond with the identified social and environmental risks. In the Senegal case study, there was a misconception that the responsibility for safeguards in NIM projects rests with the Government. Consequently, there are currently no UNDP safeguards in place in the country.

The social impact screenings reviewed included strengths in different components such as in assessing the community/local context (Albania), IWT (Botswana), conducting a gender analysis (South Africa) and in considering the rights of Indigenous People and local communities and their role in the projects (Peru, Myanmar, Costa Rica). The design phases of these projects demonstrate UNDP efforts in engaging with local communities; however, the timing and methods of these consultations vary across countries. For examples, a project in Argentina engaged with Indigenous Peoples through early stakeholder mapping, exemplifying adherence to the UNDP SES policy requirement for early participation. Conversely, a project in Paraguay did not engage with the Chaco's nine Indigenous communities during its design phase, deferring participation until later stages, contrary to the guidelines. Projects exhibit varied outcomes in integrating considerations

of climate change and human impact on nature within their SESP. While some projects, such as in Malaysia, effectively addressed these considerations, others, notably in Afghanistan and India, did not adequately highlight them as potential risks.

UNDP's Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU), which provides a mechanism for stakeholders to register concerns about UNDP operations, has documented 23 grievances since its establishment in 2015, of which half are closed. Just under 60 percent of the grievance cases involved biodiversity and/or natural resources issues, and almost three-quarters involved issues of land rights and/or displacement issues. The cases were documented across all regions. It was beyond the scope of this evaluation to determine whether the number of cases accurately reflects

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the number of issues at the local level. Most of the cases originate from reported issues with the assessments and consultations conducted in project design, and the investigations routinely point to weaknesses in the conduct of the SESP. This suggests that they could likely have been prevented using existing UNDP tools, and draws attention to the limited number of non-vertical fund projects meeting full compliance for uploading safeguarding documents and the quality of the process. Two cases relate to private sector engagement and reaffirm the reputational challenges mentioned throughout this report. The most serious case relates to the forced displacement of communities for the establishment of PAs. In other countries, UNDP has carefully advised governments on the local risks of protected area expansion, but this case highlights the care needed as countries work towards GBF's 30x30 conservation target.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Conclusions

Recommendations

Management response

The following conclusions and recommendations focus on strategic issues related to the UNDP support for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. The recommendations take into consideration recent corporate strategies, priorities of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025, the partnerships UNDP forged and other change processes underway.

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CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1: UNDP provided national partners with relevant support to protect and enhance a diverse range of ecosystems and biodiversity. There was strong evidence of the value that UNDP brings in the form of technical expertise, and its capacity to convene, integrate solutions from the national to the community levels, and provide innovative solutions, support government planning processes, and meet obligations under international agreements.

Having established a strong track record supporting the creation of PAs, UNDP has successfully broadened its offer to address gaps in the biodiversity and human development nexus that are not substantially supported by other agencies. Key strategic steps include expanding its focus beyond PAs to landscapes, establishing links with the governance agenda to increase and formalize recognition of the role of Indigenous and local institutions in OECM, and engaging ministries of finance in biodiversity planning. UNDP EMBC work has been relevant and largely effective in enabling improved and more inclusive conservation or regenerative actions on the field, where it has provided support to fill capacity gaps. In addition, its longer-term engagements have contributed to land regeneration and improvements in biodiversity levels. Through global partnerships with UNEP, the CBD and the UNCCD, UNDP has delivered important knowledge products for governments and other stakeholders, although these initiatives have not been well aligned with the institutional landscape in many LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Broadening UNDP's focus beyond specific ecological sites or species to human development has expanded the number of stakeholders and incentives structures involved in environmental management. The vast majority of UNDP initiatives are institutionally complex; hence, UNDP clearly capitalizes on its contextual understanding, network of partnerships, and ability to design and manage large, multi-component projects. Its ability to support PAs through a package of measures that includes national planning, institutional capacity, financial opportunities, and the engagement of Indigenous People and community led conservation has been a particular niche. Making use of its regional presence, UNDP has successfully supported transboundary EMBC initiatives in all regions, even between countries that have unresolved disputes, and has brought improvements for avian flyways, water cooperation and ecological connectivity.

Conclusion 2: Although UNDP is expanding its engagement beyond its traditional partners in the ministries of environment, systematic cross-sectoral integration of ecosystems and biodiversity into funded development plans remains an ongoing challenge. UNDP could more effectively incorporate EMBC objectives into its wider portfolio in climate action plans, green growth agendas and crisis recovery plans.

UNDP has traditionally been most engaged with ministries of the environment, although almost all UNDP EMBC projects involve a range of line ministries and development/planning agencies, working on international commitments such as the CBD, the NBSAPS and NDCs. Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into national development planning requires cross-sectoral collaboration, but there was a tendency for sectoral ministries that implement NBSAPs to work in silos. While there have been limits to UNDP's ability to provide support across multiple sectors and sub-national levels, there have been examples of successful UNDP engagement with influential ministries such as those of economy, finance or planning, especially in its work on BIOFIN with governments. In particular, its work on ecological fiscal transfers in Indonesia and Malaysia illustrates how making the

economic case for biodiversity together with identifying funded policy options can open up space for biodiversity in development planning. Moreover, there was an opportunity for United Nations agencies to work together, strengthen human resources and sustain them through targeted processes in national action plans for biodiversity, climate change, and combating land degradation. This was key to sustain long-term conservation efforts.

UNDP has only partially made use of its wider portfolio to enable more comprehensive approaches for improving ecosystems and biodiversity. Notwithstanding some successful examples of incorporation of EMBC in climate action plans, most do not identify EMBC as a priority for climate action, and within the EMBC portfolio there was little consideration of the ramifications of climate

Photo Credit: UNDP Somalia

change on the sustainability of UNDP initiatives. Similarly, UNDP has had difficulty in giving EMBC a prominent position within the Green Growth agenda, and its support to governments in this area (e.g. extensive work in green agriculture) has not led to a higher profile for EMBC in national planning. There was unrealized potential to integrate ecosystems services and biodiversity in green agriculture, sustainable tourism, waste management, green cities and Green Economy Action Plans. Recent promising examples of a coordinated portfolio in Ecuador and Liberia illustrate a potential pathway to integrate EMBC within key national climate and green growth agendas. While EMBC typically has a low profile in UNDP crisis recovery plans, examples such as green earthquake recovery in Türkiye and support for sustainable tourism in Lebanon illustrate the innovative thinking and role that EMBC can play.

Conclusion 3: Since UNDP has considerable experience in innovative sub-national EMBC work, it has a comparative advantage a. Where achieved, this work has strengthened capacity in the 'missing-middle', which has historically hampered the implementation of national policies and prevented the scale-up of field-level innovations in many countries.

Support to local government has been a less prominent part of UNDP's ecosystems and biodiversity strategies, and received limited attention in global environmental fora. The evaluation has demonstrated UNDP's strengths in this area through a series of positive outliers in Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean that deserve more attention because of their ability to localize NBSAP, establish ICCAs, and integrate biodiversity in village planning and local development plans, despite the many hurdles of working at this level. Support has been most effective where it was framed within a national process of decentralization of government services, although in certain contexts UNDP has been able to implement a viable bottom-up model and scale up to other areas with national government support.

Working with multiple districts and with sub-national institutions required deep understanding of context, strong technical skills, and an ability to convene stakeholders at all levels, in which UNDP excels over other development partners. It has been difficult for IFIs to work at this level given high transactions costs and limited sub-national institutional capacities, which created further barriers for private sector engagement. Targeting key capacity gaps at the local government level that undermine environmental progress presents an opportunity for UNDP (e.g. by strengthening portfolios with an EMBC focus or developing new streams of work around governance of natural resources, peace, security and climate change). Nonetheless, progress at the 'missing middle' level is likely to be slower than at the national level and may affect the pace in achieving the Nature Pledge targets and the GBF goals.

Conclusion 4: The positive returns from biodiversity and ecosystem services have not been realized at sufficient scale to incentivize a comprehensive conservation effort in many countries. UNDP was successful in increasing funding for EMBC, but national and community budgets remain dependent on official development assistance, and questions remain over the sustainable management of new capacities.

UNDP's landscape projects have delivered high quality biodiversity conservation but often required sequential projects to see results and scaling via replication to new landscapes. This duration reflects the time it takes to establish a viable field-level intervention and legislate and finance the policies that will see its wider replication, as well as the period of ecological renewal. Inefficiencies are introduced from the time required to set up and close down projects. While

scaling has been a key objective of UNDP's support since at least 2012, expanding EMBC initiatives ultimately depends on government capacity and action, suggesting a need for UNDP's greater focus and innovations. Although typical for the sector, the pace of change did not keep up the urgency of biodiversity loss.

GEF- and GCF-funded landscape projects have played a crucial role in UNDP's objective to offer countries additional resources for conservation but have rarely been combined with more catalytic financing or effective routes to scaling and sustainable finance. UNDP did not make full use of its support for green growth and climate transitions to bring biodiversity considerations into national planning and budgets, and its collaborations with organizations that can bring larger and more consistent volumes of finance were focused on specific initiatives. Ensuring that EMBC has a central role in green growth and climate change planning is essential to meet the 2030 Nature Pledge target of supporting at least 140 countries to integrate nature into their national and sectoral plans and practices, and in both of these areas, UNDP has good examples to build on.

Crucially, sustainable land use benefits derived by communities were often too low to adequately compensate for lost livelihood opportunities, particularly in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and remote areas of Latin America and Central Asia. UNDP's internal challenges in working with the private sector limited its ability to encourage business to invest in value chains that incorporate local livelihoods in these areas. These factors presented a particular threat in moving from PA to broader landscapes in which community stewardship was vital. Although UNDP has made important progress in boosting the recognition and capacities of Indigenous People and local communities, insecure or lack of land tenure remains a widespread barrier to community livelihoods and stewardship. The organization's support through the SGP has made a significant contribution to local financing and was an important mechanism for building awareness of the capacity of Indigenous and local institutions, and threats in government and private sector processes.

Conclusion 5: UNDP's support to the governance frameworks for terrestrial and freshwater conservation improved planning and enhanced enforcement but was insufficient to address the core drivers of ecosystem degradation. Recent action on harmful national subsidies and international financial disclosures offers an excellent platform for UNDP to strengthen its action against the underlying causes.

The severe negative impacts of land use change, resource extraction and pollution driven by industrial activity significantly outweigh the ability of conservation and enforcement initiatives to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, especially when combined with other drivers from invasive species, climate change and population pressure. The lack of a UNDP strategy on harmful drivers has limited UNDP's response to a largely localized focus and reduced its ability to engage with international regulations and market demand. UNDP is yet to leverage its global footprint to identify where it could encourage international policy change and prepare countries to take economic advantage of the new opportunities. The Global Value shift in UNDP's 2023 Nature Pledge has the potential to build public momentum to address international and domestic demand that drives harmful practices. However, UNDP should also consider different approaches for working with CSOs to raise awareness of the value of ecosystem services.

Although at an early stage, BIOFIN's work has been particularly important because harmful subsidies are the biggest contributor to the global biodiversity financing gap. In addition, it will be vital to the Nature Pledge target to redirect, repurpose or eliminate $200 billion of nature-harmful

subsidies. UNDP is one of the few major players directly targeting this tipping point, and the first phase of BIOFIN has been a very good example of how UNDP can use a standard process to enable governments to scale up initiatives. The second phase will be more action-focused and context-specific, requiring specialized skills and close engagement with government and other stakeholders. At the country level, UNDP has enjoyed excellent partnerships in project delivery, but less so for in providing governments with solutions for the macro- or system-level challenges regarding biodiversity.

There is a critical need for UNDP to reinforce legal and policy structures that support comprehensive landscape planning (in agricultural and urban ecosystems), ensuring that they are well-aligned with the objectives of ecosystem health, particularly in the management of transboundary water and land resources. Partnerships with FAO have recently produced some innovative approaches to address agricultural land use, albeit only reaching a small part of the EMBC portfolio and covering a fraction of the ecosystems in Africa and Asia that are at risk of serious degradation. Most country offices are concerned about navigating reputational risks with a lack of guidance and streamlined processes to work with the private sector, even where these actors already have a long presence in the landscape. UNDP will need to invest in specialist capacity, make better use of existing private sector expertise within the organization and partner with IFIs to improve the offer to private sector EMBC investors.

Conclusion 6: Biodiversity continues to rapidly decline, and the remainder of the current decade is marked by ambitious global targets in areas that the international community has previously failed to achieve. UNDP is embarking on a more transformative approach through the Nature Pledge and can draw on tangible examples of field-level improvements to ensure that quality environmental outcomes are achieved in efforts to meet quantitative goals.

The Global Biodiversity Framework target to protect 30 percent of global territories by 2030 illustrates the challenge of achieving substantive environmental progress. UNDP support for PAs has produced notable successes; however, overall, supported countries remain significantly off-track for establishing PAs amidst serious questions about the quality of existing protection, which was a problem with Aichi Target 11. Establishing new PAs has occurred as the same time as the legal strength of PAs has been undermined by industrial-scale resource extraction and development. Similar challenges are posed for the utility of NBSAPS and other GBF targets. Based on the areas where progress was made under the Aichi Targets, there is a risk that any achievements made by 2030 will remain at the level of intermediary outcomes rather than substantive environmental and social improvements.

The 2023 UNDP Nature Pledge vision to catalyse three transformational shifts provides a very useful framework within which to scale UNDP EMBC work. As an evolution in UNDP's strategic approach on biodiversity, the Nature Pledge sets targets and timeframes for their achievement, which should allow for better tracking and adaptive management, acknowledging that there may be trade-offs between the number of countries supported and the depth of change achieved. Much faster scaling of successful UNDP EMBC work will be needed to meet the targets. BIOFIN phase 1 is a promising model for UNDP more generally because its scaling has been very efficient with its combination of a template for identifying drivers and funding sources, work with ministries of finance (learning from earlier Poverty Environment Initiative work) and support for locally owned solutions.

Community engagement has been a cornerstone of ecosystem preservation, conservation and

management with local populations, serving as both beneficiaries and custodians of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Lessons from this evaluation suggest that increasing the hectares of priority ecosystems under indigenous land tenure can be achieved by scaling UNDP's successful work with Indigenous People and local communities, combined with a new financing approach and capacity building of their organizations.

Viable pathways and targets to 'bend the curve' of biodiversity loss are significant gaps in the sector. To date, UNDP has not consistently monitored drivers and ecosystem health, nor adequately promoted knowledge-sharing at the ecosystem level. However, the development of such scenarios would benefit from the use of participatory approaches, integrating stakeholders and decision makers from multiple sectors to explore trade-offs and pathways – areas in which UNDP has demonstrated strengths.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. UNDP should prioritize building ownership of the Nature Pledge in regional bureaux and country offices and enhance collaboration with key partners. Given the continued declines in biodiversity, the action plan for the Nature Pledge must intently focus on strategies for scaling and replication of EMBC practices that have proven successful and include milestones to assess projections periodically.

The Nature Pledge has the potential to galvanize collective efforts needed to address global and local drivers of the biodiversity decline and sustain comprehensive conservation. Internally, regional bureaux and country offices should integrate the Pledge's three 'Shifts' i.e. values, economic and finance, and policy and practice, into their respective regional strategies and country programme documents, and contextualize the Pledge's principles and priorities. At headquarters, UNDP should consider the development of a 'Nature Seal' that guides and recognizes substantive efforts by regional bureaux and country offices to incorporate environmental and development priorities. The action plan should include mid-term milestones and targets to systematically assess the likely contribution of different approaches used by UNDP towards the achievement of Nature Pledge goals and revisit these projections periodically. Externally, UNDP should use the Pledge to build on United Nations-system and IFI work through issue-based coalitions and provide a clear statement of UNDP's intent and capacity to bilateral, philanthropic and other donors. While ecosystem and biodiversity are highly context-specific, it is imperative for UNDP headquarters to strengthen and share learning on what works in which contexts.

Recommendation 2. UNDP senior leadership should create a global taskforce to target the drivers of biodiversity loss. The taskforce would galvanize a whole-of-UNDP response to fill a critical gap and bolster country office support for economic transitions.

Despite the threat to human development, there are no significant initiatives that aim to shift the international demand and supply processes that drive biodiversity loss and ensure that countries are ready to benefit from this shift. UNDP has demonstrated that it can achieve this by responding to changes in international trade policy for palm oil by co-founding the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures, and through BIOFIN engagements at the national level. A taskforce

led by the UNDP Executive Office should formalize this experience into a UNDP approach and focus on creating opportunities across key sectors and in a greater number of countries. This will require further engagement at the global and regional levels with organizations that can incentivize change in private sector behaviour in programme countries and coordinated support to country offices on environmental governance and harmful subsidies (see Recommendation 3). The task force should draw together various parts of the organization with relevant expertise in governance, environment, food systems, climate, chemicals and waste management, inclusive growth and gender equality. It should dovetail with external initiatives to identify plausible pathways to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss, such as IPBES's modelling, scenarios employed by UNCCD under the Global Land Outlook, and the UNEP-led Global Environment Outlook 7.

Recommendation 3. UNDP should intently promote harmful subsidy reform as a key organizational offer.

UNDP is a key player in this emerging area and its relationships with governments could unlock a significant amount of national financing that is currently working against biodiversity and sustainable development. As successful examples of subsidy reduction are demonstrated, UNDP headquarters and regional bureaux should publicize them widely to encourage replication. Sectoral subsidies, such as in agriculture or infrastructure, will require specialized agencies and partners, and UNDP has the convening power to bring these into discussion with governments. As harmful subsidies are removed, UNDP should work with governments to channel the resources towards sustainable development, thus helping to alleviate ODA shortfalls and growing sovereign debt.

Recommendation 4. UNDP should develop a list of priority geographic areas to address the environmental and poverty nexus, and work with country offices in the most at-risk areas to create context-specific strategies.

This would enable UNDP to better target support to areas where poverty is being deepened by environmental stress, and would complement targeting criteria used in the environmental sector. The identification should make use of UNDP's Maps of Hope and Essential Life Support Areas approaches to identify the most impactful areas in which to intervene in the national context. This may involve targeting already degraded lands that have a higher value to poorer groups, thereby reducing downstream pressures on more ecologically rich areas, or critical areas for water security. Earlier-stage capacity building may be required for LDCs and fragile contexts. Once areas are selected, more thorough gender and SESP assessments should be conducted. To expand the targeting criteria, UNDP may need to mobilize resources to complement vertical funding that prioritizes environment criteria and/or embeds environmental criteria into criteria for financing non-vertical fund projects.

Recommendation 5. UNDP should engage with the current reshaping of international finance mechanisms to develop a combined UNDP-international finance institutions offer of support to governments on ecosystems and biodiversity. This will require coordinated actions between headquarters and country offices.

UNDP headquarters should seek to tailor partnerships in EMBC with IFIs, and create additional opportunities for country-level collaboration (e.g. delivery of different project outputs) as well as better integration of UNDP project scaling and IFI lending. This will help accelerate the implementation

of government policy on biodiversity and strengthen sustainability of outcomes achieved. IFIs can provide types and scales of finance that UNDP cannot, such as key components for UNDP-supported processes, for example, debt-for-nature swaps. The institutional partnerships between UNDP and the IFIs should aim to streamline their respective administrative processes so they do not slow joint delivery at the country level.

Recommendation 6. UNDP should develop guidance and invest in human resources capacity development at the regional and country levels to enable country offices to provide governments with integrated support for ecosystems, biodiversity, climate and green growth agendas.

Stand-alone biodiversity and ecosystems projects are too often seen as positive action on their own, without making the case for broader approaches. By providing governments with integrated support across multiple sectors to address national priorities, UNDP can provide a sustainable approach to integrate biodiversity and ecosystems into inclusive growth and climate agendas. UNDP should maintain its emphasis on tailoring its approach to specific contexts, utilizing various combinations of tools that facilitate better integration with governance, green growth and climate agendas. This should be accompanied by fostering new and stronger partnerships with other United Nations agencies and IFIs, as well as enhancing sub-national and private sector engagement to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. There is an opportunity for UNDP to promote an integrated approach as it rolls out the portfolio approach, which will require investment in human resources capacity in the regional bureaux and potentially in the country offices to support this.

Recommendation 7. UNDP has the capability of building on its comparative advantage with sub-national governments and seek opportunities to reduce transaction costs and barriers to scaling.

Sub-national work is critical to delivering improved ecosystems and biodiversity at scale but often presents the most difficult challenges because capacity is spread thinly, there are many stakeholders, and perceived investment risks are high. Many organizations cannot work effectively in this context, but UNDP has demonstrated important strengths. Working with partners at scale to harmonize sub-national regulatory frameworks and build institutional capacity will be required. UNDP should collect and share its experience in this area and identify other countries that may offer quicker wins through ongoing decentralization processes. In its global engagements, UNDP should promote the value of working at the sub-national level for ecosystem services and seek to develop new funding lines.

Recommendation 8. UNDP country offices and regional bureaux should undertake more systematic capacity building of Indigenous and local institutions, rural communities and ethnic minority groups. This provides an opportunity to support women and minorities-led groups to advocate for their needs and rights, and to be able to meaningfully participate in relevant negotiation spaces.

UNDP should identify opportunities to progressively build the leadership skills and capacity of representative groups of Indigenous and local institutions, rural and local institutions, and ethnic minority groups to monitor and effectively address threats, advocate for their needs and rights, participate in negotiations, and manage larger amounts of funding. Developing novel financing models and incentives for ecosystem, services not only values the intrinsic worth of these

ecosystems, but also motivates stakeholders to invest in their long-term health. To reinforce this, UNDP should provide leadership on the steps that remain to fully integrate Indigenous People and local communities into OECM and collate lessons on approaches that contribute meaningfully to biodiversity conservation.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Recommendation 1: UNDP should prioritize building ownership of the Nature Pledge in regional bureaux and country offices and enhance collaboration with key partners. Given the continued declines in biodiversity, the action plan for Pledge must intently focus on strategies for scaling and replication of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation practices that have proven to be successful and include milestones to assess projections periodically

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

In line with Recommendation 1, following the formal launch of the UNDP Nature Pledge 2030 by the UNDP Administrator in September 2023, a detailed Action Plan to deliver the Nature Pledge has now been developed. The Plan seeks to: (i) embed the Nature Pledge into UNDP core and daily development business by mainstreaming the Nature Pledge's shifts and strategic actions into our policies and programming, and drive corporate efforts to achieve the moonshots; (ii) ensure that the shifts and strategic actions inform and influence global action to deliver the deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, and the Paris Agreement by putting nature at the heart of development decisions and actions, including on climate change; (iii) empower global action for nature beyond UNDP by capacitating UNDP staff as change agents to elevate 'nature for development' through partnerships with governments, civil society, private sector, practitioners, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and other key stakeholders; (iv) rapidly and efficiently scale knowledge, collaboration, learning, finance, impact and capacity for nature; and (v) create opportunities to share experiences and solutions to scale up and accelerate nature-positive successes, and learn from failures.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Roll out the Nature Pledge and elevate the UNDP narrative on nature for development at the global, regional and country levels through structured dialogues with regional bureaux and country offices towards an internal value shift for scaling impact of UNDP support for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.	June 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub, Inclusive Growth Team, Sustainable Energy Hub)	Ongoing	
2. Align nature and climate commitments by providing support to 30 countries with their NDCs and NBSAPs, encouraging high ambition on nature-based climate solutions and fostering integrated whole-of-government approaches on nature and climate.	December 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub, Climate Hub)	Ongoing	

Recommendation 2: UNDP Senior Leadership should create a global taskforce to target the drivers of biodiversity loss. The taskforce would galvanize a whole-of-UNDP response to fill a critical gap, and bolster country office support for economic transitions.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

The UNDP Nature Pledge targets drivers of biodiversity loss through three systemic shifts—a value shift, an economic and finance shift, and a policy and practice shift. The drivers of biodiversity loss are nested within the current unsustainable production and consumption system, intertwined with the prevailing economic model that ignores environmental externalities and the value of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Given its mandate as the United Nations development agency, with integrated portfolios and multi-sectoral relationships within countries and globally, UNDP has enormous potential and comparative advantages in supporting countries to address these drivers. This makes it critical to realise the whole of UNDP approach in delivering the Nature Pledge. A task force will be created building on the existing internal mechanisms to bolster country office support for economic transitions.

In line with Recommendation 1, following the formal launch of the UNDP Nature Pledge 2030 by the UNDP Administrator in September 2023, a detailed Action Plan to deliver the Nature Pledge has now been developed. The Plan seeks to: (i) embed the Nature Pledge into UNDP core and daily development business by mainstreaming the Nature Pledge's shifts and strategic actions into our policies and programming, and drive corporate efforts to achieve the moonshots; (ii) ensure that the shifts and strategic actions inform and influence global action to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, and the Paris Agreement Development Goals and Paris Agreement by putting nature at the heart of development decisions and actions, including on climate change; (iii) empower global action for nature beyond UNDP by capacitating UNDP staff as change agents to elevate 'nature for development' through partnerships with governments, civil society, private sector, practitioners, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and other key stakeholders; (iv) rapidly and efficiently scale knowledge, collaboration, learning, finance, impact and capacity for nature; and (v) create opportunities to share experiences and solutions to scale up and accelerate nature-positive successes, and learn from failures.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Roll out the Nature Pledge, elevating the UNDP narrative on nature for development at global, regional and country levels through structured dialogues with regional bureaux and country offices towards an internal value shift for scaling impact of UNDP support for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.	June 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub, Inclusive Growth Team, Sustainable Energy Hub)	Ongoing	
2. Expand existing nature-related task teams to include representatives from senior management in regional bureaux and country offices to serve as a global task force that: (i) addresses drivers of biodiversity loss for scaling support for economic transition, and with direct contribution to the environmental convention COPs and other relevant political processes, and (ii) integrates the Nature Pledge principles into their respective regional and country programme strategies.	February 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub), regional bureaux, country offices		

Recommendation 3: UNDP should intently promote harmful subsidy reform as a key organizational offer.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

UNDP, through BIOFIN, has long been advocating for the importance of looking at nature negative public expenditure while supporting countries with creation of new sustainable financing mechanisms for biodiversity conservation. BIOFIN has been supporting 27 countries in examining the harmful impacts of subsidies on biodiversity and creating action plans to rethink and redesign them, towards redirecting nature negative government expenditure towards nature and people positive. Countries are looking at subsidies that promote unsustainable productions patterns, including use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, over-harvesting of fish, timber and other resources, and conversion of natural ecosystems to managed lands. This work has influenced target 18 of the Global Biodiversity Framework with the target of reducing harmful subsidies by $500 billion per year by 2030. With BIOFIN now supporting an additional 91 countries, beyond the current 41 countries, UNDP plans to scale support to address harmful subsidies globally. This directly contributes to the economic and finance shift of the Nature Pledge.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Roll out guidelines on repurposing subsidies harmful to biodiversity and improving their impact on people and nature.	June 2024	BPPS (Nature Hub)	Ongoing	
2. Support at least 20 additional countries with subsidy repurposing planning.	April 2026	BPPS (Nature Hub), regional bureaux, country offices		

Recommendation 4: UNDP should develop a list of priority geographic areas for addressing the environmental and poverty nexus, and work with country offices in the most at-risk areas to create context-specific strategies.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts this recommendation.

The UNDP global and national project portfolio extends to more than 140 countries. A short list of priority countries will help focus work with high-impact results. Based on prior UNDP experience, criteria for focusing on geographic priorities regarding the environmental and poverty nexus could include: (i) geographies where UNDP has a strong national focus on nature-related programming already, particularly in the areas of food security, water security and ecosystem restoration; (ii) geographies where actions on protecting, restoring and sustainably managing nature are likely to have the most significant outcomes for multi-dimensional poverty; and (iii) geographies with a low Human Development Index, a high Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), and high levels of risk in context-specific areas. The 30 countries supported on NDCs and NBSAPs can also serve as a good entry point to ensure multiple impact. New development programme opportunities will be explored, and context-specific strategies developed to inform country programme documents.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Map geographic areas with biodiversity hotspots and a high incidence of poverty and support development of country-specific strategies to inform country programme documents and new programming opportunities focused on the intersection of nature, poverty and human wellbeing, including ecosystem services that underpin human wellbeing.	December 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub, Inclusive Growth Team), regional bureaux, country offices	Ongoing	

Recommendation 5: UNDP should engage with the current reshaping of international finance mechanisms to develop a combined UNDP-IFI offer of support to governments on ecosystems and biodiversity. This will require coordinated actions between headquarters and the country level.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

Close interweaving of UNDP Nature Pledge into the work of financial institutions, governments and key external facilitators will indeed increase the scale of the impact and help avoid segregation. UNDP has a close working relationship with financial institutions including IFIs, through the various workstreams of the Sustainable Finance Hub. Indeed, UNDP works with over 20 of the world's largest IFIs in 77 countries across five regions across the six UNDP Signature Solutions through joint analysis and assessments, Goal-aligned tools and methodologies, knowledge products and policy support, capacity development and project implementation to support governments' efforts towards sustainable and inclusive growth. In addition, UNDP has unique branded instruments in the space that have proven effective over time such as the approach of the Biodiversity Finance Initiative where working with the finance sector is a Signature Solution. UNDP aims to expand this approach and strengthen its viability. UNDP also acts as a facilitator for the largest global nature disclosure and nature action platforms, including the Task Force for Nature related Financial Disclosure, and Biodiversity Credit Alliance, effectively helping co-manage global partnerships in this space. The key is to translate global policies into local action, which is exactly where the three-tier structure of UNDP (headquarters-regions-country offices) comes into space, as hardly any other institution has it. UNDP has a mandate to fully engage nature stewards (local communities and iIndigenous People) in BCA, TNFD, and other nature policy and action from the beginning. UNDP is also expanding collaboration with IFIs such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to provide fit-for-purpose credit enhancements to target countries in order to unlock financing for ecosystems and biodiversity.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Integrate ecosystems and biodiversity into existing UNDP sustainable finance offers to finance institutions at international and national levels across public finance for sustainable development (tax, budget, debt instruments), Unlocking private capital (building bankable projects, blended finance and impact management and measurement), Integrated National Finance Frameworks, as well as into UNDP international policy engagements such as the Finance for Development Process.	June 2025	BPPS (Nature Hub, Sustainable Finance Hub)		

Recommendation 6: UNDP should develop guidance and invest in human resources capacity development at the regional and country levels to enable country offices to offer governments integrated support for ecosystems, biodiversity, climate and green growth agendas.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

UNDP is rolling out a portfolio approach in countries to strengthen integrated support that aims to cause systems transformation required to respond to multi-faceted development challenges. In addition, the Ecosystems and Biodiversity portfolio funded through the Global Environment Facility has evolved in the last several years to become more integrated and multi-focal, partly necessitated by the requirements of the funds and UNDP integrated approaches. UNDP brings different thematic expertise to tackle ecosystem, biodiversity, climate and the green growth agenda in an integrated fashion. Key lessons from these portfolios are being extracted to guide country offices' programming. As part of the Nature Pledge Activation, development of the Nature Pledge action kits is underway with the participation of various thematic team. These include, (i) Nature for Gender Equality; (ii) Nature for Prosperity; (iii) Nature for Food Security; (iv) Nature for Climate Action; (v) Nature for Disaster Reduction and Resilience, and (vi) Nature for Peacebuilding. Other thematic areas of relevance to programming include landscape management for resilience building and ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change, and drought resilience or natural resources management for social cohesion and peacebuilding.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Complete the 'Nature for X' kits, including internal and external consultations, webinars, clinic sessions, and dissemination.	December 2024	BPPS	Ongoing	
2. Develop metrics for tracking the contribution of ecosystems and biodiversity projects to UNDP's Poverty Moonshot, and include/integrate these into the monitoring and evaluation framework of individual projects, as appropriate.	December 2024	BPPS (Nature Hub, Inclusive Growth Team)		

Recommendation 7: UNDP has the opportunity to build on its comparative advantage with sub-national governments and to seek opportunities reduce transactions costs and barriers to scaling.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

UNDP provided capacity-building support to sub-national governments in many countries through ecosystems and biodiversity projects, including China, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, and others. Sub-national-level capacity building is critical for ecosystems and biodiversity management especially in countries with strong decentralized governance system. UNDP can indeed build on the lessons and good practices from its extensive portfolio of initiatives in over 140 countries in this regard. Through its ecosystem and biodiversity initiatives, UNDP will strengthen partnerships with sub-national governments and local stakeholders, provide capacity-building support at systemic, institutional and individual levels, and promote measures to streamline regulatory frameworks for scaling. By fostering knowledge management and learning, and advocating for policy reforms, UNDP aims to reduce transaction costs and bureaucratic hurdles associated with scaling and accelerating nature-positive initiatives. The UNDP emphasis on exploring innovative financing mechanisms and promoting multi-stakeholder collaborations will help unlock much needed investments from both public and private sources for scaling. These concerted efforts will empower sub-national governments to take the lead in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development efforts at the sub-national level, ultimately contributing to the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystem restoration, and the acceleration of sustainable development pathways at a global scale.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Develop guidance to country offices, project developers and project preparation grant/ project development teams to integrate the Nature Pledge in project designs, including policy reforms and regulatory frameworks that support nature-positive work at the sub-national level are included in the design of the future UNDP portfolio.	December 2024	BPPS (Nature Hub)		
2. Develop guidance to country offices, project developers and project preparation grant/ project development teams to integrate the Nature Pledge in project designs, including policy reforms and regulatory frameworks that support nature-positive work at the sub-national level are included in the design of the future UNDP portfolio.	December 2025	Country offices with technical support from regional bureaux and BPPS (Nature Hub)		

Recommendation 8: UNDP country offices and regional bureaux should undertake more systematic capacity building of institutions of Indigenous People and local and rural communities, and ethnic minority groups. This provides an opportunity to support women and minorities-led groups to advocate for their needs and rights, and to be able to meaningfully participate in relevant negotiation spaces.

Management response: UNDP fully accepts the recommendation.

The recommendation responds to the COP26 Glasgow pledge to provide $1.7 billion in finance to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, as well as the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF) target to channel 20 percent of GBFF resources to Indigenous People and local communities by 2030. A more systematic approach will include: (i) engagement of Indigenous People and local communities in national planning processes for NBSAPs and NDCs, including by leveraging the UNDP Climate Promise; (ii) provision of direct access to finance by the SGP/local action delivery mechanism in over 120 countries; (iii) capacity-building to Indigenous-led funds; and (iv) recognition through global awards, training and fellowship programmes. Support will include targeted support for Indigenous women-led organizations and further contribute to the UNDP Gender Equality Strategy, UNDP poverty moonshot, and leaving no one behind priorities. In alignment with other United Nations agencies, UNDP will contribute to the United Nations System-Wide Action on Indigenous Peoples (UN SWAP), including through the introduction of a policy marker on programming supporting human rights and Indigenous people.

Key action(s) Arab States	Completion date	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1. Further increase the integration of the SGP/ local action country delivery mechanisms, financed by vertical and non-vertical funds, into the operations of UNDP country offices, aimed at strengthening the capacities of Indigenous People and local community institutions (plus women-led groups), including for direct access to funds, and enhanced opportunities for South-South cooperation.	December 2025	BPPS (Nature, Climate, Vertical Fund hubs), Bureau of Management Services, UNDP country offices, regional bureaux		

* Implementation status is tracked in the Evaluation Resource Centre.

ANNEXES

The annexes listed below may be found on the IEO website at:
https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/23272

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

Annex 2: Theory of change

Annex 3: The Evaluation Matrix

Annex 4: Process for identifying UNDP's EMBC portfolio

Annex 5: Analysis of the EMBC global financial portfolio

Annex 6: Sampling criteria

Annex 7: Case Study tool: Interview guide

Annex 8: Case Study tool: Country case studies

Annex 9: Meta-synthesis methodology

Annex 10: Analysis of evaluation scores of UNDP GEF projects with EMBC components

Annex 11: Maps

Annex 12: Literature reviewed

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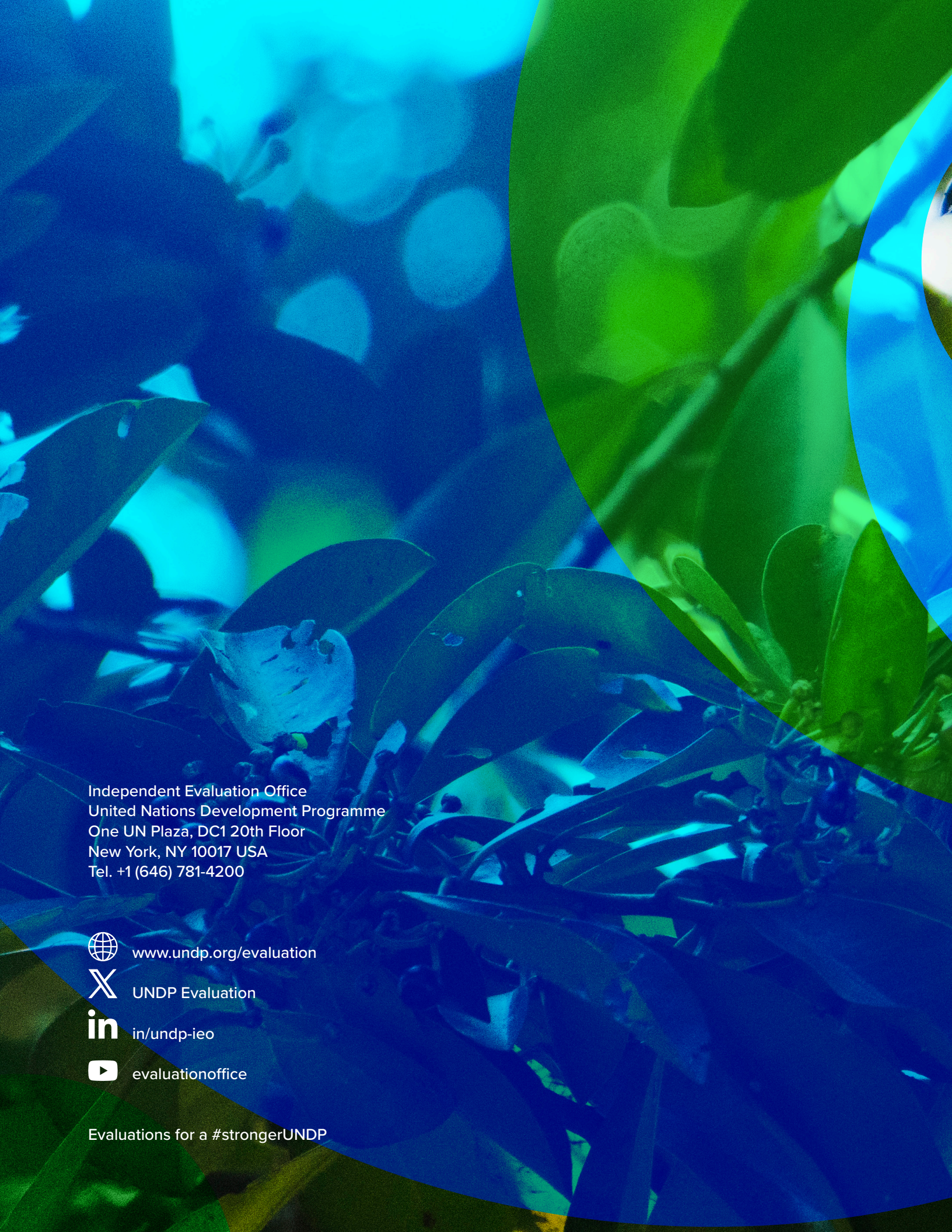

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