**Management response to the Conserving Biodiversity and Enhancing Ecosystem Function through a "Ridge to Reef" Approach in Cook Islands**

Project Title: Cook Islands R2R

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**Context, background and findings**

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| The project was designed to enhance Cook Islands’ capacities to effectively manage its Protected Areas (PAs) and sustainably manage its productive landscapes at local scales while considering food security and livelihoods. This included the operationalization of the Cook Island Marine Park (CIMP) (covering approximately 1.1 million km2 of Cook Islands southern Exclusive Economic Zone) and the establishment and strengthening of various forms of protected and locally managed areas within the CIMP, including Protected Natural Areas, Community Conservation Areas, and Ra’ui Sites. In doing so, the project aimed to support the Cook Islands in maintaining traditional resource management and conservation systems and approaches, including a leading role for traditional and local leaders and the local communities that they represent in the declaration and management of protected areas, while also integrating these traditional systems into a formal legal and institutional system of protected areas. The project further aimed to support the Government in tailoring policy, regulatory and institutional frameworks to suit the specific characteristics of the Cook Islands and of the new CIMP, recognizing that protection and sustainable use need to be zoned and planned carefully, and that tenure over most land areas is vested in local communities through a traditional tenure system.  |

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| Finally, the project was designed to engineer a paradigm shift in the management of marine and terrestrial PAs from a site centric approach to a holistic “ridge to reef” land and seascape approach, whereby activities in the immediate production areas adjacent to marine and terrestrial PAs were to be managed to reduce threats to biodiversity stemming from key production activities (tourism and agriculture). The project included two components on (1) strengthening PAs management and (2) mainstreaming biodiversity across productions land and seascapes; and seven outputs as follows: Output 1.1: Strengthened Legal / Regulatory and Policy Frameworks for Protected Areas Output 1.2: Expanded and strengthened management systems for Protected Areas Output 1.3: Strengthened institutional coordination and capacities at the national and local levels for the participatory management of Protected Areas Output 1.4: Financial sustainability framework developed for system of Protected Areas Output 2.1: Ridge to Reef approaches integrated into Land Use and Development Planning Output 2.2: Biodiversity conservation mainstreamed into agriculture sector Output 2.3: Biodiversity conservation mainstreamed into tourism sector  |

**Recommendations and Management Response**

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| **Recommendation 1.** Draft key marine spatial plans and management plans that were supposed to be produced (and implementation of these begun) during the project period but which have not yet been completed (CIMP, Aitutaki Lagoon Management Plan, Te Manga Te Kou Cloud Forest, Manuae Wildlife Sanctuary). Management plans do not all need to be finalized in this period, but at a minimum, drafts for discussion by stakeholders should be produced. In the case of some of these plans (e.g. Te Manga Te Kou Cloud Forest), consideration should be given to adopting a less formal, more innovative, and simplified approach to developing a type of agreement with landowners as to priority actions to be undertaken rather than the more formal PA management plan. |
| **Management response: Partially accept**Drafting and implementation of Marine Spatial Plans (MSPs) was not explicitly part of the R2R project design/results framework, and takes significant time and resources to achieve. The MSPs remain a national priority and are part of a work plan recently developed by the Marae Moana Technical Advisory Group, in which the Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) has taken on the lead role of MSP development and will be looking to consolidate this work to appropriately suit its audience (local authorities and communities), functionality and relevance. Efficient progress of MSPs remain subject to identification of appropriate resourcing. The recently approved GEF Islands To Islands (I2I) regional programme may provide opportunity for this. Other opportunities will continue to be explored.The Aitutaki Lagoon Management Plan (ALMP) remains a priority for the MMR. The Aitutaki Master Plan and Aitutaki Lagoon Management Plans have been drafted. Work in this area will continue to be led by MMR to realize the completion and implementation of an integrated and community centric ALMP. Cloud Forest and Manuae land tenure issues are a complex issue and require in-depth understanding of the national context. The National Environment Service (NES) and MMR continue their efforts to build relationships with communities, land owners and traditional leaders, increase awareness and education about biodiversity, gather scientific data, etc., as part of their work plans. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking[[1]](#footnote-2)** |
| **Comments** | **Status[[2]](#footnote-3)** |
| * 1. Explore opportunities for realizing community centric plans (marine spatial plans and management plans) under the UNEP-ADB-SPREP GEF I2I regional programme.
 | 30 Jun 2022 | Marae Moana Coordination Office (MMCO), MMR |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 2**. Ensure the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) meets to discuss the various project-produced reports that have not yet been reviewed/discussed by the TAG (see Table 9). |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**The TAG met within the final month of the R2R project (May 2021) and developed an annual work plan to guide and prioritize actions required by the TAG, which includes critical analysis and review of R2R outputs (e.g. Outlook Report). The TAG also agreed to meet monthly to continue discussions and progress in these areas, amongst others. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 2.1 TAG to develop work plan providing for the analysis and review of R2R project output. | Sept 2021 | TAG, MMCO |  | Completed. |

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| **Recommendation 3.** NES and MFEM to meet to discuss the Sustainable Financing Mechanisms (SFM) report and the Marine Ecosystem Services Valuation (MESV) report (within 3 months) and decide on what follow-on actions to take on each. NES to organize an event to launch the reports (within 6 months) – preferably co-hosted by MFEM. |
| **Management response**: **Partially accept**The SFM and MESV reports were produced through and for MMCO, and therefore the options presented in these reports are Marae Moana centric. As such, MMCO (as a division within the Office of the Prime Minister) is the lead point of contact for further discussions with MFEM on the implementation of selected/preferred options outlined in these reports. NES will continue to provide support as required.The MMCO, guided by the TAG, has considered the two reports as a reference and will seek further discussion with partners through the TAG, given the broad scope of activities and mandates involved in the space of sustainable ocean financing, which requires a holistic approach.Given current financial limitations as a result of Covid-19 as well as other factors impacting NES and other agencies, a launch event may not be feasible. However, the reports are publicly available on the R2R website and other platforms, and continued awareness efforts will be made to direct interested stakeholders to these resources. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 3.1 NES/MFEM to co-organize launching of the report on SFM and MESV | Dec 2021 | MFEM, MMCO |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 4**. Future GEF-supported projects should place much greater emphasis on working with Cook Islands youth on R2R issues, both in and out of school. Do this through seeking partnerships with local NGOs involved in R2R issues and provide the necessary resources to enable those NGOs to not only continue with their ongoing programs, but to strengthen them substantially.  |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**The MCO will support NES in exploring partnership with potential NGOs/CSOs in the framework of the new GEF-7 project for the Cook Islands.  |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 4.1 Explore partnership with local NGOs/CSOs as part of the new Cook Islands GEF-7 project. | June 2022 | NES, UNDP MCO |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 5.** UNDP and IP to ensure lessons from this project are incorporated in the re-design of the Project Implementation Framework (PIF) for the next GEF project. Some key lessons are: Don’t over-complicate things. Simplify. Fewer plans, more direct action. Templates that may work elsewhere can effectively be used as guidance, but one size does not fit all, and a home-grown approach complemented by-- but not led by -- external expertise may work best.  |
| **Management response**: **Fully Accept** |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 5.1 Review lessons learned and ensure that they are incorporated in the PPG for GEF-7.  | June 2022 | UNDP MCO, UNDP RTA, NES |  |  |

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|  **Recommendation 6.** UNDP MCO Samoa Senior Management to meet with UNDP RTA to discuss this TE and how to improve awareness by senior management regarding performance of GEF projects they are responsible for overseeing.  |
| **Management response**: **Fully Accept** |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 6.1 Meeting held between RTA/NCE team and MCO Management to discuss the oversight role of the MCO with required actions | 31 December 2021 | UNDP MCO, NCE team/Bangkok Regional Hub |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 7.** Institute measures to enhance the functioning of the TAG (consider options such as payment for non-Government TAG members who actively contribute, as well as other measures). |
| **Management response**: **Fully Accept** The TAG met during the final month of the R2R project (May 2021) and developed an annual work plan to guide and prioritize actions required by the TAG. This included a review of the warrants and procedures to strengthen processes and agency representation, which will inherently improve the functioning of TAG. These measures to enhance the functioning of TAG will remain flexible and adaptive as necessary, given the decision to not legislate the rules and procedures of TAG but maintain them as a policy document to guide the work going forward. The work plan developed will also guide TAG to be more results oriented and consequently more effective in its role as advisory to the MM Council. The TAG agreed to meet on monthly basis to continue discussions and progress in these areas, amongst others. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 7.1 Complete review of the warrants and procedures to strengthen processes and agency representation in the TAG, and implement agreed actions. | Dec 2021 | MMCO |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 8.** Discuss whether maintaining the technical resource positions in MMR, HoA, and NES -- established and paid for with GEF support-- is important to sustaining project outcomes, and if so, how these positions will be maintained (or, in the case of HoA, re-established). Note: This recommendation does not refer to individuals but rather to positions. |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**For NES and MMR, the positions were reviewed and found to be critical. They therefore have been retained after the end of the project and were included in the organizational structures of each agency, with funding from alternate sources. The House of Ariki (HOA) remains understaffed with a very small annual budget, and the project-funded positions were vacant for some time prior to project closure. As with all government positions and expenditure, fluctuations in budget appropriations based on external factors such as Covid-19 may impact the funding of the positions post-project in NES and MMR in the longer term.  |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 8.1 Explore the possibility of maintaining technical positions within MMR, HoA, and NES.  | 31 September 2021 | MMR, HoA, NES |  | Completed. |

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| **Recommendation 9.** Involve independent evaluators who are familiar with ongoing or recently completed relevant projects in the country in the review of planned projects at an early stage of their development (i.e., during the development of the PIF). This may help ensure lessons from prior projects are incorporated into the design of future ones. |
| **Management response**: **Partially accept**While UNDP does not budget for independent evaluators to be involved in PIF or PPG development, incorporating lessons learned from prior projects is a key design principle held by the organization. The UNDP MCO and the RTA for the new Cook Islands GEF-7 project will emphasize experience in the Pacific region and with similar projects in selecting the consultants for developing the project during the PPG phase (July 2021-June 2022), and ensure that key lessons learned from the R2R project are incorporated.  |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 9.1 Select consultants for project design with experience in Pacific and in similar projects. | September 2021 | UNDP MCO |  |  |
| 9.2 Make available Mid-Term and Terminal Evaluation Reports and other lessons learned and good practices documents to the GEF-7 project design consultants.  | October 2021 | UNDP MCO |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 10.** Future GEF-supported projects should collaborate much more with local NGOs as part of a long-term strategy to build CI capacity related to biodiversity conservation. |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept** |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 10.1 Same as 4.1Explore partnership with local NGOs/CSOs as part of the new Cook Islands GEF-7 project. | June 2022 | UNDP MCO, NES |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 11.** Strengthen the exit/sustainability strategy produced by the PM and CTA by making it more practical and more detailed. Ensure this is reviewed and discussed by the PSC prior to project closure. |
| **Management response**: **Partially accept**The exit/sustainability strategy (ESS) report was produced at the start of the year (2021), circulated to National Biodiversity Steering Committee (NBSC) members, presented at the Q1 NBSC meeting and submitted to UNDP at the time. Given the delayed completion of the Terminal Evaluation report, which was not submitted until after project closure, the project contracts of the CTA and PMU have since come to an end, and revisiting and updating of reports is no longer feasible. The ESS was designed to be an input in to the TE process, which would provide a more comprehensive and independent set of strategies within the final TE report. The UNDP MCO, however, will follow the recommendation to making exit/sustainability strategies detailed and practical in other projects due to close soon, including the R2R Niue and EWACC Samoa projects.  |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 11.1 The recommendation exit strategy/sustainability will be followed in GEF projects due to close soon | July 2022 | UNDP MCO |  |  |
| 11.2 The draft exit sustainability strategies will be developed right after the MTRs and evolve as living documents on an ongoing basis until TE. | July 2022 | PM, CTA, UNDP |  |  |

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| **Recommendation 12.** Compile (online) all technical documents produced with project support and keep these together in one place which is easily accessible to all (Government, Non-Governmental Organizations, Individuals). Decide on a system for referencing documents that makes them easy to locate (the current system of referencing by the names of the CTA and PM may aid in publishing credits but may not be the best for locating project documents). |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**An R2R website (<https://r2r.environment.gov.ck/>) was created for this purpose to house project reports produced as outputs under the project, in addition to others such as videos. These are now freely available online to all and will continue to remain available beyond project closure, as the website has been created under the NES domain to absorb any ongoing website operational costs, ensuring sustainability. Links to the website will also be posted and shared on other partners’ media links and networks such as the Marae Moana website ([www.maraemoana.gov.ck](http://www.maraemoana.gov.ck)).In addition, reports will be loaded to the INFORM database coordinated by SPREP for regional exposure and access (<https://cookislands-data.sprep.org/>). |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 12.1 Creation of website and uploading of documents | Sep 2021 | PMU |  | Completed. |

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| **Recommendation 13.** Strengthen financial capacity related to project management so that future projects do not encounter the same financial management issues this one did (consider options for more intensive mentoring and oversight by MFEM, establishing internships with MFEM, etc.). |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**To strengthen the financial capacity of related to project management, the UNDP MCO organized a virtual training for staff of implementing partners and responsible parties in May 2021, which the NES finance team, PMU and MFEM staff participated in. The UNDP MCO has also adapted the HACT Handbook for Partners developed by UNDP Philippines CO with support from the Bangkok Regional Hub, and will roll this out to all IPs/RPs in the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau in August/September 2021. Centralization of government financial management and reporting through the FMIS Unit 4 online system continues to be rolled out across government agencies in the Cook Islands, which NES has now fully moved to. NES finance and management staff including the PMU have spent significant time with the FMIS support team to receive training in this platform, which greatly improves financial oversight and management of both government appropriated and project funds. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 13.1 Roll-out of UNDP HACT Handbook to Cook Islands IPs/RPs including NES and MFEM.  | Sep 2021 | UNDP MCO |  |  |
| 13.2 FMIS Unit 4 online system rolled out in NES, and NES staff trained in its use. | Sep 2021 | MFEM, NES |  | Completed. |

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| **Recommendation 14.** Ensure whenever projects have planned for a Technical Advisor (in this case a Chief Technical Advisor - CTA) that the CTA is brought on board early on during the project rather than towards the later stages of the project. |
| **Management response**: **Fully accept**The TOR for the CTA for the new Cook Islands GEF-7 project will be finalized and the advertisement will be done in tandem with project approval. |
| **Key action(s)** | **Completion date** | **Responsible unit(s)** | **Tracking** |
| **Comments** | **Status** |
| 15.1 Recruitment of CTA in parallel with approval of the new Cook Islands GEF-7 project document. | May 2022 | UNDP MCO |  |  |

1. If the TR is uploaded to the ERC, the status of implementation is tracked electronically in the Evaluation Resource Centre database (ERC). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Status of Implementation: Completed, Partially Completed, Pending. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)