

Central project evaluation – executive summary

Integrated Biodiversity Management, South Caucasus

Title	Integrated Biodiversity Management, South Caucasus		
Country / Region / Global	South Caucasus		
Sector and CRS Code	Biodiversity, CRS-Code 41030		
Project number	2015.2101.2		
Commissioning party	German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)		
Lead executing agency / implementation partner	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH / Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of Armenia, Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia		
Project volume	EUR 22,892,420		
Project term	1 December 2015 to 30 November 2019		
Reporting year	2020	Sample year	2018

The subject of this evaluation is the Integrated Biodiversity Management, South Caucasus project identified by the project number 2015.2101.2. It will be referred to as the project throughout the report.

Context of the project

The Caucasus is one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world, with ecosystems often shaped by traditional land use. Mainstreaming biodiversity in these land-uses and avoiding or recovering from processes such as land degradation and erosion, wildfires, illegal hunting or fisheries is central for biodiversity conservation. Ecosystems provide services that can be sustainably used for income generation and diversification.

Photo 1: Sainfoin seeding in Gulyan-Mudru municipality, 2019



The political and sectoral context at times is framed by geopolitical and cultural pressures between Armenia and Azerbaijan and it appears at other levels: tension between traditional inhabitants and refugees, Georgia's accession to the European Union. A strong

focus on economic development also puts constraints on biodiversity conservation.

According to the project proposal, the target group comprised all those in rural areas in the three countries in the South Caucasus that make use or will make use and benefit from ecosystem services. This amounts to about 50% of the population (approximately 1.5 million (Armenia), 4.5 million (Azerbaijan) and 1.8 million (Georgia)). There was a focus on the predominantly poor rural population in the pilot areas. These citizens were directly affected if areas are threatened by erosion or degradation and the viability of traditional land use systems are therefore at risk.

Figure 1: Project region



Brief description of the project

The Integrated Biodiversity Management Project aimed to improve intersectoral management of biodiversity and ecosystem services, basing its practice on robust data. The project developed pilot initiatives to mainstream biodiversity conservation in agriculture, forest and pasture land management – and aimed to share the knowledge generated by these pilots for replication at policy level while strengthening a regional network and fostering sustainability-oriented capacity-building and awareness-raising activities.

The project was implemented between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2019. It worked primarily at the country level in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and at the regional level on output D ('The regional exchange on sustainable management of biodiversity and ecosystem services to be improved').

The project acted at different levels, from local pilots to national tool and policy development to regional exchange and cooperation, which are also interconnected: about half of the project budget targets Georgia, 20% each Armenia and Azerbaijan and 10% the regional level. The project is financed by the German Ministry of Economic and Development Cooperation (BMZ) and implemented by the GIZ. The total budget of the project was initially EUR 9,900,000 and rose to EUR 22,892,420, following updated offers, including a new output (E, 'The data basis for informed political and management decisions about Georgian's forests is improved'). The activities cofinanced by ADA University under the predecessor projects (Sustainable management of biodiversity in the Southern Caucasus SMBP, Integrated erosion control in mountainous areas IEC) are not part of this evaluation.

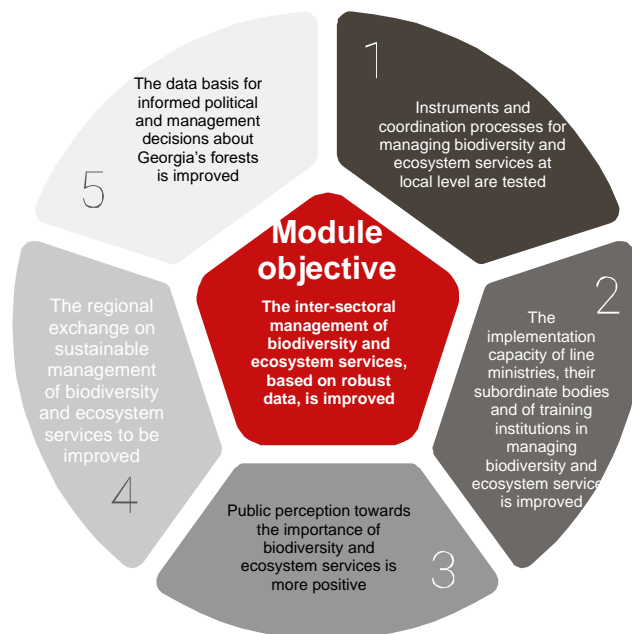
Capacity development is pursued at different levels, with an emphasis on institutional processes (academic and vocational training) over a focus on individuals in relevant professional positions. In addition, the project aims for societal and institutional development, with output C ('The perception of the general public towards the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem services is more positive') addressing the biodiversity perception by the public, and outputs A ('Instruments and coordination processes for the management of biodiversity and ecosystem services at local level are tested') and B ('The implementation capacity of line ministries, their subordinate bodies and of training institutions regarding the management of biodiversity and ecosystem services is improved') addressing institutional coordination and cooperation processes.

About 3,000 households will directly benefit from measures to integrate forest and pasture management, protect against erosion, and promote agrobiodiversity; 30,000 households will be indirect beneficiaries. There is particular awareness of women and refugees. The module objective benefits from output A because:

- 'Successful inter-sectoral coordination, ideally coming up with win-win decisions, motivates sector specialists to work together to improve the management of biodiversity and ecosystem services'
- 'Experiences from local level are considered relevant and are recognised when decisions are taken at national level'
- 'Decisions are at least in parts based on robust information/ data from information and monitoring systems'

It also benefits from output C: 'Changed knowledge, attitude and practice of general public regarding biodiversity and ecosystem services leads to improved Integrated Management of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. The general public has a way to express its preferences and influence all relevant sectors to improve the integrated management of biodiversity and ecosystem services.'

Figure 2: Module objective/areas of intervention



These are also part of the corresponding national steering structures. The specific denomination of the partner institutions has changed over time following administrative changes in the countries. Further high-level implementing partners are the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Environment of Armenia, the Ministry of Agriculture in Azerbaijan, and the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure in Georgia.

Assessment according to DAC criteria

Relevance

The project is aligned with the relevant strategic reference frameworks at all levels: national and regional policies and strategies, including strategies of German development cooperation.

It is embedded in an important international, national and regional strategic framework. The Ecoregion Conservation Plan of the Caucasus refers to the Caucasus as one of the most biologically rich regions on Earth. It is one of the World Wide Fund for Nature 35 'priority places' and includes two of 34 'biodiversity hotspots' identified by Conservation International as the richest and at the same time most threatened reservoirs of plant and animal life on the planet.

Several Sustainable Development Goals (for example 1, 4, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16) are relevant to the project. It also targets the national strategies in the three countries, which are implemented by project partners.

The project strategy is designed to address the target groups' core problems and needs. It addresses important priority areas, building on existing workstreams at the partner organisations.

Pilot measures started with detailed and participative needs assessments. The project approach reduces gender-specific disadvantages, especially in rural areas. As a concept, the project was designed well to achieve the set objective.

Risks were well identified and tackled, which has been reflected in many interviews with partners and stakeholders. The project results models have been effectively developed and updated for the three countries, though an overall model has not been generated.

The original project approach has been mostly implemented according to the project offer, but significant (new output E) and much-valued adaptations such as the strengthening of work with proactive partners and support to new policy development initiatives has been undertaken by the project team. This was the result of deliberation with partners and stakeholders, which aimed to reduce project implementation risks and address external conditions such as institutional changes and new policy opportunities.

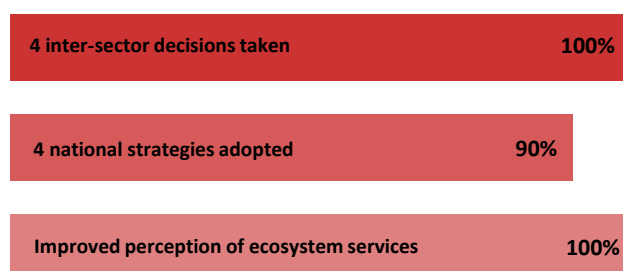
Effectiveness

The module objective indicators are consistent and in line with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) criteria. They have widely been achieved, with two module objective indicators at output level fully achieved, one partially achieved, and one regional indicator is partially achieved. However significant progress has been made in all areas as confirmed by interviews with partners.

Overall, the activities and outputs of the project contributed substantially to the project's achievements through steering and advisory work, financial and technical inputs and improved communications. The assessment of improved implementation capacities has been primarily based on qualitative interview statements as well as quantitative monitoring. Regarding the assessed hypotheses, three of them could be confirmed. One hypothesis cannot yet be confirmed as processes are still pending, and for one of the confirmed hypotheses, a slightly changed wording would explain the results better.

Five positive and two negative unintended project results have been associated with the project on output level. The positive results cover awareness-raising, increased data gathering, changes in policy-making and others. The main negative result refers to the competition between NGOs being influenced by the project. This has been partly addressed by the project even though it is beyond the scope of the project itself. Altogether, there is a significant balance of positive against negative unintended results.

Figure 4: Achievement of project objective indicators



Impact

The intended overarching development results regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 4, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16) are in line with the expected impact. The project expected to indirectly benefit 30,000 households, and has accounted for 26,000 (rural) income measure beneficiaries (minimum of 500 women and 175 young people) and 6,900 training and education beneficiaries, including 300 women and 4,500 young people, which is lower than planned but still a significant figure. The four hypotheses for the project contributions to overarching development goals have been confirmed, and the evaluation has compiled a large number of positive interviews that recognise the project's contributions.

As one of the key actors on biodiversity in the region, the project has built many synergies with other initiatives either in parallel or in assuring sustainability and replication of project methodologies, tools or results. It has built on existing frameworks, strengthening partner capacities and impact and utilising opportunities. It has actively addressed any negative framework conditions.

The design of the project incorporated the upscaling of mechanisms at its core. This has been partly successful with outstanding examples in the sectors of forest inventories or spatial planning. Gaps in replication have been identified; for example, in the educational programme or with erosion control measures in Azerbaijan due to issues in high-level policy support and funding and the limited impact of the social online regional network. Some innovative approaches have been successfully implemented and extended.

Overall, 14 positive and 3 negative unintended results can be associated with the project on impact level. On the positive side, the majority refers to the replication of initiatives or tools. The main risks at the impact level relate to possible changes in the biodiversity policy in the countries, or ineffective donor coordination action. Tools employed by the project to mitigate such risks include coordination with other donors, participation in working groups, and frequent meetings with partners at all levels. The assessment concludes that the project has monitored the occurrence of additional (not formally agreed) positive results at impact level and opportunities for further positive results have been seized. Few negative results at impact level have occurred, and the project responded adequately to manage them.

Efficiency

Resources were differently distributed among the five outputs. The two outputs targeting on-site implementation (A with 19% and E with 13% of the budget share) accumulate the largest share of the project budget, closely followed by output B (31%), which includes capacity building and technical work with partners and stakeholders. Output C targeting education and awareness covers 14% of the budget – approximately half of the previously mentioned outputs – and output D 7%, including the costs for preparing and conducting regional activities and events. Overarching costs amount to 15% according to the costing by the project management.

Applying the follow-the-money approach, the preliminary statements suggest that a major part of the project results have been achieved and that significant impact has been tracked by GIZ and the partners. The partners, beneficiaries and stakeholders have also expressed their high degree of satisfaction with the project team performance, technical knowledge and appropriate innovative solutions. The project constructs logical intervention sequences describing risks, deviations and possible causes. Important examples of production efficiency have been identified. Among the positive aspects, a resource allocation focusing on strengthening trust-building, partner institutionalisation and innovation has contributed most.

The project claims to have maximised the project outcome with the same amount of resources and the same or better quality. It has implemented different resource use strategies, including financing partners, subcontracting, finance of staff and innovative activities; which minimises risks and allows for learning (though scarcely documented). Stepping up these approaches is a core element of the project. Benchmarks at outcome level have not been used, but synergies with other GIZ projects and funds from other donors, including the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and the Global Environment Facility have been identified. Partner contributions were estimated to be EUR 2,000,000 and they have been delivered. This includes funding for a programme office and staff, which comes to approximately 1,000 expert months.

Sustainability

In relation to the newly created and/or strengthened capacities based in the partner structures as well as a new project built up on the structures of IBiS, the anchoring of results in the partner structure reflects a conscious and ambitious approach since the project start.

The project has strengthened institutional, staffing and financial sustainability through partner ownership and capacity along several main action lines. These include building on existing structures and workstreams at the partner organisations (for example in the educational system) or supporting emerging structures to expand partner decision-making and operational capacity through measures such as deployment of local short-term experts and targeted organisational development and training. It has worked on developing replicable pilots and actions (based on cost-benefit assessments), facilitated access to funding streams beyond the project duration and finally, generating a positive sense of success and pride among the participants. Events where prominent local notables have presented pilots that addressed social sustainability have added to public pride in these achievements.

A significant part of the project results appear permanent, stable and resilient for the long term under current conditions. However, limited funding in the future will be a major risk for the durability of positive results, even if important future funding sources have been unlocked with the support of the project. No trade-offs between sustainability dimensions have been identified by the evaluators.

National financial allocation remains the most relevant barrier to overcome, and primary risks have been identified for the National Forest Management and Information System in Armenia, as well as for continuing environmental education and for plans to replicate integrated erosion control in Azerbaijan. Future funding for these still depends on governmental decisions, despite the generally positive responses received during the interviews. The project team has taken an active role in discussing the added value of such financial investments and has also paused further project activities (as the complementary capacity building) in case the anticipated governmental commitments are not implemented as planned.

Overall rating

The project has broadly achieved its ambitious objectives and is evaluated as highly successful.

The project is highly aligned with the relevant strategic reference frameworks at all levels (national and regional policies and strategies, including strategies of the German development cooperation).

Two module objective indicators have been fully achieved, one partially achieved, and one regional indicator is partially achieved. Overall, the activities and outputs of the project contributed substantially to the project objective achievements due to steering and mentoring, financial and technical inputs and activated and improved communications.

The intended overarching development results regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are in line with the expected impact.

In the assessment of efficiency, manifold synergies with other donors could be identified.

A significant part of the project results is permanent, stable and resilient in the long term; the project has helped to ensure future funding.

Twenty-three non-intended positive or negative results have been achieved. These include proliferation of useful tools and approaches and awareness-raising on international conventions and EU legislation.

Table 1: Rating OECD/DAC evaluation criteria

Criteria	Score (Max. 100)	Rating 1 (highly successful) to 6 (highly unsuccessful)
Relevance	97	Level 1: highly successful
Effectivity	93	Level 1: highly successful
Impact	88	Level 2: successful
Efficiency	93	Level 1: highly successful
Sustainability	92	Level 1: highly successful
Overall	92	Level 1: highly successful

Conclusions and factors of success and failure

Factors for success or failure are summarised according to the success factors outlined by the Capacity WORKS management tool. External factors were also considered:

- ☑ **Management of the project:** Partners, beneficiaries and other partners appreciated the competencies of the project team, referring to the input they received from “knowledgeable experts”. In addition to technical competencies, social competencies have been highlighted as relevant for the project’s success. These entail the capacity for active listening and a proactive approach to address ideas for pilot activities or changes – all attributes of a good advisor.
- ☑ **Strategy:** The project strategy has been based on a thorough assessment of about 100 existing partner initiatives as options for engagement. This has built on the structures and priorities of the partners and thus assured a high level of partner ownership and a prompt start. All relevant activities have started with appropriate needs assessments. Another strategic strength was the fact that pilot projects at local level (output A) must be accompanied by relevant actions on national level (output B) to promote upscaling, replication and sustainability.
- ☑ **Cooperation:** The whole project centred on the idea of fostering intersectoral inter-administrative cooperation, which is reflected in results such as the support given to spatial planning in Georgia. Close cooperation and communication with the partners has been fundamental for the project’s progress and success. Community engagement has been mentioned by beneficiaries and partners as a crucial element.
- ☑ **Steering:** This aspect has proved very successful, especially in view of the fact that it is a regional project that individual participating countries did not request. Outstanding elements include exchange with other donors and international partners such as the German state-owned development bank KfW.
- ☑ **Learning and innovation:** The project implemented a ‘learning by doing’ approach, requesting that partners assume leadership in decision-making and implementation. The identification and capacity-building of leaders and change-makers in the community further strengthened this action and provided a means of powering it.
- ☑ **External Factors:** A major factor for success or failure is the capacity and continuity of partner organisation engagement, which has resulted in important adaptation.

Recommendations

The following aspects are highlighted as key recommendations for the GIZ team involved in the related ECOserve project, as well as for the partners:

- ☑ **A strategy for follow-up steps:** Though the project has achieved most of its aims, follow-up steps are still taking place within the framework of a new project, including the replication or adaptation of pilots or the endorsement of regulations. Though this makes much sense to assure final results and impact, partners should prepare for a post-project period.
- ☑ **Stronger links to SDGs:** The project documents have shown that it has provided relevant contributions to the national strategies dealing with the Sustainable Development Goals. It is therefore recommended to GIZ to link the project work more explicitly to the SDGs. This could increase the political and public visibility of the project results as well as facilitate identification and access to funding sources.
- ☑ **Improved regional exchange:** The regional exchange has only been partly successful in carrying on contact beyond the effective physical networking events and conferences, and this could have had a more prominent role. The COVID-related restrictions are likely to affect such activities under ECOserve and change the perception and use of socially distanced tools and formats, which will be explored by the GIZ team in cooperation with partners.

General recommendations for other projects in the field of biodiversity management and others are:

- ☑ **Strengthen project ownership at partner institutions:** The project strategy and steering structure aimed to ensure and strengthen partner ownership in the process and is highly valuable and could be promoted as good practice. This includes the selection of project components based on a thorough assessment of previous partner initiatives, the decision-making processes with partners in an active role, and the ‘learning by doing’ approach during implementation.
- ☑ **Addressing ecosystem services supports more robust decision-making:** When ecosystem services are addressed, valued and improved – along with their fragility, deterioration and restoration – they gain recognition at administrative levels and within the local population. Such recognition supports identification of possible conflicts or trade-offs in

planning and management and thus contributes to more robust decision-making on local or national development choices.

Approach and methods of the evaluation

The project has been selected randomly according to the guidelines of the GIZ Central Project Evaluations. It is a final evaluation as the project ended on 30 November 2019.

Evaluation design: The assessment follows the questions of the evaluation matrix and applies these to the project overall, or to specific aspects in one or more of the three countries and/or at the regional level in the South Caucasus. Where relevant a theory-based contribution analysis method has been used. This has been complemented with an explorative method for assessing unintended results. A detailed and well-developed monitoring system at project level is in place, complemented with assessments undertaken as open recording of comparative perspectives of partners and target groups (KOMPASS), an SDG contribution assessment, and a self-assessment of unexpected results.

Empirical methods: Following the evaluation matrix, data from different sources has been collected, coded (marking relevant items, relevant and conflictive statements) and summarised, analysed based on triangulation and finally evaluated.

The main stakeholders of this evaluation are the GIZ corporate unit evaluation, the BMZ, the project team and the key project partners, especially the partner ministries of the three countries.

Overall, some 80 stakeholders have been involved in the whole evaluation process through 51 interviews, 3 workshops, written contributions and a survey. The planned evaluation mission was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions, and a major part of the evaluation was carried out with remote methods.

In regard to the evaluation team, the international evaluator is the team leader and drives the process, assessing in detail the regional dimension of the project and assuring coherence and quality of the overall process. The three local evaluators (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) are included in all central tasks of the evaluation as the participation in the inception mission, together carrying out of evaluation interviews and workshops, and assessing specific topics relevant to the assessment criteria for each of the countries.

Rating system

Projects are rated based on the Development Cooperation Directorate Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) criteria of relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and efficiency. Each of the five criteria is rated on a scale of 1 to 100 (percentage system).

The project's overall score is derived from the average points awarded for each DAC criteria. The average value for the overall score is rounded according to mathematical convention. All DAC criteria are equally weighted for the overall score. Compared with the previous systems (6-point scale, 16-point scale), a 100-point scale has advantages in that it allows differentiation. It is used internationally, it is easy to understand and can readily be converted into other assessment systems.

Table 2: Rating and scale score

100-point-scale (Score)	6-level-scale (Rating)
92–100	Level 1 = highly successful
81–91	Level 2 = successful
67–80	Level 3 = moderately successful
50–66	Level 4 = moderately unsuccessful
30–49	Level 5 = unsuccessful
0–29	Level 6 = highly unsuccessful

Both the assessment dimensions within the OECD/DAC criteria and the determination of the overall score with a points system serve to increase the transparency of ratings, while enabling better comparability between individual projects.

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