

GEF/UNDP project
Removing Barriers Hindering Protected Area
Management Effectiveness in Viet Nam

Mid Term Evaluation Report

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Funding Source	GEF Trust Fund
Project Name	Removing Barriers Hindering Effective Protected Area Management Effectiveness in Viet Nam
Country	Viet Nam
Region	Asia and the Pacific
Focal Area	Biodiversity
Strategic Program	BD SO1/SP1
PIF Approval Date	19/2/2008
Approval Date	28/7/2008
CEO Endorsement Date	24/03/2010
Executing Agency	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.
Description	The Viet Nam “PA Financing” project is a Global Environment Facility (GEF) funded full-sized project (FSP) designed to assist in achieving the long-term solution for biodiversity conservation in Viet Nam’s system of protected areas (PAs) through strengthened systemic, institutional and individual capacities, supported by sustainable financing. This project focuses on these thematic areas, with sustainable financing pilots at three national parks. The Government of Viet Nam (GoV) has established a network of protected areas across Viet Nam. The decentralisation process for PA management has resulted in a fragmented system, with little or no coordination or cooperation, resulting in cost inefficiencies and competition for scarce resources. This project is focussed on a system-wide approach in contrast to the earlier projects that were focused on improving management of specific protected areas.
PPG Amount	USD 100,000
Project Cost	USD 18,786,360
GEF Agency Fees	USD 353,636
GEF Project (CEO Endor.)	USD 3,536,360
Co-financing Total (CEO Endor.)	USD 18,541,043
Project Costs (CEO Endor.)	USD 22,177,403
GEF Agency Fees (CEO Endor.)	USD 363,636

Executive Summary

Overview of Mid-Term Review

The project began in April 2011, and is currently planned for completion in December 2015. The project is within the GEF biodiversity focal area. GEF funding is US\$ 3.54 million, and with planned co-financing of US\$18.54 million, the total project budget is US\$22.08 million. The project is executed under UNDP's National Implementation (NIM) modality (i.e. national execution), with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) acting as the National Implementing Partner (NIP) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) acting as the Co-Implementing Partner (CIP). The project objective is to “secure a sustainably financed PA system, to conserve globally significant biodiversity”, which will be realized through four outcomes:

- Outcome 1: A comprehensive and harmonized legal and policy framework supports sustainable PA financing
- Outcome 2: Clear and harmonized institutional mandates and processes support sustainable PA financing mechanisms
- Outcome 3: Knowledge and experience of sustainable financing options developed through demonstrations
- Outcome 4: Information on biodiversity and PA status supports PA management and builds public support for the PA system

According to GEF and UNDP evaluation policies, Mid-Term Reviews (MTRs) are required practice for GEF funded FSPs, and the mid-term review was a planned activity of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan of this project. As per the review Terms of Reference (TORs), the MTR considers the actual performance and progress toward results of the project against the planned project activities and outputs, based on the standard evaluation criteria: relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, results and sustainability. The MTR assesses progress toward project results based on the expected objective and outcomes, as well as any unanticipated results. The MTR identifies relevant lessons for other similar projects in the future, and provides recommendations as necessary and appropriate. The review methodology was based on a participatory approach and included three main elements: a) a desk review of project documentation and other relevant documents; b) interviews with key project participants and stakeholders; c) field visits to the three project demonstration sites (Bidoup – Nui Ba, Xuan Thuy, and Cat Ba National Parks), where the project is working at the field level. The review is based on evaluative evidence from the project development phase through November 2014, when the mid-term review data collection phase was completed. The desk review was begun in October 2014, and the review mission was carried out from 3-12 November, 2014.

Findings and Conclusions on the Main Evaluation Criteria

The project is a highly important and valuable project for protected areas in Viet Nam. The project has encountered a number of challenges during the first half of implementation, relating both to Operational issues associated with project implementation and execution, and Technical issues related to project design and strategic focus. The difficulties faced thus far have slowed project execution and dispersed the project's technical focus, resulting in limited progress in terms of results and efficiency.

However, the increased activities, results and disbursements in the past two years signal a positive shift for the project, and there is a good chance of concrete and catalytic results before the end of the project. To ensure this outcome, UNDP and MONRE, as the main project partners, must be focused and diligent in ensuring the project reaches its goals in the 2nd half of implementation.

With respect to **relevance**, the project objective is considered **relevant** (or “satisfactory” in terms of the relevance criteria), as the project clearly supports priority biodiversity conservation issues in Viet Nam. The project is in line with national laws, regulations and policies, and is relevant to local resource user needs and priorities as well. The project supports agreed UNDP country priorities as well as GEF strategic priorities for the biodiversity focal area. Furthermore, the project supports relevant multilateral environmental agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The project design and strategy include numerous activities that will help to support biodiversity conservation and effective protected areas management.

The project **efficiency** is rated **moderately satisfactory**. In addition, project implementation is considered **moderately satisfactory**, while project execution (i.e. project management) is also assessed as **moderately satisfactory**. As detailed in Section III F, the project start-up process was marked by delays. The Prodoc was approved by the GEF Secretariat in March 2010, but signing of the Prodoc did not take place until December 2010; the PMU was not established until April 2011, and the Inception Workshop did not take place until December 2011. Furthermore, it was only in November 2012, another 11 months later, that a Project Management Unit was established within MARD. As a result of these delays, the actual implementation of project activities only really began in mid – late 2011, more than a full year after the planned start date in April 2010. Another important delay in project implementation concerned the implementation of activities at the project demonstration sites, which did not start until late 2013.

As of September 30, 2014 the project has reached 66.39% disbursement of the overall project budget; and 79.49% of what was expected to have been spent by this phase of the project. Project implementation arrangements have functioned well, although the level of coordination between MONRE and MARD has been less than should have been expected. Project oversight mechanisms have been in place, but the Project Executive Board has not met sufficiently often (once per year) to provide the level of oversight, guidance, and policy support that the project required.

While the project is behind schedule in its budget delivery, the late start of the project and the significant increase in budget disbursements in the last two years suggest that the project can be expected to disburse the entire budget in a timely manner. Similarly, it can be hoped that the Project Executive Board will provide more hands-on and sustained support for the project in its final year of implementation, as recommended by this Mid Term Review. As for cooperation between MONRE and MARD, this is now a moot point insofar as the project is concerned since MARD will soon end its formal participation in the project, although the PMU and MONRE generally need to address the PA institutional coordination issues outlined in section IV b. Overall, the project has the potential to receive a higher efficiency rating by the end of the project, if performance significantly improves, as expected.

Project **effectiveness** is assessed as **moderately satisfactory**. As of this review, the combined assessment of progress toward the project in the results framework indicator targets shows that of the total of 38 indicator targets, 11 have been achieved, 17 are on target to be achieved, and 10 are not on target to be achieved. It should be noted here that by including 38 different indicators, including

indicators at the Output level, the Results Framework did not follow current GEF practice for prioritized and targeted indicators; Annex 8 provides detailed guidance on potential changes to improve the Results Framework. Furthermore, of the 16 indicator targets that are uncertain, 9 of these are targets related to the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool, the Financial Scorecard, and the Capacity Scorecard; in all of these cases, the uncertainty lies primarily in problems with the templates and scoring used in these tools at project inception and/or mid-term. In reality, however, the project stands a good chance of meeting most of these 9 targets by the end of the project. As for other project activities and results, the project has made impressive progress in strengthening the potential for PA financing at the project demonstration sites, in terms of new ecosystem valuations, management plans, business plans, and approval for new PA financing mechanisms at these sites. The critically important challenge for the project during its final year will be to successfully implement the new PA financing mechanisms, and to ensure that all of these site level achievements begin to be replicated and up-scaled throughout the PA system in Viet Nam. The other critical challenge for the project in the final year of implementation will be to make progress on strengthening coordination on PA management and financing at the systemic level, and in ensuring that new biodiversity information from the sites is integrated into system-level PA planning.

Sustainability is assessed as **moderately likely**. By definition, mid-term reviews are not well positioned to provide ratings on sustainability considering that more activities will be undertaken before project end that may positively or negatively affect the likelihood of sustainability. However, since this project is approximately 75% through its implementation period at the time of this Mid Term Review, the sustainability rating in this case is warranted. Socio-political and environmental risks are rated as moderately likely, whereas financial and institutional risks are rated as moderately unlikely. These ratings reflect the on-going challenge of securing sufficient and sustainable financing for protected areas in Viet Nam, and the challenge of consolidating what is currently a highly diffused system of management responsibilities for protected areas in the country.

Main Lessons learned

Lessons from the Experience of the Project

The mid-term review is relatively early in the project implementation for identifying significant lessons from the project, but a few lessons that have been identified are included below. Note: A review of the 2014 PIR showed that no lessons learned were identified in that document.

The Project design is very ambitious: The goal of the project is broad, the institutional arrangements are complex, and the timeframes are challenging. The project at all levels requires stakeholders to work together and in new ways, and this requires time for consultation and consensus building. Accordingly, recognition of the potential for delay should be built into the implementation timetable projects such as this one, and the project design needs to balance ambition and pragmatism to ensure that project objectives are realistic and can be achieved and yet also make a significant positive impact.

Addressing institutional cooperation among government agencies is challenging: Efforts to harmonise government institutions need realistic and clearly defined targets. Given the complexity of most governmental structures and the differing goals and purposes of institutions, short-term, relatively small projects such as most GEF-funded biodiversity projects can only hope to accomplish limited change in

inter-institutional relationships and structures. Furthermore, project management units can only accomplish a limited amount in this environment; it is up to project executing agencies and project steering committees to provide not only guidance and support, but also leadership in addressing institutional reforms.

Results Frameworks must be consistent with the descriptions of project outputs and activities: Discrepancies between the indicators and targets in the project Results Framework, and the text descriptions of project outputs and activities, can create confusion among project teams and partners about the goals and approaches of the project. Moreover, the Results Framework provides an effective tool for ensuring that project design is realistic; by requiring project stakeholders to consider actual targets and how they are measures, the results framework can help them to avoid proposing activities in general terms and language that in fact are not likely to be successfully implemented.

Critical questions on project partnerships and responsibilities should be resolved during project design: It is important to clearly identify and agree on the responsibilities of official project partners during the project design phase, rather than deferring such decisions until project implementation. Relevant partners are generally more flexible and accommodating during the project design phase, when actual funding and implementation of the project are still uncertain and off in the future, whereas once a project is approved and beginning implementation, partners tend to be more determined to structure their participation in ways that most suit them. As a result, delays in clarifying these issues can greatly delay the implementation of the project, as well as negatively affecting the willingness to work together in a collaborative between partners.