

Terminal Evaluation of the UNEP/GEF Project
“Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National
Protected Areas Network in Iraq” (GEF ID 5392)
(2015-2023)



Evaluation Office of the United Nations Environment Programme

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Special appreciation is extended to the Ministry of Environment (MoE) of Iraq for their invaluable collaboration. Under the leadership of Dr. Najla Al-Waeli, Director-General of the Technical Department and former National Project Manager, the ministry team—Dr. Adel Omran, Head of the Biodiversity Section, and Mrs. Rasha Majed, Manager of the Biodiversity and Natural Resources Section—facilitated interviews, shared documentation, and provided thoughtful reflections.

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It is hoped that the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this report will support the effective closure of the current project, inform the design of any future phases, and enhance similar UNEP-implemented, GEF-financed interventions. Ultimately, the evaluation aims to assist UNEP, IUCN, and their partners in accelerating Iraq's progress toward the global "30 × 30" biodiversity conservation target and the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹.

Evaluation team

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¹ 30 × 30: As a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Iraq has endorsed Target 3 of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, pledging that by 2030 at least 30 % of its land, inland waters, and marine/coastal zones—including key ecosystems such as the Mesopotamian Marshes, desert reserves, and the northern mountain ranges—will be placed under effective, equitable protection or other area-based conservation measures.

Brief consultant biography

Dr Khaled Rajab is a senior governance and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) specialist with over 20 years of experience leading more than 80 evaluations, strategic reviews, and results-based planning assignments across the Middle East and North Africa. He has supported a wide range of programmes in areas such as biodiversity conservation, public-sector reform, social protection, and climate resilience. His clients include UNEP, UNDP, UN Women, USAID, the World Bank, the EU, GIZ, and other leading development partners.

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About the Evaluation

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ABSTRACT: This report is a Terminal Evaluation of the UNEP/GEF project: “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq” (GEF ID 5392), implemented between 2015 and 2025. The project's overall goal was to develop and start implementing the plan for the establishment of a national Network of Protected Areas in Iraq. The evaluation sought to assess project performance (in terms of relevance, effectiveness and efficiency) and determine the sustainability of its results. The evaluation has two primary purposes: accountability and learning. Data collection methods included: field observations, in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions and document reviews. Data analysis was based on applying triangulated data to assess performance against a reconstructed Theory of Change and its causal pathways. With an overall performance rating of Moderately Satisfactory, the 4th point on a six-point scale, the main findings include: i) the project was highly relevant to Iraq's national biodiversity priorities and its international commitments under the CBD. It responded to critical gaps in Iraq's legal and institutional architecture for biodiversity, particularly the absence of a protected areas strategy, legal framework, and technical data for PA planning; ii) The project achieved several foundational outputs. However, it encountered challenges in translating outputs into institutionalized outcomes; iii) The project's sustainability prospects are rated as moderately likely. Political buy-in was strong at the MoE level, particularly from the Technical Department, but less so across ministries or at the subnational level.

The main recommendations to UNEP are: i) Ensure strategic coordination between GEF-5 outputs and future GEF-7/8 programming; ii) Document and disseminate lessons learned through global and regional knowledge-sharing platforms. Implementing parties are advised to: i) Formalize enforcement roles and legal mandates across relevant ministries for PA governance; ii) Develop and operationalize a dedicated national budget line for Protected Areas; iii) Integrate gender and social inclusion into future PAN phases; iv) Establish a cross-ministerial PA coordination platform with statutory authority; v) Integrate PA content into formal education and civil service training (with Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Planning); vi) Establish grievance redress and benefit-sharing mechanisms for communities near PAs.

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Source(s) of Funding by Institution Type: (indicate all that apply)

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UN Body	No
Multilateral Fund	Yes
Environment Fund	Yes

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DA	Direct Access
DOPA	Digital Observatory for Protected Areas
ESS	Environmental and Social Safeguards
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GIS	Geographic Information System
Gol	Government of Iraq
HY	Half Yearly
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoE	Ministry of Environment (Iraq)
MoF	Ministry of Finance (Iraq)
MTR	Mid-Term Review
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NCEP	National Council for Environmental Protection
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRM	Natural Resource Management
PA	Protected Area
PAN	Protected Areas Network
PIR	Project Implementation Report
PMU	Project Management Unit
PSC	Project Steering Committee
ROWA	Regional Office for West Asia
SNR	Sixth National Report (to the CBD)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TE	Terminal Evaluation
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP-WCMC	UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre

Project identification table

Table 1: Project Identification Table

GEF Project ID:	5392		
Implementing Agency:	UNEP Ecosystems Division, Biodiversity and Land Branch, GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit	Executing Agency:	UNEP West Asia Office
Relevant SDG(s) and indicator(s):	15.1.2 Proportion of important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity that are covered by protected areas, by ecosystem type. 16.3.1 Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area		
GEF Core Indicator Targets (identify these for projects approved prior to GEF-7²)	N/A, GEF 5 project		
Sub-programme:	Healthy and Productive Ecosystems (Nature Action in the MTS 2022-2025)	Expected Accomplishment (s):	EA (a) the health and productivity of marine, freshwater, and terrestrial ecosystems are institutionalized in education, monitoring and cross-sector and transboundary collaboration frameworks at the national international level. Indicator (i): Increase the number of countries and transboundary collaboration frameworks that have made progress to monitor and maintain the health and productivity of marine and terrestrial ecosystems
UNEP approval date:	09 August 2017	Programme of Work Output(s):	PoW 2018-2019 Subprogramme 3. Healthy and Productive Ecosystems, EA (a) the health and productivity of marine, freshwater, and terrestrial ecosystems are institutionalized in education, monitoring and cross-sector and transboundary collaboration frameworks at the national international level
GEF approval date:	19 November 2015	Project type:	Medium-sized Project

² This does not apply for Enabling Activities

GEF Project ID:	5392		
GEF Operational Programme #:	GFL/5392	Focal Area(s):	Biodiversity
		GEF Strategic Priority:	
Expected start date:	January 2015 (ProDoc)	Actual start date:	09 August 2017
Planned operational completion date:	31 December 2018	Actual operational completion date:	30 June 2023
Planned project budget at approval:	USD 4,680,365	Actual total expenditures reported as of January 2024:	USD 1,687,991
GEF grant allocation:	USD 1,230,365	GEF grant expenditures reported as of January 2024:	USD 926,225
Project Preparation Grant - GEF financing:	USD 366,363	Project Preparation Grant - co-financing:	--
Expected Medium-Size Project/Full-Size Project co-financing:	USD 3,450,000 (at design) USD 830,320 (formally committed by MoE). USD 281,537 (committed by IUCN) Total expected: USD 1,111,857	Secured Medium-Size Project/Full-Size Project co-financing (as of June 2021):	USD 500,125 (from MoE) USD 281,537 (from IUCN) Total secured: USD 781,662
Date of first disbursement:	05 August 2018	Planned date of financial closure:	31.06.2024
No. of formal project revisions:	1	Date of last approved project revision:	August 2022
No. of Steering Committee meetings:	3	Date of last/next Steering Committee meeting:	Last: Feb. 2021 Next: N/A
Mid-term Review/ Evaluation (planned date):	2021	Mid-term Review/ Evaluation (actual date):	Note: The UNEP Task Manager clarified that a progress report was used in place of a Mid-term Review.
Terminal Evaluation (planned date):	Year 4, Q4	Terminal Evaluation (actual date):	Inception Phase contract: June-Dec 2024 Evaluation Phase Contract: April 2025-Sep 2025
Coverage - Country(ies):	Iraq	Coverage - Region(s):	West Asia
Dates of previous project phases:		Status of future project phases:	Promotion of Integrated Biodiversity Conservation and Land Degradation Neutrality in Highly Degraded Landscapes of Iraq

Executive Summary

Context and Project Overview

1. Iraq has experienced decades of conflict, instability, and environmental degradation, leading to the deterioration of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Prior to this project, Iraq lacked a coherent, legally mandated, and technically supported framework for managing protected areas (PAs), despite its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).
2. The project sought to address this gap by delivering four key components: (1) strengthening the legal and institutional framework for PAs; (2) improving baseline knowledge and site-level data; (3) piloting site-level planning at two candidate areas (Dalmaj and Teeb); and (4) increasing national capacity, awareness, and stakeholder engagement for protected areas management.
3. The project's total budget was USD 4,680,365, comprising GEF financing of USD 1,230,365 and expected co-financing of USD 3,450,000. Actual expenditures from GEF grant amounted to USD 926,225, with an unspent balance of USD 254,420. Realized co-financing totaled USD 781,662, including USD 500,125 from the MoE and USD 281,537 from IUCN.
4. The Project Management Unit (PMU) was housed within the MoE and coordinated technical activities with support from international partners, including International Union for Conservation of Nature- Regional Office for West Asia (IUCN-ROWA) and United Nations Environment Programme' World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC).

Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

5. This Terminal Evaluation (TE) assesses the project "Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq" (GEF ID 5392), implemented internally by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) from 2017 to 2023, with the UNEP GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit serving as the Implementing Agency and the UNEP West Asia Office as the Executing Agency. The Ministry of Environment (MoE) of Iraq acted as the national executing partner, with funding provided by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the UNEP Evaluation Policy and the GEF Guidelines for Terminal Evaluations.
6. The primary purpose of this evaluation is to provide accountability to stakeholders and to extract lessons and recommendations that can inform future biodiversity and environmental governance programming in Iraq and similarly fragile contexts. The evaluation covers the entire implementation period and assesses performance against the UNEP evaluation criteria. Cross-cutting themes including stakeholder engagement, gender, human rights, safeguards, and institutional sustainability are also examined.
7. The evaluation was conducted between June 2024 and July 2025 using a mixed-methods approach, including document review, 20 key informant interviews (13 in-person in Baghdad, 7 remote), and triangulation with technical outputs and national reports. Stakeholders consulted included the MoE, UNEP, IUCN, Nature Iraq, UNEP-WCMC, and academic experts.

Key Evaluation Findings

Strategic Relevance

8. The project was found to be highly relevant to Iraq's national biodiversity priorities and its international commitments under the CBD. It aligned with GEF's BD-1 strategic objective and UNEP's Medium-Term Strategies (2014–2017, 2018–2021, 2022-2025), particularly in terms of ecosystem management and capacity building.
9. The intervention responded to critical gaps in Iraq's legal and institutional architecture for biodiversity, particularly the absence of a protected areas strategy, legal framework, and technical data for PA planning. It also complemented national initiatives such as the National Environmental Strategy and Action Plan (NESAP) and the Sixth National Report to the CBD.

Effectiveness

10. project achieved several foundational outputs. These include: (i) a National Strategy for Protected Areas; (ii) a legal review and draft Protected Areas Law; (iii) biodiversity assessments for Dalmaj and Teeb; (iv) draft management plans for selected sites; and (v) a suite of capacity building materials and awareness-raising tools.
11. Despite these achievements, the project encountered challenges in translating outputs into institutionalized outcomes. While national-level frameworks were improved, outcome-level targets such as formal legal adoption, active management of PA sites, and institutionalized stakeholder platforms were only partially realized.
12. Given its foundational nature, the project did not aim to deliver immediate ecological results but rather to create enabling conditions for future biodiversity protection. The evaluation found early signs of impact in the form of: (i) improved national discourse on protected areas; (ii) availability of baseline biodiversity data; and (iii) increased institutional familiarity with international conservation standards.
13. Stakeholder engagement varied across the project. While national-level consultations were consistent, participation at the governorate and community levels was less systematic. The absence of a formal grievance mechanism limited the institutionalization of stakeholder feedback, especially from women, indigenous users, and other vulnerable groups.
14. Gender integration was uneven. Women held leadership roles within the MoE PMU, and the project reported participation by female managers in workshops and planning processes. However, no sex-disaggregated indicators were embedded in the results framework, and gender outcomes were not systematically monitored.

Efficiency

15. The project experienced implementation delays due to the deteriorating security situation, COVID-19 disruptions, and changes in MoE leadership. These affected the sequencing of activities, notably fieldwork, technical training, and the timing of stakeholder consultations.
16. The project team demonstrated adaptive management by revising timelines, reallocating budgets, and delivering technical support remotely. These measures helped mitigate some delays and enabled the completion of core deliverables. The level of collaboration with UNEP and IUCN-ROWA also contributed to sustained technical quality.

Financial Management

17. Fiduciary standards were upheld, with expenditures documented against UNEP and GEF requirements. However, USD 254,420 remained unspent under the infrastructure budget line, reflecting delays in site permissions and procurement. This gap underscores the distinction between disbursed and executed funds.

Monitoring and Reporting

18. UNEP reporting requirements (PIRs, financial statements, progress updates) were met but monitoring lacked depth. Feedback loops to improve adaptive management were weak, indicators were not sex-disaggregated, and reporting quality was uneven.

Sustainability

19. The project's sustainability prospects are rated as moderately likely. Political buy-in was strong at the MoE level, particularly from the Technical Department, but less so across ministries or at the subnational level.
20. The draft law, strategy, and site-level plans are critical assets, but at the time of evaluation, had not been formally adopted, institutionalized, or budgeted. Mechanisms for long-term funding, inter-ministerial coordination, and decentralization remain weak.
21. The lack of a dedicated unit or budget line within the MoE for protected areas raises concerns about the continuity of results beyond the project's end. However, interest in aligning with GEF-7 and GEF-8 projects and the CBD post-2020 targets provides opportunities for continued engagement.

Table 2: Summary of project ratings

Criterion	Rating
Strategic Relevance	Satisfactory (S)
Quality of Project Design	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Nature of External Context	Unfavorable (U)
Effectiveness	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Financial Management	Satisfactory (S)
Efficiency	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Monitoring and Reporting	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Sustainability	Moderately Likely (ML)
Factors Affecting Performance	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Overall Project Performance Rating	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Key Strategic Questions

22. The evaluation included five key strategic questions. A summary response is presented below:

1. To what extent were women and local communities engaged in project planning and implementation?

Women and local communities were consulted throughout the project and involved in awareness campaigns, site-level discussions, and training sessions. However, the engagement process was not underpinned by systematic tools to track gender equity or social inclusion outcomes. Nor were grievance mechanisms established to capture and address community concerns. As a result, while the project did reach women and vulnerable groups, the depth and quality of engagement were uneven, limiting the ability to demonstrate clear equity outcomes.

2. How did COVID-19 affect the project's implementation and outcomes?

The project demonstrated significant adaptability in response to COVID-19 disruptions. Remote coordination, virtual training, and revised workplans allowed for continuity of

activities and achievement of outputs despite travel restrictions. Nevertheless, these adaptations came at a cost: they reduced opportunities for direct community engagement and constrained field-level consultation. The pandemic also delayed government processes, including approvals and inter-ministerial coordination, which slowed down progress toward institutional outcomes.

3. Did the project strengthen national and local capacity for protected areas management?

Capacity building was one of the project's notable achievements, with staff from the MoE and partners gaining technical skills in biodiversity monitoring, legal frameworks, and protected area planning. These efforts resulted in improved knowledge and awareness of international standards. However, high turnover within the MoE weakened institutional memory and continuity, underscoring the fragility of capacity gains in the absence of formalized structures and long-term retention strategies.

4. Was there political buy-in across different ministries and levels of government?

The project benefited from visible support from the MoE and certain line ministries, which facilitated progress on policy drafting and inter-ministerial discussions. Yet, political buy-in was uneven, with some ministries demonstrating limited engagement and others prioritizing competing agendas. This unevenness reflected broader challenges in Iraq's governance context, where coordination mechanisms remain weak and subject to shifts in leadership and political priorities.

5. How did fragile context factors (security, land tenure disputes, decentralization) affect progress?

The fragile political and security environment posed continuous challenges to the project. Security concerns limited access to some sites, while unresolved land tenure disputes complicated efforts to formalize protected areas. Decentralization processes also created ambiguity in roles and responsibilities between federal and local authorities. Despite these obstacles, adaptive management by the project team -such as focusing on feasible sites and engaging multiple layers of government- helped to mitigate risks, though systemic constraints remained beyond the project's direct control.

Lessons Learned

23. Key lessons include: (i) capacity building must be coupled with retention strategies; (ii) legal mandates need clarity for PA enforcement; (iii) engagement requires equity tools and grievance mechanisms; (iv) hybrid delivery models can be effective in fragile contexts; and (v) alignment with strategies must be matched with statutory adoption and budgets for sustainability.

Recommendations

24. The evaluation presents eight forward-looking recommendations to strengthen the sustainability, institutionalization, and upscaling of Iraq's PAN. These are grounded in field evidence and stakeholder consultation and are directed at both national and international actors.

1. Formalize enforcement roles and legal mandates across relevant ministries for PA governance.
2. Develop and operationalize a dedicated national budget line for Protected Areas.
3. Integrate gender and social inclusion into future PAN phases.
4. Establish a cross-ministerial PA coordination platform with statutory authority.
5. Integrate PA content into formal education and civil service training (with Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Planning).

6. Establish grievance redress and benefit-sharing mechanisms for communities near PAs.

25. Two recommendations are directed at UNEP as the GEF Implementing Agency:

7. Ensure strategic coordination between GEF-5 outputs and GEF-7/8 programming.
8. Document and disseminate lessons learned through global and regional knowledge sharing platforms.

1 THE PROJECT

1.1 Context

1.1.1 Intervention context

26. Iraq hosts globally important wetlands, arid steppes and montane ecosystems, yet less than 1 percent of its territory is formally protected.¹ Decades of conflict, the large-scale drainage of the Mesopotamian Marshes, unregulated oil and agricultural expansion, and recurrent droughts have driven extensive habitat loss, water-quality decline and precipitous species depletion, eroding ecosystem services that underpin local livelihoods.²
27. Underlying these trends are weak and overlapping institutional mandates, limited enforcement of the Environment Protection Law (2009),³ insufficient spatial data and chronic under-investment in conservation. Oil-price shocks since 2015 further constrained public financing for protected areas (PAs), while the 2014–2017 Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) insurgency left widespread unexploded ordnance that restricts field operations.⁴
28. To address these drivers, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)– Global Environment Facility (GEF) medium-sized project “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the PAN in Iraq” (GEF ID 5392) sought to design an evidence-based PAN, pilot its implementation at two priority sites—Al-Dalmaj Marsh (Al-Qadisiyah & Wasit Governorates) and the Al-Teeb riparian-desert mosaic (Maysan Governorate)—and raise public and institutional awareness of biodiversity values. Approved in 2015 and implemented during 2017–2023, the project was structured around three components: (i) Design of Protected Areas System and institutional strengthening., (ii) Protected Areas Network implementation., and (iii) Public Awareness..⁵
29. Implementation unfolded amid a volatile context: the Ministry of Environment (MoE) was merged into the Ministry of Health in 2017, diluting its cabinet standing and complicating the gazettelement process;⁶ COVID-19 restrictions (2020–2022) delayed stakeholder consultations; and severe drought lowered water levels at Dalmaj, affecting baseline ecological surveys.⁷ A 2019 ministerial decree nonetheless created multi-disciplinary governance teams—management, technical, legal, IT, environmental-awareness and site-specific expert groups—engaging the Ministries of Agriculture, Housing, Higher Education and governorate authorities to steer project delivery.⁸
30. These external pressures highlight both the urgency and the difficulty of establishing a resilient PAN capable of meeting Iraq’s CBD obligations and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 15 target. A geo-referenced maps of Dalmaj and Teeb intervention sites are presented in Figures 1 and 2.⁹

¹ National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for Iraq, 2015.

² UNEP–GEF Project Document, “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq,” 2015.

³ Iraqi Environment Protection and Improvement Law No. 27 of 2009.

⁴ World Bank, “Iraq Damage and Needs Assessment,” 2018.

⁵ UNEP–GEF Project Document, “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq,” 2015..

⁶ Republic of Iraq, Council of Ministers Decision No. 173, 2017 (merging MoE into MoH).

⁷ Iraq Ministry of Water Resources, Drought Situation Report, 2021.

⁸ Ministerial Decree No. 4/2019 establishing PAN governance teams (MoE, 2019).

⁹ The maps are sourced from: Mudhafar A. Salim and Suzan Kaki, Survey Report of Dalmaj and Teeb Protected Areas – Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq (GEF ID 5392), April 2019 (internal consultancy report, UNEP and Ministry of Environment, Iraq).

Figure 1: Location of Dalmaj area in Iraq

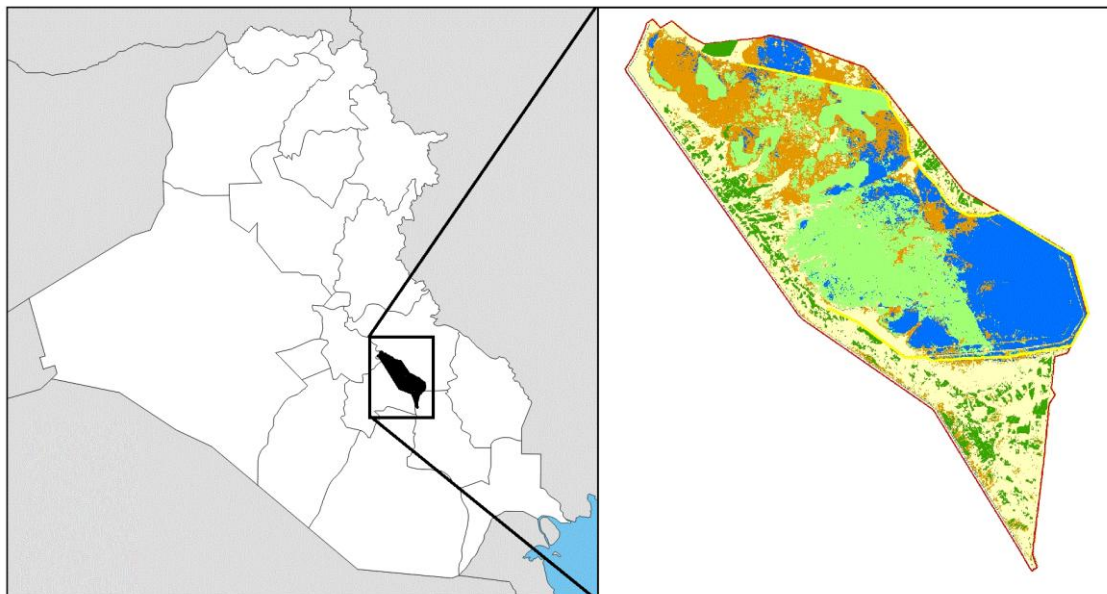
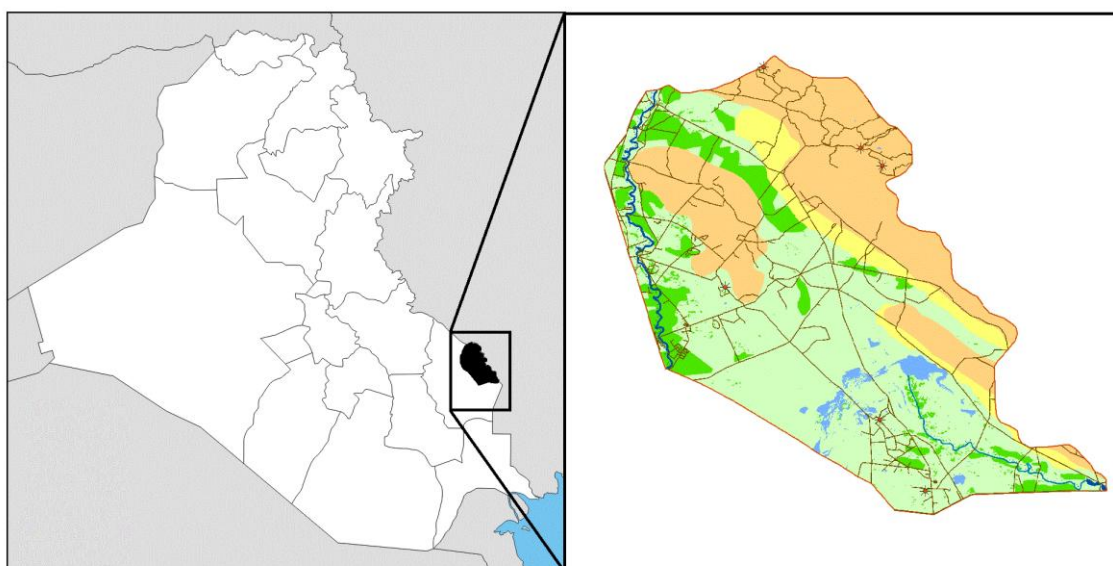


Figure 2: Location of Teeb area in Iraq



1.1.2 Institutional context

31. The project was implemented by the GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit part of the UNEP's Ecosystems Division, within the Biodiversity & Land Branch. The project contributed to the Healthy and Productive Ecosystems sub-programme (formerly Sub-programme 3, Ecosystem Management, and currently Nature Action Subprogramme in the MTS 2022-2025) of UNEP's Programme of Work. It supported the Expected Accomplishment (a): national-level frameworks that monitor and maintain the health and productivity of marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems.¹⁰
32. The UNEP GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit served as the project Implementing Agency, while execution was led by the UNEP West Asia Office (WAO) in partnership with Iraq's MoE. Key technical partners include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and BirdLife International, alongside governorate

¹⁰ UNEP Programme of Work 2022-2023, Ecosystem Management Sub-programme (Expected Accomplishment a).

authorities and national NGOs, as reflected in the project's multi-stakeholder Steering Committee and National Technical Working Group.¹¹

33. The Project Review Committee endorsed the design on 19 November 2015 (GEF approval), and UNEP signed the project document on 9 August 2017, marking the official start date. The medium-sized project was initially planned for completion by 31 December 2018 but following pandemic-related and institutional delays, received a single revision and closed operationally on 30 June 2023.¹²
34. At approval, the project budget totaled USD 4.68 million, comprising a USD 1.23 million GEF grant and USD 3.45 million in pledged co-financing. As of January 2024, cumulative expenditures reported by UNEP totaled USD 926,225 from GEF resources. In addition, realized co-financing amounted to USD 781,662, comprising USD 500,125 in in-kind contributions from the MoE and USD 281,537 from IUCN (USD 112,433 in cash and USD 169,104 in-kind). When combined, these figures bring the total project expenditures to approximately USD 1.71 million. This reflects the sum of GEF disbursements and verified partner co-financing contributions, as reported in the project's financial documentation.
35. This project represents the first phase of Iraq's longer-term PAN agenda. A follow-on GEF-7 full-sized project—"Promotion of Integrated Biodiversity Conservation and Land Degradation Neutrality in Highly Degraded Landscapes of Iraq" (GEF ID 10672)—was endorsed by the GEF Council in October 2023 and entered inception in early 2024; UNEP and the MoE are now finalising work-plans, stakeholder agreements and baseline surveys for target landscapes around Lakes Razzaza and Sawa.¹³
36. In parallel, a distinct GEF-8 full-sized project—"Restoration and Preservation of Key Biodiversity Areas and Ecosystems in Anbar Province, Iraq" (GEF ID 11426)—led by UNDP, was cleared for preparation in February 2024 with an indicative grant of USD 5.7 million over 48 months.¹⁴ Together, these successive GEF investments signal a scaling-up from pilot protected-area establishment under the current PAN project to landscape-level restoration and land-degradation neutrality interventions across central and western Iraq.
37. As no formal Mid-Term Review was undertaken for the GEF ID 5392 (a management progress report substituted for it in 2021), this Terminal Evaluation provides the first independent assessment of the initiative and will generate lessons directly relevant to both the newly launched GEF-7 project and the emerging GEF-8 pipeline.¹⁵

1.2 Results Framework

38. The project was framed around a classical GEF/UNEP results chain: Goal→ Objective→ Outcomes→ Outputs→ Activities—designed to move Iraq from ad-hoc site protection toward a coherent, legally grounded, and institutionally supported national PA system.¹⁶ Table 3 condenses the results chain set out in the 2015 Project Document, moving from the overarching Goal through the Project Objective to the three expected Outcomes. The following paragraphs outline how the project was structured to deliver its intended results.

¹¹ UNEP & MoE Iraq, Inception Report – TE, GEF ID 5392, 28 Aug 2024.

¹² UNEP-GEF Project Document "Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq", 2015/2017.

¹³ GEF Council, Work Program decision approving Project ID 10672, "Promotion of Integrated Biodiversity Conservation and Land Degradation Neutrality in Highly Degraded Landscapes of Iraq," October 2023.

¹⁴ GEF Secretariat, Work Program, Project Identification Form for Project ID 11426, "Restoration and Preservation of Key Biodiversity Areas and Ecosystems in Anbar Province, Iraq," February 2024.

¹⁵ UNEP–MoE, Management Progress Report for the PA Network project, 2021 (internal document).

¹⁶ UNEP-GEF Project Document "Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq" (2019).

39. Component 1 – Design of Protected Areas System and institutional strengthening: This component lays the institutional bedrock for Iraq’s emerging protected-area network. It focuses on drafting, validating, and enacting the legislative and policy instruments that formalize PA governance. Core deliverables include a comprehensive PA System Gap & Priority Analysis, a package of draft laws and regulations, the establishment of an inter-agency PA Steering Committee, and the integration of PA targets into the updated National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) as well as the national SDG indicator set. By providing this enabling environment, Component 1 is the primary driver of Outcome 1 and sets the stage for all site-level and capacity-building interventions that follow.
40. Component 2 – Protected Areas Network implementation.: Building on the policy platform established under Component 1, this component tests practical management models at two priority sites—the Ahwar wetlands (i.e. Al Dalmaj) and a contrasting dryland reserve (i.e. Al Teeb). Activities encompass participatory management planning, community-led governance structures, training, and the installation of essential visitor and monitoring facilities. The experience and lessons generated serve as proof-of-concept, feeding directly into national policy refinement and paving the way for broader roll-out of the protected-area network.
41. Component 3 –Public Awareness: To ensure that the legislative framework and pilot sites translate into lasting impact, Component 3 invests in both people and information systems. It delivers a competency-based training programme that reaches more than 200 national and local staff, establishes a national PA information system to support monitoring and CBD reporting, and launches a dedicated Ministry of Environment website section on protected areas to serve as a public-facing knowledge hub. Complemented by a targeted communication and outreach toolkit, these measures strengthen stakeholder engagement and transparency. Collectively, they underpin Outcome 3 and reinforce the long-term viability and scalability of the gains achieved under Components 1 and 2.

Table 3: Summary of project’s latest approved results framework ¹⁷

	Results Statement
Project objective	Institutional, legal and technical foundations for a functional national protected-area network in Iraq are established and piloted.
Impact	Conservation of globally significant biodiversity in Iraq achieved through the progressive establishment of a representative, effectively managed national network of protected areas.
Intermediate state	Not explicitly specified in the 2019 Project Document.
Project outcome	Outcome 1.1- The first Protected Areas Network for Iraq is designed. Existing information and prior studies in the country, Inventory of the Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq, NBSAP results, international best practice, and relevant regional examples in PA management are reviewed as the basis for the plan. Outcome 1.2- The required national professional capacity is in place to support all steps in the process of development of the first comprehensive PA Network in Iraq Outcome 2.1- Protected Areas Network implementation is started, with the establishment of two priority Protected Areas Outcome 3.1- The level of understanding, consensus and awareness within relevant government sectors, other stakeholders including the

¹⁷ UNEP-GEF Project Document “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq” (2019).

	Results Statement
	wider public on the social, economic, ecosystem services, and environmental conservation values provided by a viable PA network is enhanced
Outputs	Output 1.1.1 - Site-specific baseline ecological and land-use surveys and data collection through ground surveys and remote sensing are conducted at priority sites, to support the development of the first national network of Protected Areas. (Baseline=None, target=3) Output 1.1.2 - A detailed plan for the establishment of a national network of protected areas, including institutional set-up and supporting legal framework. Recent KBA studies, as well as experience and best practice on Protected Areas management at regional level is gathered and used as the basis to develop the plan (Baseline= NA, Target=1 PAN plan, 2 management plans). Output 1.1.3 – A costed Strategy and Action Plan for the institutional, legal and operational set-up of a national network of Protected Areas is developed in consultation with all stakeholders and under the leadership of the MOE. (Baseline=A budget of 670,000 USD was allocated by MoE for establishing 10 new PAs, Target=Existence of a Costed Strategy for 10 years) Output 1.1.4 –Essential new legislation required for the establishment of a PAN in Iraq is drafted and included in the national legislative system (Technical Guidelines Issued: Baseline= 0, Target =5; Case Studies Presented: Baseline=0 Target= 5; Toolkits Adapted for Iraq: Baseline= 0, Target=1) Output 1.2.1 –A Training Needs Assessment (TNA) for staff of MOE at central (institutional) as well as local level (at the two priority sites covered in component 2), and involving other strategic partners, is carried out at project inception, providing the basis for an integrated training and institutional strengthening programme. (Baseline= Ongoing GEF funded Project “National Capacity Needs Self-Assessment for Global Environment Management – Iraq” developed by MoE and UNEP-ROWA to be completed in 2016, Target= Training Needs Assessment for PAN completed) Output 1.2.2 – The Capacity Building programme is implemented (on the basis of 1.2.1), covering top priority areas, some of which are already pre-identified by the MOE. (Baseline= Several capacity building initiatives carried out for capacity building of Iraqi institutions by UNEP, UNDP, IUCN, Ramsar Secretariat, and other International and national NGOs, Target=Capacity Building Programme Effectively Implemented: 1 international workshop on Protected Area Network (PAN), 6 national workshops on PAN, 4 structured training courses, 2 on-the-job training initiatives (Dalmaj and Teeb PA areas), 6 webinars focused on PA management, Training Materials Developed) Output 2.1.1 – The essential infrastructure, staff, equipment and outline management plans for the 2 priority PAs of (1) Dalmaj marshes in Qadissiya (100,000 ha) and Wasit governorates and (2) Teeb area in Maysan governorate (124,000) are established, serving as an initial model for other PAs (baseline=Iraq's KBA and MoE updates identified 21 proposed Protected Areas, including Dalmaj and Teeb sites, Target=2 new PA established in the selected priority areas of Dalmaj and Teeb) Output 8: 2.1.2.a - Implementation of PAN (PA Dalmaj) Output 9: 2.1.2.b - Implementation of PAN (PA Teeb) Output 3.1.1 - Public awareness and outreach strategy developed and implemented, to publicize and support the main objectives and values of the PAN within (a) other relevant line Ministries and government bodies,

	Results Statement
	with a focus on decision-makers, and (b) the wider public including local community groups (Baseline=No Public Awareness and Outreach Strategy for the PAN for Iraq, Target=One Public Awareness and Outreach Strategy for the PAN in place by end of project) Output 3.1.2 - MOE website developed to include/enhance the section on Protected Areas, managed and sustained by the MOE. (baseline=The MoE website is existing but with no PAN page, Target=Target will be set during project implementation, and at least 3 staff members to be trained). Output 3.1.3- Targeted thematic outreach materials and technical toolkits (electronic and/or printed) are developed and published to support the public awareness and communication strategy (Baseline=Awareness campaigns on Protected Areas conducted by MoE and international partners in Iraq, Target= Outreach materials and toolkits published and disseminated:

1.3 Project Implementation Structure and Partners

42. The GEF allocated financial resources to the “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the PAN in Iraq” project through UNEP acting as the GEF Implementing Agency. Within UNEP, overall technical oversight was provided by the Ecosystems Division, while fiduciary and administrative supervision was delegated to the UNEP West Asia Office.¹⁸
43. Execution responsibilities rested with the MoE, which established a Project Management Unit (PMU) under its Biodiversity & Natural Resources Directorate. The PMU served as the national focal point for PAN activities, coordinated annual work-planning and budgeting, oversaw compliance with UNEP and GEF safeguard policies, and consolidated progress reports for submission to UNEP and the GEF Secretariat.¹⁹
44. A multi-stakeholder Steering Committee, chaired by the MoE’s Deputy Minister for Technical Affairs and comprising representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Resources, the three pilot Governorates (Qadissiya, Wasit, Maysan), UNEP, IUCN and Nature Iraq, met bi-annually to review implementation performance, endorse annual expenditure ceilings and provide strategic guidance. Operational liaison with field-level stakeholders was ensured through Governorate-level Technical Working Groups that included protected-area rangers, community leaders and academic experts.
45. The implementation arrangement—embedding a dedicated PMU within the MoE and employing a two-tier coordination architecture (national Steering Committee and Governorate Working Groups)—is consistent with best practice observed in comparable GEF biodiversity initiatives and provided an adequate platform for adaptive management.²⁰ Table 4 summarizes the principal agencies and organisations that formed the project’s delivery consortium, indicating their institutional category and specific contribution to implementation performance.

¹⁸ GEF Project Document (2014) “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network (PAN) in Iraq”, Section 4.4.

¹⁹ PAN Project Steering Committee, Terms of Reference, Ministry of Environment, Baghdad (2015).

²⁰ UNEP West Asia Office, Supervision Mission Aide-Mémoire, February 2023.

Table 4: Project partners

Partner	Role in Delivery & Performance	Institutional Type
Ministry of Environment (MoE)	Hosted PMU; led policy dialogue; chaired Steering Committee; integrated PAN provisions into legislation and NBSAP targets.	Executing Agency (National Partner)
UNEP West Asia Office	Provided fiduciary oversight, safeguards monitoring, QA of technical outputs and consolidated GEF reporting.	Executing Agency (UN Agency)
Nature Iraq	Led baseline ecological surveys, GIS mapping, and community outreach at the Dalmaj and Teeb pilot sites. As a national NGO, Nature Iraq contributed local expertise and facilitated engagement with communities, ensuring ecological data collection and participation were rooted in the Iraqi context.	National NGO
IUCN	Responsible for the technical aspects of the PAN design and management planning. IUCN led the preparation of management plans, the development of the full spatial database, and supported the MoE with training on protected area governance and staff mentoring. Additionally, IUCN conducted the communication strategy, developed the project website, and peer-reviewed outputs to ensure alignment with international standards..	International NGO
Governorates of Qadissiya, Wasit & Maysan	Facilitated local stakeholder engagement, endorsed gazettelement decrees and co-financed small infrastructure.	Sub-national authorities
Academic institutions (University of Basra, University of Baghdad)	Provided taxonomic expertise, co-designed monitoring protocols and supervised student internships linked to PAN.	Academia
UNEP-WCMC	Maintained PAN spatial database and supported adoption of WDPA standards.	International Research Centre

1.4 Stakeholders

46. From the project's inception, a comprehensive stakeholder analysis was undertaken to navigate the complex, multi-level institutional framework necessary for establishing Iraq's PAN. This exercise, captured in the stakeholder matrix of the Project Document, assessed each actor's level of interest—including anticipated benefits, land-use rights, traditional knowledge and technical capacity—and their potential influence through institutional authority, economic leverage, political standing or social networks.
47. Validation during the evaluation phase—including review of Steering Committee minutes, stakeholders' interviews and field reports—confirmed that the inception-phase stakeholder mapping accurately anticipated institutional roles, influence dynamics and engagement pathways. Where unanticipated shifts occurred—such as the MoE's merger and resulting inter-ministerial tensions—adaptive measures (e.g., conflict-resolution support and revised coordination protocols) were rapidly instituted, preserving collaborative progress toward establishing a representative PAN in Iraq.
48. At the national level, the MoElater merged into the Ministry of Health and Environment (MoHE)—served as the project's Executing Agency and chair of the Project Steering Committee. With a committed co-financing package of USD 3.45 million and formal responsibility for legislation, site declarations and long-term stewardship, the MoE/MoHE wielded both high interest and high influence over PAN design and

implementation. UNEP GEF Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit and the UNEP West Asia Office provided critical financial oversight, technical back-stopping and channels for global knowledge exchange, ensuring alignment with international biodiversity conventions.

49. Universities and research centers, such as the University of Wasit, Al-Qadisiya and the Center for Restoration of Iraqi Marshlands and Wetlands, played a pivotal enabling role by supplying baseline data, conducting applied research and delivering capacity-building workshops. National and local NGOs complemented these efforts by mobilizing communities, facilitating participatory consultations, assisting with field assessments and gaining practical training that enhanced their technical expertise and profile.

1.5 Changes in Design during Implementation

50. The project's trajectory was significantly influenced by a series of external shocks and structural adjustments early in its lifecycle. Following its approval and the signing of the Project Document in December 2014, the first major disruption emerged in 2015 when the Government of Iraq restructured the Ministry of Environment (MoE), merging it with the Ministry of Health to form the Ministry of Health and Environment (MoHE). This institutional transition weakened the operational capacity and decision-making authority previously held by the MoE, resulting in delays in procurement processes and postponement of the formal gazettement of the two pilot protected areas—Dalmaj and Teeb. Concurrently, rising ISIL-related insecurity further impeded field access, diverted technical staff, and slowed the mobilization of pledged co-finance, necessitating early adjustments to both the implementation timeline and the resource plan.
51. In response to these challenges, the project partners convened an inception and launch workshop in Amman on 23 November 2017, with participation from MoHE, UNEP West Asia, IUCN, and Nature Iraq. This event marked the formal reactivation of field activities following a two-year delay. The workshop served to validate a revised Year-1 workplan and led to a phased restructuring of the results framework, enabling delayed baseline assessments to inform site-level planning and protected area management.
52. Recognizing the enduring impact of institutional bottlenecks, the project underwent internal schedule adjustments during 2019–2020 to re-profile disbursements and maintain continuity of consultancy inputs. Further adjustments became necessary with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Restrictions on travel and in-person meetings disrupted fieldwork and stakeholder consultations, prompting a shift to adaptive management strategies. Project activities were redirected to virtual modalities, including online training, remote technical support, and hybrid coordination mechanisms. These operational changes required adjustments to the scope, delivery approach, and budget allocations—such as provisions for Personal Protective Equipment, data access, and digital platforms.
53. These adjustments were operational in nature and did not constitute a formal project no cost-extension (NCE). Progress reports at the time projected possible extensions to accommodate delays, but UNEP did not formally approve any change until August 2022, when a no-cost extension was granted through an amendment of the Internal Cooperation Agreement (ICA). This single revision extended the operational completion date to 30 June 2023, with financial closure scheduled for 31 December 2023 and the Terminal Evaluation planned for March 2024.

1.6 Project Financing

54. This medium-sized project (MSP) was financed through a GEF grant of US \$1,230,365. While 100% of the GEF grant was officially disbursed, not all planned activities were implemented as scheduled. Approximately 20% of the GEF grant (roughly USD 254,000), primarily allocated to the development of infrastructure at the Dalmaj and Teeb Protected Areas, remained unexecuted due to delays related to land ownership disputes and administrative approvals. This unspent portion, although committed in the financial system, did not translate into physical outputs, contributing to partner perceptions of incomplete delivery. The project team confirmed that it will return the unspent funds to GEF once the terminal evaluation and project financial closure are completed. The expected co-financing commitments at design totaled USD 3,450,000 from the MoE, which were later reduced to USD 830,320 in formally committed co-finance. By project closure, the total actual co-financing realized amounted to USD 781,662. This included USD 500,125 from the MoE in the form of in-kind contributions, and USD 281,537 from IUCN (USD 112,433 in cash and USD 169,104 in-kind), with IUCN fully delivering its pledged amount. Taken together, this represents approximately 94% of the formally committed co-financing.

Table 5: Project co-finance (USD)

Co-financing (Type/ Source)	UNEP Planned	UNEP Actual	Gov't Planned	Gov't Actual	Other Planned	Other Actual	Total Planned	Total Actual
Grants					112,433	112,433	112,433	112,433
Loans								
Credits								
Equity investments								
In kind support	0	0	830,320	500,125	169,104	169,104	999,424	669,229
Other (*)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	NA	NA	830,320	500,125	281,537	281,537	1,111,857	781,662

*Other = contributions from IUCN-ROWA.

2 EVALUATION METHODS

2.1 UNEP's Evaluation Approach

55. In line with the UNEP Evaluation Policy and the UNEP Programme & Project Management Manual, the terminal evaluation was conducted to assess project performance and to determine both the actual and potential outcomes, impacts and their sustainability. The evaluation pursued two complementary purposes: (i) to provide verifiable evidence of results for accountability to the GEF Council and UNEP management, and (ii) to generate lessons to inform adaptive management and knowledge sharing across UNEP's biodiversity portfolio.
56. Primary audiences for the findings include the UNEP Ecosystems Division, the UNEP West Asia Office, the Iraqi Ministry of Environment as Executing Agency, the co-implementing partners Nature Iraq, IUCN-ROWA and UNEP-WCMC, the governorates of Al-Qadisiyah, Wasit and Maysan, and the GEF Secretariat. Results will also inform practitioners engaged in the follow-on GEF-7 project "Integrated Biodiversity Conservation & Land Degradation Neutrality in Iraq".
57. Consistent with the UNEP Evaluation Manual and the "Guidelines for GEF Agencies in Conducting Terminal Evaluations", nine standard evaluation criteria were applied: (1) Strategic Relevance, (2) Quality of Project Design, (3) Nature of External Context, (4) Effectiveness, (5) Financial Management, (6) Efficiency, (7) Monitoring & Reporting, (8) Sustainability, and (9) Factors Affecting Performance and Cross-Cutting Issues. Detailed sub-questions and indicators are presented in Annex II (Evaluation Framework).²¹
58. Each criterion is rated on a six-point scale from Highly Satisfactory (HS) to Highly Unsatisfactory (HU). Sustainability and Likelihood of Impact are rated from Highly Likely (HL) to Highly Unlikely (HU), while Nature of External Context is rated from Highly Favorable (HF) to Highly Unfavorable (HU). Weighted aggregation of these ratings yields the Overall Project Performance score, with greatest weight accorded to achievement of outcomes and to sustainability dimensions.
59. The UNEP Evaluation Office provides detailed performance descriptors for each rating tier. The evaluator systematically crosschecked all evidence (document review, interviews, financial analysis and field verification) against this matrix to derive the ratings presented in Section 4.
60. Beyond the core criteria, the evaluation responded to strategic questions agreed in the Terms of Reference concerning: (i) achievement of GEF Core Indicator Targets; (ii) stakeholder engagement processes and partnerships; (iii) gender-responsive measures and results; (iv) implementation of Environmental & Social Safeguards; and (v) delivery of the Knowledge Management Approach. A synthesis covering these five GEF focal topics is provided in Annex VIII for upload to the GEF Portal.
61. A participatory approach was adopted throughout. During the inception phase (May-October 2024), the evaluator reviewed the available documents and interviewed project staff to reconstruct the Theory of Change (ToC) at evaluation, mapping causal pathways from project outputs through intermediate states to intended impact. The draft ToC was validated with stakeholders via interviews during data collection (May-June 2025). The final ToC graphic and narrative (Section 3) served as the core

²¹ Guidelines for GEF Agencies in Conducting Terminal Evaluations (2017).

analytical lens for assessing outcome achievement, assumptions and drivers of change.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Primary data sources

62. The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, desk-based document review, and field verification in Iraq (May 2025). Data collection was structured to ensure representation from UNEP, IUCN, national stakeholders—including the Ministry of Environment—and technical experts involved in project implementation and oversight. Unfortunately, due to security restrictions and logistical limitations, the evaluator was unable to meet directly with local-level project beneficiaries. Remote consultations were also not feasible, as internet access and connectivity with community stakeholders were not reliably available during the data collection period. This gap was partially mitigated by triangulating information obtained from national counterparts, project documents, and monitoring reports.
63. Consultations were conducted in person in Baghdad from 11–14 May 2025 to enable direct engagement and a nuanced understanding of contextual and institutional factors. A total of 13 key informants were consulted during the mission, including three senior technical and policy-level representatives from the MoE, two female section managers overseeing biodiversity and international cooperation, seven technical staff directly involved in project implementation, and one national expert affiliated with the University of Baghdad. The sample was gender-balanced (50% female, 50% male), reflecting an intentional effort to ensure diverse representation. To complement the fieldwork and expand institutional coverage, seven remote interviews were held with UNEP and IUCN staff after the mission. Respondents were purposively selected based on their leadership roles or technical contributions to the project—particularly in relation to biodiversity planning, institutional coordination, and field-level activities at designated protected area sites. A comprehensive list of stakeholders had been developed and included in the Inception Report; however, some individuals were either unavailable or did not respond to interview requests despite multiple follow-up attempts. These limitations were acknowledged and addressed through triangulation with project documentation and cross-stakeholder perspectives.

Table 6: Evaluation respondents and field visits

Stakeholders - Individuals			A. Total number involved (M/F)	B. Number contacted (M/F)	Sample size (% B/A) ²²	C. Total number responded Total (M/F)	Response rate (% C/B) ²³
Project Team	Project Team (with management responsibilities e.g. Project Management Unit)	Implementing agency	(8/2)	(8/2)	100%/100%	6/1	75%/50%
		Executing agency(ies)	16/7	16/7	100%/100%	10/4	62%/57%
Beneficiaries	Direct Beneficiaries: (e.g. duty bearers, gatekeepers, training participants, etc.) Indirect Beneficiaries: (e.g. household members, civil society representatives, group members, etc.)		NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Stakeholders - Entities			A. Total number involved	B. Number contacted	Sample size (% B/A) ²⁴	C. Total number responded	Response rate (% C/B) ²⁵
Partners	Project implementing/ executing partners (receiving project funds)		3	3	100%	3	100%
	Project collaborating/ contributing partners ²⁶ (not receiving project fund)		NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Field Visits		Region / country / locality ²⁷	A. Total number sites	B. Number sites visited	Sample Size (%B/A) ²⁸		
		Iraq	3	0	0%		

2.2.2 Strategies for inclusivity

64. To maximize response rates and ensure the inclusion of all relevant perspectives, the evaluator applied a purposive and inclusive sampling strategy targeting individuals across roles, gender, and institutional affiliations. Stakeholders were identified from a pre-validated list developed during the inception phase, with follow-up conducted via multiple channels (in-person, phone, email) to improve accessibility. Special attention was paid to gender balance, resulting in a 50/50 male–female ratio among national-level respondents. While direct engagement with local beneficiaries was not feasible due to security constraints, the evaluator actively sought indirect insights through technical staff with field-level experience and reviewed workshop materials and field reports documenting community interactions. Efforts were also made to reflect divergent views—especially regarding infrastructure delays and institutional coordination—by comparing accounts across UNEP, IUCN, and MoE representatives. These strategies ensured that the findings presented a balanced and inclusive picture of the project’s achievements and limitations.

²² Percentage of people involved in the project who were contacted.

²³ Percentage of people contacted who responded.

²⁴ Percentage of entities involved in the project who were contacted.

²⁵ Percentage of entities contacted who responded.

²⁶ Contributing partners may be providing resources as either cash or in-kind inputs (e.g. staff time, office space etc.).

²⁷ In case of a global project, the unit of analysis is 'region'. In case of a regional or multi-country project, the unit of analysis is 'country'. In case of a single country project, the unit of analysis is 'locality', which could refer to a city, town, village, etc.

²⁸ Percentage of total number project sites in each region, country or locality that were visited.

2.2.3 Secondary data sources

65. The evaluation drew extensively on secondary data sources provided by UNEP, project partners, and national stakeholders. Key documents included the original Project Document, Inception Report, approved budget revisions, and the signed ICA. Financial tracking relied on UMOJA expenditure statements from 2018 to 2023, annual PIRs with annexes, and co-financing letters submitted by the MoE. Additional material included PIMS entries, mission reports, costed work plans, and training outputs. During the field visit, the evaluator collected supplementary materials from national partners, such as workshop reports, monitoring forms, and correspondence documenting implementation progress and bottlenecks—particularly related to protected area infrastructure. These secondary sources were instrumental in triangulating interview data, verifying financial delivery, and assessing the alignment between planned and actual results.

2.3 Data Analysis

66. The evaluation applied a combination of thematic analysis, contribution analysis, and structured matrix scoring to analyze qualitative and quantitative data. Interview transcripts and notes were coded manually to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergent perspectives across stakeholder groups. Thematic clusters were then mapped against the evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, contribution to impact) to assess consistency across data sources. Financial data were reviewed through a comparative framework using planned-versus-actual disbursements, co-financing targets, and implementation milestones. Contribution analysis was used to assess the project's role in observed environmental or institutional changes, acknowledging external influences and contextual factors. Findings were synthesized using evidence matrices to ensure traceability of judgments, and ratings were informed by triangulated data from documents, interviews, and field observations.

2.4 Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

67. Nearly two years elapsed between the project's operational completion (30 June 2023) and the fielding of this terminal evaluation (10 – 15 May 2025). During that period several key staff moved to new posts of both MoE and UNEP, records were archived or dispersed, and routine monitoring systems were wound down. As a result, the consultant faced gaps in up-to-date quantitative data, weaker institutional memory, and reduced accessibility of original implementers, all of which constrained the depth of performance verification.
68. From concept approval (2015) through design, inception, and full implementation to closure, the project spanned almost eight years. Such a lengthy trajectory inevitably introduced shifts in national priorities, personnel, and data-management practices.
69. Volatile security conditions in the region and in Iraq—exacerbated by intermittent cross-border hostilities in early 2025—led UNDSS to postpone the evaluation field mission three times. Concurrently, some MoE senior staff were not available for virtual interviews, and also during the evaluation mission. Ultimately, only a condensed five-day mission window (10 – 15 May 2025) was possible, limiting the number and length of stakeholder consultations.
70. UNDSS travel advisories in force at the time did not permit the consultant to visit the two protected areas sites (Al Teeb, and Al Dalmaj). Consequently, the consultant could not directly observe the outputs of the project on ground or meet with local-level project

beneficiaries . The evaluation therefore relied on secondary evidence: such as photographs and videos posted on social media or the ministry website, and interviews with Baghdad based staff and national experts.

71. To address these constraints, the evaluation triangulated multiple data sources (project reports, financial records, photos and videos) and conducted 16 remote and in person interviews with former project staff, UN partners, MoE staff, and national experts. While these steps strengthened the robustness of conclusions, the limitations above should be borne in mind when interpreting ratings—particularly those related to effectiveness and sustainability.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

72. Throughout the evaluation, all activities were conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards and human rights principles, in line with the UN Standards of Conduct. Efforts were made to ensure that the perspectives of both mainstream and marginalized stakeholders—including women, technical staff, and representatives of the MoE—were respectfully and accurately captured. All data were collected with prior informed consent, including during in-person interviews and field-level consultations. Interviewees were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was recorded or disclosed in the report. Anonymity was maintained in all interview records and reporting outputs, and no photos or statements were included without explicit permission. These safeguards were especially important given the politically sensitive context and the involvement of government institutions, ensuring both the protection of respondents and the integrity of the findings. AI tools were used exclusively to support transcription and summarization; they did not substitute the Evaluator’s professional judgment, analysis, or responsibility for the findings.

3 THEORY OF CHANGE AT EVALUATION

73. The approved Project Document (2015; revised 2019) set out a logical framework that broadly reflected the project's ambition but did not employ UNEP's standard results architecture—intermediate states were missing, drivers and assumptions were implicit, and several deliverables sat at the wrong level. In keeping with UNEP evaluation guidance, the evaluation therefore reconstructed a ToC that preserves the original “goal-posts” while clarifying causal pathways.
74. The reconstruction of the Theory of Change drew on five primary sources of evidence: (i) the approved Project Document and its 2019 budget reallocation memorandum; (ii) six annual Project Implementation Reviews (PIRs) covering the period 2017–2023; (iii) the Initial Steps project completion report (June 2023); (iv) two technical syntheses produced by IUCN on protected area governance; and (v) sixteen key informant interviews with MoE directors, UNEP Task Managers, and IUCN counterparts. In addition, field consultations conducted in Baghdad from 10 to 15 May 2025 further refined the project's problem-solution logic and validated key contextual assumptions and external influencing factors.
75. Three key adjustments were made to reconstruct the ToC in line with UNEP evaluation standards. First, two intermediate states were introduced to bridge the gap between immediate project outcomes and the intended long-term impact. These intermediate states are: (i) “Legislative framework concerning Protected Areas updated and enforced,” and (ii) “Positive attitudes and practices that support biodiversity conservation and address environmental issues related to Protected Areas adopted and implemented by the public.” These statements reflect the systemic and behavioral shifts necessary to enable national-level replication and long-term sustainability. Second, the amendment of Protected Areas By-law No. 2/2014 was elevated from an activity to a distinct output (Output 1.3) to reflect its significance as a formal, verifiable policy product. Finally, two critical drivers were explicitly incorporated: (i) sustained political support at the national level across electoral cycles, and (ii) an operational and functional inter-ministerial coordination mechanism, notably the National Protected Areas Committee (NPAC) and its Environment Planning and Implementation Committee (EPIC) sub-group²⁹, to ensure coherent decision-making across sectors. The successful achievement of the project's outcomes and transition toward impact was contingent on a number of external contextual factors, which were explicitly acknowledged and examined during the ToC reconstruction. Chief among these were security conditions, particularly the accessibility of project sites given localized instability in Iraq; the availability and timely release of public budgets, especially for the operationalization of protected areas; and the retention of trained MoE staff, which was repeatedly challenged by high staff turnover and institutional restructuring.
76. The project also operated in a politically fluid environment. Notably, the merger of the Ministry of Environment with the Ministry of Health mid-implementation diluted the MoE's mandate and weakened its influence over protected area governance—a shift that disrupted inter-ministerial dynamics and delayed the formal declaration of Dalmaj and Teeb as protected areas. Moreover, changes in government leadership and intermittent conflict in other parts of Iraq (though not directly in the pilot sites) added layers of uncertainty to project delivery.

²⁹ EPIC refers to the Environment Planning and Implementation Committee, a technical sub-committee or working group formed under the National Protected Areas Committee (NPAC) in Iraq.

77. These contextual challenges were partially mitigated through adaptive measures, such as shifting to virtual technical support during periods of restricted movement (e.g., during COVID-19) and leveraging relationships with academic and subnational actors to maintain continuity of field activities. Nevertheless, the external risk landscape remained a significant influence on project performance, particularly in relation to the timely achievement of legal reform milestones and the sustainability of capacity gains at the governorate level.
78. The reconstructed ToC adds a clearly articulated impact statement—"Health and resilience of Iraq's ecosystems improved." This end-state, absent from the original log-frame, makes explicit the environmental condition the project ultimately seeks to influence. It was derived from the project's stated rationale and aligns with CBD-related national commitments. Accompanying revisions to outcomes and outputs ensure each result is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART), thereby strengthening internal logic and evaluability.
79. Figure 3 now captures a fully tested causal chain: outputs from the three components (orange) have led to four verified outcomes (blue) that are already advancing—at differing speeds—through the two intermediate states (yellow) toward the long-term impact of healthier, more resilient Iraqi ecosystems (green). Assumptions A1–A9 and drivers D1–D2 remain positioned at the transition points where they exerted the greatest influence, but their validity has been reassessed in light of field evidence and stakeholder testimony collected during the evaluation:
- **Driver D1** (*institutional mandates clarified and activated*) was largely realised through the re-activation of the National Protected Areas Committee and its EPIC sub-group; meeting minutes and interviews³⁰ confirm that these bodies now vet PA-related decisions.
 - **Driver D2** (*national cadre of PA professionals in place*) is only partially met. Although 147 officers completed targeted training, high staff turnover within governorate environment directorates has eroded institutional memory³¹
80. Impact pathway 1: PAN implementation. The principal pathway (blue arrows) links Component 1 (planning) and Component 2 (site establishment). Outputs such as baseline studies, the costed PAN strategy and legal instruments feed Outcome 1.1 (evidence-based PAN established) and Outcome 1.2 (stakeholders act in support of PAN). Component 2 then initiates PAN implementation through gazettelement of Dalmaj and Teeb, provision of infrastructure, staffing and preliminary management plans—collectively captured in Outcome 2.1. Successful transition to Intermediate State 1 (legislative framework updated and enforced) depends on Driver D1 (institutional mandates clarified and activated) and assumptions on government commitment (A5), national co-financing (A6) and multi-stakeholder collaboration (A7).
81. Impact pathway 2: Knowledge and capacity. The second pathway (red arrows) is triggered by the training-needs assessment and implementation of a comprehensive capacity-building programme, plus the new output on inter-sectoral collaboration mechanisms. These outputs underpin behavioral change captured in Outcome 1.2 and progress to Intermediate State 2 (Positive attitudes and practices that support biodiversity conservation and address environmental issues related to Protected Areas adopted and implemented by the public)), contingent on the availability of international

³⁰ INT 9, 13

³¹ INT 15, 16

expertise (A4) and continued partner collaboration (A7). Driver D2—creation of a national cadre able to sustain PA management—facilitates this transition.

82. Impact pathway 3: Outreach and public awareness. Component 3 outputs—public-awareness strategy, upgraded MoE website and tailored outreach materials—support Outcome 3.1 (improved consensus and behaviors in favor of conservation). Achieving Intermediate State 2 (positive conservation attitudes and practices adopted) hinges again on partner collaboration (A7) and consistent messaging through multiple channels.
83. Assumptions and risk refinement. The ProDoc identified core assumptions related to political stability, project significance, timeline sufficiency and access to international expertise, and later added a gender-equality assumption. The inception review confirmed their relevance but also re-classified routine planning factors (e.g., work-plan completion in Year 1) as management tasks rather than assumptions. Four additional assumptions were inserted to address gaps: (i) sustained national funding (A6); (ii) effective stakeholder collaboration (A7); (iii) clear institutional roles (A8); and (iv) continued public support (A9). Together these refinements provide a more realistic basis for assessing the likelihood of impact and for framing risk-management discussions with project partners.
84. Table 7 reflects the revised results hierarchy as reconstructed during the Inception Phase and reconfirmed during the Evaluation Phase. Each change is justified based on UNEP evaluation standards and the logical alignment with SMART criteria.

Table 7: Justification for reformulation of results statements

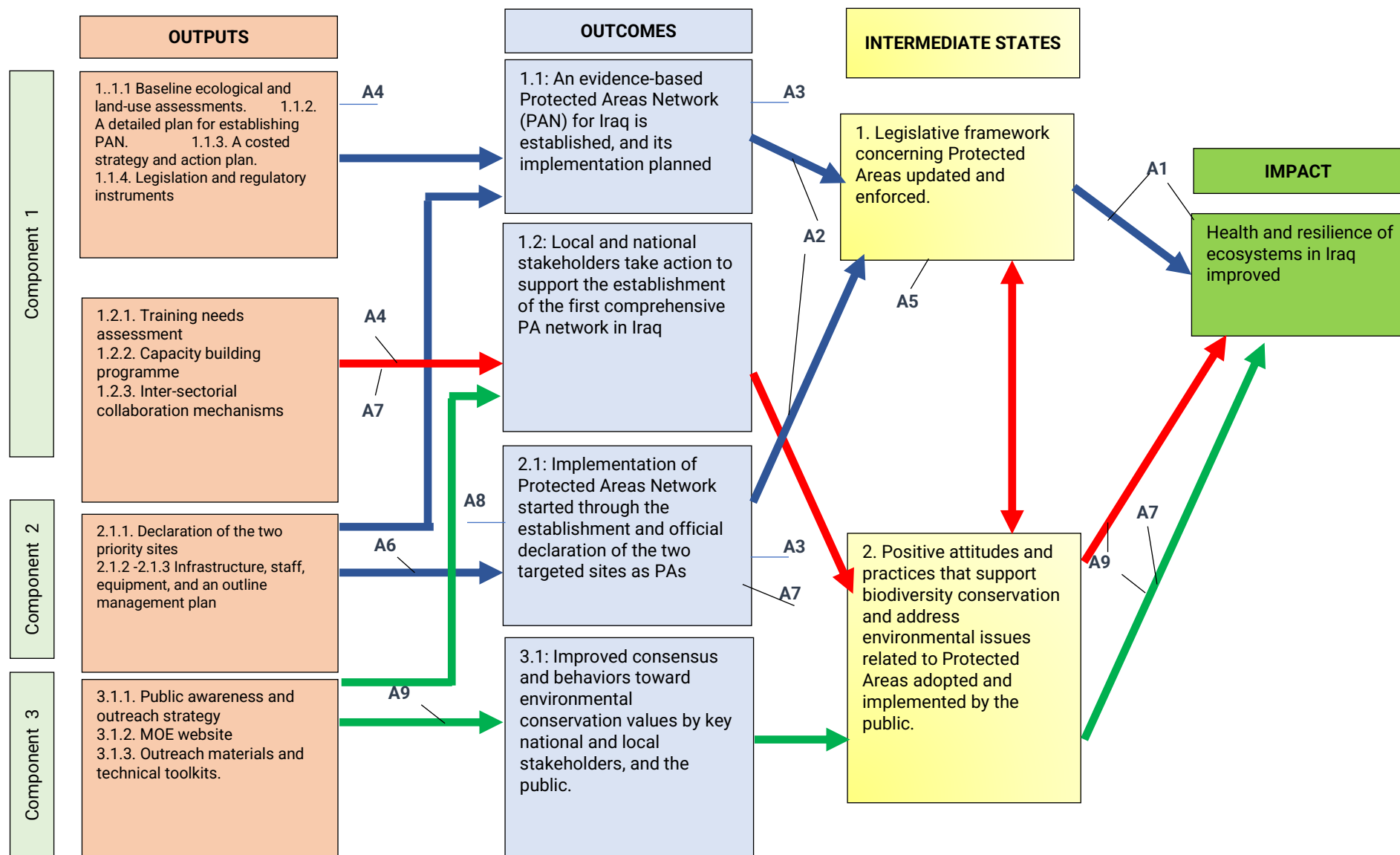
Results as in ProDoc	Reformulated Statement	Justification for Reformulation
Impact		
Missing	Health and resilience of ecosystems in Iraq improved	The Project Document did not clearly articulate the ultimate purpose or long-term impact of establishing the PAN. An indication to the suggested statement was included in the Project Document as part of describing the main problem or need it aims to tackle—in this case, improving the biodiversity and ecosystems conservation and sustainable use in Iraq.
Intermediate states (changes beyond the project outcomes that are required to contribute to the impact(s))		
Missing	1. Legislative framework concerning Protected Areas updated and enforced. 2. Positive attitudes and practices that support biodiversity conservation and address environmental issues related to Protected Areas adopted and implemented by the public.	
Component 1: Design of PA system and institutional strengthening		
Outcome 1.1- The first Protected Areas Network for Iraq is	Outcome 1.1: An evidence-based Protected Areas	Outcome was revised to cover both the

Results as in ProDoc	Reformulated Statement	Justification for Reformulation
designed. Existing information and prior studies in the country, Inventory of the Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq, NBSAP results, international best practice, and relevant regional examples in PA management are reviewed as the basis for the plan	Network (PAN) for Iraq is established, and its implementation planned.	establishment and the plan for implementation as described in the ProDoc. The term 'evidence-based' was used to represent the activities, which made the original outcome lengthy. Outcome was shortened to focus on the expected result and not the activities.
Output 1.1.1 - Site-specific baseline ecological and land-use surveys and data collection through ground surveys and remote sensing are conducted at priority sites, to support the development of the first national network of Protected Areas.	Output 1.1.1 - Baseline ecological and land-use assessments developed for the two pilot sites - Dalmaj and Teeb area - and made available to key stakeholders	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries' perspective.
Output 1.1.2 - A detailed plan for the establishment of a national network of protected areas, including institutional set-up and supporting legal framework. Recent KBA studies, as well as experience and best practice on Protected Areas management at regional level is gathered and used as the basis to develop the plan	Output 1.1.2 - A detailed plan for establishing a national network of protected areas developed, and made ready to be implemented by the national government	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries' perspective.
Output 1.1.3 - A costed Strategy and Action Plan for the institutional, legal and operational set-up of a national network of Protected Areas is developed in consultation with all stakeholders and under the leadership of the MOE	Output 1.1.3 - A costed strategy and action plan developed for the institutional, legal, and operational setup of the PAN and provided to key stakeholders for adoption.	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries' perspective.
Output 1.1.4 - Essential new legislation required for the establishment of a PAN in Iraq is drafted and included in the national legislative system	Output 1.1.4 - Legislation and regulatory instruments for PAN developed and institutionalized within the relevant national bodies, including technical guidelines, and toolkits on PA management.	Revised to better reflect the project's goals as outlined in the ProDoc and to align with UNEP's definition of "an output," which is "the availability of new products and services and/or gains in knowledge, abilities, and awareness of individuals or within institutions." The inclusion of these instruments within the national legislative framework appears to be

Results as in ProDoc	Reformulated Statement	Justification for Reformulation
		far from being an achievable output within Iraq's complex legal and political system.
Outcome 1.2- The required national professional capacity is in place to support all steps in the process of development of the first comprehensive PA Network in Iraq	Outcome 1.2 - Local and national stakeholders take action to support the establishment of the first comprehensive PA network in Iraq	Reformulated to emphasize the behavioral change that will result from the increased capacity, i.e., support to the development of the PA network. Added "local" capacity in addition to "national" to reflect the project's focus on both levels.
Output 1.2.1 –A Training Needs Assessment (TNA) for staff of MOE at central (institutional) as well as local level (at the two priority sites covered in component 2), and involving other strategic partners, is carried out at project inception, providing the basis for an integrated training and institutional strengthening programme	Output 1.2.1 –Training needs assessment developed and presented to key stakeholders to inform the design of the capacity building program	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries' perspective.
Output 1.2.2 – The Capacity Building programme is implemented (on the basis of 1.2.1), covering top priority areas (ref section A.1.3), some of which are already pre-identified by the MOE. The Training Programme will entail a combination of on-the-job and formal training carried out in collaboration with national conservation NGOs and regional conservation training	Output 1.2.2 – A theoretical and on-the-job training capacity building programme for key local and national stakeholders developed and implemented. New: Output 1.2.3- Inter-sectorial collaboration mechanisms for the development of the PA network established and engagement of key stakeholders enhanced	The initial output was retained and revised to encompass the type of training and the specific target groups (local and national). A new output has been introduced; the ProDoc referred to the establishment of a collaboration mechanism aimed at enhancing outcomes related to institutional capacity building. The evaluator considers this to be a key output that deserves inclusion in the evaluation.
Component 2: PAN implementation		
Outcome 2.1- Protected Areas Network implementation is started, with the establishment of two priority Protected Areas	Outcome 2.1- Implementation of Protected Areas Network started through the establishment and official declaration of the two targeted sites as PAs	Revised to better place greater emphasis on the declaration and establishment of the two priority sites.
Output 2.1.1 – The essential infrastructure, staff, equipment and outline management plans	Output 2.1.1 - Gazetting process for the declaration of the two priority sites as	There is a discrepancy in describing this output between the "Logical /

Results as in ProDoc	Reformulated Statement	Justification for Reformulation
for the 2 priority PAs of (1) Dalmaj marshes in Qadissiya (100,000 ha) and Wasit governorates and (2) Teeb area in Maysan governorate (124,000) are established, serving as an initial model for other PAs Output 8: 2.1.2.a - Implementation of PAN (PA Dalmaj) Output 9: 2.1.2.b - Implementation of PAN (PA Teeb)	Protected Areas (PAs) supported. Output 2.1.2 - Essential infrastructure, staff, equipment, and an outline management plan provided to stakeholders to support the establishment of the Dalmaj Protected Area. Output 2.1.3 - Essential infrastructure, staff, equipment, and an outline management plan provided to stakeholders to support the establishment of the Teeb Protected Area.	Results Framework” annex and the description provided in the “Project components and expected results” section. The outputs were revised to reflect the expected product of the project from the beneficiaries’ perspective Additionally, two separate revised outputs were proposed for each site.
Component 3: Public Awareness		
Outcome 3.1- The level of understanding, consensus and awareness within relevant government sectors, other stakeholders including the wider public on the social, economic, ecosystem services, and environmental conservation values provided by a viable PA network is enhanced	Outcome 3.1 – Improved consensus and behaviors toward environmental conservation values by key national and local stakeholders, and the public.	Minor revisions were made to ensure consistency with the expected level of result; how stakeholders utilize the gained knowledge/understanding/awareness/capacity etc.
Output 3.1.1 - Public awareness and outreach strategy developed and implemented, to publicize and support the main objectives and values of the PAN within (a) other relevant line Ministries and government bodies, with a focus on decision-makers, and (b) the wider public including local community groups	Output 3.1.1 - Public awareness on PAN improved and outreach strategy developed and made accessible to relevant stakeholders.	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries’ perspective.
Output 3.1.2 - MOE website developed to include/enhance the section on Protected Areas, managed and sustained by the MOE.	Output 3.1.2 - MOE website with a dedicated PA section developed and made available for relevant stakeholders.	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries’ perspective.
Output 3.1.3- Targeted thematic outreach materials and technical toolkits (electronic and/or printed) are developed and published to support the public awareness and communication strategy (3.1.1)	Output 3.1.3- Targeted outreach materials and technical toolkits created and disseminated to support the public awareness strategy.	Output revised to better reflect the expected product/service of the project from the beneficiaries’ perspective.

Figure 3: Project's Theory of Change at Evaluation



Legend:

Drivers:
D1: Institutional mandates related to enforcing legislations are clarified and activated.
D2: National professional and technical capacity is in place to support and sustain the development of Protected Areas.
Assumptions:
<u>Mentioned in the ProDoc:</u> A1: Political instability will not affect the execution of project activities and achievement of project objectives A2: International and national partners are committed to support the project with requested resources and co-financing A3: National decision makers responsive to PA planning and coordination by MoE A4: Availability of international experts to support the field activities, capacity development, and baseline assessment. <u>New:</u> A5: Continuous and strong commitment to the project by the Government of Iraq and its supporting partners A6: Availability of contribution from national government A7: Willingness of national and local partners to collaborate A8: MoE has the mandate and is empowered to steer project activities and complete the declaration process A9: The integration of gender equality measures is understood and valued by the main project partners.

4 EVALUATION FINDINGS

4.1 Strategic Relevance

4.1.1 Alignment to UNEP MTS, PoW and Strategic Priorities

85. The project was conceived and implemented in response to Iraq’s obligations under the CBD—specifically the Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA) and Aichi Target 11—and was fully aligned with UNEP’s Medium-Term Strategy 2014-2017 (Sub-programme 3: Ecosystem Management) and 2022-2025 (Nature Action Subprogramme). It also contributed directly to SDG 15 (Target 15.1) and to the Government of Iraq’s NBSAP 2015-2020. It directly contributed to the UNEP Expected Accomplishment (a): “The health and productivity of marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems are institutionalized in national and sectoral development frameworks.”³⁴ This was achieved through the legal declaration of Iraq’s first PAs at Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb, which expanded terrestrial PA coverage by 74%, from 0.65% to 1.13% of the national territory.³⁵
86. The project was explicitly designed to leverage UNEP’s normative strengths particularly in enabling legal frameworks, institutional development, and technical capacity for environmental governance. Project documents and interview data confirm that UNEP’s comparative advantage as a normative agency with a strong regional presence (via its West Asia Office) informed its selection as the Implementing Agency.³⁶ The project also aligned with UNEP’s strategic priorities under the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building (BSP), especially by supporting Iraq’s compliance with multilateral environmental agreements and national biodiversity targets.³⁷
87. Consistent with the BSP, the project made significant contributions to institutional strengthening. It produced nine technical guidelines and delivered capacity-building programmes that trained over 200 staff from the Ministry of Environment and partner agencies on protected area planning, zoning, and monitoring.³⁸ Interview evidence confirms that these activities helped operationalize Iraq’s NBSAP 2015–2020.³⁹
88. By 2023, the project was recognized in UNEP’s corporate scorecard as one of four new country cases demonstrating compliance with PoW indicator 3(a)(i).⁴⁰ It also played a catalytic role in promoting South-South Cooperation. Project-developed knowledge products were disseminated through IUCN to peer institutions in Jordan and Egypt, and stakeholders recommended future structured exchange visits with neighboring countries such as UAE and Saudi Arabia to enhance regional peer learning.⁴¹
89. Additionally, interviews with UNEP staff affirmed that embedding a UNEP-funded national officer within Iraq’s Ministry of Environment was a strategic measure to strengthen national ownership and ensure accountability.⁴² This reflects UNEP’s model of “light-touch implementation,” combining country-led delivery with international strategic oversight.

³⁴ UNEP Medium-Term Strategy (2014–2017), Subprogramme 3 – Ecosystem Management.

³⁵ Ministry of Environment, Iraq, “List of Protected Areas,” <https://moen.gov.iq/en/reserves>

³⁶ UNEP, Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building (2005).

³⁷ UNEP, Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building (2005).

³⁸ Final Project Report

³⁹ INT 7

⁴⁰ UNEP Corporate Scorecard, 2023, <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/projects/10672>

⁴¹ INT 1, INT 15, INT 8

⁴² Interview with INT1, and INT14

Table 8: Alignment to the UNEP Medium Term Strategy (MTS), Programme of Work (PoW), and Strategic Priorities

UNEP Strategic Document	Alignment with UNEP's Mandate and Thematic Priorities	Level of Alignment
MTS (2014–2017)	Directly aligned with Sub-Programme 3 “Ecosystem Management.” Contributed to Expected Accomplishment (a): institutionalising ecosystem health and productivity in national frameworks.	Full
PoW (2018–2019)	Mapped to PoW Indicator 3(a)(i); Iraq listed in UNEP's 2023 scorecard as a new country demonstrating contribution to ecosystem management outcomes.	Full
Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building	Nine technical guidelines produced and over 200 national staff trained; capacity support targeted compliance with MEAs and NBSAP.	Full
South-South Cooperation	Knowledge products disseminated globally through the IUCN library, regional forums (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine), and upcoming IUCN Congress in the UAE. However, stakeholders emphasized the need for more structured and direct exchanges, particularly with UAE and Saudi Arabia.	Partial

4.1.2 Alignment to GEF/Donor Strategic Priorities

90. The project was approved under GEF-5 within the biodiversity focal area and aligned with GEF Objective BD-1: improving the sustainability of protected area systems.⁴³ It aimed to develop and initiate a national protected areas network in Iraq, consistent with GEF's mandate to address biodiversity loss through institutional strengthening and area-based conservation.
91. Moreover, the project's outputs addressed several GEF cross-cutting priorities, including gender mainstreaming and stakeholder engagement, which were operationalized through a Gender Action Plan and Stakeholder Engagement Plan.⁴⁴ The design also aligned with GEF's Land Degradation focal area by supporting land use planning and sustainable natural resource management around protected areas.⁴⁵
92. Importantly, GEF-5 implementation helped catalyze follow-up projects: the GEF-7 Middle Mesopotamia Basin project and the GEF-8 Anbar Key Biodiversity Areas project. Stakeholders confirmed that “Initial Steps” served as the foundation for these subsequent investments.⁴⁶ Though MoE' co-financing was reduced due to Iraq's economic downturn, in-kind contributions from national stakeholders—including staff time, legal drafting support, and infrastructure access—ensured the project's continuity and enhanced country ownership. According to UNEP's West Asia programme team, this continued alignment with national systems improved trust and set a precedent for the effective design of the Middle Mesopotamia project under GEF-7.⁴⁷

⁴³ GEF Project Information Form – GEF ID 5392, <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/projects/5392>.

⁴⁴ UNEP PAN Project Gender Action Plan and Stakeholder Engagement Plan, Final Report 2023.

⁴⁵ GEF Land Degradation Strategy, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/publications/GEF_LD_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

⁴⁶ INT 1, INT 7

⁴⁷ INT 10, INT 13

Table 9: Alignment to GEF/Donor Strategic Priorities

Donor or Partner Strategic Document	Alignment with Donor or Partner Strategic Priorities	Level of Alignment
GEF-5 Biodiversity Focal Area Strategy	Fully aligned. The project contributed directly to GEF-6 Objective BD-1 by developing and initiating a national Protected Areas Network in Iraq. It also addressed land degradation neutrality and included cross-cutting priorities such as gender and stakeholder engagement.	Full
GEF-5 Land Degradation Focal Area Strategy	The project incorporated sustainable land and resource management principles around PA sites, consistent with GEF's land degradation priorities.	Partial

4.1.3 Relevance to Global, Regional, Sub-regional and National Priorities

93. Nationally, the project directly supported Iraq's 2015–2020 NBSAP, which prioritized the establishment of protected areas. It also contributed to Iraq's National Strategy for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment (2024–2030), which prioritizes biodiversity and protecting 10% of Iraq's land.⁴⁸ The formal gazettelement of Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb PAs—guided by ByLaw 2/2014—represented Iraq's first concrete steps toward fulfilling its CBD and SDG 15 obligations.⁴⁹ The project's contributions are recognized in Iraq's Sixth National Report to the CBD and its national reports to the UNFCCC and UNCCD. The protected areas were also included in Iraq's draft NAP as a nature-based climate solution.⁵⁰
94. Regionally, the project promoted alignment with Middle East conservation efforts. It incorporated best practices from Jordan and Egypt via IUCN's regional office and mobilized IUCN's global networks to provide training, databases, and Red List expertise.⁵¹ The selection of Al-Teeb—a transboundary wetland site bordering Iran—illustrates regional biodiversity relevance.
95. Local level relevance was reinforced through participatory site selection, awareness campaigns with herders and fishers in Dalmaj, and recognition of protected areas as livelihood buffers, aligning with SDG 1 ("No Poverty") and the CBD principle of "leaving no one behind."

Table 10: Relevance to Global, Regional, Sub-regional and National Environmental Priorities

Strategic Document or Agreement	Alignment with Global, Regional, Sub-regional, National Environmental Priorities	Level of Alignment
Iraq's 2015–2020 National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)	The project directly supported NBSAP by prioritizing the establishment of protected areas.	Full
Iraq's National Strategy for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment (2024–2030)	Contributed to the strategy's goal of protecting biodiversity and conserving 10% of Iraq's land.	Full
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	The formal gazettelement of Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb PAs represents Iraq's commitment to fulfilling CBD obligations.	Full
SDG 1: No Poverty SDG 15: Life on Land	Local-level relevance was reinforced through the recognition of PAs as livelihood buffers. The project contributes to the protection of biodiversity through the establishment of protected areas.	Full

⁴⁸ Iraq NBSAP (2015–2020), Ministry of Environment, Iraq.

⁴⁹ Bylaw No. 2 on Natural Sites (2014), Government of Iraq.

⁵⁰ Iraq's Sixth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (2023), Ministry of Environment.

⁵¹ INT 11, Progress Report (2023)

Strategic Document or Agreement	Alignment with Global, Regional, Sub-regional, National Environmental Priorities	Level of Alignment
Iraq's Sixth National Report to the CBD	The project's contributions to the establishment of PAs are explicitly recognized in Iraq's report to the CBD.	Full
UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change)	The project's inclusion in national reports supports Iraq's climate adaptation efforts, aligning with the UNFCCC.	Partial
UNCCD (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification)	Recognition of PAs in national reports to UNCCD shows the project's relevance in combating desertification.	Partial
Iraq's Draft National Adaptation Plan (NAP)	The PAs are included in the NAP as nature-based climate solutions, illustrating integration with climate adaptation efforts.	Partial
Middle East Regional Conservation Efforts (IUCN)	The project promoted regional collaboration with Jordan and Egypt, incorporating best practices from these countries.	Full
IUCN's Global Networks	The project mobilized IUCN's global networks for training, databases, and Red List expertise, fostering global partnerships.	Full
Transboundary Wetland Sites (Al-Teeb bordering Iran)	Al-Teeb's selection aligns with regional biodiversity priorities due to its significance as a transboundary wetland site.	Full

4.1.4 Complementarity with Existing Interventions/ Coherence

96. The project built upon the foundational Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) Survey conducted between 2005 and 2012, which identified 82 ecologically significant areas across Iraq. The selection of Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb as the project's pilot sites was informed by this earlier KBA analysis, which was supported by the Italian government. These sites were chosen not only for their ecological representativeness but also to test the feasibility of transboundary conservation (in the case of Al-Teeb) and wetland management (in the case of Al-Dalmaj).⁵²
97. Crucially, the project complemented a range of national and donor-supported initiatives launched during the 2015–2023 period. These included the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN), which aimed to develop national biodiversity expenditure reviews and financing strategies. BIOFIN produced Iraq's first comprehensive assessment of biodiversity-related funding gaps and recommended policy and institutional reforms, including mainstreaming biodiversity into sectoral budgets. The "Initial Steps" project operationalized some of these recommendations by translating financing needs into concrete management plans and legal reforms.⁵³
98. The project also built upon outputs from GEF-5 enabling activities, which helped Iraq fulfill its obligations under the CBD through the preparation of national reports and the NBSAP 2015–2020. In doing so, it served as the first large-scale implementation effort that gave life to Iraq's NBSAP targets by legally declaring and managing protected areas.⁵⁴ It also informed ongoing reforms in protected area governance, including MoE's revision of Bylaw 2/2014 and decentralization of biodiversity responsibilities to four regional departments.⁵⁵
99. However, evaluation findings revealed significant coordination challenges among GEF-funded projects during project implementation. Although GEF-6, GEF-7, and GEF-8 initiatives were conceptually aligned, they were managed under separate institutional arrangements without shared governance mechanisms. This fragmentation led to

⁵² INT 1, INT 8 GEF-8 KBA Project Document.

⁵³ INT 15

⁵⁴ GEF-5 Enabling Activities Report for Iraq, UNEP/MoE (2015).

⁵⁵ INT 7

duplicated efforts, including repeated legal and institutional reviews, and missed opportunities for shared technical expertise and economies of scale. Project managers acknowledged these limitations, and stakeholders have since proposed corrective measures such as joint steering committees, inter-project knowledge exchanges, and unified environmental data systems.⁵⁶

100. Despite these coordination gaps, “Initial Steps” filled a critical strategic void.⁵⁷ It established Iraq’s first functional model for protected area governance, setting standards in legal designation, participatory management planning, and institutional roles. Interviews with both national and international stakeholders confirmed that the project “provided the template now used for future GEF interventions,”⁵⁸ including those under the GEF-7 Middle Mesopotamia Basin project and the GEF-8 Anbar KBAs initiative.

Table 11: Complementarity with Existing Interventions/Coherence

Other Initiatives by UNEP or Other Organisations	Complementarity (including collaboration, coordination, and overlap or duplication)	Level of Alignment
BIOFIN (Biodiversity Finance Initiative)	Provided foundational Policy and Institutional Review (PIR) and financing gap analysis. “Initial Steps” should have built directly on these outputs. However, GEF-7 and GEF-8 duplicated some assessments. Coordination was partial.	Partial
GEF-5 Enabling Activities	Enabled Iraq to develop its NBSAP and prepare national reports to the CBD. “Initial Steps” served as the first implementation phase of NBSAP targets (e.g., protected area coverage).	Full
IUCN Technical Assistance	Direct implementing partner. Developed PA toolkits, conducted fieldwork, and trained MoE staff. Outputs were shared regionally (Jordan, Egypt). Strong complementarity and no duplication.	Full
BIO-KBA Survey (Italy-funded, 2005–2012)	Baseline for site selection. Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb were selected based on these surveys. Used effectively without duplication.	Full

101. **Finding 1: Strategic relevance was maximized through UNEP’s normative strengths and catalytic influence on national and regional frameworks.** The project’s full alignment with UNEP’s MTS, PoW, and the Bali Strategic Plan translated into tangible institutional reforms and capacity gains in Iraq. By embedding a national officer in the Ministry of Environment and producing technical guidelines aligned with MEA commitments, UNEP ensured a “light-touch” yet strategic implementation model. This not only enabled legal gazettment of Iraq’s first protected areas but also positioned the project to catalyze downstream investments such as GEF-7 and GEF-8. The choice to deliver normative outputs (e.g., protected area legislation, national guidelines, institutional roles) amplified UNEP’s comparative advantage and helped institutionalize biodiversity priorities in Iraq’s post-conflict governance system.
102. **Finding 2: Despite conceptual complementarity, weak inter-project coordination diluted the potential synergies between GEF-funded interventions.** The project was designed to build on prior work (e.g., BIOFIN, GEF-5 enabling activities, KBA surveys), and it indeed served as the foundation for follow-up initiatives. However, fragmentation across the GEF-6, -7, and -8 project cycles—due to siloed institutional arrangements and absent knowledge transfer mechanisms—resulted in duplicated legal assessments and missed opportunities for shared technical learning. Stakeholders confirmed that while “Initial Steps” created the operational blueprint, its full value was under-leveraged in subsequent projects. This underscores a structural challenge in translating strategic alignment into operational coherence, particularly in complex institutional environments like Iraq’s.

⁵⁶ INT1, INT13 and INT15

⁵⁷ INT7, INT 14

⁵⁸ INT15

Rating for Strategic Relevance: Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Alignment to UNEP MTS, PoW and Strategic Priorities: Highly Satisfactory (HS)

Rating for Alignment to GEF/Donor Strategic Priorities: Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Relevance to Global, Regional, Sub-regional and National Priorities: Highly Satisfactory (HS)

Rating for Complementarity with Existing Interventions/Coherence: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

4.2 Quality of Project Design

103. The quality of project design for the “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq” project is rated as Moderately Satisfactory. The project was grounded in a clear analysis of national and ecological needs and aligned with UNEP, GEF, and national priorities. The Project Document provided a robust situation and stakeholder analysis, and the geographic and institutional targeting of pilot sites was evidence-based, reflecting prior KBA data and existing ministry jurisdictions.⁵⁹ Interviews confirmed that site selection built on the Italian-funded KBA Survey and was validated during national consultations held in 2017–2018.⁶⁰
104. However, several limitations affected the design quality. While the ProDoc mapped relevant stakeholders and their institutional roles, it did not provide evidence of their actual consultation during design.⁶¹ MoE counterparts later confirmed that most community and tribal inputs were incorporated during implementation workshops rather than the preparatory stage.⁶² UNEP team noted that the inclusion of the evidence of stakeholder consultation has become mandatory after the GEF6 cycle. While the project included a Gender Action Plan and acknowledged the role of women in conservation, interviews and project documents indicate that gender considerations were weakly operationalized. No gender analysis or baseline was conducted, and while many of the MoE staff involved in project activities were women—including the two national project managers—there was limited emphasis on proactive outreach to women or marginalized groups during fieldwork or site assessments. That said, there is no evidence that women’s participation was deliberately excluded; rather, inclusion strategies were not explicitly integrated at the local level, particularly in provincial consultations and training. This gap reflects the broader institutional absence of formal mechanisms to ensure gender-responsive implementation at the sub-national level.⁶³
105. The ToC lacked clearly articulated causal pathways from outputs to outcomes and did not adequately identify assumptions or drivers of change. Although Component 3 addressed awareness and capacity development, it did not specify how these would lead to systemic institutional reforms.⁶⁴ Despite this, the logframe presented mostly SMART indicators and relevant outputs, and the monitoring budget was reasonable at 4% of total project cost.⁶⁵ No formal Mid-Term Review was conducted; instead, an internal UNEP ROWA progress review in 2021 confirmed that reporting formats and data systems were in place, though still reliant on a limited number of MoE technical staff.⁶⁶ Risk identification was partially sufficient; however, several major risks (such as government

⁵⁹ Project Document, UNEP/GEF Iraq PAN Project, 2019.

⁶⁰ 5392 Iraq PAN UNEP GEF PIR 2019; INT 7, INT10

⁶¹ Evaluation Inception Report, Annex C.

⁶² INT1, INT5

⁶³ INT 1, INT 3, INT 10

⁶⁴ Project Document (2019), Component 3 design narrative.

⁶⁵ Project Document Budget Table and Logframe; Annex C.

⁶⁶ Internal UNEP ROWA update, mid-2021.

restructuring, MoE capacity constraints, and co-financing volatility) were not adequately anticipated or budgeted for.⁶⁷

106. The project design acknowledged the importance of sustainability but initially lacked a detailed exit strategy. However, in the final year of implementation, a dedicated Exit and Sustainability Strategy was developed to guide the handover of results and ensure the continuation of project.⁶⁸ The strategy outlines a comprehensive handover plan, assigning the MoE full responsibility for all deliverables, including legal frameworks, management plans, technical guidelines, outreach materials, and a functioning website for the PAN. It adopts a “phasing-over” approach, with deliverables systematically transferred to MoE and sustainability responsibilities clarified across national units. The exit strategy presents concrete follow-up measures—such as training continuation, institutional ownership of PAN processes, and stakeholder engagement guidance—and was communicated to relevant stakeholders. However, interviews and the final project report suggest that while the strategy was well conceptualized, its implementation was uneven: for example, critical institutional mechanisms such as formal inter-ministerial coordination or financial bridging for follow-up under GEF-7 were not fully operationalized during the transition phase.⁶⁹ Despite these shortcomings, the exit strategy significantly strengthened the project's sustainability posture and provided a replicable model for other environmental governance initiatives in Iraq.

107. Importantly, the project's catalytic intent was clear, and it successfully laid the groundwork for GEF-7 and GEF-8 follow-up projects. Strategic coherence and realism of outputs were strengths, as was the use of UNEP's normative role to push legislative reform (e.g., revision of Bylaw 2/2014).⁷⁰ However, institutional coordination gaps and the underdeveloped approach to gender inclusion lowered the overall design rating.¹³

Table 12: Quality of Project Design Ratings

	SECTION	RATING (1-6)	Weighting	Weighted Score
A	Project Preparation	5	1.0	5.00
B	Risk identification and Safeguards	4	0.8	3.20
C	Governance and Supervision Arrangements	6	1.0	6.00
D	Partnerships	5	1.0	5.00
E	Strategic Relevance	6	0.4	2.40
F	Logical Framework and Causality	4	1.5	6.00
G	Financial Planning	5	0.8	4.00
H	Efficiency	5	0.4	2.00
I	Monitoring	5	0.8	4.00
J	Sustainability / Replication and Catalytic Effects	4	1.5	6.00
K	Learning, Communication and Outreach	5	0.8	4.00
	<i>Total (Weighted) Score:</i>			4.76

Rating for Project Design: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

4.3 Nature of the External Context

108. The project was implemented in a context of significant political and economic instability in Iraq, which directly constrained delivery. In late 2019, widespread anti-government protests and political paralysis led to the suspension of the national budget in 2020, leaving ministries—including the MoHE—without approved funding for nearly a year. This stalled project MoE' co-financing, delayed key activities such as site

⁶⁷ INT15; Final Project Report (2023).

⁶⁸ Exit and Sustainability Strategy (2023).

⁶⁹ Project Document Section 5.4; INT 10; INT 14; INT 15

⁷⁰ INT13; GEF-7 ProDoc.

infrastructure, and hindered the timely transfer of earmarked funds for PA construction. Interviewees confirmed that the crisis was compounded by liquidity restrictions, the lack of a UNEP country office to fast-track decisions, and complications with direct fund transfers due to banking regulations and budget procedures. According to interviews, this fiscal freeze particularly affected the timely construction of PA management facilities, which were considered essential for protected area visibility and operationalization. Project focal points had to navigate ministerial turnover, shifting governorate leadership, and weak local budget planning systems—factors that collectively undermined the steady implementation of key components, despite the eventual completion of 95% of planned outputs.⁷¹

109. At the site level, the project encountered a complex array of security and governance issues that directly impacted implementation. In Al-Teeb, proximity to the Iranian border, tribal dynamics, and the presence of armed groups created a high-risk environment. Field teams reported constraints in accessing areas due to safety concerns and cultural resistance to external enforcement.⁷² Stakeholders noted that Al-Teeb's scenic and strategic location attracted tourism and hunting activities, some involving visitors from outside Iraq, making regulation particularly difficult without triggering confrontation. Similarly, at Al-Dalmaj, competing land-use interests—including private fish farming concessions and reliance on the lake for agriculture—complicated site governance. Governance instability compounded these site-level constraints. Interviewees confirmed that repeated turnover of governors and technical counterparts across pilot governorates eroded institutional memory, requiring constant re-engagement and re-briefing of local officials. Moreover, the MoE's limited enforcement mandate—without formal backing from the Council of Ministers or legal integration with the Ministry of Interior—meant that enforcement responsibilities remained unimplemented, with no clear jurisdictional support from environmental police or rangers.⁷³
110. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 was an unexpected shock that the project had to swiftly adapt to. National lockdowns and travel bans forced the postponement of community meetings, training workshops, and field surveys for an extended period. The project responded by adjusting its implementation approach – wherever possible, activities were shifted to virtual formats or handled through national experts on the ground when international consultants could not travel.⁷⁴ Key milestones, such as the formal declaration of the new protected areas, were rescheduled.⁷⁵ UNEP and project partners negotiated a no-cost extension of the project timeline into 2021 to accommodate the pandemic-related delays and ensure that outputs could be completed. Despite the disruptions, the team maintained close communication with stakeholders and used downtime for desk work (e.g. policy drafting, data analysis) so that momentum could be regained quickly once restrictions eased. This adaptive management softened the pandemic's impact, though some efficiency and outreach were inevitably lost.
111. The above external disruptions had tangible effects on the project's results and the sustainability of outcomes. Several outputs were delayed – most notably, the official gazettelement of the Dalmaj and Al-Teeb protected areas was pushed back in the timeline due to COVID-19 and political holdups.⁷⁶ Field-based capacity building also proceeded slower than planned, which in turn affected community engagement in protected area management. High turnover in government institutions means that knowledge and capacity built by the project can be easily lost if not institutionalized.⁷⁷ A risk flagged by

⁷¹ Final Report (2023), INT 1, INT 13

⁷² INT 1; INT 8; INT 14

⁷³ INT1; INT14.

⁷⁴ Half-Yearly Progress Report (2020); INT 1; INT 14

⁷⁵ Final Report (2023); Project Extension Documentation.

⁷⁶ Final Report (2023); Project Extension Documentation.

⁷⁷ INT13; INT15

the evaluation: "High staff turnover, lack of enforcement authority, and no formal placement of PA-trained staff within the civil service structure limit sustainability." Likewise, without stable budgetary support, there is a risk that management of the new protected areas will not be adequately financed once external support withdraws.

Rating for Nature of the External Context: Unfavorable

4.4 Effectiveness

4.4.1 Availability of Outputs

Table 13: Availability of outputs

Output (with Indicators, Baselines, and Targets)	Narrative Assessment	Sources of information / evidence
1.1.1 Baseline ecological and land-use assessments developed for the two pilot sites - Dalmaj and Teeb area - and made available to key stakeholders Indicators: Number of ecological and land-use assessments Baseline: 0 Target: 2 (Dalmaj and Teeb)	Fully delivered – Both ecological and land-use assessments for Dalmaj and Teeb were completed and made available to stakeholders as targeted.	FINAL REPORT; Half Yearly (HY) Progress 2.2; INT8
1.1.2 detailed plan for establishing a national network of protected areas developed, and made ready to be implemented by the national government Indicators: i) PAN plan submitted to NCPA; ii) Number of framework documents Baseline: No PAN plan; 2 existing PAs Target: i) 1 PAN Plan; ii) 2 framework documents	Partially delivered – Draft national PAN plan was submitted and consultations held, but final plan was not approved by NCPA.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Output 2; INT1
1.1.3 A costed strategy and action plan developed for the institutional, legal, and operational setup of the PAN and provided to key stakeholders for adoption. Baseline: None available Target: 1 strategy with 5- & 10-year costing	Partially delivered – Strategy and costed plans were prepared and submitted to MoE. However, it was not formally adopted by the government during the project's lifetime.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 7–8; FINAL REPORT p.3
1.1.4 Legislation and regulatory instruments for PAN developed and institutionalized within the relevant national bodies, including technical guidelines, and toolkits on PA management. Indicators: i) # of technical guidelines; ii) # of case studies; iii) # of toolkits Baseline: 0 Target: i) 5 guidelines; ii) 5 case studies; iii) 1 toolkit	Fully delivered – The project produced three main guideline publications, each consolidating sub-guidelines to provide protected area managers with a single, user-friendly reference. These included: 1. Technical guidelines on Protected Area Management Effectiveness, 2. Protected Area Network legislation guidelines and designation form, and	FINAL REPORT p.4; IUCN INT11

Output (with Indicators, Baselines, and Targets)	Narrative Assessment	Sources of information / evidence
	3. Guidelines for Protected Area Managers, which incorporated additional sub-guidance on zoning, surveillance and patrolling, and tourism management. In addition, several case studies and outreach materials were developed, including fact sheets on Teeb and Dalmaj (in Arabic and English), a guideline on the benefits of protected areas (Arabic), a case study on Invasive Alien Species (IAS) management in Al-Dalmaj, and a study on annual carrying capacity.	
1.2.1 Training needs assessment developed and presented to key stakeholders to inform the design of the capacity building program Baseline: Partial training initiatives existed Target: 1 completed TNA	Fully delivered – A complete Training Needs Assessment was finalized and shared with stakeholders as planned.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 12
1.2.2 A theoretical and on-the-job training capacity building programme for key local and national stakeholders developed and implemented. Indicators: a) # of initiatives; b) # of materials; c) # of MoE staff trained Baseline: Existing ad hoc trainings Target: i) 6 national workshops; ii) 4 courses; iii) 100+ personnel trained	Fully delivered – Capacity building exceeded targets with 11 workshops, 4 webinars, and over 100 staff trained.	FINAL REPORT p.4; HY Progress Activity 13
1.2.3 Inter-sectorial collaboration mechanisms for the development of the PA network established and engagement of key stakeholders enhanced Indicators: Number of collaboration mechanisms activated Baseline: No institutional coordination Target: 1 committee reactivated; inter-ministerial collaboration	Partially delivered – Committee was reactivated and consultations held, but a fully institutionalized mechanism was not established.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress; INT 1, 4, 5, 8, 14
2.1.1 Gazetting process for the declaration of the two priority sites as Protected Areas (PAs) supported. Baseline: 0 Target: 2 sites (Dalmaj, Teeb) gazette	Fully delivered – Legal declarations for both Dalmaj and Teeb sites were prepared and approved as Protected Areas.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Output 7; INT1

Output (with Indicators, Baselines, and Targets)	Narrative Assessment	Sources of information / evidence
2.1.2 Essential infrastructure, staff, equipment, and an outline management plan provided to stakeholders to support the establishment of the Dalmaj Protected Area. Indicators: i) Management plan; ii) Infrastructure analysis Baseline: 0 Target: i) 1 plan; ii) 1 analysis	Partially delivered – Management plan for Dalmaj was developed, but infrastructure components were not delivered.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 15; INT1, 13, 14
2.1.3 Essential infrastructure, staff, equipment, and an outline management plan provided to stakeholders to support the establishment of the Teeb Protected Area Indicators: i) Management plan; ii) Infrastructure analysis Baseline: 0 Target: i) 1 plan; ii) 1 analysis	Partially delivered – Management plan and studies for Teeb were finalized, but infrastructure was not implemented.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 16; INT8
3.1.1 Public awareness on PAN improved and outreach strategy developed and made accessible to relevant stakeholders. Indicators: i) Outreach strategy; ii) # of stakeholder groups consulted Baseline: No strategy Target: i) 1 strategy; ii) 15 stakeholder groups	Fully delivered – Public awareness strategy developed and validated with consultation of 15 stakeholder groups.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 17; INT3
3.1.2 MOE website with a dedicated PA section developed and made available for relevant stakeholders. Indicators: i) PAN section; ii) # of updates; iii) # of trained staff Baseline: No PAN content on MoE site Target: i) 1 PAN section; ii) 16 updates; iii) 3 staff trained	Partially delivered – PAN section was developed and staff trained, but the site remained only partially functional and lacked sustainability.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Output 11; INT1, INT8
3.1.3 Targeted outreach materials and technical toolkits created and disseminated to support the public awareness strategy. Indicators: i) # of outreach materials; ii) # of toolkits Baseline: Minimal existing materials Target: i) 5+ materials; ii) 3 toolkits available online	Fully delivered – Outreach materials and toolkits were developed and dissemination initiated, meeting and exceeding targets.	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress Activity 23; FINAL REPORT p.5
Assessment of Outputs	Moderately Satisfactory	

112. The project delivered the majority of its planned outputs for the PAN in Iraq, with overall output performance assessed as moderately satisfactory. A combination of enabling and hindering factors influenced this achievement. On the positive side, thorough planning and strong technical support underpinned successful delivery – for instance, the early Training Needs Assessment ensured that capacity-building activities addressed real needs, and collaboration with international conservation experts (e.g. IUCN) contributed to high-quality technical guidelines. Most key outputs were completed on schedule, particularly following the project’s resumption after COVID-19-related disruptions and the appointment of the late National Project Manager and team, which reactivated implementation momentum. This included, for example, the timely delivery of extensive ecological and land-use baseline surveys across 82 sites, which provided essential data to inform PAN design. Other outputs, such as capacity-building workshops, toolkits, and public outreach materials (including an awareness strategy), were also delivered as planned.
113. However, the project also encountered significant external and institutional challenges that impeded some results. The COVID-19 pandemic and an unforeseen inter-ministerial dispute between the Environment and Water Resources ministries caused considerable delays, particularly in activities such as the formal declaration of new protected areas. Some outputs remained only partially achieved due to operational and institutional constraints – notably, planned infrastructure upgrades at the pilot sites were not implemented due to multiple compounding issues, and the PAN website remained only partly functional due to limited support for ongoing maintenance. Additionally, the project’s short timeframe constrained the full institutionalization of emerging inter-sectoral collaboration mechanisms. Despite these challenges, by project end, most outputs were either completed or nearing completion, laying a foundation for strengthened protected area management in Iraq.
114. The project’s capacity-building efforts were highly effective at the national level. It delivered an extensive training programme comprising 11 workshops, 4 webinars and 2 on-the-job training sessions, collectively reaching over 100 personnel from the Ministry of Environment and partner institutions. This programme was strategically guided by a Training Needs Assessment completed in January 2020, ensuring that training activities addressed priority gaps in protected area management skills. To further institutionalize capacity gains, the project developed and validated comprehensive training kits for participants. The project also produced technical guidance documents – including Protected Area Manager and Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME) guidelines – which were finalized and published with ISBNs, providing standardized reference material that has helped solidify the knowledge base for PAN management among Iraqi practitioners.
115. The project also fostered greater political will and institutional support for an effective PAN in Iraq. Notably, it facilitated the legal designation of two new protected areas – Dalmaj and Teeb – which, despite delays caused by COVID-19 and a dispute with the Ministry of Water Resources, were eventually declared by the Ministry of Environment and formally endorsed by the Cabinet, demonstrating enhanced government commitment to expanding the PAN. The project reactivated a national multi-sectoral committee on protected areas and convened cross-sector consultations, engaging various ministries in PAN planning and coordination. Furthermore, a detailed national plan for establishing the PAN was formulated (approximately 90% complete and informed by two national consultation workshops), and a costed strategy and action plan (with 5- and 10-year budget scenarios) was prepared to give decision-makers a practical roadmap for PAN implementation. To support longer-term policy improvement, the project also drafted a guideline for protected area legislation. Collectively, these outputs and actions indicate positive momentum and groundwork for stronger political and institutional support for

protected area management in Iraq, even if formal inter-agency collaboration mechanisms are not yet fully institutionalized. These foundations, however, will require sustained leadership and commitment from the Ministry of Environment and the wider government to ensure long-term impact and institutionalization.

116. Despite sound planning and the development of detailed architectural and management plans, infrastructure components at the Teeb and Dalmaj Protected Areas were not implemented due to a range of compounding factors. The GEF project scope therefore did not include funding or mechanisms for physical infrastructure or equipment procurement. This limitation was compounded by the lack of formal land allocation from the government, with only verbal assurances provided, and further delayed by the fiscal crisis during the COVID-19 period, which prevented the transfer of earmarked national budget funds. UNEP was also unable to transfer funds directly to the Ministry of Environment due to internal policies and the Iraqi government's financial restrictions and sanctions affecting the Central Bank. Although alternative options were explored, including using existing governorate buildings or delegating execution to other UN agencies such as UNDP, unresolved land issues and unstable local leadership made these unviable. These barriers were consistently cited by stakeholders, underscoring the importance of addressing financing gaps, land tenure issues, and inter-agency coordination in future project cycles under GEF-7 and GEF-8.
117. The development of a dedicated website for Iraq's PAN progressed in phases and achieved several technical milestones yet remained only partially functional at project closure. According to interviews⁷⁸, the site's core content—such as interactive protected area profiles, downloadable guidelines, and GIS-linked biodiversity records—was developed with support from IUCN and a Jordanian IT firm familiar with MoE systems. Six MoE personnel were trained to manage the portal, as confirmed in the Final Report and interviews. A key challenge emerged during the migration of the website to Iraq's National Data Centre, mandated by government policy; the site's original software was not compatible with the Centre's legacy systems, causing delays and requiring a full redesign of the MoE website structure.⁷⁹ Though the PAN website was eventually integrated into the redesigned MoE portal, its public visibility and interface remained limited, and no dedicated line item exists in the MoE budget for web hosting or server upkeep.⁸⁰ Moreover, limited outreach and promotional efforts meant that awareness of the site remained confined largely to project stakeholders. Both MoE and UNEP staff acknowledged in interviews that the PAN website was flagged as a sustainability gap requiring bridge financing and was therefore included as a follow-up component in the GEF-8 proposal.⁸¹ Overall, the website represents a partially completed asset: while foundational work such as technical content development and training was achieved, full operationalization and sustainability remain contingent on renewed funding, institutional ownership, and better integration into Iraq's broader conservation communications strategy.
118. The delivery of outputs involved meaningful efforts to engage stakeholders at both national and local levels, though the depth and consistency of participation varied across activities and locations. Two national consultation workshops were held to inform the PAN planning process, incorporating broad input from government ministries and technical experts into the network's design. At the local level, a stakeholder workshop contributed to the development of the protected area management plan for Dalmaj and Teeb, ensuring the involvement of local partners. Overall, more than 100 individuals participated in the project's training and capacity-building events, including staff from the Ministry of Environment, other government agencies, and NGOs—effectively expanding

⁷⁸ INT1, INT8

⁷⁹ Int 1

⁸⁰ INT1, INT8

⁸¹ INT8

the national community of practice for protected area management. The reactivation of the national committee further institutionalized stakeholder engagement by bringing together multiple sectors to guide project outputs. However, sustaining this institutionalization will depend on keeping the committee active and functional, supported by clear terms of reference, dedicated resources, and political will, especially given previous challenges related to inconsistent participation, unclear mandates, and limited authority. The project also incorporated elements of social inclusion in its outputs, particularly with respect to gender. The public awareness and outreach strategy, completed in June 2020, was explicitly gender-mainstreamed to ensure inclusive messaging. However, there was limited evidence of targeted outreach to other vulnerable or marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities or remote communities, as most outputs aimed to benefit institutional stakeholders and the general public. Importantly, no unintended negative socio-economic or environmental consequences were reported. Since the newly designated protected areas were only officially gazetted toward the project's end and no restrictive management measures had yet been enforced, local communities did not experience any immediate adverse impacts.

4.4.2 Achievement of Project Outcomes

Table 14: Achievement of project outcomes

Outcome 1.1:	An evidence-based Protected Areas Network (PAN) for Iraq is established, and its implementation planned
Performance against Indicator(s) and Target(s):	Indicators: 1. Number of Ministry of Environment (MoE) regulations on Protected Areas (PAs) approved by the National Council for Environmental Protection (NCEP) and the Council of Ministers 2. Number of PA-related initiatives prepared by the MoE and submitted to the NCEP and the Council of Ministers 3. Number of stakeholders involved by the MoE in the design process for PA procedures 4. Amount (in million USD) allocated by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) to the PAN Plan of Iraq Targets: • Existence of a coherent and coordinated design and costed PAN Plan of Iraq • At least 15 key stakeholder groups involved in the PAN design process The project successfully delivered a coherent, evidence-based, and costed PAN Plan for Iraq, thereby achieving the primary target of establishing a nationally coordinated strategy for protected area development. The PAN Plan includes a spatially explicit analysis of biodiversity assets, updated Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), site-level ecological assessments (e.g., rangeland productivity, invasive species), and a phased implementation plan with 5- and 10-year costing projections. This constitutes a major policy milestone and a planning framework for future investments, including under GEF-7, GEF-8, and GEF-9 cycles. In alignment with Indicator 1, the MoE finalized draft regulations and policy proposals related to Protected Areas, which were submitted for approval to the National Council for Environmental Protection (NCEP) and the Council of Ministers. These drafts are currently undergoing review, marking tangible progress toward formal adoption. For Indicator 2, several key initiatives were developed by the MoE—including the PAN establishment plan and technical annexes—and formally submitted to national oversight bodies (NCEP and EPIC), demonstrating increased institutional ownership and policy engagement. With regard to Indicator 3, the project meaningfully exceeded the target of involving at least 15 stakeholder groups in the design process. Over 20 distinct entities—including governmental, academic, civil society, and community-based organizations—were engaged through consultations, technical workshops, and validation meetings, ensuring broad representation and buy-in. On Indicator 4, while direct financial allocation by the MoF to PAN implementation had not yet materialized by project closure, the availability of a fully costed implementation strategy constitutes an enabling condition for future budgeting and resource mobilization. Overall, the project laid the technical and institutional groundwork for operationalizing a national Protected Areas Network. Stakeholders widely acknowledged the structured, participatory, and nationally owned approach introduced by the project as a critical enabler of long-term sustainability and inter-ministerial coordination.
Sources of Information /Evidence:	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress; INT1, INT 3, INT 5, INT 13

Narrative Assessment:	The outcome represents an important foundational step toward establishing a PAN in Iraq. The project successfully developed a costed, spatially grounded, and technically robust PAN Plan, supported by updated ecological data, stakeholder consultations, and institutional coordination mechanisms. This constitutes a significant achievement, particularly in a context where such structured planning frameworks had previously been absent. However, the depth and scale of the outcome remain constrained by external factors. While the PAN Plan offers national-level applicability and was developed through broad stakeholder engagement—including more than 20 entities across government, academia, and civil society—its operationalization and long-term sustainability are heavily dependent on national ownership and political will. The formal approval of draft regulations and the allocation of resources by the MoF have yet to materialize, limiting the immediate institutional uptake and implementation of the plan. The project's contribution to this outcome is credible and substantial. It directly enabled the design of the PAN Plan and fostered a nationally owned process, engaging key bodies such as the National Council for Environmental Protection and the Environmental Protection and Improvement Council. Nonetheless, translating these outputs into sustained action will require continued institutional commitment and financial investment—both of which face ongoing challenges in Iraq's current governance and fiscal context. As such, while the project laid essential groundwork, the full realization and impact of this outcome remain contingent on future developments beyond the project's direct control.
Level of Achievement:	Partially Achieved
Outcome 1.2: Performance against Indicator(s) and Target(s):	Local and national stakeholders take action to support the establishment of the first comprehensive PA network in Iraq Indicators: A Capacity Building Programme for Protected Area (PA) Management in Iraq is developed and effectively implemented, measured by: a) Number of partners contributing to the capacity building programme b) Number of UN agencies supporting the development of MoE capacity c) Number of ministries seconding staff to participate in the programme d) Number of staff participating in regional capacity building initiatives related to PA management and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) Target: A Capacity Building Programme for PA Management is developed and effectively implemented by Year 4. The project made credible progress toward achieving the target of developing and implementing a Capacity Building Programme for PA Management by Year 4. (a) Multiple national and international partners—including IUCN, UNEP, and academic institutions—contributed to the design and delivery of the capacity building programme through technical inputs, training materials, and co-implementation of workshops. (b) At least two UN agencies actively supported the development of MoE capacity. UNEP, as the Implementing Agency, and IUCN, as a technical partner, played instrumental roles in knowledge transfer, policy development, and training facilitation.

	(c) Several line ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Water Resources, seconded staff to participate in project-led technical consultations, training sessions, and PA planning workshops. These secondments, while ad hoc, signal emerging institutional interest in the PA agenda. (d) MoE staff participated in multiple regional capacity building initiatives, including those organized under the frameworks of GEF and IUCN, with themes covering PA governance, MEA implementation, and biodiversity monitoring. Despite these achievements, full institutional integration of the programme remains incomplete. While the target of developing and implementing the programme by Year 4 was technically met, its continuation and mainstreaming into national training systems depend on further political commitment, formal endorsement, and secured budget allocations—challenges acknowledged by both the MoE and interviewed stakeholders.
Sources of Information /Evidence:	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress; INT1, INT 3, INT 6, INT 8, INT 12
Narrative Assessment:	The outcome reflects a modest but important step toward building stakeholder engagement and institutional capacity for PA management in Iraq. Through the development and partial implementation of a national Capacity Building Programme, the project made tangible contributions to raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and enhancing technical knowledge among MoE staff and selected national institutions. The depth of the outcome is moderate. Several capacity-building activities were conducted, and staff from multiple ministries were seconded to participate in trainings and technical meetings. UN agencies, particularly UNEP and IUCN, provided substantive input into programme design and delivery. MoE staff also engaged in regional training sessions on PA management and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), improving their understanding of international standards and practices. However, the scale and institutional reach of these efforts remained limited. Engagement was concentrated among a relatively small group of actors within the MoE and select ministries, with little evidence of broad institutional uptake or integration into formal government training structures. Moreover, the programme's continuation beyond the project period is uncertain, as it lacks dedicated national budget lines, policy backing, or formalized inter-agency coordination mechanisms. The project's contribution to the observed changes is credible and direct. It initiated the design and delivery of the capacity building programme, mobilized key actors, and enabled cross-sectoral engagement. Nonetheless, the extent to which stakeholders have taken concrete action—as reflected in durable institutional changes, long-term resource commitments, or national policy integration—remains limited. As such, the outcome is partially achieved, and future progress will depend heavily on national ownership, political continuity, and sustained financing.
Level of Achievement:	Partially Achieved
Outcome 2.1	Implementation of Protected Areas Network started through the establishment and official declaration of the two targeted sites as PAs

Performance against Indicator(s) and Target(s):	Indicators: a) Number of protected areas created and operational; b) Number of Local PA Management Committees composed by at least 30% women established according to PA regulations; c) Number of PA management plans approved and fully funded d) Number of staff seconded to or hired for PA management. Targets: a) 2 new protected areas established in Dalmaj and Teeb priority areas b) 2 Management Plans approved, financed and effectively implemented c) Additional Coverage of at least 200,000 ha of unprotected ecosystems The project made substantive progress in initiating the implementation of the PAN in Iraq. It played a catalytic role in convening national and sub-national actors, building awareness, and setting the institutional and procedural groundwork for PA establishment. Interview data confirm the project's unique contribution in framing PA designation within a national legal and ecological context and in facilitating inter-agency engagement, including with the MoE, governorates, and civil society. With respect to Indicator (a) – number of protected areas created and operational – the two targeted sites, Dalmaj and Teeb, were advanced through legal, ecological, and consultative processes. However, their formal gazettelement was only completed toward the end of the project. For Indicator b (local PA management committees with at least 30% women participation), no formal committees were established in accordance with PA regulations during the project period. Nonetheless, preliminary consultations with local stakeholders and communities created an enabling environment for future committee formation. On Indicator c (number of PA management plans approved and fully funded), draft management plans for Dalmaj and Teeb were developed and validated in stakeholder consultations, but they were not officially approved or financed at the national level. No domestic funding mechanisms were committed to operationalizing these plans. Regarding Indicator d (staff seconded to or hired for PA management), some initial steps were taken, including identification of focal points and training of select MoE staff, but no formal staff appointments or secondments were completed by the end of the project. Although the target of establishing 2 new PAs and managing an additional 200,000 ha of unprotected ecosystems was not fully met, the project provided the essential technical, legal, and participatory inputs to enable future designation and management of these areas—pending political will and resource mobilization under follow-up funding (e.g., GEF-7 or GEF-8).
Sources of Information /Evidence:	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress INT1; INT 2; INT 5; INT 8
Narrative Assessment:	The nature of this outcome reflects the project's aim to move from planning to tangible implementation of Iraq's PAN, specifically through the legal designation and operationalization of two pilot protected areas in Dalmaj and Teeb. The intended change included not only formal declaration but also the establishment of functional management structures, financing mechanisms, and staffing—all foundational for scaling up the PAN nationwide.

	The depth of the outcome is partial. While the project successfully conducted ecological assessments, stakeholder consultations, and drafted management plans, these efforts culminated in the formal gazettement of the two sites only toward the end of the project, and full operationalization was not achieved within the project's lifespan. Similarly, while local engagement and technical groundwork were robust, critical elements such as approved management plans, fully funded budgets, and staff secondment remained incomplete. The scale of the outcome was expected to be site-specific but with broader policy implications. In practice, the outcome remained localized in planning terms only, without extension into formal legal, institutional, or financial implementation. No formal local PA Management Committees were established, and the additional target of protecting 200,000 ha of unprotected ecosystems was not achieved. The project's contribution to the outcome is credible and significant within the constraints of its scope and operating context. It initiated the first serious national-level processes for PA declaration in over a decade, reactivating stalled policy discussions and mobilizing inter-sectoral dialogue. It also developed the core technical and legal foundations necessary for future declaration and management—an achievement widely acknowledged by interviewed stakeholders. However, the realization of this outcome remains contingent on post-project developments, particularly political commitment, formal approvals, and resource allocation under future funding cycles (e.g., GEF-7, GEF-8). As such, while the project made measurable progress, the outcome was partially achieved, with significant work remaining to translate plans into action.
Level of Achievement:	Partially achieved
Outcome 3.1:	Improved consensus and behaviors toward environmental conservation values by key national and local stakeholders, and the public.
Performance against Indicator(s) and Target(s):	Indicators: a) Number or (%) of people mentioning in a survey on high level of understanding on the objectives and values of the PAN; b) Frequency of appearance on media and number of articles in the local media on PA c) % of national budget allocated to PA management by government due to increased understanding Targets: a) Public awareness and outreach strategy developed and implemented b) PAN website developed and maintained c) Targeted thematic outreach materials and technical toolkits developed and published The project made initial but important contributions toward building public consensus around environmental conservation and the value of PAs. Through MoE-led awareness campaigns, local consultations, and partnerships with universities and environmental advocates, it opened space for dialogue and mitigated initial resistance—especially in Dalmaj, where fishing communities initially feared access restrictions. These efforts align with the target of developing and implementing a public awareness and outreach strategy and contributed to shaping early narratives in support of PAN implementation. However, the transition from awareness to measurable behavior change remains limited. Although interviews confirmed that the project helped shift perceptions by reframing PAs as instruments for sustainable use rather than exclusion, there were no structured tools or surveys to measure public understanding (Indicator a), nor were perception indicators tracked systematically. Additionally, outreach activities were highly localized, focused primarily on the two pilot sites, limiting national-level behavioral impact.

	In relation to Indicator b, the project generated media coverage and technical materials, but no clear baseline or monitoring mechanism was in place to track the frequency of media appearances or public engagement metrics. While a PAN website was developed and maintained (Target b), its reach and impact were not systematically evaluated. Targeted outreach materials and technical toolkits were produced (Target c), but their use beyond the immediate project circle remains uncertain. Indicator c, which focuses on increased national budget allocations due to improved understanding, was not achieved. There is no evidence of budget increases directly linked to outreach or awareness gains during the project period.
Sources of Information /Evidence:	FINAL REPORT; HY Progress INT1; INT 8; INT 14
Narrative Assessment:	The nature of this outcome reflects a behavioral and attitudinal shift—aiming to improve public and institutional consensus around environmental conservation and the value of PAs. The project’s interventions were primarily awareness-driven, designed to initiate dialogue and reduce resistance to PA establishment, particularly in ecologically sensitive but socially contested areas like Dalmaj and Teeb. The depth of the outcome was limited but meaningful in the immediate target areas. Through MoE-led campaigns, technical consultations, and community engagement, the project successfully reframed the concept of PAs among certain stakeholder groups—notably local fishers and environmental advocates. Interview data confirmed that the messaging helped shift perceptions from restriction to sustainability. However, this perceptual shift did not extend to broader behavior change, as there was no systematic tracking of public understanding, nor structured mechanisms to reinforce behavior adoption over time. In terms of scale, the outreach remained geographically constrained to the two pilot sites. While some thematic materials and a PAN website were produced as part of the communication effort, national-level visibility and engagement were minimal. There is no evidence that the interventions influenced public discourse at scale or led to changes in media presence or national budget allocations for PA management. The project’s contribution to the observed change is credible and direct. It initiated and facilitated the first structured public dialogue on PAs in Iraq in years, addressed resistance through localized engagement, and created communication tools that can be scaled. Nonetheless, attribution beyond the pilot sites is limited. Broader changes in public or institutional behavior were not observed within the project timeframe, and follow-up investment will be needed to build on the initial awareness gains.
Level of Achievement:	Partially achieved

119. The project made important foundational contributions to Iraq’s environmental governance by developing the country’s first structured and evidence-based PAN plan. This included a costed and spatially grounded strategy, updated biodiversity data, and draft management plans for two priority sites (Dalmaj and Teeb). Through national and sub-national consultations, technical assessments, and institutional engagement—particularly via the National Committee for Protected Areas (NCPA) and Environmental Protection and Improvement Council (EPIC)—the project succeeded in creating a nationally endorsed planning framework. However, while planning achievements were robust, the formal gazettement of the two sites was achieved only toward the end of the project, and full operationalization was not achieved within the project’s lifespan. Implementation remains contingent on follow-up funding (e.g., GEF-7, GEF-8) and political will.
120. Progress in stakeholder engagement and public awareness was notable but uneven. Draft agreements with governorates and multi-sectoral workshops helped promote collaboration, yet institutional buy-in was inconsistent, particularly from the Ministry of Water Resources. Local outreach—especially in Dalmaj—helped mitigate fears and reframed protected areas as tools for sustainable resource use. Still, broader shifts in public behavior and policy integration were limited due to the absence of national campaigns, monitoring tools, and sustained communication efforts. Communication outputs like the PAN website and outreach materials were developed but not maintained or embedded in national systems, which reduced their long-term impact and reach.
121. Despite these challenges, the project catalyzed key policy shifts and inter-ministerial coordination. Its outputs are now informing national strategies and GEF programming cycles. The reactivation of the NCPA, EPIC endorsement, and integration of the PAN into Iraq’s national environmental strategy (2024–2030) are significant achievements. However, the durability of these outcomes hinges on the institutionalization of project gains—such as formal mandates, dedicated budget lines, and embedded coordination mechanisms. Without these, momentum may falter. Future phases must prioritize translating political recognition into concrete implementation mechanisms and sustained resource commitments to ensure long-term biodiversity protection.

4.4.3 Likelihood of Impact

Table 15: Likelihood of impact

Factors influencing likelihood of impact	Assessment	Justification
Drivers to support transition from Outputs to the Project Outcomes	<i>In place /partially /not in place</i>	
D1: Institutional mandates related to enforcing legislations are clarified and activated.	Not in place	While the project supported the development of draft by-laws and management plans for protected areas, the legal enforcement mandates remain ambiguous and fragmented. Despite MoE’s formal authority under Law No. 2/2014 to declare and manage protected areas, there was no formal handover of enforcement responsibilities to either Environmental Police or governorate-level officers. Interviews confirmed that MoE does not currently possess a clear legal basis to authorize enforcement actions on the ground without a Cabinet-level decision or formal coordination with other ministries. Stakeholders consistently described this institutional gap as a major barrier to implementation.

Factors influencing likelihood of impact	Assessment	Justification
Assumptions for the change process from Outputs to Project Outcomes	<i>Hold/ partially /do not hold</i>	
A4: Availability of international experts to support the field activities, capacity development, and baseline assessment	Hold	IUCN and UNEP technical staff provided ongoing input; multiple international consultants contributed to training, GIS baselines, and PAME guidance (Outputs 1.1.1, 1.2.2). No major disruptions reported.
A6: Availability of contribution from national government	Partially hold	In-kind support was evident (staff time, office space, workshops), but national budgeted financial contribution for PA infrastructure was never disbursed, blocking completion of Output 2.1.2.
A7: Willingness of national and local partners to collaborate	Hold	Local and national stakeholders (e.g., MoE, governorates, community reps) actively participated in planning, management plans, and workshops. Some disputes (e.g., MoWR) arose but did not paralyze collaboration.
A8: MoE has the mandate and is empowered to steer project activities and complete the declaration process	Partially hold	MoE led technical planning and stakeholder coordination; however, it lacked full legal authority to enforce PA declaration without MoWR and Cabinet endorsement, delaying legal gazettment.
A9: The integration of gender equality measures is understood and valued by the main project partners	Partially hold	Gender was considered in training participation (33% female), awareness materials, and TNA. However, gender mainstreaming was not consistently tracked nor reflected in site-level governance structures.
Proportion of Project Outcomes fully or partially achieved	All/ some/ none	
Proportion of Project Outcomes Fully or Partially Achieved	Some	Of the four primary project outcomes: • Outcome 1.1 (PAN design and planning) was partially achieved. • Outcomes 1.2, 2.1, and 3.1 were partially achieved, with progress in stakeholder engagement, pilot site preparation, and public awareness—but lacking full implementation or legal completion.
Drivers to support transition from Project Outcomes to Intermediate States	In place /partially /not in place	
D2: National professional and technical capacity is in place to support and sustain the development of Protected Areas	Partially in place	The project trained over 100 personnel (≈33% women) through 11 workshops, 4 webinars, and field-based mentoring. These trainings covered essential topics such as Red List methodology, environmental impact assessments for protected areas, and site-based ecological surveying. The project also engaged local universities and certified a small number of MoE staff as national trainers. However, despite these achievements, institutional capacity remains uneven, particularly at the governorate level. Many newly appointed MoE staff have not been trained, and key personnel in the provinces lack hands-on experience with management plan implementation. Additionally, there is no formal system to integrate trained staff

Factors influencing likelihood of impact	Assessment	Justification
		into protected area governance structures, nor are there established pathways to sustain these capacities within the civil service. The limited enforcement coordination and the absence of dedicated units for protected areas at sub-national levels further undermine long-term sustainability.
Assumptions for the change process from the Project Outcomes to Intermediate States	Hold/ partially /do not hold	
A2: International and national partners are committed to support the project with requested resources and co-financing	Partially hold	UNEP, IUCN, and some national stakeholders provided strong technical support, but co-financing from MoE was not delivered as planned, particularly for infrastructure (INT1, INT5).
A3: National decision makers responsive to PA planning and coordination by MoE	Partially hold	Technical-level cooperation was effective, but ministerial endorsement (e.g., by MoWR and MoA) and Cabinet approval for legal declarations were delayed or withheld, limiting MoE's ability to finalize PAN designation.
A5: Continuous and strong commitment to the project by the Government of Iraq and its supporting partners	Partially hold	Strong initial engagement and continued technical support by MoE staff; however, political changes, fiscal constraints, and pandemic-era disruptions reduced momentum and delayed decision-making, especially during 2021–22.
A7: Willingness of national and local partners to collaborate	Hold	As previously assessed, the project successfully engaged MoE, governorates, academia, and community groups. Most workshops and consultations were inclusive and solutions-oriented despite occasional disagreements.
Proportion of Intermediate States achieved	All/ some/ none	
1. Legislative framework concerning Protected Areas updated and enforced	None	While the project supported the technical review and amendment of Protected Areas By-law No. 2/2014—including addressing gaps related to overlaps with industrial and oil sector interests—these amendments had not been approved by the Council of Ministers as of project closure. The legal mandate for enforcement remains ambiguous due to overlapping jurisdictions between MoE, MoWR, and MoA. Although MoE has primary authority under Law 2/2014 and Environmental Law No. 41/2014, interviews confirmed that legal enforcement remains stalled. There has been no formal handover of powers to the Environmental Police or governorate authorities, and MoE lacks Cabinet-level endorsement to initiate field-level enforcement independently. Legal coordination efforts continue under the preparatory phase of GEF-7 and GEF-8, but as of now, Iraq's legislative framework for protected areas remains unchanged and unenforced.
2. Positive attitudes and practices that support biodiversity conservation and address environmental issues related to Protected	None	The project implemented a range of awareness-raising activities—including local outreach campaigns, stakeholder dialogues, and engagement of university researchers and activists—which helped to initiate important conversations around the value

Factors influencing likelihood of impact	Assessment	Justification
Areas adopted and implemented by the public		of protected areas. Interviewees confirmed that these efforts were instrumental in reducing initial resistance from some communities, especially at the protected sites, where local fishers and herders feared eviction or loss of access. Targeted messaging reframed protected areas as tools for sustaining livelihoods through resource protection. However, there is no formal measurement of changes in public behavior or perception , and no structured KAP (Knowledge, Attitude, Practice) surveys or monitoring systems were implemented to assess awareness uptake or behavioral shifts. While local acceptance may have increased in specific locations, this does not amount to evidence of broad or sustained adoption of pro-conservation attitudes or practices across the public. Continued resistance from some governorates (e.g., Najaf) and ongoing concerns from local communities underscore the need for deeper, long-term behavior change strategies.
Assumptions for the change process from Intermediate States to Impact	Hold/ partially /do not hold	
A1: Political instability will not affect the execution of project activities and achievement of project objectives	Partially hold	Iraq's broader political volatility did not directly disrupt project operations, especially in Maysan and Wasit. However, frequent turnover in MoE leadership, COVID-19–related governance disruptions and shifting ministerial priorities slowed approvals and delayed field implementation, especially PA gazettement and infrastructure rollout.
A7: Willingness of national and local partners to collaborate	Hold	As previously assessed, collaboration between MoE, governorates, academic institutions, and local community groups was consistent throughout implementation. Key outputs (e.g., management plans, TNA validation, MoUs) were completed with stakeholder input despite institutional frictions.
A9: The integration of gender equality measures is understood and valued by the main project partners	Partially hold	Gender considerations were included in training selection (33% female), awareness materials, and consultations. However, gender outcomes were not tracked systematically, and no outcome-level gender indicators were applied.

122. The project established strong foundational outputs—such as the PAN plan, biodiversity baselines, and pilot site management plans—that aligned with the Theory of Change objective of enhancing ecosystem health and resilience in Iraq. These outputs informed the GEF-7 design and were integrated into the National Strategy for Environmental Protection and Improvement (2024–2030), signaling progress in institutional planning. However, key assumptions underpinning the ToC—particularly the formalization of enforcement mechanisms (D1) and the securing of dedicated, budgeted support from line ministries (A6)—were not fulfilled by the time the project concluded. The lack of Cabinet-backed directives, legally empowered enforcement modalities, and earmarked budgets from relevant ministries continues to constrain implementation momentum. Interviews with Ministry of Environment officials consistently emphasized these limitations. As one official from MoE explained, *“We declared the protected areas, but after the project ended,*

we had no operational budget and no authority to activate enforcement at the sites. We had to reach out again to the governors just to maintain the technical teams we created”⁸². Similarly, MoE informants noted that while ByLaw No. 2/2014 provides the legal foundation, “we identified gaps during the project—especially related to overlaps with oil and industrial zones—and we are only now trying to amend the bylaw”⁸³. They also confirmed that despite site-level planning, “we do not yet have environmental police deployed on-site, nor budget allocations to manage these areas operationally”. Several interviewees also pointed to the persistent absence of enforcement personnel. As noted by one of the national experts, “We have manpower in Iraq, but not the legal clarity or political will to activate environmental police at protected areas”⁸⁴. Without activation of these mechanisms, the causal pathway linking project outputs to long-term biodiversity outcomes remains tenuous.

123. The project’s design served as a catalytic first step—particularly in piloting the management plan model and stakeholder engagement process—but its sustainability now hinges on actions that fall outside the project’s scope and timeline. These include legal amendments, institutional reform, and financial commitment from the Government of Iraq to move from pilot to protection. As such, the ToC assumptions were not holding by project closure, despite strong foundational work and inter-ministerial consultations.
124. The project enhanced stakeholder engagement across national and local levels through targeted awareness campaigns, technical workshops (e.g., Red List and EIA), and inclusive planning processes that involved local communities, tribal leaders, academia, and environmental activists. This participatory approach helped overcome initial resistance—such as in Al-Teeb, where the governor shifted from opposition to active support following MoE-led awareness sessions. However, sustained behavior changes and public buy-in remain limited and fragile. As indicated by interviews with local stakeholders’ awareness efforts did not translate into lasting institutional or community behavior change due to frequent turnover among governors and the absence of mechanisms to maintain engagement after project closure. There was no systematic monitoring of knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP), and while resistance declined in some areas, entrenched concerns remained—for example, at Al-Dalmaj, where fishers feared eviction and required repeated assurances that their livelihoods would be preserved. Although the project avoided negative impacts on marginalized groups, it lacked formal grievance mechanisms, gender-disaggregated data, and structured inclusion protocols, which could limit future equitable outcomes. Interviews also noted that resistance from governors like the one in Najaf persists, and that public understanding of protected areas remains tenuous without ongoing education and local champions.
125. The PAN plan’s alignment with GEF-7 and its integration into the National Environmental Strategy reflect strong potential for scaling and policy uptake. Its influence is evident in the design of GEF-8 and in the ongoing use of management tools and stakeholder frameworks developed during the project. Importantly, the National Committee for Natural Sites continues to convene ministry and governorate representatives, showing signs of institutionalizing cross-sector coordination. However, several foundational assumptions remain only partially fulfilled. Legislative reforms—particularly revisions to Bylaw No. 2/2014 and the clarification of enforcement roles—are still in progress, while coordination challenges persist with key actors such as the Ministry of Oil and Ministry of Water Resources. Interviewees noted that gender integration was limited in scope and lacked systematic tracking, and the Ministry of Finance never fully committed to budgetary support, citing broader fiscal constraints. COVID-era disruptions and shifting political leadership further complicated continuity and enforcement. While capacity-building

⁸² INT 1

⁸³ INT5

⁸⁴ INT8

efforts reached a broad base—including approximately one-third women—and led to the emergence of a national expert cadre, the institutionalization of technical roles within governorate structures remains fragile and uneven. Overall, the project laid essential groundwork, but the long-term realization of ecosystem resilience goals depends on finalizing legal reforms, ensuring financial allocations, and deepening cross-ministerial and local implementation capacity. **The likelihood of sustained impact is therefore Moderately Likely.**

Findings Statements on Effectiveness:

126. The project achieved most of its planned outputs which were delivered with good quality and on time, especially after delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It produced key tools and plans for Iraq's PAN, including baseline ecological surveys, a national plan for establishing the PAN, costed action plans, and technical guidelines. The project also supported capacity-building through training and workshops that reached more than 100 people from national and local institutions. Two protected areas, Dalmaj and Teeb, were legally declared, and national coordination mechanisms were strengthened.
127. However, some important outputs were only partially completed. Infrastructure and equipment planned for the two pilot sites were not delivered, mainly because UNEP is not set up to carry out construction work and national co-financing was not made available. The PAN website was developed but remained only partially functional due to technical and budget issues. While training and awareness materials were produced, they were not widely used or sustained after the project ended.
128. In terms of outcomes, the four main outcomes were partially achieved. Stakeholder engagement was strong but did not always lead to formal commitments or shared responsibilities. There was some improvement in public understanding of protected areas, but long-term behavior change could not be confirmed, and outreach efforts were limited to a few locations. Institutional and legal gaps remain, especially around enforcement, funding, and long-term maintenance. While the project laid important foundations, its long-term results depend on follow-up actions by the Government of Iraq and other partners.

Rating for Effectiveness: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Availability of Outputs: Moderately Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Achievement of Project Outcomes: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Achievement of Likelihood of Impact (Use 'Likely' scale): Moderately Likely (ML)

4.5 Financial Management

4.5.1 Adherence to UNEP's Financial Policies and Procedures

129. UNEP/GEF fiduciary controls proved largely robust: budgeting, disbursement, procurement, and financial reporting all conformed to UNEP corporate rules. Strategic oversight was provided by the Nairobi-based Ecosystems Division, with day-to-day transaction review and financial administration conducted by the UNEP West Asia Regional Office. The Task Manager and Finance Officer confirmed that budget lines, ceilings, and approval workflows were consistently applied. All budget revisions passed through the corporate workflow, no audit flags were raised, and project management costs remained below the 10% ceiling.
130. Three key deviations were observed but were addressed during implementation: (i) first disbursement occurred beyond the nine-month benchmark due to a delay in signing the ICA, which was finalized only in August 2017; (ii) a temporary overspend on the national staff line, which was subsequently realigned within the approved budget envelope; and (iii)

the planned infrastructure investments at three site offices—including Dalmaj and Teeb—were cancelled due to unresolved land tenure issues and local coordination constraints. While these site works were budgeted under non-expendable equipment (≈USD 254,000), they were not implemented, and the unspent funds were duly returned to the GEF in accordance with UNEP/GEF financial rules and procedures. Accordingly, adherence to UNEP/GEF financial policies and procedures is rated Satisfactory (S), with full compliance in financial control, but minor implementation-level shortfalls in infrastructure delivery.

6.2.2 Completeness of Financial Information

131. The evaluator received the full set of financial documentation required for the terminal evaluation, including the signed ICA, all approved budget revisions, annual PIR financial annexes, the signed 2022 and 2023 expenditure statements (UMOJA extracts), co-financing tables, and periodic progress reports with costed work plans and disaggregated expenditure data by component. Proof of fund transfers and requisitions was available in UMOJA and was reviewed as part of the sampling process. According to the project's financial reports, the Ministry of Environment committed in-kind staff and service contributions totaling USD 830,125, of which USD 500,125 was realized. In addition, IUCN fully delivered its pledged co-financing of USD 281,537 (USD 112,433 in cash and USD 169,104 in-kind). Taken together, the total realized co-financing amounted to USD 781,662, representing approximately 22.6% of the originally pledged co-financing of USD 3,450,000.
132. Although the external audit report by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) had not been issued at the time of this evaluation, this was not considered a material gap. The more substantive concern related to the protected area infrastructure budget line, which accounted for USD 254,420 under non-expendable equipment. While these funds were disbursed and included in the final expenditure statements, they were not implemented on the ground due to protracted delays related to land ownership, site permissions, and procurement. The distinction between financial disbursement and physical execution was consistently noted in interviews and project documentation. As a result, although the project achieved 100% financial disbursement, the non-delivery of these infrastructure components equates to roughly 21% of the GEF grant not being physically executed. Although this does not compromise financial accountability per se, it affects the completeness of financial delivery. Accordingly, **the completeness of financial information is rated Satisfactory (S).**

Table 16: Actual project costs (GEF grant)⁸⁵

Budget line	Approved (US\$)	Cumulative expenditure (US\$)	% of grant
Personnel	144,361	144,361	15.6%
Sub-contracts (IUCN, MoE, WCMC, CEDARE, etc.)	714,349	714,348	77.1%
Training & Meetings	52,491	39,171	4.2%
Travel & M&E	51,618	15,619	1.7%
Capital equipment (PA infrastructure)	254,420	254,420	27.5%
Evaluation (Mid-term & Terminal)	36,400	36,400	3.9%
Total***	1,243,639	926,225	74.4%

*Expenditure as of September 2023. Figures exclude minor year-end accruals and unliquidated obligations.

**Infrastructure budget for PA sites (Dalmaj and Teeb) remained unexecuted due to land ownership and implementation delays.

*** Figures as of Jan 2024, final closure in progress

⁸⁵ Signed 2022 expenditure report

Table 17: Financial management

Financial-management component	Rating	Evidence / comments
1. Adherence to UNEP/GEF policies & procedures	S	Budget revisions and disbursements cleared through UNEP corporate systems; no audit issues. Overspend on staff line corrected; procurement rules followed; buildings cancelled to avoid non-compliant construction.
Any evidence of shortcomings?	Yes	First disbursement > 9 months; unspent 30 % balance linked mainly to cancelled infrastructure.
Was first disbursement within 9 months of UNEP approval?	No	Legal instrument signed Aug 2017, almost one year after endorsement.
Were UNEP & donor procurement policies followed?	Yes	All contracts processed in UMOJA; no irregularities recorded
2. Completeness of project financial information	S	
Provision of key documents to evaluator	S	
A. Co-financing & project-cost tables at design	Yes	Detailed by budget line in ProDoc & Final Report
B. Revisions to the budget	Yes	All copies shared
C. All relevant legal agreements (SSFA, PCA, ICA)	Yes	ICA & LOAs provided
D. Proof of fund transfers	Yes	UMOJA extracts sampled
E. Proof of co-financing (cash & in-kind)	Partial	In-kind letters received; cash evidence pending
F. Summary report on project expenditures	Yes	Signed 2022 statement plus cumulative ledger
G. Audits & management responses	No	OIOS audit not yet issued
H. Procurement documents (requisition, SSP)	N/A	No capital-goods procurement executed
I. Other required financial information	N/A	—
Overall rating	Satisfactory (S)	

Findings Statements on Financial Management

133. Despite an initial start-up delay and the late cancellation of the infrastructure package, the project maintained sound fiduciary discipline. Financial information was sufficiently complete for the terminal evaluation, with only the external audit and some co-finance evidence outstanding.

Rating for Financial Management: Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Adherence to UNEP's Financial Policies and Procedures: Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Completeness of Financial Information: Satisfactory (S)

4.6 Efficiency

134. The project experienced a delayed start: although endorsed by the GEF CEO in November 2015, the Internal Cooperation Agreement (ICA) was only signed in August 2017, and the first disbursement was not received by the MoE until August 2018—exceeding UNEP's nine-month benchmark and delaying implementation by over a year.⁸⁶ This initial lag compressed the work-plan and slowed down the deployment of field surveys and institutional engagement. Additional external shocks, including nationwide civil unrest in October 2019 and COVID-19 restrictions from March 2020 through mid-

⁸⁶ INT 1; Final PIR 2018–2020; PSC Meeting Report (July 2019).

2021, further impeded field missions, meetings, and training.⁸⁷ These disruptions led to two no-cost extensions, shifting project closure from the original date of 31 December 2018 to 31 December 2023.⁸⁸ Despite this, adaptive measures—such as conducting consultations and training virtually, relocating regional workshops to Amman, and increasing weekly coordination via WhatsApp—allowed the project to regain momentum and finalize all technical deliverables by mid-2023.⁸⁹

135. The project spent approximately US \$926,225 of the US \$1.23 million GEF grant, equivalent to around 74.4% of the total approved budget. This figure reflects cumulative expenditures across all active budget lines, excluding the undelivered infrastructure investments.⁹⁰ The primary reason for the underspend was the strategic cancellation of the site-office infrastructure component (US \$254k), which faced unresolved land allocation issues and exceeded feasible timelines.⁹¹ ⁹²In response to COVID-19 and rising security costs, UNEP and executing partners adopted a series of cost-saving strategies: steering committee meetings and workshops were held online or in regional hubs, cutting travel and DSA costs by an estimated 40%.⁹³ Furthermore, UNEP's decision to embed a national project officer inside the Ministry, rather than establish a new project management unit, helped keep administrative costs below the 10% ceiling.⁹⁴ These efficiencies not only safeguarded project finances but also reduced UNEP's operational carbon footprint, by replacing long-haul international travel with virtual platforms and short-haul regional movement.⁹⁵
136. The project successfully leveraged Iraq's existing institutional structures, including the Ministry of Environment's Protected Areas Unit and the inter-ministerial National Committee for Protected Areas.⁹⁶ It was executed through UNEP's West Asia Office and supported by IUCN under a signed Project Cooperation Agreement, which facilitated access to biodiversity datasets, training resources, and regional experts.⁹⁷ Project design and execution were aligned with Iraq's commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the National Environmental Strategy and Action Plan (NESAP), and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 15 on life on land and SDG 16 on institutions.⁹⁸ Several outputs—such as management plans, red-list guidelines, and stakeholder engagement formats—were harmonized with other GEF-funded and UN initiatives, creating programmatic synergies and strengthening institutional continuity.
137. In summary, despite initial delays and pandemic-related disruptions, the project achieved full delivery of planned outputs through timely adaptive management, cost-saving strategies, and the strategic use of virtual delivery and regional partnerships. The project also made effective use of existing institutions and platforms, reduced administrative overhead, and minimized UNEP's carbon footprint through limited travel and embedded national execution, resulting in a Moderately Satisfactory efficiency rating.

Rating for Efficiency: Moderately Satisfactory

⁸⁷ PIR 2020; Half-Yearly Progress Report (Jul–Dec 2019); INT 8

⁸⁸ Final Project Report (2023); INT 13, INT 14

⁸⁹ INT 1, INT 3, INT 11

⁹⁰ Signed 2022 Expenditure Report; PAN_FINAL - Evidence_Sheet.xlsx.

⁹¹ Final Project Report (2023); PAN_PSC documentation; INT 14

⁹² As indicated in section 1.6 1.6

Project Financing; While 100% of the GEF grant was officially disbursed to the implementing agency, only approximately 66% was ultimately expended on planned activities. This discrepancy is due to the reprogramming or return of funds initially allocated for infrastructure-related components that could not be implemented. These adjustments were made in line with GEF and UNEP financial management procedures, and fiduciary integrity was maintained throughout.

⁹³ Progress Report Jul–Dec 2020; INT 7; INT 10

⁹⁴ INT 9; INT 10; INT 15

⁹⁵ PIR 2020–2021; Regional workshop agendas; Evidence Sheet.

⁹⁶ National PA Committee TORs; INT 8; INT 15

⁹⁷ PCA documentation; INT 10; INT 11

⁹⁸ Final Report 2023; Project Design Document; CBD National Reports (Iraq).

4.7 Monitoring and Reporting

4.7.1 Monitoring of Project Implementation

138. The project included a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework with key indicators aligned to the results framework and ToC. The M&E design was considered moderately robust, featuring output- and outcome-level indicators with corresponding baselines and targets. However, both the Final Project Report (2023) and stakeholder interviews⁹⁹ highlighted that the monitoring systems encountered practical limitations during implementation. While quarterly and annual progress reports were submitted, data collection was reported to be inconsistent across sites and thematic areas, particularly in locations such as Teeb and Dalmaj. Prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns, slow internet connectivity and reduced working hours postponed critical trainings and delayed the upload of quarterly monitoring data to the central M&E system¹⁰⁰; mined border corridors and the presence of armed tribal groups around Al Teeb site—together with requirements for military or police escorts—made routine ecological transects hazardous¹⁰¹, while access to the water-rich Al Dalmaj marshes was further complicated by local unrest and a private fish-farming concession¹⁰².
139. Monitoring data was used to inform some adaptive management decisions, especially concerning training delivery and local coordination. For example, stakeholder interviews confirm that the MoE adjusted its engagement model with governorates based on field feedback and data gathered during the implementation period¹⁰³. Nonetheless, evidence suggests limited real-time feedback loops; adaptive management was more reactive than proactive. The lack of site-specific biodiversity monitoring tools and protocols meant that the project had to rely on more general observations rather than precise ecological baselines. The absence of sex- and vulnerability-disaggregated indicators in the original log frame also constrained the ability to systematically track the representation of women, youth, and other marginalized groups in project activities.

4.7.2 Project Reporting

140. Across the life of the project, the team submitted the mandatory Project Implementation Reviews (PIRs) for FY 2018-2022, together with semi-annual progress updates and certified financial statements. Both the 2018 and 2019 PIRs show the “Reporting” line rated as complete and accurate, although task-manager comments note recurrent delays and a need for deeper analysis of progress and implementation issues. Narrative sections in the PIRs generally describe outputs and immediate outcomes but often stop short of clearly articulating how activities contribute to the higher-level objective of establishing a functional Protected-Area Network. Budget tables do explain year-on-year variances and reference risk-mitigation actions (e.g., recruitment of a national officer, re-sequencing of field work), yet early-phase financial data are aggregated at component level, limiting granular cost-effectiveness analysis. Overall, the evaluation can conclude that core UNEP reporting obligations were met, but the analytical depth and financial disaggregation required for results-based management improved only gradually over the implementation period.

⁹⁹ INT 2, INT 4

¹⁰⁰ INT 1, INT 15

¹⁰¹ INT 1, INT 8

¹⁰² INT 14

¹⁰³ INT 2; INT 6

141. Reporting on gender and other social dimensions was uneven across the project. The Final Report records that women constituted “about one-third” of overall trainees and workshop participants, signaling some progress towards sex-disaggregated monitoring but without extending the analysis to outcomes or decision-making roles. By contrast, the FY-2020 PIR provides only event-specific data (e.g. 14 of 25 participants, or 56 per cent, at the January 2020 Amman workshop were women) and earlier PIRs (2018-2019) mention gender mainstreaming in narrative form yet omit quantitative breakdowns, making trend analysis impossible. None of the standard reports reviewed include systematic tracking of participation or benefits for persons with disabilities or other marginalized groups, nor do they reference UNEP’s Gender Policy or Human-Rights-Based Approach guidance. In addition, the Communication and Knowledge-Management Strategy (CKMS) and the linked Public Awareness & Outreach Strategy—identified as key vehicles for mainstreaming equity—remained “under development” in successive PIRs and were not operationalized during the reporting cycle. Consequently, while minimum corporate reporting requirements were met, the inclusivity lens remained ad hoc, and the project only partially complied with UNEP standards on gender equality and leaving-no-one-behind.

Findings Statements on Monitoring and Reporting:

142. **Monitoring of Project Implementation was only partially operational.** COVID-19 shutdowns, security clearances and high staff turnover curtailed regular field missions at Teeb and Dalmaj; site-level data were submitted late or in inconsistent formats and fed only sporadically into adaptive management, leaving gaps in the evidence chain between activities and outcomes.

143. **Project Reporting met corporate timeliness requirements but lacked analytical depth and equity focus.** Annual PIRs, semi-annual progress updates and certified financial statements were delivered on schedule, yet links to higher-level results, cost-component disaggregation and systematic gender- or disability-disaggregated data were inconsistent, constraining results-based learning and accountability.

Rating for Monitoring and Reporting: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Monitoring of Project Implementation: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Project Reporting: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

4.8 Sustainability

4.8.1 Socio-political Sustainability

144. National ownership of the nascent PAN has grown steadily over the project period, driven by participatory planning approaches and targeted outreach efforts. Multi-stakeholder workshops in Baghdad, Maysan, and Diwaniyah convened representatives from line ministries, governorate councils, NGOs, and local communities to co-develop conservation priorities and to shape site-specific management plans. At the pilot sites of Dalmaj and Teeb, the project established local coordination committees that included tribal leaders, marshland users, and environmental activists, thereby embedding traditional knowledge into management frameworks. The Stakeholder Involvement Plan—validated during the January 2020 workshop in Amman—emphasized that protected areas should not be perceived as restrictive zones, but rather as mechanisms to sustain rural livelihoods through improved access to ecosystem services, regulated grazing, and sustainable fishing practices. Interviews with MoE officials and local actors suggest that these efforts helped reduce early resistance from fishing cooperatives and livestock herders who had feared exclusion from key resource areas.

145. Nonetheless, the socio-political environment surrounding PAN implementation remains fragile and complex. Both the 2019 and 2020 PIRs rated the external political context as a “Medium” risk, noting that fluctuating security dynamics and weak governance in some governorates posed challenges. In Teeb, the proximity to a militarized border zone and the presence of armed tribal groups have made access unpredictable and sometimes unsafe for government staff and project partners. At the same time, decentralization reforms have contributed to a lack of clarity over jurisdictional authority between central and provincial entities, particularly in terms of protected area oversight and budgetary control. Interviews with MoE confirm that some provincial authorities remain hesitant to enforce the PAN legal framework, fearing a loss of autonomy over local land and water resources. Without formal buy-in from these regional actors, site-level implementation risks being delayed or contested. To maintain the momentum established during the project, sustained high-level dialogue between the MoE and governorate councils is essential, alongside confidence-building measures that reinforce the social and economic value of protected areas for local communities.

4.8.2 Financial Sustainability

146. The project laid important groundwork for the long-term financial sustainability of the PAN, though the extent to which this foundation will translate into sustained funding remains uncertain. A ten-year costed PAN Strategy was developed, with an estimated initial budget of approximately US\$ 670,000, and submitted to the Ministry of Finance with the intent to secure long-term state support. The Final Report and interviews with MoE staff confirm that the Ministry expressed interest in integrating PAN-related operational costs into its annual budget allocations, but this commitment remains largely indicative, with no specific budget lines yet confirmed. At project design, co-financing commitments were pledged at USD 3.45 million, significantly exceeding the original target and demonstrating strong partner engagement. By project closure, however, the actual co-financing realized amounted to USD 781,662. This included USD 500,125 from the MoE—largely linked to short-term, activity-based inputs such as staff time, technical services, and field support—and USD 281,537 from IUCN, which fully delivered its pledged contribution (USD 112,433 in cash and USD 169,104 in-kind). The strategy and financial tools developed under the project were considered technically sound, but interviews with stakeholders suggest that institutional uptake and practical application of these tools had not fully materialized by project closure. Preparatory work for a follow-on GEF-7 investment was underway at the time of evaluation, offering a potential avenue for scaling and operationalizing the foundational outputs of the current phase. However, the long-term financial sustainability of the PAN remains uncertain and vulnerable to broader fiscal and governance risks. Iraq’s national budget remains under strain from oil price volatility, post-conflict recovery obligations, and an expanding public sector wage bill. As documented in the 2020 PIR, 79% of direct expenditures that year were financed through GEF and other donor sources, with only modest cost-sharing by MoE and line ministries. Stakeholder interviews—highlighted the limited absorptive capacity at governorate levels and the absence of earmarked budget lines for site-level PAN operations, such as ranger salaries, biodiversity monitoring, or community engagement activities. Alternative financing mechanisms (e.g. ecosystem service fees, wetland tourism, private sector offsets) were discussed during consultations but were not piloted under this project. Interviewees noted that without innovative domestic revenue streams or further international investment, there is a risk of deterioration in site management quality and institutional momentum after the project’s end. Ensuring the financial sustainability of the PAN will therefore require strong inter-ministerial coordination, fiscal decentralization, and activation of the enabling policies laid out in the PAN Strategy.

4.8.3 Institutional Sustainability

147. The project delivered several foundational instruments essential for long-term institutionalization of the PAN. These include a draft legal framework for PAN, comprehensive management plans for the Teeb and Dalmaj sites, and technical guidelines tailored to PA managers. A Training Needs Assessment (TNA) was conducted and used to design a phased, on-the-job capacity-building programme, targeting core competencies such as GIS, Red List species assessment, and participatory management. As of project completion, the MoE operational teams trained in these areas, with several staff members remaining active in departmental roles.
148. The revitalization of the National Committee for Protected Areas (NCPA) and the development of Iraq's first management plans for declared protected areas (Teeb and Dalmaj) represent important milestones in institutionalizing the PAN. However, institutional sustainability remains Moderately Likely, as structural and political uncertainties continue to pose risks to the continuity and effectiveness of the PAN framework. Several interrelated challenges emerged during and after project implementation. First, frequent turnover of ministry staff, especially in mid-level and technical positions, has disrupted institutional memory and slowed progress on follow-up activities, including implementation of the management plans and training rollouts. This concern was echoed by multiple MoE staff and confirmed in interviews, where it was noted that each new wave of staff or governors requires renewed orientation and stakeholder engagement.
149. Second, the decentralization of environmental functions to newly created regional departments within the MoE has shifted operational responsibility for GEF-7 and GEF-8 to local offices, without consistent technical oversight or clear financing structures. While decentralization aligns with national reforms, the transition has created fragmentation in PAN governance and planning, as highlighted by stakeholders, who emphasized that the Technical Department—which houses treaty mandates and institutional memory—should retain a central coordination role.
150. Third, persistent ambiguity in the roles and mandates of enforcement bodies, particularly the Environmental Police, undermines field-level monitoring and compliance. The project proposed coordination with law enforcement agencies, yet no formal mechanisms were adopted to clarify whether environmental police report to the Ministry of Environment or the Ministry of Interior. Interviews revealed that despite having sufficient manpower, enforcement remains politically sensitive and underdeveloped, especially in border areas like Teeb, where the presence of armed groups and hunting pressure demand a robust, clearly mandated security presence.
151. Finally, ongoing debate within the MoE about the institutional home of PAN leadership—whether as a dedicated directorate, a cross-departmental unit, or an inter-ministerial platform—has further delayed the consolidation of responsibilities. While the PAN legal framework was drafted and the management guidelines published, their adoption into permanent institutional practice remains incomplete. Without formal budget lines, inter-ministerial coordination agreements, and a stable PAN anchor within MoE, there is a risk that the foundational work achieved during the project may not be sustained or fully implemented.

4.8.4 Findings Statements on Sustainability

152. Community engagement and awareness efforts have generated initial local buy-in, but fragile security and provincial skepticism mean political support for the PAN remains moderately at risk.

153. A costed strategy and government budget pledges provide a pathway to financial continuity, yet sustained operations depend on follow-up donor funding and diversified revenue streams.
154. Core legal, technical and organizational foundations are in place, but decentralization, staff turnover and unclear enforcement mandates pose moderate risks to institutional durability.

Rating for Likelihood of Sustainability (use 'Likely' scale): Moderately Likely (ML)

Rating for Socio-political Sustainability: Moderately Likely (ML)

Rating for Financial Sustainability: Moderately Unlikely (MU)

Rating for Institutional Sustainability: Moderately Likely (ML)

4.9 Factors Affecting Performance and Cross-Cutting Issues

4.9.1 Quality of Project Management and Supervision

4.9.1.1 UNEP/Implementing Agency

155. Project management support was provided by UNEP through its Nairobi-based Task Manager, who offered technical and administrative backstopping. This included quarterly coordination calls, review of documents, and oversight of the project budget. While UNEP's support was generally considered responsive, several national stakeholders indicated that delays were experienced in securing timely approvals for activity reprogramming, particularly in the context of COVID-19 disruptions and evolving security challenges.

4.9.1.2 Partners/Executing Agency

156. Day-to-day project implementation was led by a National Project Manager embedded within Iraq's Ministry of Environment (MoE), working in collaboration with technical partners from IUCN. Interviews with stakeholders described project coordination as effective and aligned with on-the-ground realities, especially in adjusting timelines due to external constraints.
157. The Project Steering Committee (PSC), led by the MoE, was established in accordance with the project document and included representatives from key line ministries such as Water Resources (MoWR), Agriculture (MoA), Oil, and Tourism and Antiquities. The PSC met at least once a year and was chaired by the Deputy Minister of Environment. It served as a vital mechanism for reviewing project progress, resolving inter-institutional coordination challenges, and ensuring alignment with biodiversity governance mandates. Early in the project, the PSC was instrumental in affirming the MoE's leadership under the CBD and Law No. 41 of 2014, especially when MoWR contested its authority. Despite these strategic roles, several stakeholders from UNEP and MoE highlighted operational shortcomings within the PSC. Participation from high-level representatives was inconsistent, often depending on whether meetings were held abroad (e.g., in Amman). Additionally, frequent turnover among ministerial focal points and shifting institutional priorities undermined continuity and reduced the effectiveness of inter-ministerial engagement.

4.9.2 Stakeholder Participation, Cooperation and Partnerships

158. Stakeholder participation was a core strength of the project and pivotal to its achievements. The design and implementation processes actively engaged a wide spectrum of actors, including governorate authorities, universities, environmental NGOs, and tribal and religious leaders. Local consultation workshops were held in both Al-Teeb and Al-Dalmaj, helping to dispel community concerns and incorporate traditional

knowledge into site planning. Local advisory committees were formed under the guidance of the MoE, and technical teams were established in each governorate to oversee site-level implementation. The Ministries of Agriculture and Water Resources were also involved through a legal tripartite committee, which played a key role in resolving overlapping mandates and informing revisions to Bylaw No. 2 (2014) during the PAN framework process.

159. Collaborative partnerships extended to international actors, notably IUCN, which delivered technical manuals, GIS tools, and capacity-building workshops in Jordan and Baghdad. Relationships between national staff and IUCN consultants were generally positive, though some MoE participants reported a need for deeper follow-up on technical training (e.g., Red List methodology and EIA procedures). Interview evidence also highlights that inter-ministerial cooperation improved over time, aided by UNEP convening power and periodic high-level dialogues.

4.9.3 Responsiveness to Human Rights and Gender

160. The project demonstrated initial sensitivity to gender and social inclusion but fell short of fully embedding these principles across activities. A Stakeholder Involvement Plan was prepared, and a gender-disaggregated attendance record was kept for major workshops, including the January 2020 consultation in Amman, where 56% of participants were women. Nevertheless, sex- and vulnerability-disaggregated data were not consistently applied across monitoring indicators, and reports lack analysis on participation and benefit-sharing impacts across marginalized groups.
161. Consultations in Dalmaj and Teeb included outreach to fishers, pastoralists, and tribal elders, reflecting a general commitment to local inclusion. Women were active participants in these community engagements and also held prominent roles within the project team. Both National Project Managers appointed during the project's lifecycle were women—Mrs. Nahla Rida initially, followed by Dr. Najla Abdullah, who led the project through its final and most intensive implementation phase and later became Director General at the Ministry of Environment. In addition, several female technical staff contributed from the Ministry of Environment, particularly in biodiversity and protected area planning. Despite this representation, women were still underrepresented in local decision-making bodies and technical fieldwork at the governorate level. The project also lacked dedicated gender-responsive measures such as women-led monitoring teams, accessible formats for diverse participants, or equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. While inclusion was evident at the staffing level, gender-transformative outcomes remained limited.

4.9.4 Environmental and Social Safeguards

162. The project was classified as low-risk under UNEP's Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS) framework; however, several relevant issues were identified at the design stage. These included environmental risks related to the establishment of protected areas (SS 1.7) and potential social impacts linked to community engagement and access to resources (SS 2.3). Mitigation strategies were developed and included capacity-building for Ministry of Environment staff, stakeholder consultations, and legal reviews to ensure alignment with safeguard principles. While no relocation or restrictions were planned without consultation, the evaluation noted that these safeguard considerations were not captured in a standalone risk register or systematically integrated into the project's results framework. Furthermore, disaggregated monitoring of impacts on vulnerable groups—such as women and pastoralist communities—was not established. Although infrastructure development was planned for the Dalmaj and Teeb Protected Areas, including management buildings and visitor facilities, these components were not

implemented due to unresolved land ownership disputes and delays in obtaining administrative approvals.

163. During implementation, safeguard risks were not actively monitored through a dedicated ESS mechanism. While some consultations were conducted at both Dalmaj and Teeb, they were conducted on an ad hoc basis without a formal tracking framework. This lack of structured monitoring contributed to emerging issues—particularly at Dalmaj—where confusion over the implications of protected area status led to tensions among local fishermen and land users. Additional concerns were raised about the exclusion of women and vulnerable groups from planning processes. These dynamics reduced community buy-in and delayed site-level planning. In response, the PMU and Nature Iraq expanded outreach and consultations in affected areas, as documented in 2023–2024 field mission reports. However, the absence of a formal grievance redress mechanism and structured ESS framework limited the effectiveness and consistency of mitigation efforts. As a result, while the project demonstrated partial adherence to UNEP’s ESS standards, its safeguard performance was constrained by design and implementation shortcomings.

4.9.5 Country Ownership and Driven-ness

164. The project enjoyed strong political support at the national level, with the Ministry of Environment endorsing both the PAN Strategy and the legal framework developed through the project. Despite fiscal constraints, the Government of Iraq contributed approximately US \$500,125 in in-kind co-financing, including office space, staff time, and logistical support. The revitalization of the National Committee for Protected Areas and the deployment of MoE-led task teams for site management planning reflect a sustained institutional commitment to protected area governance.
165. At the sub-national level, ownership varied. In Maysan and Diwaniyah, local authorities were actively engaged and helped convene stakeholder consultations and facilitate site access. In contrast, some governorates were less involved, citing lack of staffing and unclear mandates under decentralization reforms. Moreover, institutional memory was often disrupted by turnover in governorate leadership, requiring renewed outreach and relationship building. Overall, country ownership was present but uneven across implementation sites.

4.9.6 Communication and Public Awareness

166. The project developed a Communication and Knowledge Management Strategy (CKMS) aimed at promoting protected area awareness and sharing project results with stakeholders. Communication products included awareness posters, workshop materials, and a project website maintained by MoE’s IT Unit. Public outreach campaigns were conducted in collaboration with civil society groups and schools in Dalmaj and Teeb, using culturally tailored messaging. Although a CKMS was prepared and submitted, it was not adopted or institutionalized by the Ministry, and therefore remained effectively at a draft stage until late in the project.
167. Opportunities for feedback and knowledge exchange were primarily embedded in the project’s consultation process. Annual stakeholder workshops, technical training events, and PSC meetings enabled mutual learning and refinement of strategies. Yet formal feedback loops—such as beneficiary surveys or community monitoring platforms—were not institutionalized. Some interviewees noted that while knowledge sharing occurred at national events, it did not always reach community levels, particularly in rural or remote areas.

Findings Statements on Factors Affecting Performance and Cross-Cutting Issues:

168. **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement Strengthened Local Legitimacy, but Sustained Participation Remains Contingent on Political Stability.** The project's participatory planning processes—including consultations with tribal leaders, fishers, pastoralists, and NGOs—enhanced local ownership and mitigated early resistance, particularly in Dalmaj and Teeb. However, fluctuating governance structures, frequent turnover among provincial authorities, and security challenges in militarized zones have undermined continuity in stakeholder engagement, requiring sustained dialogue and re-engagement mechanisms.
169. **Gender Representation in Staffing Was Positive, Yet Gender-Transformative Results Were Limited.** The project demonstrated notable inclusion of women in leadership, with both National Project Managers being female and several female technical staff participating from MoE. Nevertheless, women remained underrepresented in field roles and local governance structures, and no dedicated gender-responsive mechanisms—such as benefit-sharing schemes or inclusive monitoring units—were established.
170. **Institutional Fragmentation and Turnover Undermined Continuity of PAN Rollout.** Despite the development of management plans, legal frameworks, and training curricula, frequent staff turnover and unclear decentralization mandates weakened institutional memory and coordination. The handover of responsibilities to regional MoE offices without consistent technical oversight created fragmentation, limiting coherent implementation of the PAN framework.
171. **The Steering Committee Played a Crucial Legal Coordination Role, but Its Strategic Function Was Undermined by Inconsistent Senior-Level Engagement.** While the Project Steering Committee facilitated inter-ministerial dialogue, particularly on clarifying the MoE's mandate over protected areas, its potential was limited by inconsistent attendance of senior decision-makers and reliance on external incentives (e.g., holding meetings abroad) to secure participation.

Rating for Factors Affecting Performance and Cross-Cutting Issues: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Quality of Project Management and Supervision: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Stakeholders Participation and Cooperation: Satisfactory (S)

Rating for Responsiveness to Human Rights and Gender Equality: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Environmental and Social Safeguards: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Country Ownership and Driven-ness: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Rating for Communication and Public Awareness: Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

172. **Overall, the project performed at a *Moderately Satisfactory* level.** The project's strongest aspects were its clear strategic relevance, catalytic role in launching Iraq's first PAN, and the high technical quality of its outputs, including national biodiversity assessments, legal instruments, and capacity-building initiatives that informed follow-on GEF investments. These achievements were enabled by UNEP's normative expertise and effective national partnerships. However, weaknesses emerged in the delivery of site infrastructure—due to procurement and land tenure constraints—as well as in gender mainstreaming, which was not fully embedded in implementation or monitoring. The project's M&E systems lacked depth and consistency, and its institutional gains—such as coordination mechanisms and trained staff—remain at risk due to staff turnover, limited sub-national capacity, and the absence of long-term financial and political commitments.
173. **The main achievements of the project were:** (i) the development of Iraq's first structured and costed PAN plan, informed by extensive biodiversity baselines and stakeholder consultations; (ii) the legal declaration of two new protected areas—Al-Dalmaj and Al-Teeb—through a nationally owned process; and (iii) enhanced national capacity through training, technical guidelines, and coordination mechanisms involving over 100 professionals from government, academia, and civil society.
174. **These achievements were brought about largely by** UNEP's normative strengths, including technical backstopping and fiduciary oversight, the sustained commitment of the Ministry of Environment (MoE), and adaptive project management in the face of security and COVID-19 disruptions. The strategic embedding of a national officer in the MoE and the use of regional and global expertise (notably IUCN) also facilitated country ownership and technical excellence.
175. The project demonstrated an innovative and catalytic approach through its integration of legal reform, ecological science, and participatory planning. It reactivated the National Committee for Protected Areas (NCPA) and convened multi-sectoral platforms that brought together diverse stakeholders—from environmental police and tribal leaders to academics and local NGOs. This inclusive governance model was considered a replicable foundation for GEF-7 and GEF-8 initiatives.
176. **The sustainability of the project is rated at the *Moderately Likely* level.** Social and political support for the PAN has grown, yet persistent challenges—such as weak enforcement mandates, fragmented institutional structures, and lack of earmarked national budgets—pose significant risks. The project laid essential groundwork, but its long-term results depend on legal reforms, fiscal integration, and institutional coordination across ministries and governorates.
177. **There were no unintended negative effects observed.** However, the lack of formal grievance mechanisms and structured community feedback loops is a gap that UNEP should address in future projects, particularly those involving territorial planning and potential livelihood impacts. Efforts to manage risks from community resistance, enforcement ambiguity, and sectoral overlap were reactive rather than systematic.
178. **The project's contribution to capacity building was substantial,** with a national cadre of trained professionals and widely disseminated technical guidelines. Gender equality was moderately addressed—women represented 33% of trainees, and both National Project Managers were female—but broader gender-responsive systems, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and tracking indicators were not established. While the project promoted

early South-South knowledge exchanges (e.g., through IUCN regional and global platforms), these were not formalized beyond ad hoc technical interactions.

179. The project's achievements contribute to the evolution of Iraq's environmental governance framework and the broader UNEP/GEF portfolio on protected areas. The PAN design and pilot experiences informed the national environmental strategy (2024–2030) and directly shaped the GEF-7 and GEF-8 pipelines. Institutional structures such as the NCPA and EPIC provide a platform for policy continuity, but formalization remains a work in progress.

Responses to Key Strategic Evaluation Questions:

180. The evaluation Terms of Reference included a set of strategic questions of interest to UNEP. Regarding strategic question 1—In what ways, and to what extent, have the needs and interests of differentiated groups been considered in the implementation and monitoring of the project? The project showed moderate responsiveness to the needs of differentiated groups. Women were actively involved in training sessions (comprising roughly one-third of participants), and both National Project Managers were female. Community consultations included local fishers, pastoralists, and tribal leaders, especially at the Dalmaj and Teeb sites. However, there was limited systematic analysis of vulnerable groups' needs, and no formal grievance mechanisms or tracking tools were used to assess participation or benefit-sharing. Monitoring did not disaggregate data by gender or vulnerability, limiting the ability to assess equity outcomes.
181. Regarding strategic question 2 - *What changes were made to adapt to the effects of COVID-19 and how might any changes affect the project's performance?* The project adapted effectively to COVID-19 disruptions by transitioning to virtual modalities for training, stakeholder meetings, and technical support. International missions were replaced by remote mentoring and the use of national experts on the ground. While this ensured continuity of most outputs, it affected field-based engagement and limited the depth of site-level consultations. Some planned infrastructure and awareness activities were delayed or canceled. These adaptations preserved technical delivery but likely constrained local ownership and delayed behavioral change processes.
182. Regarding strategic question 3 - ***How effective was the project in building capacity at the national level on protected area management?*** The project made a substantial contribution to national capacity building. It conducted 11 workshops, 4 webinars, and 2 on-the-job trainings, reaching over 100 government and civil society personnel. Topics included biodiversity assessment, protected area zoning, and monitoring protocols. Technical outputs—such as training kits and management guidelines—were institutionalized within the MOE. However, high staff turnover and lack of structured follow-up limited the long-term retention and application of these capacities, particularly at sub-national levels.
183. ***Regarding strategic question 4 - To what extent did the project positively influence political will for effective PAN in Iraq?*** The project played a catalytic role in elevating protected areas on the national agenda. It reactivated the National Committee for Protected Areas, supported inter-ministerial coordination, and achieved Cabinet-level endorsement for the legal declaration of two new PAs. These achievements fed directly into Iraq's 2024–2030 Environmental Strategy and informed the design of GEF-7 and GEF-8 projects. However, political support remains uneven across ministries and governorates, with some resistance—especially from the Ministry of Water Resources and sub-national authorities—persisting beyond project closure.
184. ***Regarding strategic question 5 - What were the main challenges faced by the project related to the context of implementation?*** The project operated in a highly volatile context, marked by ministerial restructuring, budget freezes, civil unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Security concerns restricted site visits, and unresolved land tenure issues

delayed infrastructure investments. Political turnover and decentralization reforms led to coordination breakdowns and required repeated re-engagement with shifting leadership. Despite these obstacles, the project adopted flexible strategies—such as adaptive planning and reliance on national experts—that allowed it to deliver core outputs, though institutionalization and enforcement remain incomplete.

185. The table below provides a summary of the ratings and findings discussed in Chapter 4. Overall, the project demonstrates a rating of **“Moderately Satisfactory (MS)”**

Table 18: Summary of project findings and ratings

Criterion	Summary assessment	Rating
Strategic Relevance	Strong alignment with UNEP’s MTS and the GEF biodiversity focal area, as well as relevance to national and global environmental priorities. However, moderate shortcomings in coherence and coordination with related initiatives (e.g., GEF-7 and GEF-8) prevent a “Highly Satisfactory” rating.	Satisfactory (S)
1. Alignment to UNEP MTS, PoW and Strategic Priorities	Fully aligned with UNEP’s Medium-Term Strategy (2014–2017, 2018-2021 and 2022-2025) and Programme of Work objectives. Supported expected accomplishments under Ecosystem Management, Healthy and Productive Ecosystems and Nature Action Subprogrammes.	Highly Satisfactory (HS)
2. Alignment to UNEP Donor/GEF/Partner strategic priorities	Well aligned with GEF-6 priorities under the biodiversity focal area and GEF Objective BD-1. Also contributed to cross-cutting themes including stakeholder engagement and gender.	Satisfactory (S)
3. Relevance to global, regional, sub-regional and national environmental priorities	Direct contribution to Iraq’s NBSAP, SDG 15, CBD commitments, and regional cooperation through IUCN networks.	Highly Satisfactory (HS)
4. Complementarity with existing interventions/ Coherence	Built upon prior initiatives such as the BIO-KBA Survey and GEF-5 enabling activities. However, coordination with GEF-7/8 initiatives was limited.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Quality of Project Design	Based on a well-founded problem analysis and solid outputs, but lacked a fully articulated Theory of Change, enforcement planning, and gender mainstreaming in design.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Nature of External Context	Highly constrained due to post-conflict fragility, institutional restructuring, COVID-19, and volatile local security conditions.	Unfavorable (U)
Effectiveness	Outputs were partially delivered and outcomes were partially achieved, limitations in institutional follow-through and enforcement readiness constrained full outcome realization and long-term impact potential.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
1. Availability of outputs	Most planned outputs were completed with good quality and technical soundness. Some infrastructure activities were not implemented.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
2. Achievement of project outcomes	Project outcomes were partially achieved; due to delays and limitations in institutionalization.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
3. Likelihood of impact (use ‘likely’ scale)	Project has good foundations and some political uptake, but incomplete enforcement and weak institutional continuity reduce probability of full impact.	Moderately Likely (ML)
Financial Management	The project demonstrated sound financial management, fully adhering to UNEP and GEF policies with no audit concerns. All key financial documents—including expenditure records, budget revisions, and co-financing	Satisfactory (S)

Criterion	Summary assessment	Rating
	data—were complete and transparently provided, ensuring accountability despite minor reallocations and an external audit still pending.	
1. Adherence to UNEP's financial policies and procedures	Fully compliant with UNEP rules; no audit flags reported.	Satisfactory (S)
2. Completeness of project financial information	All required documentation provided, and expenditures transparently tracked.	Satisfactory (S)
Efficiency	Despite delays and unspent funds for infrastructure, the project adapted well and maintained good cost-effectiveness through embedded staffing and remote delivery.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Monitoring and Reporting	Limited use of results-based monitoring, absence of disaggregated indicators, and missed opportunities for using data to inform adaptive management—despite meeting minimum reporting requirements.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
1. Monitoring of project implementation	Monitoring was inconsistently applied and lacked results-level indicators, particularly on gender and equity.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
2. Project reporting	UNEP's reporting requirements were met but lacked analytical depth and systematic tracking of social dimensions.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Sustainability (use 'likely' scale)	This reflects the project's solid foundation in policy and institutional frameworks but also highlights vulnerabilities due to limited financial commitments and uneven implementation capacity at sub-national levels.	Moderately Likely (ML)
1. Socio-political sustainability	Community and institutional engagement showed promise, but decentralization and governorate-level resistance pose risks.	Moderately Likely (ML)
2. Financial sustainability	A costed strategy was prepared but not institutionalized; national budgets remain constrained.	Moderately Unlikely (MU)
3. Institutional sustainability	Key mechanisms and plans exist, but are weakened by turnover, decentralization, and lack of statutory anchoring.	Moderately Likely (ML)
Factors Affecting Performance	In general, a strong project management and stakeholder engagement, tempered by ongoing challenges in field-level implementation, institutional coordination, and integration of gender and communication strategies.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
1.1 UNEP/Implementing Agency	Provided strategic and fiduciary oversight, though responsiveness to changing risks was occasionally slow.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
1.2 Partners/Executing Agency	MoE was strongly engaged but affected by internal restructuring and limited enforcement authority.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
2. Stakeholders' participation and cooperation	Broad-based engagement and consultations were a project strength; some governorates remained reluctant.	Satisfactory (S)
3. Responsiveness to human rights and gender equality	Gender was considered in staffing and materials but lacked systematic tracking or outcome-level integration.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
4. Environmental and social safeguards	No safeguard issues were reported; compliance was adequate.	Moderately Satisfactory (S)
5. Country ownership and driven-ness	Strong political support at national level, but inconsistent follow-through across sectors and regions.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

Criterion	Summary assessment	Rating
6. Communication and public awareness	Good outreach tools were developed, but use was uneven and the PAN website remains only partially functional.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)
Overall Project Performance Rating	The project was strategically relevant and catalytic, but constrained in effectiveness and sustainability by contextual risks, institutional fragmentation, and weak gender and M&E integration.	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)

5.2 Lessons Learned

Lesson Learned #1:	Institutionalizing technical capacity is essential for sustainability in fragile contexts.
Context/comment:	While the project trained over 100 individuals, high staff turnover and decentralization limited the long-term impact. Future interventions should integrate retention strategies, formalize PA-related roles within civil service systems, and link training to certification or incentive structures.
Cross-reference(s) to relevant paragraphs: 95, 132, 83, 107	

Lesson Learned #2:	Legal clarity and enforcement mandates must be resolved early in PA governance projects.
Context/comment:	The absence of formal authority for enforcement agencies delayed protected area operationalization. Legal instruments, mandates, and coordination with security bodies should be clarified and operationalized at the outset.
Cross-reference(s) to relevant paragraphs: 86, 98, 102	

Lesson Learned #3:	Inclusive engagement improves legitimacy but must be paired with formal mechanisms for equity.
Context/comment:	Although local and female participation was achieved in consultations and training, monitoring systems did not track differentiated benefits or address barriers to participation. Future projects should embed participatory monitoring and grievance mechanisms to ensure equity.
Cross-reference(s) to relevant paragraphs: 121, 142, 297	

Lesson Learned #4:	Adaptive delivery models enhance resilience in volatile and high-risk contexts.
Context/comment:	The project's ability to switch to virtual engagement, utilize embedded national experts, and sequence activities flexibly was key to maintaining momentum during COVID-19 and security disruptions. Future projects in fragile environments should proactively design for remote delivery, decentralized teams, and scenario-based planning.
Cross-reference(s) to relevant paragraphs: 87, 114, 117, 154	

Lesson Learned #5:	Alignment with national strategies is necessary but not sufficient to secure implementation.
Context/comment:	While the project's PAN strategy was integrated into Iraq's national environmental plans, implementation lagged due to the absence of dedicated budget lines and statutory mandates. Future efforts must pair strategic alignment with institutional anchoring and financial commitment to ensure follow-through.
Cross-reference(s) to relevant paragraphs: 127, 137, 297	

5.3 Recommendations

Recommendation #1	The Ministry of Environment (MoE) should lead the formalization of enforcement roles and legal mandates for Protected Areas (PA) governance across all relevant ministries. This includes initiating a cross-ministerial process to clearly define and document the respective responsibilities of institutions such as the Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and others with overlapping mandates. The MoE should also ensure these roles are integrated into the national legal and regulatory framework governing biodiversity and PA management. This process should culminate in an official inter-ministerial agreement or directive to reduce ambiguity and strengthen compliance and accountability mechanisms.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Institutional fragmentation and legal ambiguity (especially between MoE and MoWR) delayed site declaration and enforcement.
Cross-reference(s)	§153, §160–161
Priority Level	High
Type of Recommendation	Partners
Responsibility	MoE with support from UNEP and Ministry of Justice
Proposed implementation time-frame	Within 12 months
Recommendation #2	The Ministry of Environment (MoE), in coordination with the Ministry of Finance, should develop and operationalize a dedicated budget line for Protected Areas (PAs) within the national budget. This includes preparing a costed financing plan for PA management and submitting a formal budget proposal through the national budget cycle. The MoE should advocate for the institutionalization of this line item to ensure predictable and sustained government funding for PA operations, infrastructure, staffing, and ecological monitoring. This effort should be linked to the broader environmental policy and planning framework and endorsed by the Council of Ministers.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Financial sustainability is undermined by lack of predictable funding for PAN operations.
Cross-reference(s)	§153, §161
Priority Level	High
Type of Recommendation	Partners
Responsibility	Ministry of Finance, MoE, with UNEP support
Proposed implementation time-frame	Within 12 months.
Recommendation #3	The Ministry of Environment (MoE) should integrate gender and social inclusion as a core component in the design and implementation of future phases of the PAN. This should include the development of gender-responsive guidelines, mandatory inclusion of women and marginalized groups in stakeholder consultations, and dedicated indicators to monitor social inclusion outcomes. The MoE should coordinate with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and relevant civil society organizations to ensure inclusive access to benefits, participation in decision-making, and equitable livelihood opportunities linked to protected area management.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Inclusion was not tracked systematically and lacked structured benefit-sharing.
Cross-reference(s)	§154, §157, §161
Priority Level	Medium
Type of Recommendation	Partners

Responsibility	MoE, UNEP, with local NGOs and women's organizations
Proposed implementation time-frame	Integrated into GEF-7 implementation
Recommendation #4	The Ministry of Environment (MoE), in consultation with the Prime Minister's Office, should lead the establishment of a cross-ministerial Protected Areas (PA) coordination platform with statutory authority. This platform should bring together key line ministries—such as Water Resources, Agriculture, Tourism and Antiquities, and Interior—under a formal governance structure to oversee national PA policy implementation, resolve mandate overlaps, and ensure coherent planning. The MoE should propose a legal framework (e.g., Council of Ministers decree or inter-ministerial by-law) that grants the platform decision-making and budget coordination authority. The platform's secretariat could be housed within the MoE's Biodiversity Directorate, with rotating leadership and regular reporting obligations.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Inter-agency collaboration was informal and reliant on individual relationships.
Cross-reference(s)	§152, §160–161
Priority Level	Medium
Type of Recommendation	Partners
Responsibility	Prime Minister's Office / Cabinet Secretariat with MoE
Proposed implementation time-frame	18–24 months

Recommendation #5	The Ministry of Environment (MoE), in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Planning, should integrate Protected Areas (PA) content into formal environmental education curricula and civil service training programs. This includes updating university and technical institute curricula to reflect modern biodiversity conservation principles and PA governance models. Additionally, the MoE should work with the National Center for Administrative Development to embed PA-related modules into induction and in-service training for civil servants working in environmental, agricultural, and planning departments. These efforts will help institutionalize knowledge and build a pipeline of qualified professionals for sustainable PA management.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Capacity gains are at risk due to staff turnover and lack of institutional embedding of PA knowledge.
Cross-reference(s)	§155, §159
Priority Level	Medium
Type of Recommendation	Partners
Responsibility	Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Environment, UNEP
Proposed implementation time-frame	Within 18 months
Recommendation #6	The Ministry of Environment (MoE), in collaboration with local authorities and relevant ministries, should establish formal grievance redress and benefit-sharing mechanisms for communities living in or near Protected Areas (PAs). This includes developing clear protocols for receiving, documenting, and addressing community complaints related to PA access, restrictions, or conflicts. Simultaneously, the MoE should design a benefit-sharing framework—such as co-management opportunities, livelihood support schemes, or eco-tourism revenue allocation—ensuring that local communities gain tangible socio-economic benefits from conservation. These mechanisms should be piloted at selected PA sites and embedded in future PA regulations, with monitoring conducted by an independent body or multi-stakeholder committee.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Absence of formal mechanisms to manage community concerns or distribute benefits weakens trust and equity.
Cross-reference(s)	§154, §157
Priority Level	Medium
Type of Recommendation	Partners
Responsibility	MoE, with support from UNEP and local CSOs
Proposed implementation time-frame	Piloted during early GEF-7 implementation phase

Recommendation #7	UNEP should proactively facilitate strategic coordination between the GEF-5 project outputs and the ongoing GEF-7 and GEF-8 programming in Iraq to ensure continuity, scaling, and synergy. This includes convening joint planning sessions with the Ministry of Environment (MoE), GEF Operational Focal Point, and executing partners to align future investments with the foundational work completed under GEF-5. UNEP should advocate for the incorporation of the National Protected Areas Plan, updated biodiversity baselines, and institutional frameworks developed under the current project into the design of GEF-7/8 interventions, particularly those addressing land degradation, climate adaptation, and biodiversity mainstreaming.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Missed opportunities for consolidation, scale-up, and institutional integration due to weak coordination across GEF funding cycles.
Cross-reference(s)	§89, §196, §200
Priority Level	High
Type of Recommendation	Project
Responsibility	UNEP project team in coordination with MoE and GEF Secretariat
Proposed implementation time-frame	Within 6 months (during GEF-7/8 programming cycles)

Recommendation #8	UNEP should document and disseminate the project's model and lessons learned through global biodiversity and GEF knowledge-sharing platforms. This should include preparing a synthesis brief, presenting at international forums (e.g., CBD COP events), and contributing to GEF's Good Practice Briefs. The documentation should highlight innovative aspects such as science-to-policy translation, the use of KBAs in PA planning, and adaptive coordination in fragile contexts.
Challenge/problem to be addressed	Valuable practices and innovations risk being underutilized if not captured and shared with global peers.
Cross-reference(s)	§177, §200
Priority Level	Medium
Type of Recommendation	Project
Responsibility	UNEP project team in coordination with MoE and GEF Secretariat
Proposed implementation time-frame	Within 12 months

ANNEX I. RESPONSE TO STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS

Paragraph / Page number	Stakeholder comment	Response by the Evaluation Consultant
22, 23, 24, 25 pp. 13-14	Similarly to above: the sentences on lessons learned and recommendations are too short. They could be more elaborate.	The intention here is to list the recommendations only. Detailed elaboration is provided in the recommendations section. Adding more detail at this stage would make the executive summary too long.
25, p. 14	Recommendation 7, "...future GEF 7/8 programming" – as of now, these GEF cycles are in the past.	GEF7 and GEF 8 are currently being implemented by MOE (with UNEP and with UNDP). I removed the word "future" to make the sentence neutral.
117, p. 53	A sentence "A key limitation was that UNEP, as a normative agency, does not have the operational mandate or capacity to implement construction activities" is misleading. I cannot access the source of info to understand better. The point is not about UNEP's mandate, but rather about the nature of GEF-funded projects and/or capacity of Executing Agency to implement the activity. Please revisit this sentence.	I agree with the comment regarding the relevance of this statement in the paragraph, and therefore I deleted the sentence. However, this observation was noted to me during interviews with UNEP staff.
127, 128, 129, p. 68	Are they findings? Following Finding 1 and Finding 2 under "Strategic relevance" section, p. 43. A general remark: please consider a dedicated chapter on "Findings" under "Recommendations and Conclusions" chapter, especially since Table 18 introduces the findings again.	I followed the outline of the UNEP evaluation report template, which includes this subheading under Effectiveness (Findings Statement).
Recommendation 7, p. 87	See the comment above on this. Suggest replacing to "GEF9".	Please see above. As I indicated, GEF6 and GEF 8 are still in early stages of implementation (as I understood from UNEP and MoE)
Annex V	Arabic text could be removed	I would suggest keeping the Arabic text, This is the original agenda as communicated with MOE
Annex VI	In the Table, please indicate everywhere "Yes/No"	I indicated (Y/N) for the questions that require that per the template.
Page 23	Could you please clarify this sentence " <i>but UNEP did not formally approve any change until August 2022, when a no-cost extension was granted through an amendment of the Internal Cooperation Agreement (ICA)</i> ". These changes that were made by IUCN or internally between the UNEP's departments?	My understanding this is an internal process for UNEP
Page 40	Table 8: Alignment to the UNEP Medium Term Strategy (MTS), Programme of Work (PoW), and Strategic Priorities. Point "South-South	While IUCN successfully disseminated knowledge products globally through its library and at multiple

Paragraph / Page number	Stakeholder comment	Response by the Evaluation Consultant
	Cooperation”, we consider changing this to full alignment as the knowledge dissemination were not only in the mentioned country but rather worldwide through the IUCN library that anyone can access and view these products. For example, based on the figures from our Library database, the number of downloads for the following publications since the time of publishing till date increased which shows that the exposure are not only targeted specific place, but since we printed some copies from these publications we disseminate the hard copies during the conference and exchange visits, conferences (IUCN Regional Conservation Forum in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, upcoming IUCN Congress in the UAE October 2025). Example: دليل تقييم فاعلية إدارة المحميات الطبيعية (Protected areas Management effectiveness guidelines). 2023. - 2023: number of downloads equal 411 while in 2025 equal, 2,607 downloads. الخطوط الإرشادية لإدارة المناطق المحمية في جمهورية العراق (Guidelines for the Protected Areas managers). 2023. 2023: number of downloads equal 249 while in 2025 equal, 900 downloads.	regional and international forums, partner consultations highlighted that more structured and direct South–South exchanges (e.g., with UAE and Saudi Arabia) would have further strengthened cooperation. The assessment therefore remains Partial, reflecting both the achievements in dissemination and the continuing need for deeper institutionalized collaboration. I also edited the text in the table to reflect the new information provided by IUCN
Page 48	4.4.1 Availability of Outputs (Table 13): 1.1.3A Should be fully delivered, since the target was achieved. The plan was submitted to the Ministry and key stakeholders are represented in the steering committee 1.1.4 We think that this should be considered as fully delivered and over-achieved. The key three guideline publications included sub-guidelines that could be considered as stand-alone guidance, but they were merged within same publication for easier reference by protected area managers: (Guidelines: 1. technical guidelines PA management effectiveness, 2. Protected Area Network legislation guidelines & PA designation form, 3. Guidelines for the Protected Areas managers which included sub-guidelines covering additional guidance on specific topics; including: 4. zoning guideline, 5. surveillance and patrolling, and 6. tourism management,	For 1.1.3A: According to the Final Report received from UNEP, as well as discussions with the MoE in Iraq, this output is technically completed in terms of preparation and submission. However, it was not formally adopted by the government during the project's lifetime. Since the output explicitly required that “a costed strategy and action plan [be] developed for the institutional, legal, and operational setup of the PAN and provided to key stakeholders for <u>adoption</u>” the evaluator considers that the output was not fully completed. <i>I edited the report to reflect this.</i> For 1.1.4: The suggestion was accepted, and the report was revised to reflect the output as fully achieved, with the text updated accordingly.

Paragraph / Page number	Stakeholder comment	Response by the Evaluation Consultant
	Additionally, the project produced the following documents as case studies: Fact sheet on Teeb AR & EN (2 publications), Fact sheet on Dalmaj AR & EN (2 publications), PA benefits guideline (AR). A Case study on Invasive Alien Species (IAS) Management in Al-Dalmaj Protected Area. A case study to determine the annual grazing capacity for Al-Teeb Protected Area.	
Page 61	Points on the Outcome 3.1 Through the project we developed and prepared a communication and awareness strategy for the whole PAN Iraq in close coordination and aligned with the strategic objectives of the Ministry of Health and Environment on communicating Protected Areas and biodiversity conservation, as they will be the sole owner and implementer of the Strategy in cooperation with other ministries and institutions with common interests in implementing the Strategy. Under this strategy the discussion on the PAN website was in place. Noting that the strategy contains aspects related to monitoring and evaluation to measure the impact of the Strategy, proposed cost for the implementation and the proposed workplan. Please see the strategy for further information.	Many thanks for your clarification and for highlighting the important efforts that went into developing the communication and awareness strategy, as well as aligning it with the Ministry's objectives. The evaluator recognizes the value of this work and the comprehensive elements included, such as M&E, costing, and a proposed workplan. At the same time, based on field missions and reporting data, the evaluator notes that the strategy was not fully adopted or implemented by the Ministry during the project's lifetime. Similarly, while the PAN website was developed under this framework, it required additional support to ensure its sustainability and regular use.
Page 69	Table 16: Actual project costs (GEF grant): Could you please clarify exactly the role of CEDARE? As we don't recall we have a sub-contract with them as IUCN, unless this was managed by UNEP directly.	CEDARE was listed in financial reports provided by UNEP and procurement/contracting records as a subcontracted partner (alongside IUCN, MoE, and UNEP-WCMC). However, in the final project documentation (Final Report, PIRs, and co-financing reports), CEDARE's role is not described as a substantive partner in implementation. Their contribution seems to have been limited to specific consultancy or subcontracted technical services under the "Sub-contracts" budget line, rather than being a formal project partner like IUCN or Nature Iraq.
Page 78	Point 4.9.6 Communication and Public Awareness: <i>"However, the CKMS remained largely at draft stage until late in the project and was not fully institutionalized."</i>, do you mean by draft stage that the CKMS since it was not <i>institutionalized within the MOE</i> we consider as draft or this means the project submitted as draft not finalized version?	The project did prepare and submit a CKMS as a final document. However, since the strategy was not adopted or integrated into MoE systems, it effectively remained at a "draft" stage from an implementation perspective. I have edited the relevant text on page 78 to reflect this.

ANNEX II. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
A. Strategic relevance		
<i>KSQ 1: In what ways, and to what extent, have the needs and interests of differentiated groups been considered in the implementation and monitoring of the project?</i> <u>Relevant sub-questions:</u> ☞ Were the objectives and implementation strategies consistent with i) the expectations and needs of key stakeholder groups (ii) Global, Regional, Sub-regional and National Environmental Priorities, (iii) UN Environment Medium Term Strategy (MTS) and Programme of Work (POW), and (iv) the Donor/GEF/Iraqi Government Strategic Priorities	☞ Level of alignment with (contribution of results to) global, regional and national environmental issues, UNEP mandate and policies at the time of design and implementation; and the GEF FA objectives ☞ Level of stakeholders' participation and cooperation during the design and implementation of the project. ☞ Cross-cutting (extent of considering gender and human rights issues, and the role of women, youth, and other groups; level of involvement of local communities, especially in the two PA sites, in the selection, planning, design, and operations). ☞ Level of ownership and commitment by the Iraqi government and local partners.	☞ Analysis and review of project document and annual reports and policy and strategy papers of local-regional agencies, GEF and UN Environment ☞ KIIs with UN Environment staff, project staff, governmental agencies, and PSC members. ☞ KIIs and/or FGs with representatives of local communities and local partners. ☞ Validation of Quality of Project Design evaluation
☞ Were the objectives and implementation strategies complementary with existing interventions from the project partners? ☞ To what extent did the project take into account ongoing and planned initiatives addressing similar needs of the same target groups? ☞ Were efforts made by the project team to ensure that their intervention complemented other initiatives?	☞ Level of alignment/complementarity with ongoing/planned initiatives of national and local government agencies and executing agencies.	☞ Analysis and review of project document and annual reports with progress reports of initiatives of project partners ☞ KIIs Interviews with UN Environment staff, project staff and partner agencies
B. Quality of Project Design		<i>This will rely on the Quality Design Template during the inception phase and will be confirmed during the evaluation phase.</i>
C. Nature of external context		

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
KSQ 2: What changes were made to adapt to the effects of COVID-19 and how might any changes affect the project's performance? Relevant sub-questions: Did the (political, security, environmental, social, institutional) context change during project implementation? What were the implications of these changes, and how did the project respond or adapt to them?	☞ Reported adaptive management measures in response to changes in context ☞ Ability of the project and project team to adapt to changing conditions	☞ Analysis and review of project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with project staff and key stakeholders
D. Effectiveness		
i. Availability of outputs		
KSQ 3: How effective was the project in building capacity at the national level on protected area management? KSQ 4: To what extent did the project positively influence political will for effective PAN in Iraq? Relevant sub-questions: ☞ To what extent did the project achieve its intended outputs in terms of quantity, quality, usefulness, and timeliness?	☞ Output level indicators of Results Framework (RF)	☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ Tangible products (publications, studies, legislations, awareness materials, etc.) ☞ Field observations ☞ KIIs with project with staff, partner organizations in implementation, consultants, and project beneficiaries
☞ Did key stakeholders, including local partners, participate and engage in producing the planned outputs?	☞ Levels and forms of stakeholder contribution to the achievement of outputs.	☞ Citation of stakeholders' roles in progress reports and tangible products (publications, studies, etc.) ☞ KIIs with project with staff, local partners, and project beneficiaries
☞ What were the key factors that explain the satisfactory or unsatisfactory achievement of outputs?	☞ Number, type and characteristics of factors mentioned by stakeholders that explained generation of outputs	☞ Citation of stakeholders' roles in tangible products (publications, studies, etc.) ☞ KIIs with project with staff, local partners, and project beneficiaries
ii. Achievements of outcomes		
KSQ 3: How effective was the project in building capacity at the national level on protected area management? KSQ 4: To what extent did the project positively influence political will for effective PAN in Iraq? Relevant sub-questions: ☞ How successful was the project in achieving the outcomes along the impact pathway on building capacity at the national	☞ Indicators of outcomes per the RF of the project ☞ Degree of achievement and access to project products by key stakeholders. ☞ Degree of commitment and buy in by the national stakeholders to	☞ Means of verification of outcomes (see RF) ☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, local decision makers, local partners, consultants, PSC members.

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
level on protected area management, as well as influencing political will for effective PAN in Iraq? Particularly: ☞ Designing and establishing the first Protected Areas (PAs) for Iraq based on existing information and prior studies in the country, an inventory of the Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) results, international best practices, and relevant regional examples in PA management are reviewed as the basis for the plan (Outcome 1.1). ☞ Creating the required national professional capacity to support all steps in the process of developing the first comprehensive PA Network in Iraq (Outcome 1.2). ☞ Commencing the implementation of PA Network through the establishment of two priority PAs (Dalmaj and Teeb) (Outcome 2.1). ☞ Enhancing the level of understanding, consensus, and awareness within relevant government sectors, other stakeholders including the wider public on the social, economic, ecosystem services, and environmental conservation values provided by a viable PA network (Outcome 3.1).	utilize and sustain the outcomes of the project .	☞ Field visits to the sites of the PAs, interviews with local beneficiaries/communities. ☞ Verification of project-produced outputs (as listed in the project evidence sheet).
☞ Were the assumptions and risks outlined in the ToC for the project adequately addressed and mitigated during the project's implementation?	☞ The extent to which national stakeholders commit to and utilize the project's outputs? ☞ The degree of adaptation and flexibility of the project's implementation strategies and plans to accommodate the changing needs and situations of local stakeholders?	☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, local decision makers, local partners, consultants, PSC members.
<i>iii. Likelihood of Impact</i>		
☞ To what degree the project is likely to contribute to the long-term impact of improving the health and resilience of ecosystems in Iraq (new impact statement in ToC)	☞ Indicators of project objectives (see RF) ☞ Likelihood of sustainability of biodiversity conservation and sustainable land protection impact	☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ Field mission and observations ☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, local decision makers, local partners, consultants, PSC members.

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
☞ Were the assumptions outlined in the ToC for the project adequately addressed and influenced the transition from outcomes to impact? (as included in the ToC)	☞ - Level of compliance with assumptions, particularly considering the impact of external factors (political instability, commitment of national decision-makers, availability of co-financing, fulfillment of obligations by the national government, etc.)	☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, local decision makers, local partners, consultants, PSC members.
☞ Have desired outcomes and impacts occurred amongst all stakeholder groups (and if not, why this might be).	☞ Equity of benefits among different stakeholder groups	☞ Analysis and review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, local stakeholders. Field mission and observations
☞ Have there been any unintended negative effects, especially on vulnerable groups such as PWDs, marginalized/poor communities, women, and children?	☞ Occurrence of unintended negative outcomes or impacts on environment or society	☞ Project progress reports/PIR ☞ Interviews with project staff, key stakeholders ☞ Field mission and observations
☞ To what extent has the project promoted scaling up and/or replication of outcomes as part of its ToC contributing to greater or long-lasting impact?	☞ Examples of scaling up or replication initiatives/strategies promoted by the project	☞ Project progress reports/PIR ☞ Interviews with project staff, key stakeholders ☞ Field mission and observations
E. Financial Management		
☞ To what extent did the project adhere to UNEP's financial policies and procedures?	☞ Level of compliance with policies and procedures	☞ KIIs with administrative/financial staff ☞ Review of financial reports and audit reports
☞ Was financial information and communication between financial and project management staff complete and transparent?	☞ Completeness of financial information and communication	☞ KIIs with administrative/financial staff, and project team ☞ Review of financial reports and audit reports
☞ To what extent co-financing (contribution from the national government) has materialized as expected at project approval?	☞ Level of co-financing, related to original planning	☞ KIIs with administrative/financial staff, project team, and national counterpart (MoE) ☞ Review of financial reports and audit reports
F. Efficiency		

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
<i>KSQ 2: What changes were made to adapt to the effects of COVID-19 and how might any changes affect the project's performance?</i> <u>Relevant sub-questions:</u> ☞ To what extent did the project effectively utilize and build upon pre-existing institutions, agreements, partnerships, data sources, synergies, and complementarities with other initiatives, programs, and projects?	☞ Level of synergies and complementarity with preexisting initiatives, agreements and institutions	☞ Review of Project document ☞ KIIs with key stakeholders and partners (preexisting initiatives and other institutions) ☞ Evaluation of project design
☞ To what extent were the planned activities delivered within the expected timeframes and sequenced efficiently?	☞ Level of compliance with project planning / annual plans	☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with project staff
☞ How cost-effective was the project in translating inputs into outputs, achieving its results at the lowest possible cost? How did the actual operational spending compare to the original budget plan?	☞ Level of compliance with project financial planning / annual plans	☞ Review of Project financial reports ☞ KIIs Interviews with project staff and financial staff
☞ What were the main reasons for delays/modifications in implementation? How did these affect project execution, costs, and timelines? What was the primary reason for extending the project, and how did this extension impact efficiency?	☞ List of reasons, validated by project staff ☞ Extension requests and explanation by project staff	☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with project staff ☞ KIIs with project partners and PSC members
☞ Did the project team adopt cost or time-saving measures to maximize results within the secured budget and agreed project timeframe? Were alternative implementation strategies or approaches considered to enhance efficiency?	☞ List of measures, validated by the project staff and partners	☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR ☞ KIIs with project staff ☞ KIIs with project partners and PSC members
G. Monitoring and Reporting		
i. Monitoring Design and Budgeting	☞ Assessment of the relevance and appropriateness of project indicators, as well as the methods used for tracking progress against them, is crucial for conscious results-based management. ☞ Assessment of the quality of the monitoring plan design and the funds allocated for its implementation is important.	☞ Done during inception; quality of project design (Section 6, Annex C)
ii. Monitoring of Project Implementation: ☞ Was the M&E system operational and facilitated timely tracking of results and progress towards projects objectives throughout	☞ Level of implementation of M&E system (execution of activities)	☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR, and PSCs minutes

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
the project implementation period? Did this include monitoring the representation and participation of disaggregated groups? Were the results used to improve project performance and to adapt to changing needs?	☞ Changes in project implementation as result of midterm review, PSCs review or other supervision visits	☞ KIs with project staff, PSCs members, and partners
iii. Project reporting: ☞ Were PIR reports, half-yearly progress reports, and Financial Reports prepared in accordance with applicable reporting commitments, and were they complete and accurate?	☞ Level of compliance and completeness of reports	☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR,
H. Sustainability and replication		
i. Socio-political sustainability: ☞ Are there any social or political factors that may influence positively or negatively the continuation of project results and progress towards impacts?	☞ Key factors positively or negatively impacted project results (in relation to stated assumptions)	☞ KIs with project staff, PSCs members, and partners ☞ Review of Project progress reports/PIR, and materials produced. ☞ Field mission and discussion with local stakeholders
ii. Financial sustainability: ☞ To what extent are the continuation of project outcomes will rely on future funding? What is the probability that sufficient financial resources are currently available or will be secured to sustain the implementation of the project's results?	☞ Estimations on financial requirements ☞ Assessment of future budget/resources of key stakeholders, mainly the national government.	☞ Figures on financial sustainability of this and other (similar) initiatives ☞ Projected budgets of project partners, mainly the government. ☞ Review of the Project financial reports ☞ KIs Interviews with project staff financial staff, and local stakeholders.
iii. Institutional sustainability: ☞ To what degree do the continuity of outcomes and achieved progress toward making an impact depend on institutional frameworks and governance issues? How robust are the institutional accomplishments, particularly those concerning the PA Network, such as capacity building, guidelines, organizational structures and procedures, policies, legal and accountability frameworks, institutional ownership, etc., necessary to sustain project outcomes and drive them toward impactful results?	☞ Level of commitment, demonstrated through formal agreements, resource allocation, recommendations, declarations of PAs, and the utilization of capacities developed during the project. ☞ Level of engagement and meaningful participation of stakeholders.	☞ Analysis of existing institutional framework ☞ KIs Interviews with project staff financial staff, and local stakeholders. ☞ Documentation (agreements, declarations, meeting minutes) of PSCs, media reports)
H. Factors and processes affecting project performance		
i. Preparation and readiness:		
☞ Was the project ready for implementation reasonably soon after project approval? Were appropriate measures taken to	☞ Time between project approval, first disbursement and actual	☞ Review of the first PIR/PPR ☞ Project inception reporting

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
either address weaknesses in the project design or respond to changes that took place between project approval, the securing of funds and project mobilization?	implementation (first technical activity) ☞ Examples of measures taken to address weaknesses to respond to changes.	☞ KIIs with UN Environment, project team, executing partners
<i>ii. Quality of project management and supervision</i>		
☞ Was the project management (project manager, component managers, local coordinators) adequate, effective and efficient? (skills, leadership, coordination, adaptive capacity)?	☞ Level of satisfaction (among partners and project staff) of overall management by project managers	☞ KIIs with project staff (managers and rest of team) and partner organizations
☞ How effective, transparent and democratic was decision making in the project? Did project management respond to direction and guidance provided by the PSC?	☞ Perception of functioning of Steering Committee by its members ☞ Level of response to SC guidance and decisions ☞ Quality of discussions and number /type of decisions of the PSC	☞ Review of PSC Meeting minutes ☞ KIIs with PSC members and project team
☞ What were the strengths in guidance and backstopping from UN Environment and what were the limiting factors?	☞ Perception of effectiveness ☞ Documented backstopping activities by UN Environment to project staff	☞ KIIs with UN Environment staff and project manager, project team, and national counterparts. ☞ Documented support (audits, communication, reports on visits, etc.)
<i>iii. Stakeholder participation, cooperation and partnerships</i>		
☞ To what extent was the collaboration and interactions between the various project partners and stakeholders effective during design and implementation of the project?	☞ Level of participation of project partners in project design and actual inclusion in project implementation arrangements	☞ Review of PPR/PIR ☞ KIIs with key stakeholders ☞ Field mission and discussion with local stakeholders.
☞ How did the relationship between the project and the collaborating partners (institutions and individual experts) and third parties develop?	☞ Perceived satisfaction of main partners of collaboration in project, including institutional benefits	☞ KIIs with key stakeholders
<i>iv. Responsiveness to Human Rights and Gender</i>		
☞ To what extent have the project activities fostered positive and sustainable changes in attitudes, behaviors, and power dynamics among the various stakeholders?	☞ Examples of measures to promote positive changes or actual positive changes in power relations between stakeholders.	☞ KIIs with project team and key stakeholders. ☞ Field mission and discussion with local beneficiaries. ☞ Review of project documents, including minute of meetings, reports of workshops, and trainings, etc.

EVALUATION CATEGORY/CRITERIA	EVALUATION INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
☞ How was the gender mainstreaming approach applied throughout the project, and are there concrete examples of gender-transformative results, particularly concerning access to and control over natural resources? ☞ Did the project consider the needs, interests, and conditions of local communities and beneficiaries in the design and implementation of its activities, especially within PAs? Special attention will be given to the vulnerabilities of disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, children, and those living with disabilities. ☞ Did the project include measures to support disadvantaged groups in mitigating or adapting to environmental changes, and in participating in environmental protection and rehabilitation efforts?	☞ Examples of gender-transformative outcomes in the participation, management, control, and benefit from natural resources. ☞ Level of consultation and inclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the design and implementation of project activities. ☞ Examples of measures implemented to support disadvantaged groups in mitigating or adapting to project outcomes.	☞ KIIS with project team and national partners. ☞ Field mission and discussion with local beneficiaries. ☞ Review of project documents, including PPR/PIR, minute of meetings, reports of workshops, and trainings, etc. ☞ Evidenced activity results
<i>v. Country ownership and driven-ness.</i>		
☞ In how far the national partners have assumed responsibility for the project and provided adequate support to project execution, including the degree of cooperation received from the various public institutions involved in the project?	☞ Endorsement of project by governmental agencies ☞ Provision of counterpart funding	☞ KIIs with national partners, UN Environment and project staff ☞ Review of project progress reports/PIR ☞ Documented endorsements and co-financing
☞ How and how well did the project stimulate country ownership of project outputs and outcomes? Is this different by gendered and marginalized groups?	☞ Perception of ownership by national and local agencies	☞ Review of PSC meeting minutes ☞ KIIs with PSC members and other key stakeholders at national and local government level
<i>vii. Communication and Public Awareness</i>		
☞ To what extent did the project effectively utilize existing communication channels and networks, ensuring they met the specific needs of gendered or marginalized groups? Did the project establish or utilize existing feedback mechanisms? ☞ How effective were the project's knowledge management approach and communication strategies/tools in promoting learning and sharing experiences among partners, and in raising awareness to influence attitudes or shape behavior within broader communities?	☞ Effectiveness of communication strategies and tools ☞ Examples of feedback mechanisms utilized or established by the project ☞ Instances of learning and sharing opportunities	☞ KIIs with project team and national partners. ☞ Field mission and discussion with local beneficiaries. ☞ Review of project documents, including PPR/PIR, communications and outreach materials, website and social media.

ANNEX III. STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED DURING THE EVALUATION

Organization	Position	Role in the project	Gender
MoE	Director of Technical Department / National PM	National project coordination and oversight	F
	Director of Climate Change Department	Technical policy input	M
	Manager of Biodiversity and Protected Areas Unit	Biodiversity management and site implementation	M
	Manager of Biodiversity and Natural Resources Section	Biodiversity management and reporting	F
	Director General of the Technical Department	Senior oversight and institutional support	F
	Director of IT Department / Senior Programmer	Technical systems and data management	M
	Environmental International Relations Officer	Liaison on international cooperation	F
	IT Department Officer	Website development and information management	M
University of Baghdad	National Expert	Academic and technical expertise	M
UNEP	Senior Finance Assistant	Financial administration	M
	Task Manager	Overall UNEP project oversight and coordination	M
	Portfolio Manager	Project backstopping and quality assurance	M
	Regional Coordinator for Environmental Governance	Regional institutional linkages	M
	GEF-7 Project Manager	GEF alignment and technical guidance	F
IUCN	Programme Manager – Biodiversity and PAs	Technical support and implementation guidance	F
	Programme Assistant	Operational and logistical support	M

ANNEX IV. KEY DOCUMENTS CONSULTED

Project Planning and Reporting Documents

- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (n.d.). *Project document: Initial steps for the establishment of the national protected areas network in Iraq (GEF ID 5392)*.
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (n.d.). *Inception report*.
- UNEP Evaluation Office. (2021). *Mid-term review report*.
- UNEP/Project Management Unit. (2018–2020). *Project implementation reports (PIRs), 2018–2020*.
- Project Management Unit. (2025). *Final narrative report*.
- UNEP Evaluation Office. (2025). *Terms of reference for the terminal evaluation*.

Project Outputs – Overall

- Ministry of Environment & UNEP. (n.d.). *National strategy for protected areas in Iraq*.
- Ministry of Environment. (2018). *Sixth national report to the Convention on Biological Diversity*.
- UNEP & Project Team. (2025). *Stakeholder consultation summary: Baghdad consultations, May 2025*.
- UNEP. (n.d.). *Project communications materials and website snapshot*.

Project Outputs – Work Package 1: Legal and Institutional Frameworks

- National Consultant & UNEP. (2023). *Legal review of protected areas and environmental legislation in Iraq*.
- Ministry of Environment. (2023). *Draft protected areas law (unpublished draft)*.
- UNEP. (n.d.). *Institutional capacity assessment report*.

Project Outputs – Work Package 2: Biodiversity and Site Assessment

- Nature Iraq & UNEP. (2022). *Biodiversity baseline assessment: Dalmaj site*.
- Nature Iraq & UNEP. (2022). *Biodiversity baseline assessment: Teeb site*.
- UNEP-WCMC. (n.d.). *GIS mapping of priority protected areas in Iraq*.

Project Outputs – Work Package 3: Management Planning and Piloting

- Ministry of Environment & UNEP. (2023). *Dalmaj protected area management plan*.
- UNEP & Project Team. (2024). *Teeb site: Management planning concept note*.
- UNEP. (n.d.). *Site-level consultation reports*.

Project Outputs – Work Package 4: Knowledge, Awareness and Capacity Building

- IUCN-ROWA & UNEP. (2023). *Training manual on protected areas management*.
- UNEP. (2019 & 2023). *Workshop reports: Baghdad (2019), Amman (2023)*.
- UNEP. (n.d.). *Stakeholder engagement and communication strategy*.

Previous Evaluations

- UNEP Evaluation Office. (2021). *Mid-term review of GEF Project 5392*.
- GEF Independent Evaluation Office. (n.d.). *Evaluation synthesis report on GEF-6 biodiversity projects*.

Reference Documents

- Convention on Biological Diversity. (n.d.). *Iraq national commitments under the CBD*.
- Ministry of Environment. (2017). *National environmental strategy and action plan (NESAP)*.
- Global Environment Facility (GEF). (2014). *GEF-6 biodiversity focal area strategy*.
- UNEP. (2014). *Medium-term strategy 2014–2017*; UNEP. (2018). *Medium-term strategy 2018–2021*.

ANNEX V. EVALUATION ITINERARY

Date التاريخ	Possible activities/meetings الاجتماعات المقترحة	
Saturday- 10 May 2025	Arrival to Baghdad الوصول الى بغداد	
Sunday- 11 May 2025	- اجتماع تمهيدي مع مدير/ة المشروع من وزارة البيئة والطاقي الرئيسي - عرض لأهداف ونطاق عمل التقييم - مقابلات معمقة مع موظفي وزارة البيئة ذوي العلاقة بالمشروع - Kick-off meeting with MoE Project Manager and leadership - Presentation of the evaluation objectives and scope - In-depth interviews with relevant MoE staff	Detailed meetings list will be identified before the mission التفاصيل وأسماء الأشخاص الذين سيتم مقابلتهم سيتم تحديدها قبل المهمة بالتنسيق مع وزارة البيئة
Monday - 12 May 2025	- مقابلات مع أعضاء اللجنة التوجيهية للمشروع - مقابلات مع أصحاب العلاقة الرئيسيين (الوزارات الشريكة) - مجموعة بؤرية مع المستفيدين/ات من أنشطة بناء القدرات/التدريبات التي نفذها المشروع - Meetings with PSC members and other relevant ministries - Group discussions/Focus Groups with participants involved in the capacity-building and training components of the project	
Tuesday - 13 May 2025	- مخصص لزيارة ميدانية الى موقع المشروع (أن أمكن) أو: - استكمال المقابلات مع موظفي وزارة البيئة المعنيين - Site visit to the Dalmaj site - Meetings with governorate stakeholders and local beneficiaries.	
Wednesday – 14 May 2025	- مخصص لزيارة ميدانية الى موقع المشروع (أن أمكن) أو: - استكمال المقابلات مع موظفي وزارة البيئة المعنيين - Site visit to the Teeb site - Meetings with governorate stakeholders and local beneficiaries.	
Thursday - 15 May 2025	اجتماع تلخيصي مع وزارة البيئة والطاقي الرئيسي للمشروع حول المشاهدات/النتائج الأولية للزيارة	
Friday - 16 May 2025	Departure المغادرة	(this could be on Thursday if flights are available)

ANNEX VI. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SAFEGUARDS ASSESSMENT

ESS PLANNING AT PROJECT DESIGN	
List any ESS issues identified at project design (e.g. SS 1.7, SS 2.3, etc.)	At design, potential environmental risks related to protected area establishment (SS 1.7) and community engagement (SS 2.3) were acknowledged. Risks were primarily tied to limited institutional capacity and legal enforcement for environmental protection, as well as possible displacement or restriction of access to resources for local users.
For any ESS issues identified at project design, were mitigation strategies developed (Y/N)? (If yes, briefly describe)	Yes. Mitigation strategies included capacity building for Ministry of Environment staff, integration of stakeholder consultations, and legal review of the PA framework to align with social safeguards. No relocation or land use restrictions were planned without consultation.
Were any gaps in ESS issues identified at the evaluation inception phase (Y/N)? (If yes, briefly describe)	Yes. The evaluation noted that while ESS risks were acknowledged in general terms, there was no standalone ESS risk register or monitoring framework in the project's results framework. Disaggregated impacts on vulnerable communities, such as women or pastoralist groups, were also not tracked systematically.

ESS MONITORING AT PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION	
Is there evidence that the potential emergence of ESS issues was actively monitored during project implementation (Y/N)? ¹⁰⁴ (If yes, briefly describe)	No. ESS risks were not monitored through a dedicated safeguard mechanism. While stakeholder consultation was conducted at both sites, this was ad hoc and not tracked against an ESS-specific plan.
Is there a justification for the absence of ESS monitoring (Y/N)? (If yes, briefly describe)	Yes. The project was implemented under the assumption that minimal infrastructure or land-use interventions would limit the need for active ESS oversight. However, this overlooked potential risks tied to resource use conflicts and excluded groups.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIVENESS DURING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION	
Identify the ESS issues/events triggered ¹⁰⁵ by the project.	Tensions emerged in Dalmaj related to resource access concerns from local fishermen and land users, due to confusion over the implications of "protected area" status. There were also concerns about the limited inclusion of women and vulnerable groups in formal planning processes.
Describe consequences of ESS issues/events during project implementation.	These issues led to reduced community buy-in in some locations and contributed to delays in finalizing site management plans. Trust issues emerged where communities felt decisions were externally imposed.
Describe the management response and identify supporting documentation.	The PMU and implementing partners (e.g., Nature Iraq) increased direct community outreach, including additional consultation meetings in Teeb and Dalmaj. Documentation is reflected in field mission reports (2023–2024), although no formal grievance redress mechanism was established.
Were negative ESS effects offset by management response (Y/N)? (If yes, briefly describe)	No. While engagement increased and some site-level concerns were addressed informally, the absence of a structured safeguard framework limited systematic mitigation.

¹⁰⁴ **Low risk:** Negative impacts minimal or negligible: no further study or impact management required.

Moderate risk: Potential negative impacts, but limited in scale, not unprecedented or irreversible and generally limited to programme/project area; impacts amenable to management using standard mitigation measures; limited environmental or social analysis may be required to develop an Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP). Straightforward application of good practice may be sufficient without additional study.

High risk: Potential for significant negative impacts (e.g. irreversible, unprecedented, cumulative, significant stakeholder concerns); Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) (or Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (SESA)) including a full impact assessment may be required, followed by an effective comprehensive safeguard management plan.

¹⁰⁵ 'Triggered' refers to environmental or social issues/events that are caused or exacerbated—directly or indirectly—as a result of the project's activities, interventions, or presence.

ANNEX VII. COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH TOOLS

1. Project Webpages and Online Platforms

- **Dedicated webpage** within the [Iraqi Ministry of Environment (MoE) website] to host the Protected Areas Network (PAN) content (not linked directly but mentioned across reports).
- **MoE PAN Website** (under development as of final reporting): Included technical toolkits, management plans, maps, biodiversity data, legislation, etc.

2. Online Document Repositories

- **Dropbox Folders** with full access to technical reports, toolkits, plans, and guidelines:
 - [PAN Documents Folder 1](#)
 - [PAN Documents Folder 2](#)
 - [Training Material](#)
 - [Additional Reports](#)

3. Published Guidelines and Toolkits

Accessible through IUCN's digital library:

- [Protected Areas Managers Guidelines \(Iraq\)](#)
- [Protected Areas Management Effectiveness \(PAME\) Guidelines](#)

4. Factsheets and Brochures

- **Teeb and Dalmaj Factsheets** (in Arabic and English): Summarizing biodiversity features, species, socio-economic value.
- **Brochures targeting schoolchildren**: Highlighting the importance of PAs and biodiversity in Iraq.

5. Webinars and Online Events

- Series of **virtual webinars** as part of the communications strategy and capacity building:
 - *PANORAMA Solutions for a Healthy Planet*
 - *Effective PA Management – Jordan Case*
 - *Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas*
 - *Implementation of the PAN Communications Strategy*

6. Workshops and Regional Forums

- **On-site and virtual consultation meetings**: Teeb and Dalmaj management plan consultations.
- **Training workshops** included a session on *raising awareness and engaging decision-makers and local communities*.

7. Communication and Outreach Strategy

- A full **Communication and Outreach Strategy** was developed and implemented (see §2.1 of the Final Report), including:
 - Stakeholder analysis
 - Media outreach planning
 - Development of technical and thematic toolkits
 - Communication impact assessment tools

ANNEX VIII. BRIEF CV OF THE EVALUATOR

Dr. Khaled Rajab

Senior Governance & Development Expert | International Program Manager:
Policy Reform | MEL | Local Government Development | Institutional Capacity Building

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Senior Evaluator & Researcher, the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT)

USA, worldwide

2024-2025

Served as Senior Evaluator & Researcher, leading the design, implementation, and oversight of monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives to assess the impact of CVT's programs. My key responsibilities included:

- Supporting the capacity development of four partner organizations in Bangladesh, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Zimbabwe by providing technical assistance (TA) and training on Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL).
- Conducting in-person missions to collaborate with each partner's MEL staff, ensuring effective implementation of MEL frameworks.
- Developing evaluation frameworks, analysed qualitative and quantitative data, and produced evidence-based reports.

Senior Governance and Evaluation Consultant, Progress Impact Consulting LLC USA & MENA
2011 - Present

Examples of Consultancy Assignments:

Evaluator-ILO: for the Final Independent evaluation Of Strengthening Nexus Coherence and responsiveness in the Palestinian Social Protection Sector

Senior Evaluator for TPM-MSI/Tetra Tech: responsible for collecting data for three MEPPA /US Government funded projects.

Consultant- UNEP-GEF, Iraq: for the Terminal Evaluation of the project 'Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq'.

Evaluator- Aguaconsult: for the mid-term review of the second phase of the WaterWorX (WWX) which supports public water operators across Africa, Asia, and South America.

Program Formulation Expert: UNWOMEN, Jordan: Provided consulting services for the redesign and development of exit strategy of the Oasis program in Jordan.

Evaluation Expert-UNESCO Paris: Served as a key expert in evaluating the progress and effectiveness of the Agreement between UNESCO and the Government of Bahrain for the establishment of the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARC-WH) in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Team Leader-UNDP: For the final evaluation of "Transboundary wastewater pollution control-3rd Phase" Project funded by the Netherlands

Public Sector Reform Consultant: Assisted DAI UK in preparing for the FCDO funding opportunity on public reform, local government services, and public financial management program (2023-2024)

Municipal Management and Decentralisation Consultant: Assisted DAI USA in preparing proposals for USAID's Local Governance Strengthening Activity (LGS) and MA'ONA Water Project (2023)

MEL Consultant- UN Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO) in Lebanon: Supported the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO) in Lebanon in revising and updating the Cooperation Framework Theory of Change (ToC) including revisiting results (outputs and outcomes) and providing recommendations to improve its quality.

Key Expert (Local Government and Civil Society Focus) - European Union Jerusalem: Supported the "Review and Enhancement of the European Joint Strategy to Aid Palestine." With primary focus on the local government sector and public sector reform (2023-2024).

International Expert (Local Government and Service Delivery) - UNDP IEG New York: Served as the LG and Service Delivery Expert for Evaluation of the UNDP Programme of Assistance to Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) (2023-2024).

Strategic Local Planning Expert - GIZ/Local Governance Reform Programme LGRP to support the Ministry of Local Government to enhance participatory local development planning process and mainstream SDGs, climate change, and resilience planning within the national planning system (2023-2024).

Local Governance Expert and Team Leader - GIZ Local Governance Reform Programme (LGRP): Led a team in conducting a national assessment of the local government complaint system (2023).

Local Governance - EVOLUXER S.L-Iraq: Supported the "Third-Party Monitoring service for Iraq" for Local Government and Civil Society Program of the the European Commission in Iraq (2022)

Institutional Expert-AECOM/USAID: Provided institutional technical assistant for the development of Wastewater Strategy and Regional Utilities Reform in Palestine.

Emergency Planning Consultant-UNICEF: Collaborated with the Ministry of Education to formulate strategic emergency/contingency plans, ensuring the resilience of education systems.

Governance Expert- UNFPA Tunisia- Led the assessment and development of governance models for the Centre of Excellence for Youth in the Arab Region (CoEY) in Tunisia, facilitating effective growth and impact.

Program formulation Expert-Sida: Assisted the Environmental Quality Authority (EQA) in designing a new phase of the Sida programme, focusing on environmental governance, climate change, and pollution control.

Strategic Planning Expert: for the development of Dan Church Aid/ Norwegian Church Aid (DCA/NCA Joint Country Program Palestine (JCPP) 2022-26.

Team Leader for Impact Evaluation, DT Global International Development UK Ltd, World Bank "Development Impact Bond (DIB)" Project. *Palestine* **2019 -2024**

Led an international team of evaluators and researchers in conducting the impact evaluation of the Development Impact Bond (DIB), a World Bank-managed project aimed at supporting investments in youth training and employment. Coordinated with both local and international stakeholders, while leading a team of over 10 international consultants. Oversaw the evaluation process, including both qualitative and quantitative components, and played a key role in designing the methodology and delivering the qualitative component. Managed inputs from the Quantitative Expert on the quantitative aspect and led the development of the final evaluation report.

MEL Lead, FCDO/Tetra Tech Stability Services and Reform Programme (SSRP) (Takamol) Project *Palestine* **2021 -2022**

Served as Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Lead for a USD 30 million public sector reform program funded by the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and learning support for public sector reform program to support the Palestinian Authority with financial planning, budgeting, and policy implementation. Improved ongoing learning processes and activities aligned with the program's problem-driven iterative approach (PDIA). Identified learning opportunities and lessons learned and applied adaptive management processes for activity planning.

Strategic Advisor, Enabel (Belgium Technical Agency) *Palestine & Jordan* **2021 -2023**

Successfully **concluded the design and set-up of a new EUR 70 million Country Portfolio** for Belgium in Palestine (2022-2026). The Country Portfolio includes five interventions: Education and Learning, Civic engagement and Protection (human rights, civic space, citizenship, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights), (SRHR); Skills, employment, TVET, and entrepreneurship; Climate Change and Action; and Local government services (including green and circular economy).

Senior Development Officer & Analyst, Government of Canada *Palestine* **2011 - 2021**
EDUCATION

Ph.D. in Governance and Policy Analyses (Dissertation: Strategic Planning in Local Governments under Fragile Situations), Maastricht University, Netherlands, 2018.

Master's Degree in Urban and Regional Planning, Morgan State University, Baltimore, USA, 2005.

Master's Degree in Environmental Engineering, John Hopkins University Baltimore, USA, 2005.

Bachelor's Degree in Civil Engineering, Birzeit University, Palestine, 2000.

Vocational Diploma in Media and Journalism, Birzeit University, Palestine, 1997.

CERTIFICATIONS

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2024 | Strategic Management Performance System Certification (SMPS), the George Washington University Center for Excellence in Public Leadership (GW-CEPL) and LBL Strategies |
| 2008 | International Program for Development Evaluation Training Certificate (IPDET), Carleton University-Canada, and the World Bank |

LANGUAGES

- Arabic (Native), English (Fluent).

ANNEX IX. GEF PORTAL INPUTS

Table 19: GEF portal inputs

Question: What was the performance at the project's completion against Core Indicator Targets? (For projects approved prior to GEF-7¹⁰⁶, these indicators will be identified retrospectively and comments on performance provided¹⁰⁷).
Response: At completion, the project successfully delivered a costed, evidence-based plan for a National Protected Areas Network (PAN), updated Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) data, and two management plans for pilot sites (Teeb and Dalmaj). While no formal GEF Core Indicators were embedded at design (as it was a GEF-5 project), the results retrospectively align with: • Core Indicator 1 (Terrestrial Protected Areas): Two new sites (Teeb and Dalmaj) were designated and equipped with management plans, contributing to increased coverage. • Core Indicator 11 (Number of direct beneficiaries): Over 100 MoE and partner staff were trained, contributing to institutional capacity. • Core Indicator 4 (Capacity Development): Institutional strengthening of the MoE Biodiversity Directorate, including legal frameworks and stakeholder coordination mechanisms. Reference: §§116–121, §§130–134, and Annex 1.
Question: What were the progress, challenges and outcomes regarding engagement of stakeholders in the project/program as evolved from the time of the MTR? <i>(This should be based on the description included in the Stakeholder Engagement Plan or equivalent documentation submitted at CEO Endorsement/Approval)</i>
Response: Stakeholder engagement remained a strong feature throughout the project, particularly post-MTR. While the MTR noted weaknesses in inter-ministerial coordination, the second half of the project saw the operationalization of the National Committee for Protected Areas and successful execution of inclusive consultations on PA designation, legislation, and site-level planning. Challenges included political instability and turnover, but the team adapted through online forums and extended bilateral consultations. Engagement was also expanded to academic institutions, local NGOs, and site-level actors. Reference: §§145–147, §§150–153, §173.
Question: What were the completed gender-responsive measures and, if applicable, actual gender result areas? <i>(This should be based on the documentation at CEO Endorsement/Approval, including gender-sensitive indicators contained in the project results framework or gender action plan or equivalent)</i>
Response: Gender was not a major design feature of the project, and no standalone gender action plan was developed. However, several gender-responsive actions were integrated during implementation, particularly in training activities. Women represented approximately 40% of training participants and 50% of interviewees during the evaluation field visit. Gender balance was also considered in the staffing of MoE project units and in community outreach materials, though monitoring of gender-specific outcomes was limited. Reference: §§157–158, §173.2
Question: What was the progress made in the implementation of the management measures against the Safeguards Plan submitted at CEO Approval? The risk classifications reported in the latest PIR report should be verified and the findings of the effectiveness of any measures or lessons learned taken to address identified risks assessed. <i>(Any supporting documents gathered by</i>

¹⁰⁶ The GEF is currently operating under the seventh replenishment period of the GEF Trust Fund covering the period July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2022. The GEF Portal Reporting Guide for FY20 Reporting Process indicates that GEF-6 projects that have yet to map existing indicators to GEF-7 Core Indicators need to do so at MTR stage or (if already there) at the time of the TE. (i.e. not GEF projects approved before GEF-6)

¹⁰⁷ This is not applicable for Enabling Activities

the Consultant during this review should be shared with the Task Manager for uploading in the GEF Portal)

Response:

Environmental and social safeguard (ESS) risks were acknowledged at design—particularly those related to access to resources, PA governance, and institutional capacity—but no standalone ESS monitoring framework or risk register was developed. Mitigation measures included participatory planning, legal reviews to align land use regulations with community rights, and consultations at pilot sites. The project was correctly classified as “Category B” for moderate risk and complied with UNEP’s safeguards policies, with no major ESS incidents reported.

Reference: §§180–183, and Annex 6.

Question: What were the challenges and outcomes regarding the project’s completed Knowledge Management Approach, including: Knowledge and Learning Deliverables (e.g. website/platform development); Knowledge Products/Events; Communication Strategy; Lessons Learned and Good Practice; Adaptive Management Actions? *(This should be based on the documentation approved at CEO Endorsement/Approval)*

Response:

The project developed and implemented a Public Awareness and Communication Strategy, produced technical toolkits (e.g., PAME guidelines, PA manager guides), factsheets, and thematic briefs for dissemination. A dedicated section on the MoE website was created to host PA materials, and a series of webinars and workshops supported internal learning and adaptive management. Lessons learned and good practices were documented in final reporting, but broader dissemination through international GEF platforms remains limited and is recommended as a follow-up action.

Reference: §§175–178, §200, Annex 8.

Question: What are the main findings of the evaluation?

Response:

The evaluation concluded that the project was relevant, largely effective, and moderately efficient, with strong contributions to national planning for biodiversity conservation. The PAN Plan, updated biodiversity data, legal frameworks, and institutional capacity building are all significant achievements. However, challenges in sustainability—particularly regarding funding, inter-ministerial coordination, and infrastructure implementation—were noted. The project’s adaptive response to COVID-19, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and emphasis on science-to-policy translation were highlighted as good practices.

Reference: §§203–207 (Conclusions); §210 (Lessons); §212 (Recommendations).

ANNEX X. QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF THE EVALUATION REPORT

Quality Assessment of the Evaluation Report

Evaluand Title: Terminal Evaluation of the UNEP/GEF Project “Initial Steps for the Establishment of the National Protected Areas Network in Iraq” GEF ID 5392.

Evaluator: Dr. Khaled Rajab

All UNEP evaluations are subject to a quality assessment by the Evaluation Office. This is an assessment of the quality of the evaluation product (i.e. evaluation report) and is dependent on more than just the consultant’s efforts and skills.

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
Section A: Executive Summary	Assessment	
1. Does the Executive Summary act as a concise, accurate standalone section, especially to inform decision-making? Consider how clearly and concisely the report presents: - a clear summary of the evaluation object - evaluation objectives, scope and methodology - the overall project evaluation rating - a summary of main evaluation findings, including key features of performance (strengths and weaknesses) - summary responses to key strategic evaluation questions - summary of main conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All required elements are addressed including a summary response to the key strategic questions. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The Executive Summary represents a concise and accurate standalone summary of the evaluation report.	6
Section B: The Project	Assessment	
2. Does the report clearly describe the key parameters, scale and complexity of the evaluand? Consider how well the report presents: - an overview of the main issue that the project is trying to address - timeline, including dates of project approval, duration and number of phases (where appropriate) - geographic coverage (regions/countries) - total secured budget and project financing, including a table with funding sources - implementing and funding partners - institutional context (i.e. UNEP sub-programme, Division, Branch etc.) - implementation structure with diagram - UNEP results frameworks to which it contributes (e.g. PoW Direct Outcome) - summary of results framework as stated in the ProDoc (or as officially revised) - stakeholder groups organised according to relevant common characteristics - whether the project has been evaluated in the past (e.g. mid-term, by an external agency, etc.) - substantive or significant changes in design during implementation	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements adequately addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The report presents a comprehensive description of the key dimensions of the evaluand required.	6
Section C: Evaluation Methods and Theory of Change	Assessment	

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
3. Does the report present a clear, comprehensive and adequate description of the evaluation methodology? Consider how well it presents the following elements, and their adequacy based on the scope of the evaluation: - statement of the purpose of the evaluation and the key intended audience for the evaluation findings - data collection methods and information sources - justification for methods used (e.g. electronic/face-to-face interviews, qualitative/quantitative analysis) - criteria and sampling strategies used to select stakeholders for consultations, and for sites/countries visited - number and types of respondents (<i>including in a table broken down by gender</i>) - strategies used to increase stakeholder engagement and response rate - methods used to include the voices/experiences of different and potentially excluded groups (e.g. women, marginalised) - data verification methods (e.g. triangulation) - data analysis methods (e.g. scoring, thematic analysis) - evaluation limitations and mitigation measures (e.g. how these were addressed by the evaluator) - consideration for ethics and human rights issues, including how anonymity and confidentiality were protected	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements adequately addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The section provides a clear description of the evaluation methods including strategies for inclusivity and the limitations faced during the evaluation. The report however doesn't include clear rationale for the methods used and selection criteria for respondents and field visit sites.	4
4. Does the report describe an assessment and reformulation of the Theory of Change, and present an adequate articulation of the TOC causal pathways that were used to assess project performance (<i>narratively and diagrammatically</i>)? Consider how well the report presents: - whether the project design included a TOC - how the <i>TOC at Evaluation</i>¹⁰⁸ was designed (e.g. who was involved, etc) - confirmation/reconstruction of results in accordance with UNEP definitions (<i>including reformulation table, which may have initially been presented in the Inception Report and should appear in the Main Evaluation report.</i>) - articulation of causal pathways - identification of drivers and assumptions - identification of key actors in the change process	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The ToC at Evaluation is well presented both in narrative and diagrammatic forms. The causal pathways are articulated, and the drivers and assumptions discussed.	5
Section D: Evidence and Analysis	Assessment	
5. Is the report based on sufficient and adequate data and clear and credible evidence? Consider how well the report presents: - sufficient evidence that is consistent throughout the report - evidence that is supported by data sources (e.g. quotes, reports, etc) - evidence that is explicitly triangulated, unless noted as having a single source - gaps in data are explained and justified - data sources that are reliable, adequate, sufficient	<u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The report provides sufficient evidence to support findings. Evidence has sufficiently been triangulated and gaps in evidence sufficiently explained.	6

¹⁰⁸ During the Inception Phase of the evaluation process a *TOC at Evaluation Inception* is created based on the information contained in the approved project documents (these may include either logical framework or a TOC or narrative descriptions), formal revisions and annual reports etc. During the evaluation process this TOC is revised based on changes made during project intervention and becomes the *TOC at Evaluation*.

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
for the scope of the evaluation		
6. Does the report include rigorous analysis and logical findings? Consider the extent to which the findings are: - supported by clear analysis that is consistent with the evidence presented - logical, clear and coherent - aligned with UNEP's Criteria Ratings Matrix - aligned with the evaluation framework - more than descriptions and provide insights into 'how' and/or 'why' the project performed a certain way - balanced, presenting both successes and weaknesses	<u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The presents clear, coherent and logical findings. The ratings are also aligned with UNEP's Criteria Ratings Matrix.	5
Section E: Evaluation Findings	Assessment	
7. Does the report present evidence and analysis of project Strategic Relevance with respect to UNEP, partner and geographic policies and strategies at the time of project approval? Consider how well the report addresses: - Alignment to the UNEP Medium Term Strategy (MTS), Programme of Work (POW) and Strategic Priorities - Alignment to Donor/GEF/Partners Strategic Priorities - Relevance to Regional, Sub-regional and National Environmental Priorities - Complementarity with Existing Interventions: complementarity of the project at design (or during inception/mobilisation¹⁰⁹), with other interventions addressing the needs of the same target groups.	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> All elements are covered to a satisfactory level.	6
Does the report present a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the Quality of Project Design , based on the detailed assessment presented in the Inception Report?	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> The report presents a summary of the project design's strengths and weaknesses.	NOT RATED
Does the report recognise and describe, when appropriate, key features of the Nature of the External Context under which the project was implemented that limited the project's performance (e.g. conflict, natural disaster, political upheaval ¹¹⁰), and how they affected performance?	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> The report presents a section on nature of the external context which analyses the negative externalities to project implementation.	NOT RATED
8. Does the report present a well-reasoned, complete and evidence-based assessment of the Availability of Outputs to the intended beneficiaries? Consider how well the report presents: - a convincing, evidence-supported and clear presentation of the outputs made available by the project compared to its approved plans and budget - assessment of the nature and scale of outputs versus the project indicators and targets - assessment of the timeliness, quality and utility of outputs to intended beneficiaries - identification of positive or negative effects of the project on disadvantaged groups, including those with specific needs due to gender, vulnerability or marginalisation (e.g. through disability).	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> This report presents a detailed and evidence-based assessment of the level of achievement of project outputs.	6

¹⁰⁹ A project's inception or mobilization period is understood as the time between project approval and first disbursement. Complementarity during project implementation is considered under Efficiency, see below.

¹¹⁰ Note that 'political upheaval' does not include regular national election cycles, but unanticipated unrest or prolonged disruption. The potential delays or changes in political support that are often associated with the regular national election cycle should be part of the project's design and addressed through adaptive management of the project team.

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
9. Does the report present a well-reasoned, complete and evidence-based assessment of the Achievement of Outcomes, as a result of the uptake, adoption and/or implementation of outputs by the intended beneficiaries? This may include behaviour changes at an individual or collective level. Consider how well the report presents: - a convincing and evidence-supported analysis of the uptake of outputs by intended beneficiaries - assessment of the nature, depth and scale of outcomes versus the project indicators and targets - discussion of the contribution, credible association and/or attribution of outcome level changes to the work of the project itself - any constraints to attributing effects to the projects' work - identification of positive or negative effects of the project on disadvantaged groups, including those with specific needs due to gender, vulnerability or marginalisation (e.g. through disability).	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> This report presents a detailed and evidence-based assessment of the level of achievement of project outcomes.	6
10. Does the report present an integrated analysis, guided by the causal pathways represented by the TOC, of all evidence relating to Likelihood of Impact? Consider how well the report presents: - an explanation of how causal pathways emerged and the resulting change processes - an explicit discussion of how drivers and assumptions played out - an explanation of roles played by key actors and change agents - identification of any unintended negative effects of the project, especially on disadvantaged groups, including those with specific needs due to gender, vulnerability or marginalisation (e.g. through disability).	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. A discussion/assessment of the extent to which the drivers and assumptions presented in the ToC at Evaluation are expected to hold is also presented. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The section presents an integrated analysis following the causal pathways.	6
11. Does the report present an integrated analysis of all dimensions evaluated under Financial Management and include a completed 'financial management' table? Consider how well the report addresses the following: <i>adherence</i> to UNEP's financial policies and procedures <i>completeness</i> of financial information, including the actual project costs and actual co-financing used and explanation of any variances between planned and actual expenditures	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The section presents a concise analysis of the dimensions evaluated under financial management.	6
12. Does the report present an integrated analysis of all dimensions evaluated under Efficiency? Consider how well the report presents: - cost-effective or time-saving measures put in place to maximise results within the secured budget and agreed project timeframe - implications of any delays and no cost extensions - discussion of making use, during project implementation, of/building on pre-existing institutions, partnerships and complementarities with other initiatives, programmes and projects etc. - the extent to which the management of the project minimised UNEP's environmental footprint.	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The section discusses aspects related to timeliness, cost-effectiveness of project execution. The report also includes an analysis of project team efforts to leverage pre-existing institutions, partnerships and complementarities with other initiatives.	6

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
13. Does the report present a well-reasoned, complete and evidence-based assessment of the project's Monitoring and Reporting? Consider how well the report addresses the following: - the quality of <i>monitoring of project implementation</i> (including use of monitoring data for adaptive management) - the quality of <i>project reporting</i> (e.g. PIMS and donor reports)	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The report analyses both sub-criteria under Monitoring and Reporting. The analysis covers monitoring efforts by the project include challenges encountered and analysis of the frequency and quality project reporting.	5
14. Does the report present an integrated analysis of all dimensions evaluated under Sustainability (i.e. the endurance of benefits achieved at outcome level)? Consider how well the report addresses the following: - socio-political sustainability - financial sustainability - institutional sustainability	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are adequately addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> A detailed analysis of the three dimensions under sustainability is included in the report.	6
15. Does the report present a well-evidence analysis of the Factors Affecting Performance, either in this section or in cross-referenced sections? <i>These factors are not always discussed in stand-alone sections and may be integrated in the other performance criteria as appropriate. However, if not addressed substantively in this section, a cross reference must be given to where the topic is addressed, and that entry must be sufficient to justify the performance rating for these factors.</i> Consider how well the report addresses the following cross-cutting issues: - quality of project management and supervision¹¹¹ - stakeholder participation and co-operation - responsiveness to human rights and gender equality - environmental and social safeguards - country ownership and driven-ness - communication and public awareness	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> An assessment of all the factors affecting performance is presented as a stand-alone section within the report.	5
Section F: Conclusions, Lessons Learned and Recommendations	Assessment	
16. Do the Conclusions present a summative assessment of the evaluand as a whole, reflecting on prominent aspects of the project's performance? Consider how well the conclusions: - provide a compelling narrative and integrated assessment of project project's performance (i.e. achievements and limitations) - add deeper insights and analysis beyond the findings under each individual criterion - are derived from the synthesized analysis of evidence gathered during the evaluation process - provide clear and succinct response to the key strategic questions - address the human rights and gender dimensions of the intervention explicitly (e.g. how these	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The section presents lessons learned drawn from real project experience. On the other hand, the report presents a summary of the findings. The analysis could have provided deeper insights into the	5

¹¹¹ In some cases 'project management and supervision' will refer to the supervision and guidance provided by UNEP to implementing partners and national governments while in others, specifically for GEF funded projects, it will refer to the project management performance of the executing agency and the technical backstopping provided by UNEP. This includes providing the answers to the questions on Core Indicator Targets, stakeholder engagement, gender responsiveness, safeguards and knowledge management, required for the GEF portal.

Report Quality Criteria	UNEP Evaluation Office Comments	Final Report Rating
dimensions were considered, addressed or impacted on) provide lessons that are rooted in real project experiences, describe the context from which they are derived, and do not duplicate recommendations	performance of the evaluand beyond the findings.	
17. Does the report present Recommendations for specific action to be taken by identified people/position-holders to resolve concrete problems affecting the project or the sustainability of its results? Consider how well the recommendations: - are clearly formulated and logically derived from the findings and/or conclusions - are feasible to implement within the timeframe and resources available (including local capacities) and specific in terms of who would do what and when - include at least one recommendation relating to strengthening the human rights and gender dimensions of UNEP interventions - represent a measurable performance target in order that the Evaluation Office can monitor and assess compliance with the recommendations. NOTES: (i) In cases where the recommendation is addressed to a third party, compliance can only be monitored and assessed where a contractual/legal agreement remains in place. Without such an agreement, the recommendation should be formulated to say that UNEP project staff should pass on the recommendation to the relevant third party in an effective or substantive manner. The effective transmission by UNEP of the recommendation will then be monitored for compliance. (ii) Where a new project phase is already under discussion or in preparation with the same third party, a recommendation can be made to address the issue in the next phase.	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All elements are well addressed. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The report presents actionable and time bound recommendations based on identified problems in project implementation.	5
Section G: Report Structure and Presentation	Assessment	
18. Is the report well-structured and complete? Does it: - follow the Evaluation Office structure and formatting guidelines - include all required sections and annexes, as applicable - not exceed 50 pages in length from the Executive Summary to the end of the Conclusion Does the report present information clearly and appropriately? Is it written: - in clear and accessible language - largely free from grammar, spelling and punctuation errors - in an adequate and professional tone - with the use of visual aids, such as maps, graphs tables and photos	<u>Coverage/omissions:</u> All expected elements are included in the report. <u>Strengths/weaknesses:</u> The report is complete and follows the Evaluation Office guidelines. Overall, the report is clear and well written. The tone is adequate.	5
OVERALL REPORT QUALITY RATING	Highly Satisfactory	5.5

A number rating 1-6 is used for each criterion, with half-point increments allowed (e.g., 3.5 or 4.5). Highly Satisfactory = 6, Satisfactory = 5, Moderately Satisfactory = 4, Moderately Unsatisfactory = 3, Unsatisfactory = 2, Highly Unsatisfactory = 1. The overall rating is based on a simple average of the ratings for each criterion.