Terminal evaluation of the FAO-Global Environment Facility project Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This document is a terminal evaluation of the project entitled Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan. The project was funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented in the Republic of Azerbaijan from October 2017 to December 2021.

The evaluation aimed to assess the progress made towards the impact and sustainability of project outcomes and to detect any design and implementation issues that need to be addressed before scaling up the project's outputs.

The evaluation applied a mixed methodological approach to data collection (quantitative and qualitative). It included structured document analysis and review of primary and secondary sources of information, semi-structured interviews with key parties and direct beneficiaries, focus group discussions with community members, and direct site observations (visits).

The evaluation findings indicate significant achievements related to the most strategic dimensions of the project linked to the National Forest Inventory (NFI) and Forest Management Plan (FMP), and all the associated capacity-development activities at institutional and individual levels. Unintended results of the project were mainly associated with the capacity-development activities under the Triangular Cooperation Protocol between the Forest Development Department of the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR) of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the General Directorate of Forestry of Turkey (OGM). It is also noteworthy that the scope of the project was broad and incompatible with its timeline and funds allocated. Therefore, during the further planning and development of similar interventions, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was advised to narrow the scope and focus of future projects, and gradually scale up the project activities in similar strategic dimensions.

FAO was also recommended to continue dialogue with the Government of Azerbaijan concerning necessary legal and policy changes that would secure the sustainability of the project's achievements and address all associated risks regarding sustainability (such as financial-, legal-, and policy-level gaps). Finally, FAO was advised to reinforce its monitoring, evaluation, and validation system to report and validate the progress made through both GEF-funded and co-financed sources.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CCO	Climate change objective
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FMP	Forest Management Plan/s
FDD	Forest Development Department
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GCC	General Coordinating Committee
GIS	Geographical information systems
IDEA	International Dialogue for Environmental Action
MENR	Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
NBSAP	National Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity
NFI	National Forest Inventory
NFMS	National forest monitoring system
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OGM	General Directorate of Forestry of Turkey
PIR	Project implementation review
PPR	Project progress report
RBM	Results-based management
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFM	Sustainable forest management
SO	Specific objective
SP	Strategic priority
SSM	Sustainable soil management
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Executive summary

This report presents the results of the terminal evaluation of the project entitled Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan, implemented from October 2017 to December 2021. The evaluation was conducted from September 2021 to February 2022 and aimed to assess the progress made towards the impact and sustainability of project outcomes, and to detect any design and implementation issues to be addressed before scaling up the project's outputs.[1]

The evaluation methodology was designed to address 25 key evaluation questions grouped under these criteria – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, factors affecting performance, environmental and social safeguards and gender mainstreaming, co-financing, progress to impact, and knowledge management. In this regard, the evaluation applied various data-collection techniques to include all relevant stakeholders and validate the data gathered. These techniques encompassed online and in-person interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, direct site observations, and structured documentary analysis.

Introduction

The project goal was to support the implementation of sustainable forest management (SFM) in Azerbaijan in order to increase the social and economic benefits gleaned from forests, improve the quality of existing forests, and increase carbon sequestration. The project was comprised of three components: forest resource information management system (1); forest management planning (2); and monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge sharing (3).[2] It was a four-year project with a total budget of USD 8 484 247.[3] The GEF Trust Fund secured USD 1 484 247 of the funding. The project targeted two pilot regions (Aghdash and Gakh) in Azerbaijan.

Main findings

The evaluation resulted in the following key findings linked to each evaluation criterion:

1. **Relevance:** The project demonstrated relevance with the country context and was fully aligned with the strategic priorities of the Government of Azerbaijan, FAO Country Programming Framework, and GEF operational programme strategies. The project design was quite ambitious, with a broad thematic spectrum and significant conditional co-financing from the beneficiary country. The budget allocation was perceived to be small, and the major share of it was allocated for field work under Component 1 and Component 2 of the project. No significant strategic and priority change at the national level affected the project's goal, objectives, and outcomes. However, there were changes at the output level of the project.

2. **Effectiveness:** The project fully achieved three out of seven outcomes and 11 out of 20 outputs. More specifically, the project fully achieved all the outcomes and outputs of the most strategic dimensions of the project associated with the NFI and FMP and implemented under Component 1 and Component 2 of the project. Unintended results of the project were mainly associated with capacity development activities (at the individual and institutional level) under

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[1] The project activities were implemented in the selected pilot areas. In case there is any interest and plan to scale up the activities (within the framework of the new project) to cover other regions of Azerbaijan, the design of the new project needs to take into account the lessons learned through this evaluation.

[2] The components were subject to slight modifications; these are the titles of the components upon project completion.

[3] The Global Environment Facility (GEF) Trust Fund secured USD 1 484 247 of the funding; the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR) committed to providing USD 6 million and FAO had to contribute USD 1 million.

the Triangular Cooperation Protocol between the Forest Development Department of the MENR and the General Directorate of Forestry of Turkey (OGM). The actual achievements confirmed by this evaluation are directly attributable to the GEF-funded components. The design of these components was aligned with the core principles of the FAO Project Cycle and Strategic Framework and congruent with the provision of the Technical Assistance signed between the Government of Azerbaijan and FAO.

3. **Efficiency:** The project experienced a delay of several months at the outset that was caused by extended preparatory work; its workplan and budget were subject to several revisions and adjustments contingent on the approval of the project's steering committee. The project organized steering committee meetings on a regular basis and had the only task force meeting reported in the course of its five-year implementation. Both meeting formats demonstrated similarity in terms of agenda items and composition type (the task force meeting lacked technical and subject matter experts from the Government of Azerbaijan). The project was subject to two no-cost extensions caused by internal and external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic and design shortcomings. However, the project produced results efficiently, within the given scope and budget. Moreover, the project piloted the NFI and FMP work, thereby unleashing the potential to scale up. The project design addressed implementation-related risks to a certain extent. These risks were outlined in the project implementation and oversight provisions. The design also outlined the roles and responsibilities of the participating parties (legal entities) by providing the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the project team and international consultants.

4. **Sustainability:** Different stakeholders possessed different levels of ownership over the project results. At the national level, the Forest Development Department of the MENR proved its intellectual ownership over the NFI and FMP-related work. At the local level, ownership perceptions varied depending on the stakeholder priorities. At the same time, the evaluation found no evidence to validate any interest in or usage of the NFI and FMP by other state agencies. The sustainability and net benefit of the project results are directly linked to the political will to allocate adequate resources (financial and human) and adjust the legal framework in accordance with the evolving needs of SFM. The project significantly contributed to strengthening the capacity of the targeted institutions and individuals. However, the staffing pattern of the Government of Azerbaijan demonstrated high turnover and the loss of several key staff trained within the project framework. It was caused by several external factors, including low incentives and salary and top-level decisions related to staffing.

5. **Factors affecting performance:** The project did not actively engage non-state entities at its design and implementation stage. Instead, the project cooperated with the state sector representatives at the national and local levels. The engagement of national stakeholders was secured through the official steering committee and task force meetings, and operational-level communication.[4] The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system of the project demonstrated certain shortcomings in design and implementation. It lacked a structured M&E plan as well as systematic and consistent reporting of GEF-funded interventions under the project. In addition, its M&E was guided by the results framework indicators, which were not aligned with the "SMART" framework.[5] Moreover, the results framework lacked and did not include the GEF 7 Core Indicators. Furthermore, the M&E system did not incorporate a

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[4] Steering committee and task force meetings were both attended by high-level representatives of the Government of Azerbaijan.

[5] SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.

framework for validating the results of the activities implemented through co-financing. While in some cases the project's M&E reporting was not aligned with the targets set, the project fully achieved some results. Finally, the results reported under GEF Core Indicator 6 ("greenhouse gas emissions mitigated") were not directly attributable to the project activities. The project's M&E framework did not incorporate soil management indicators to inform reporting on changes in soil quality after pasture rehabilitation and afforestation work.

6. **Environmental and social safeguard and gender mainstreaming:** The project design was aligned with FAO's Environmental and Social Management Guidelines (2015), the GEF's Agency Minimum Standards on Environmental and Social Safeguards (2015), and the GEF's Policy on Stakeholder Engagement (2017). The project document also referred to a gender-sensitive approach that had to be applied during the project's implementation. Accordingly, the project implementation was carried out according to the gender-equality principle to the extent possible. However, some activities under Component 1 and Component 2 were gender-neutral, having a country-level focus.

7. **Co-financing:** According to the project reports, about 68 percent of in-kind co-financing was secured (against anticipated) by partnering entities (FAO and the Government of Azerbaijan) during the project implementation. However, the project did not apply any co-finance validating tools or methods.[6] Neither did it produce any separate detailed co-financing reports apart from the co-financing tables attached to the project implementation reviews.

8. **Progress to impact**: The Forest Development Department reported applying the forest development plan methodology in other regions of the country (outside the project's pilot zones). The long-term impact of the investment in seed laboratory, Absheron nursery, pasture rehabilitation, and afforestation work was not observable in the course of this evaluation; the key stakeholders positively rated the potential impact of the above-mentioned investments (which were subject to further state funding and support). Due to the scope of the project activities, the evaluation obtained no measurable evidence of environmental stress reduction and/or environmental status change caused by the project. Likewise, no evidence was gleaned with regard to any change(s) in the policy/legal/regulatory framework directly attributable to the project results.

9. **Knowledge management:** The project has invested resources and money in communication and outreach (under Component 3 of the project). However, the evaluation found the achievements in this regard to be inadequate as some outputs were partially achieved, and the evaluation was unable to attribute any changes in the content of the web page (established within the project framework) to the project activities. In this regard, the evaluation found no evidence of the MENR's commitment to maintaining the web page's content in accordance with the framework developed and approved by the project.

Conclusions

The evaluation resulted in the following key conclusions:

Conclusion 1 (Relevance): While the project was aligned with the overall strategic priorities of the partnering parties (the Government of Azerbaijan, the GEF and FAO), and its ownership rested primarily with the Forest Development Department and the MENR, the project design reflected the needs of the

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[6] The revision of the actual co-finance expenses is to be conducted in accordance with the agreed-upon procedures approved by the co-financing partners (such as internal auditing procedure).

Government of Azerbaijan at national and global levels. However, its scope, timeline, and budget proved to be inadequate. The project scope was scattered across either interlinked (such as NFI and FMP) or not directly linked (such as income generation activities for local community members, FMP, and Absheron nursery rehabilitation) dimensions.

Conclusion 2 (Effectiveness): The main strategic achievements of the project are associated with the innovative solutions related to NFI (Component 1), FMP (Component 2) and building the capacity of the Government of Azerbaijan (both institutional and individual) in the application of the above-mentioned innovative approaches.

Conclusion 3 (Efficiency): Despite its very broad scope and limited timeline and resources, the project achieved the most strategic aspects under Component 1 and Component 2. On the other hand, the project experienced certain delays due to either external factors – such as the COVID-19 pandemic, slow approval process from the Government of Azerbaijan, and martial law being imposed in the country – or challenges associated with the project design. The project governance and oversight related to steering committee and task force arrangements demonstrated mixed results in terms of the meeting frequency and thematic coverage. The engagement and contribution of third parties (such as OGM), while not planned at the design stage, demonstrated a flexible and efficient approach of consolidating human and intellectual resources to deliver on the targets set.

> **Conclusion 4 (Sustainability):** The sustainability of project results is still uncertain as it heavily depends on the political will of the Government of Azerbaijan to invest further in the achievements made – for example, investing in the activities related to NFI and FMP and following the methodology introduced within this project framework, maintaining and taking care of the pilot sites that covered afforested and rehabilitated areas; investing in seed laboratory and Absheron nursery to secure their functioning and long-term impact; allocate more financial resources (and identify co-funding options) and initiate necessary legal adjustments and policy changes to support SFM practices in the country. In addition, the sustainability of the project depends on the availability of qualified staff (of the Government of Azerbaijan) capable of applying the methodologies and approaches developed within the framework of this project.
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> **Conclusion 5 (Factors affecting performance):** The level of engagement with local stakeholders was exclusively associated with the state sector. The project M&E system was less efficient in tracking, validating and adequately reporting the achievements. The weakness of the M&E system is linked to the failure of the project to produce any M&E plan, unsatisfactory project design, and its results framework. The latter lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to the project indicators, as well as some relevant indicators to measure the mid- and long-term impact of some activities of the project related to SFM and soil quality (both of which are long-term processes).
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> **Conclusion 6 (Co-financing):** The project's financing scheme was sensitive and dependent on exogenous factors (contingent on funding from the Government of Azerbaijan) beyond the project's control. Moreover, the applied operational approach was inefficient in validating the actual co-financing secured by committed partners.
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> **Conclusion 7 (Cross-cutting: gender mainstreaming and environmental and social safeguard):** The project's focus on gender equality and opportunities for women has been weak for several reasons. The sector remains mainly male-dominated, and the project failed to produce a gender-sensitive M&E plan (as requested). The project design and implementation were quite

straightforward and followed the relevant environmental and social safeguard frameworks developed by both FAO and the GEF.

Conclusion 8 (Progress to impact): The impact of the project activities can be observed only in the long run. Therefore, the project's impact is closely tied up with its sustainability as the Government of Azerbaijan (an owner of the project results) is expected to scale up and replicate the project achievements.

Conclusion 9 (Knowledge management): Several endogenous and exogenous factors affected the project's knowledge management and outreach to a certain extent. Many of these factors were beyond the project's control – for example, the COVID-19 pandemic postponed awareness-raising activities; after completing the project, the MENR was the sole owner of the online content created within the project framework.

Based on the data gathered in the course of this evaluation, the evaluation team provided several strategic and operational recommendations:

Recommendation 1 (operational): For further planning (for example, for developing similar interventions and scaling up the project results within the framework of the follow-up project), FAO is advised to narrow the scope and focus of future projects and gradually scale up the project activities in similar strategic dimensions; instead of merging different topics (such as NFI, FMP, income generation, and pasture rehabilitation activities), it is highly recommended to focus on one specific strategic dimension. Moreover, the project design needs to address all three layers of capacity development (legal framework and policy, institutional, and individual capacity layers) and an implementation timeline (related to all the above-mentioned layers) to secure the project's sustainability.

Recommendation 2 (operational): Taking into account that the GEF is more focused on developing integrated programmes and complex operations, it needs to increase its focus on measuring the mid- or long-term impact of its operations and advancing the approaches to safeguard sustainability of its interventions. For example, the project design might incorporate SFM and sustainable soil management protocols. Furthermore, the national governments seeking to extend the project activities should be strongly encouraged to report progress made across SFM and sustainable soil management indicators and validate their contribution (in-kind and/or financial) to the project sustainability.

Recommendation 3 (operational): While planning any projects or programmes in Azerbaijan and any other country, both FAO and the GEF should enhance the stakeholder engagement approaches. It also covers the frequency, composition and agenda items of the task force meetings. While the steering committee meetings were conducted on a regular basis (semi-annually) and focused on the overall administrative and operational aspects of the project, the task force meetings had to be more technical, organized on a regular basis, and engage the subject matter experts from the beneficiary country. It is also advisable to diversify the composition of the steering committee meetings and engage the stakeholders from other relevant state agencies (or line ministries) and non-state actors to the extent possible (depending on the country context and sector structure).

Recommendation 4 (strategic): Both FAO and the GEF should continue developing the capacity of the Government of Azerbaijan in the sustainable forest and soil management domains and encourage the

participation of its relevant staff in cross-country or regional technical working groups.**[7]** Moreover, when it comes to the project steering committee composition, it is also advisable to engage other relevant agencies (not only the Forest Development Department and the MENR) to increase awareness of the project activities and topics related to SFM.

Recommendation 5 (operational): Both FAO and the GEF should consider developing the means of validating co-financing contributions from partners based on their actual involvement and monetary contributions to the project. It also implies regularly collecting information and updated statements detailing co-financing contributions.

Recommendation 6 (operational): The FAO country office needs to improve the M&E system by focusing on the development (during other project planning) of a consolidated results framework with SMART indicators and targets. It also needs to ensure that staff possesses the adequate capacity to elaborate a detailed and gender-sensitive M&E plan. In this regard, it would be highly advisable to strengthen the capacity of FAO staff on M&E practices with the support and guidance of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, whose experts for example could provide advice on the results framework; review, advise and validate the M&E plans, guide the national M&E specialists throughout the process, and so on).

Recommendation 7 (strategic): It would also be advisable to continue dialogue with the Government of Azerbaijan about necessary legal and policy changes that would secure the sustainability of the project's achievements and address all of the associated risks to sustainability (such as financial-, legal-, and policy-level gaps).

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[7] While the project incorporated pasture rehabilitation activities, it was also important to include all the relevant indicators in the results framework of the project, including soil erosion and management indicators. Change in soil conditions is a long–term process; therefore, the design phase of the project had to take into account the shortcomings associated with the time constraints and project coverage area (area to be rehabilitated).

Table 1. Global Environment Facility rating table

GEF criteria/sub-criteria	Rating	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	Highly satisfactory	Highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the country and local priorities.
A1.1. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	Highly satisfactory	It is fully aligned with the GEF and FAO strategic priorities.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs	Highly satisfactory	Fully relevant to the national, local and regional needs.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	Highly satisfactory	A unique project as no similar interventions were identified in Azerbaijan.
B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	Satisfactory	Mixed results, most strategic dimensions of the project were fully achieved.
B1.1 Delivery of project outputs	Satisfactory	11 out of 20 output indicators were fully achieved; outputs of the most strategic dimensions of the project associated with the NFI and FMP were fully achieved.
B1.2 Progress towards outcomes and project objectives	Satisfactory	Mixed results, the activities related to NGI and FMP were fully achieved.
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 1.2: An Operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring System providing reliable and up to date information on forest resources	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two areas	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 2.2: Income generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated	Moderately satisfactory	Partially achieved; actual area of pasture rehabilitated was less than planned.
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land	Moderately satisfactory	Partially achieved; Absheron nursery and seed laboratory was not fully functional (as expected); actual areas deforested were less than planned.
Outcome 3.1: Project implementation based on results-based management (RBM)	Moderately unsatisfactory[8]	Partially achieved as the M&E plan was not developed, and the results framework demonstrated some shortcomings.
Outcome 3.2: Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices	Moderately unsatisfactory	Partially achieved; web portal provided very general information about forestry and there was no reference to the project. Dissemination of information was not completed.
Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/outcomes	Satisfactory	The activities related to NFI and FMP were fully achieved.
B1.3 Likelihood of impact	Moderately satisfactory	It depends on the project sustainability and the willingness of the Government of Azerbaijan to scale up the project results.
C. EFFICIENCY		

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[8] A moderately unsatisfactory rating is given in case outcomes achieved are somewhat lower than expected and/or there were significant shortcomings.

C1. Efficiency[9]	Satisfactory	The project secured full achievement of the most strategic parts of the project under Component 1 and Component 2; activities under Component 3 were less efficient.

D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	Moderately likely	It fully depends on the will of the Government of Azerbaijan to allocate funds and resources to secure SFM practices.
D1.1. Financial risks	Moderately likely	While the Government of Azerbaijan did not officially report allocating financial resources to sustain the project results, it scaled up the FMP-related activities.
D1.2. Socio-political risks	Not likely	A stable socio-political environment.
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	Highly likely	Structural changes and high staff turnover of the Government of Azerbaijan might affect institutional memory and scale-up of the project's achievements.
D1.4. Environmental risks	Not likely	No environmental risks were identified whatsoever.
D2. Catalysis and replication	Moderately likely	The Government of Azerbaijan replicated the FMP methodology and reported developing FMP for other regions of the country (beyond the pilot areas).

E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

E1. Project design and readiness[10]	Moderately satisfactory	The project was too ambitious and incorporated activities from different strategic dimensions (such as income generation and NFI).
E2. Quality of project implementation	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results: full achievement of strategic activities and outcomes and partial achievement of others; shortcomings in M&E and co-financing validation.
E2.1 Quality of project implementation by FAO (BH, LTO, PTF, etc.)	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results: full achievement of strategic activities and outcomes and partial achievement of others; Shortcomings in M&E and co-financing validation.
E2.1 Project oversight (steering committee, project working group, etc.)	Satisfactory	Steering committee meetings were organized on a regular basis (semi-annually); just one TF meeting was conducted.
E3. Quality of project execution For DEX projects: Project Management Unit/BH; For OPIM projects: Executing Agency	Satisfactory	Despite the broad scope of the project, its limited budget, and a number of external factors that caused certain implementation delays, the budget holder (FAO) managed to achieve fully three out of seven outcomes while requesting two non-cost project extensions.
E4. Financial management and co-financing	Moderately satisfactory	The project lacked the system to validate co-financing.
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	Moderately satisfactory	Exclusively with the state sector.
E6. Communication, knowledge management and knowledge products	Moderately unsatisfactory	Web protocol provided very generic information about forestry and there was no reference to the project. Dissemination of information was not completed.

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[9] Includes cost efficiency and timeliness.
[10] This refers to factors affecting the project's ability to start as expected, such as the presence of sufficient capacity among executing partners at project launch.

E7. Overall quality of M&E	Unsatisfactory	No M&E plan was developed, and the results framework lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to the project indicators.
E7.1 M&E design	Unsatisfactory	No M&E plan was developed, and the results framework lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to the project indicators.
E7.2 M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources)	Highly unsatisfactory	There was no M&E plan developed.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results.
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	Satisfactory	The project applied the gender-equality principle to the extent possible.
F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples	Satisfactory	Indirectly contributed to the human rights agenda; no indigenous people live in the pilot areas of the project.
F2. Environmental and social safeguards	Highly satisfactory	The project was fully aligned with environmental and social safeguards.
Overall project rating	**Satisfactory**	

Source: FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

1.   Introduction

This report presents the findings and conclusions of an independent evaluation of the project entitled Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan (hereinafter referred to as "the project"). This decentralized evaluation,[11] which started in September 2021, was commissioned by the Office of Evaluation of FAO and was scheduled for completion by February 2022. It is the first decentralized evaluation managed by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia.

1.1   Evaluation scope and objectives

FAO commenced this terminal evaluation to assess the progress made towards the impact and sustainability of project outcomes and to detect any design and implementation issues that need to be addressed before scaling up the project's outputs. In addition, the evaluation intended to identify any future actions required to expand on the existing project in subsequent phases, to mainstream and upscale its products and practices, and to disseminate information to management authorities and institutions with responsibilities in food security, conservation, and the sustainable use of natural resources, as well as small-scale farmer agricultural production and ecosystem conservation to ensure the continuity of the processes initiated by the project.

Overall, the objectives of the evaluation were as follows:

- To determine the likelihood of future impacts, especially relating to environmental sustainability, due to changes following the project's interventions.

- To provide an assessment of the project's performance, gender disaggregated achievements, and the implementation of planned project activities and planned outputs against actual results.
- To identify lessons learned applicable to other countries.

The evaluation has addressed a number of key evaluation questions grouped under the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, factors affecting performance, environmental and social safeguards, gender, co-financing, progress to impact, and knowledge management (Table 2).

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[11] Decentralized evaluations are managed outside the FAO Office of Evaluation – that is, by FAO country, subregional and regional offices, and also by units and services at FAO headquarters.

Table 2. Key evaluation questions

Evaluation criteria	Key evaluation questions
Relevance	1. Were the project outcomes congruent with the GEF's focal areas/operational programme strategies and country priorities, as well as FAO's Country Programming Framework? 2. Was the project design appropriate for delivering the expected outcomes? 3. Has there been any change in the relevance of the project since its design, such as new national policies, plans or programmes that affect the relevance of the project objectives and goals?
Effectiveness	4. To what extent have project objectives been achieved, and have there been any unintended results? 5. To what extent were the project's actual outcomes commensurate with the expected outcomes? 6. To what extent can the attainment of results be attributed to the GEF-funded component?
Efficiency	7. (Implementation) To what extent did FAO deliver on project identification, concept preparation, appraisal, preparation, approval and start-up, oversight and supervision? How well were risks identified and managed? 8. (Execution) To what extent did the execution agency effectively discharge its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project? 9. To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently, cost-effectively, and management been able to adapt to any changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation? 10. Was the project cost-effective? How does the project cost/time versus output/outcomes compare to that of similar projects?
Sustainability	11. What is the likelihood that the project results will continue to be useful or will remain even after the end of the project? 12. What are the key risks which may affect the sustainability of the project benefits?
Factors affecting performance	Monitoring and Evaluation 13. (M&E design) Was the M&E plan practical and sufficient? 14. (M&E implementation) Did the M&E system operate as per the M&E plan? 15. Was information gathered in a systematic manner, using appropriate methodologies? 16. Was the information from the M&E system appropriately used to make timely decisions and to foster learning during project implementation? Stakeholder engagement 17. Were other actors, such as civil society, indigenous populations or the private sector involved in project design or implementation, and if so what was the effect thereof on the project results? Co-financing 18. To what extent did the expected co-financing materialize, and how did any shortfall in co-financing or materialization of greater than expected co-financing affect project results? Knowledge management 19. How is the project assessing, documenting and sharing its results, lessons learned and experiences?

	20. To what extent are communication products and activities likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results?
Environmental and social safeguards	21. To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?
Gender	22. To what extent were gender considerations taken into account in designing and implementing the project? Was the project implemented in a manner that ensured gender-equitable participation and benefits?
Progress to Impact	23. To what extent may the progress made towards long-term impact be attributed to the project? 24. Was there any evidence of environmental stress reduction and environmental status change, or any change in the policy/legal/regulatory framework? 25. Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards long-term impact?

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation ToR. Budapest.

1.2 Evaluation methodology

At the inception phase, the evaluation team conducted stakeholder analysis through structured document research and consultations with the country team of FAO Azerbaijan to gather qualitative information about the implementing partners and direct beneficiaries. Overall, the stakeholder analysis helped to categorize key actors by the role(s) they played in the project as follows: (i) those who were part of the project's management and governance structure; (ii) those who directly or indirectly benefited from the activities (direct and indirect beneficiaries); and (iii) those who supported the project's implementation (implementing partners).

The evaluation applied a participatory approach by including all relevant stakeholders to achieve a high level of ownership with respect to the evaluation results. It also used various data collection techniques such as key informant interviews (semi-structured online and in-person interviews), focus group discussions, direct site observations, and structured document analysis. More specifically, the evaluation team arranged in-person and in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders in Azerbaijan, including the representatives of FAO (Azerbaijan), the Government of Azerbaijan, national implementing partners, local municipalities, and local foresters. The team also interviewed international experts and the members of the project steering committee and task force. In addition, the team conducted focus group discussions with local farmers and community members (which was not feasible remotely) in Aghdash, Gakh and Sheki regions,[12] as well as with direct beneficiaries (beekeepers and hazelnut growers) of income-generation activities of the project. The evaluation team also visited the Absheron nursery, seed laboratory and forest information centre – geographical information systems (GIS) – laboratory supported within the project framework. Direct site observations, focus group discussions, and in-person interviews allowed the team to triangulate (cross-validate) primary and secondary data, secure a higher level of engagement of interviewees, and conduct an in-depth assessment of the project results in the pilot areas of the project. In total, the evaluation team interviewed over 30 national and international stakeholders and conducted two focus group discussions with 26 members of local communities.

Furthermore, the evaluation addressed the gender-mainstreaming agenda by responding to key evaluation questions outlined in the ToR of the evaluation, and assessing the project performance through the prism of the FAO's Policy on Gender Equality and the FAO's Guide to Mainstreaming

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[12] Pilot areas of the project.

Gender in the FAO's Project Cycle. While reviewing environmental and social safeguarding, the evaluation referred to several frameworks, including the FAO's Environmental and Social Management Guidelines (2015), the Global Environment Facility's (GEF) Agency Minimum Standards on Environmental and Social Safeguards (2015), and Policy on Stakeholder Engagement (2017). Despite the forestry sector being male-dominated, the evaluation attempted to ensure that women were adequately represented in the interviews. The evaluation team assessed how the project activities benefited women and safeguarded their equal participation in income-generation activities. In this regard, the evaluation team conducted focus group discussions with community members, including women, in the target areas, conducted in-person interviews, and made site visits to the direct beneficiaries of the income-generation activities of the project. The list of stakeholders interviewed in the course of this evaluation is provided under Appendix 1.

The evaluation team reconstructed the project's logical framework (Appendix 2) to obtain a strategic overview of and better visualize the logical linkages between the various parts of the project, including activities leading to the production of outputs, outputs resulting in the accomplishments of defined outcomes, and the anticipated long-term results. In addition, the evaluation team reconstructed the Theory of Change for the project (Figure 1) to outline the main pathways from outputs to project outcomes and the expected results of the project. The Theory of Change also links the project output and outcomes to the long-term development agenda of the country, its commitments under the Paris Agreement related to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Overall, the "scope of project control" covered 20 outputs and seven outcomes. The different colours of the boxes distinguish the activities under one or more outputs that led to changes at the outcome level. For example, a set of anticipated outputs (from outputs 1.1 to 1.2.4) were related to the national forest assessment and monitoring system and incorporated the establishment of the General Coordinating Committee (GCC) of SFM, the development of a concept paper and guidelines on SFM, the identification of national-level SFM criteria and indicators, a training session for foresters and biodiversity users, and the establishment and equipping of the GIS laboratory. Altogether, the achievement of these outputs led to the accomplishment of direct outcomes 1.1 and 1.2.

The "scope of project control" represents a straightforward diagram linking a set of outputs to a specific outcome. In the meantime, the "sphere of influence" covers intermediate outcomes which reflect the thematic clustering of each component of the project. Obviously, the change pathway of the project at the final outcomes group level under the "sphere of influence" was greatly affected by a combination of mutually reinforcing activities categorized under the "scope of project control" and the "sphere of influence." The achievement of the outcomes (at completion) contributed to high-level expected results from (and the long-term impact of) the programme, expressed through the commitment made by the country under the Paris Agreement related to the UNFCCC and the SDGs. And yet, political will, ownership, and the commitment of the Government of Azerbaijan remain key driving factors affecting the "sphere of interest" of the Theory of Change.

Figure 1. Theory of Change
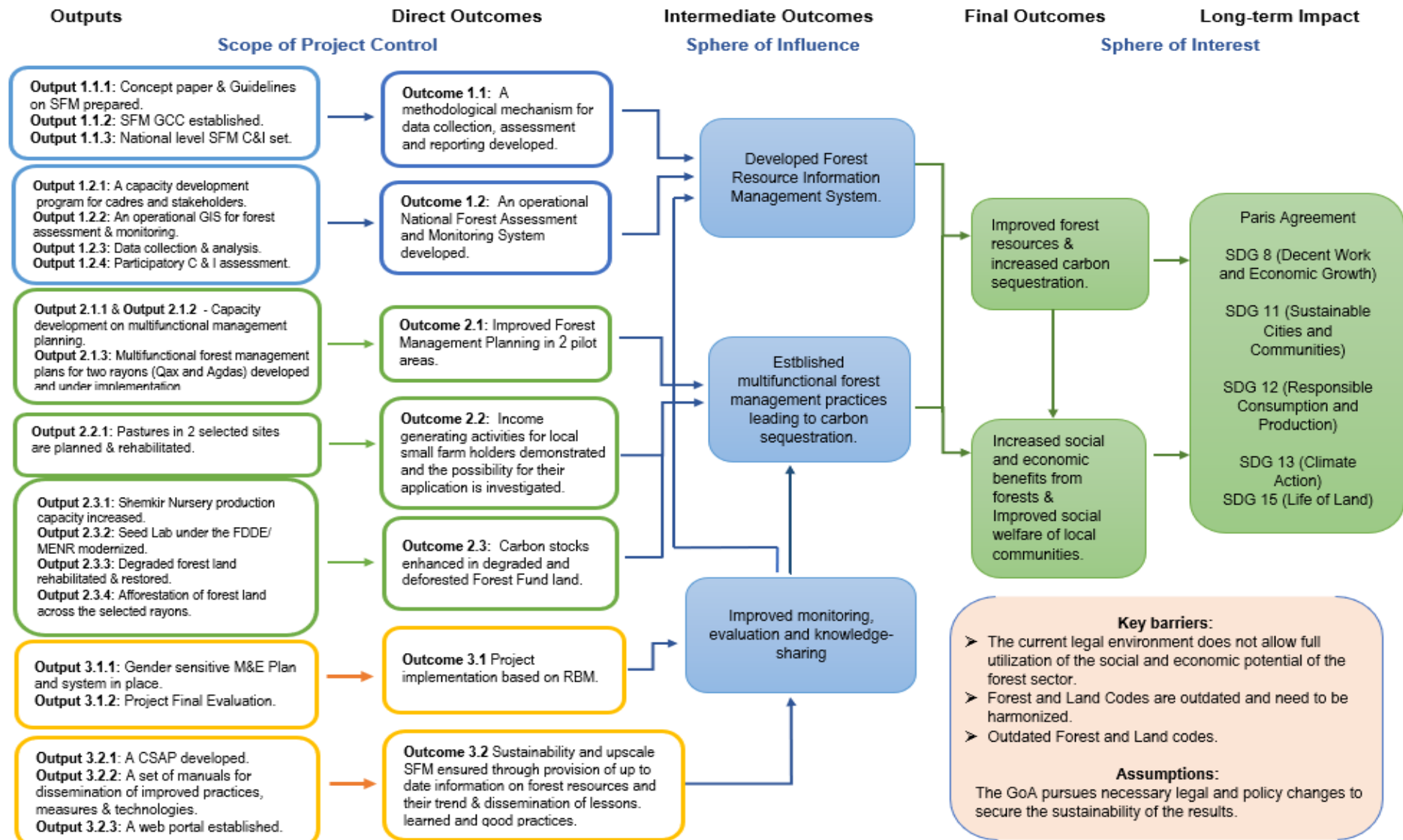
Source: FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

1.3   Intended users

The primary users of the evaluation are donor organizations, FAO management and country offices, the GEF coordination unit, the project's operational partners, national and international counterparts of the project,[13] and future formulators and implementers of technical assistance projects. The findings, conclusion, and recommendations produced in the course of this evaluation will be used to secure accountability in response to the information needs and interests of policymakers and other decision-makers. The evaluation results and lessons learned will be shared with managers or others responsible for programme operations and are expected to be incorporated into future planning to improve the design, implementation, and scale-up of similar technical assistance interventions.

1.4   Composition of the evaluation team

The evaluation team comprised two independent consultants: Nelly Dolidze, Evaluation Team Leader, who was responsible for developing the evaluation inception report, evaluation methodology and framework, and data-gathering tools, leading data collection (including in-person interviews, focus group discussions, desk research, and preparing the evaluation report); and Ruslan Salmanov, National Evaluation Consultant, who contributed to all parts of the evaluation and provided meaningful support during fieldwork data collection.

1.5   Evaluation limitations

There are several inherent limitations of this evaluation:

- The evaluation did not receive the latest progress report for July–December 2021 (which was under development). In addition, the evaluation did not receive the project's terminal report. Therefore, the evaluation assessed only the progress made by the project up to June 2021.
- The evaluation did not receive validation documents related to scaling up and co-financing and could not certify an actual area of land rehabilitated and reforested by the Government of Azerbaijan.

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[13] The Forest Development Department of the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, members of the project task force including the funding liaison officer, and the lead technical officer, the project steering committee members, the GEF, and other relevant stakeholders.

2. Project background

The project was designed upon the request of the Government of Azerbaijan, specifically by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources (MENR), and was initially anticipated to be launched in October 2017. The project was scheduled for completion by March 2019. However, it was twice subject to a non-cost extension. Pursuant to the second extension,[14] approved in June 2020, the project was continued to December 2021. The total budget of the project was USD 8 484 247. The GEF Trust Fund secured USD 1 484 247 of the funding. In the meantime, the MENR committed to providing USD 6 million (in-kind contribution). FAO had to contribute USD 1 million in the form of technical staff and programmes being implemented in Azerbaijan and running in parallel with the project.

Box 1. Project background

Implementation dates at design: October 2017 to March 2019.
Actual implementation dates: January 2018 to December 2021.
Total budget: USD 8 484 247.
GEF funding: USD 1 484 247.
Government of Azerbaijan funding (in-kind): USD 6 million.
FAO funding (in-kind): USD 1 million.
Goal: Support the implementation of sustainable forest management in Azerbaijan, to increase the social and economic benefits gleaned from forests, to improve the quality of existing forests, and to increase carbon sequestration.
Components at completion:
Component 1 – Forest resource information management system.
Component 2 – Forest management planning.
Component 3 – Monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge sharing.

Source: FAO (2017). Project Document. Baku.

The project objective was to support the implementation of sustainable forest management in Azerbaijan, increase the social and economic benefits gleaned from forests, improve the quality of existing forests, and increase carbon sequestration. In order to address the above-mentioned goals, the project incorporated three main components. It is noteworthy here that one out of these three components was subject to adjustments during the course of project implementation (_Toc97594015Table 3).

Table 3. Project components at design and completion

Project components at design	Project components at completion
Component 1: Forest resource information management system.	Component 1: Forest resource information management system.
Component 2: Multifunctional forest management leading to carbon sequestration, improvement in forest resources and their contribution to the improvement of social welfare of local communities.	Component 2: Forest management planning.
Component 3: Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing.	Component 3: Monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge sharing.

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2020. Progress reports. Baku.

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[14] The first extension was approved in April 2019.

Component 1 (forest resource information management system) was aimed at supporting the development of a system providing countrywide reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources, forestry-related elements, and their assessment under seven globally accepted criteria. This component incorporated several capacity-development activities, including the development of a concept paper and guidelines on SFM, the development of the national SFM criteria and indicators, the creation of an NFI manual, and conducting forest data collection and analysis.

Component 2 (forest management planning)[15] was aimed at revitalizing the forest management planning system and providing up-to-date maps and state-of-the-art tools for systematic sampling. This component was designed to pave the way for carbon-sequestering implementations, and to establish an appropriate environment for improving the economic benefits for the local communities and smallholders. The project identified two regions of the country (Aghdash and Gakh) as pilot areas (Figure 2). At the same time, the project was focused on supporting the modernization of Shakmir Regional Forest Nurseries Institution (5 ha) in order to create suitable conditions for large-scale rehabilitation and restoration of degraded forest areas. In the course of the project implementation, Shakmir Regional Forest Nurseries Institution was replaced by Absheron Seedling Institute (nursery). This component also incorporated institutional and individual capacity-development activities such as establishing and equipping the GIS laboratory of the MENR, and conducting training sessions for local foresters and the relevant staff at the MENR. In addition, the project teams conducted pasture rehabilitation work in Zardab region and multifunctional forest management planning for the forestry units of Zaqatala, Gabala, and Shamakhi regions.

Figure 2. Two pilot areas (Aghdash and Gakh regions)
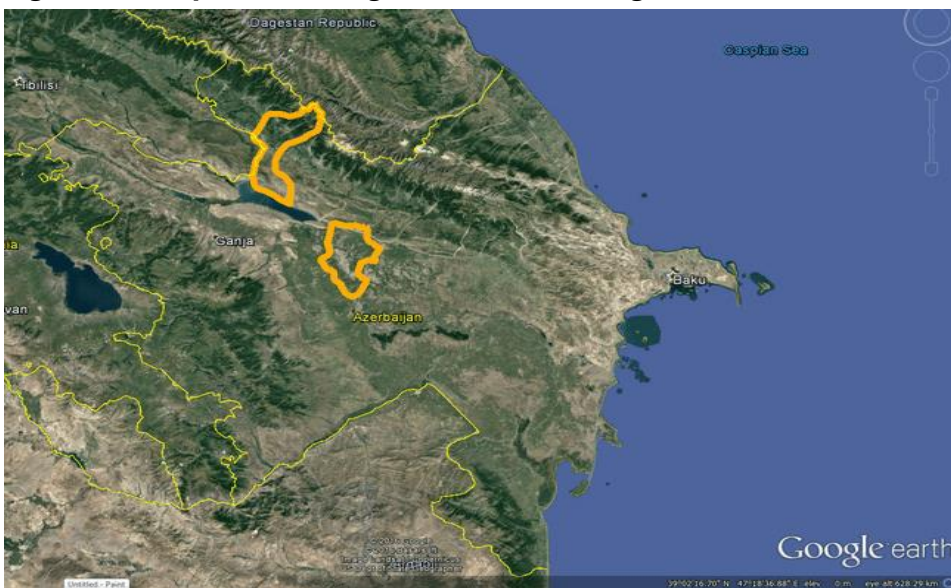
Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku.

Component 3 (monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge sharing) entailed the development of an M&E system, guidelines, and information materials to raise awareness about the environment and climate-change issues, the role of forestry in mitigating climate change, as well as building the

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[15] As defined at completion.

capacity of forestry organizations. The main deliverables of this component included but were not limited to:

- developing a gender-sensitive M&E plan and system;
- developing a communication strategy and action plan;
- carrying out awareness-raising activities, as well as incorporating activities to develop and distribute NFI manuals for field data collection for forestry experts and technicians to capture and describe the improved practices, measures, and technologies; and
- developing and integrating a web page into the MENR web portal.

The project was implemented in close cooperation with state agencies and representatives of local academic and research centres, and non-governmental organizations. Thus, the project signed an agreement with a number of local experts and non-governmental organizations to implement the project's activities (Table 4).

Table 4. Local and international partners

Organization	Role and responsibilities	Engagement in the project
HEYECAN (NGO)	Supported SFM criteria and indicators implementation and was included during project design in the technical groups developing the relevant components.	Component 1
Turkish General Directorate of Forestry (GDF)	Forest management planning activities.	Component 2
Local consultants	Pasture/forest rehabilitation activities in Aghdash and Gakh regions.	Component 2
Scientific Research Institute of Forestry[16]		
Azerbaijan Greenery and Landscape OSC		
Puls-R LLC	It was engaged in hazelnut growing activities for target beneficiaries in pilot regions.	Component 2
Scientific Research Institute on Crop Husbandry	It supported the implementation of pasture rehabilitation activities.	Component 2
Yagmur-2 LLC	It supported the establishment of a sheltered area in Absheron Seedling Institute in Jeyranbatan area.	Component 2
International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA)	Awareness-raising activities.	Component 3

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku.

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[16] The institute was abolished and was incorporated into the Centre on Forestry Economy Measures.

3.   Findings

3.1   Relevance

Finding 1. The project demonstrated relevance with the country contexts and was fully aligned with the strategic priorities of the Government of Azerbaijan, FAO Country Programming Framework, and GEF operational programme strategies.

Finding 2. The project design was quite ambitious, with a very broad thematic spectrum and significant conditional co-financing from the beneficiary country.

Finding 3. The budget allocation was perceived to be inconsistent with the scope of work planned under Component 1 and Component 2 of the project.

Finding 4. There was no significant strategic and priority change at the national level that affected the project's goal, objectives, and outcomes. However, there were changes at the output level of the project.

> The relevance of the project outcomes was assessed according to the extent to which each outcome was aligned with national strategic needs and the relevant technical objectives priorities stipulated by the donor agencies (FAO and the GEF).

> Desk research and in-person interviews validated that the project objectives and outcomes were consistent with the country's strategic needs and priorities, which were clearly articulated through various strategic documents, including the National Forest Programme (forest policy statement and action plan).[17] The above-mentioned paper, promulgated in 2013, covers a 15-year period from 2015 to 2030. It aims to promote the sustainable enhancement of the country's forests to meet public needs in the long term. In this paper, the Government of Azerbaijan acknowledged the following major challenges and development needs in the forestry sector:

> - To develop forest planning and monitoring as the country was facing difficulties accessing modern inventory tools and techniques and in providing reliable and up-to-date data for the planning and management of forest resources (the inventory and data used for the planning and management of the country's forests was acknowledged as being outdated).
> - To improve existing forests and expand forest areas as well as introduce preventive measures to counter illegal logging, overgrazing, and other sources of forest damage.
> - To strengthen public awareness of, and stakeholder participation in, sustainable forest management (SFM).
> - To improve the level of qualified human resources at all levels.

> Overall, the project was designed to contribute to the implementation of the draft National Forest Policy (NFP)[18] for 2015–2030 and to support Azerbaijan's commitments under the UNFCCC, in which the country pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 35 percent by 2030 relative to its 1990 emissions.[19] It is noteworthy that in 2019, Azerbaijan joined the international Bonn Challenge on forest landscape restoration and committed to restoring 170 000 ha of forest by

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[17] http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/aze163873.pdf

[18] The MENR has developed and endorsed the National Forestry Program (NFP) of Azerbaijan for a 15-year period with FAO technical assistance.

[19] Information presented to the UNFCCC on the Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) of Azerbaijan is available here:
https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/Azerbaijan%20First/INDC%20Azerbaijan.pdf

2030.[20] The country also pledged to restore an additional 100 000 ha, conditional upon receiving funding under the Bonn Challenge. In addition, the project objectives and outcomes were aligned with a number of the SDGs, such as:

- SDG 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere);
- SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all);
- SDG 13 (take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts);
- SDG 15 (protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss); and
- SDG 17 (strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development).

The project was also aligned with the National Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity (NBSAP) for 2017–2020,[21] which, among other things, highlighted the importance of the sustainable use of forests and enhancing community involvement there. The following activities of the NBSAP action plan directly correlated with the project agenda (Table 5).

Table 5. Link between project activities and the national strategy (NBSAP)

NBSAP activities	Project outputs
Activity 3.1.1: Develop proposals and implement pilot projects on leaching soils subjected to salinization and secondary salinization, and afforestation of these areas using tree and bush species adapted to these areas.	Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are rehabilitated. Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored.
Activity 3.1.2: Develop and implement urgent measures to provide for natural regeneration, protection and sustainable use of forests, rare shrubs, sparse xerophytes forests in border areas.	Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared. Output 1.1.2: SFM GCC established. Output 1.1.3: National level SFM criteria and indicators set identified and agreed by stakeholders. Output 1.2.1: A capacity development programme for cadres and stakeholders. Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring. Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis. Output 1.2.4: Participatory criteria and indicators assessment. Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed. Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained. Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.
Activity 3.2.1: Strengthen the role of local communities in forest management to ensure sustainable use of forest resources.	Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored. Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected rayons.

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku.

It is also noteworthy that in 2012, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed a decree that approved the development concept, Azerbaijan – 2020: Outlook for the Future. Among other

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[20] The Bonn Challenge (launched by the Government of Germany and the International Union for Conservation of Nature) is a global goal to restore 150 million ha of degraded and deforested landscapes by 2020, and 350 million ha by 2030.

[21] https://www.cbd.int/doc/world/az/az-nbsap-v2-en.pdf.

things, the decree outlined that "the establishment and restoration of forests will increase the share of forests in the total territory of the country, roadside areas and atmospheric air will be protected and trees planted to reduce the noise generated by transport vehicles."[22] At the same time, desk research and in-person interviews revealed that existing national budget allocation schemes did not prioritize forest assessment and monitoring as the Government of Azerbaijan allocated very limited funds to the sector (as a whole) and forest management planning activities in particular. Moreover, prior to the project implementation, the existing data on national forests were incomplete and outdated, as the country undertook the latest forestry inventory in 1988.

Furthermore, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB): "In 2017 Azerbaijan ranked 71st globally and sixth in central and west Asia with respect to its resilience to climate change impacts… natural hazard risks also increase because of land degradation and erosion arising from agricultural overuse, land conversion, forest destruction, and improper irrigation techniques."[23]

With regard to the project's relevance to the FAO Country Programming Framework, which outlined that its support to the country was governed by its five global strategic objectives (SOs) translated into five regional strategic priority areas. Desk research and in-person interviews validated that the project was aligned with two SOs of FAO and one strategic priority (SP) of FAO's Country Programming Framework, listed as follows:

- SO-2: Make agriculture, fisheries and forestry more productive and sustainable;
- SO-3: Reduce rural poverty; and
- SP-6: Sustainable, equitable, and efficient forestry, land, and water resources management.

SP-6 incorporates three main directions, and the project activities were expressly aligned with the following two:

Institutional capacities strengthened for sustainable management with a focus on: (i) strengthening institutional capacities for sustainable land management, with a focus on reclaiming degraded lands, preventing soil erosion in mountainous and highland areas and restoring soil fertility; and (ii) developing capacity by providing training in the introduction of appropriate approaches to ensure better salinity management in irrigated lands, with a focus on the development of tools, farmers' participatory training approaches, techniques and integrated agricultural practices (such as water, soil, and crop practices) pursuant to salinity management of irrigated lands.

Sustainable management of forest and tree resources, and the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded forest land supported in line with the NFP action plan with a focus on: (i) increased national capacity for the assessment of forest and tree resources and compiling a forest inventory, as well as multifunctional and participatory forest management planning at local and national levels; (ii) enhanced capacity for forest rehabilitation, restoration, afforestation, forest nursery production, and plantation techniques; and (iii) providing support to improve climate-change mitigation and adaptation activities within the forestry sector.

In-person interviews and comparative analysis of the project outcomes revealed the outcomes' link to the relevant GEF SOs and programmes reflected in different GEF documents. For example, under the 7th GEF replenishment (known as GEF-7), aiming to support developing countries to

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[22] https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/cps-aze-2014-2018-sd-06.pdf.

[23] https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/510266/cps-aze-2019-2023.pdf.

implement a low-emission development solution compatible with the objectives of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, the GEF operates across three overarching climate change objectives (CCOs)[24] as follows:

1. CCO-1: Promote innovation and technology transfer for sustainable energy breakthroughs incorporating the following four prioritized areas for GEF-7 in support of climate-change mitigation – decentralized renewable power with energy storage; electric driving technologies and electric mobility; accelerating energy efficiency adoption; and cleantech innovation.
2. CCO-2: Demonstrate mitigation options with systemic impacts via the three GEF-7 cross-cutting impact programmes – sustainable cities; food systems, land use, and restoration; and sustainable forest management. 25
3. CCO-3: Mainstreaming mitigation concerns into sustainable development strategies exemplified by the GEF's support for national communications, biennial update reports, technology needs assessments, nationally determined contributions, and the Capacity-Building Initiative for Transparency.

A detailed analysis of the project outcomes and GEF CCOs corroborated the relevance of the project design with CCO-2, and its compliance with one of the four GEF land degradation (LD) objectives – LD-2, related to forest landscapes (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Global Environment Facility land degradation focal area objectives and programme priorities

Source: www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/publications/GEF_LDFAbrochure_CRA_2_0_0.pdf

For ease of reference, LD-2 – "generate sustainable flows of ecosystem services from forests, including in drylands" – is focused on "integration and management of forests in agricultural landscapes by promoting access to innovative financing mechanisms, technology, and best practices combined with on-the-ground application".[26] The above objective also incorporates "a specific program priority on forest landscape management and restoration to reinforce the important role of forests for tackling these threats in agricultural landscapes". [27]

To address this evaluation question, the evaluation team conducted in-person interviews with key stakeholders and validated their feedback through a comparative analysis of the project with similar interventions.[28] Overall, the project design incorporated three main components, seven

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[24] https://www.thegef.org/what-we-do/topics/climate-change-mitigation.

[25]https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/GEF-7%20Programming%20Directions%20-%20GEF_R.7_19.pdf#page=51&zoom=100,93,96.

[26] https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/publications/GEF_LDFAbrochure_CRA_2_0_0.pdf
[27] https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/publications/GEF_LDFAbrochure_CRA_2_0_0.pdf
[28] For example, Support to Institutionalization of NFMS For Redd+ in Uganda (World Bank and FAO) and Forest for Prosperity Project in Nepal (World Bank). The details are provided under the findings section of this report presented under evaluation question number 9.

outcomes, and 20 outputs. Comparative analysis of the project outcomes and outputs presented in the project document, the project inception report (dated May 2018), and progress/implementation reports for 2018–2020, revealed minor changes in the project's components, outcomes and outputs. While the title of Component 2 was adjusted at the start of the project activities, its thematic focus (along with the titles and thematic focus of the other two components), remained intact throughout the project implementation (Appendix 3). Along with the above-mentioned adjustment of Component 2,[29] the project results framework underwent certain modifications, such as:

- The final version of outcome 2.2 did not incorporate any reference to investigating the realization of income-generating activities.
- Instead of Shemkir nursery, outcome 2.3.1 referred to building the capacity of Absheron nursery.[30]
- The final version of output 2.3.2 did not incorporate any reference to the MENR's modernization of the Forest Development Department (as it stipulated at the design stage).

The interviewed stakeholders and desk research confirmed that the above modifications had no significant impact on the thematic focus of the project. With regard to the overall conceptual structure of the project, some key stakeholders believed that the project design was too ambitious in terms of its timeframe and scope of work. Others said that the budget allocated for Component 1 and Component 2 was inconsistent with the scope of work. Furthermore, many stakeholders claimed that the NFI work planned in the course of this project had to be started all over, as the country lacked systematic NFI data. Both the project documents and interviewed stakeholders confirmed the importance of building the capacity of national and local staff. This above-mentioned information was validated by the report produced within the project framework as follows:

At the beginning of the 21st century (2002–2003), national experts carried out a few forest management-planning inventories, applying the 'Russian' method, based on forest age classes. In 2018 national experts have tested a 'Turkish' method for forest management planning inventories, based on forest age classes. However, no systematic national-level forest inventory has ever been conducted in Azerbaijan.

In addition, key stakeholders also referred to similar technical assistance projects carried out by other donors to support beneficiary countries in building their institutional and human resources capacity, and developing their NFIs.

According to key stakeholders, forest inventories have been recognized as prerequisites for forest planning. They are implemented at various levels, including national, regional, provincial, municipal, geographic/political unit, and even global, depending on the inventory goal and decision-making processes. This current project was focused on conducting NFI work at the national level. According to FAO, the NFIs have a broader scope to provide the overall information:

National and subnational forest inventories aim to generate forest-related data and information for a whole country or subnational administrative/geographic entity. They are not specifically geared towards managing specific forests but provide the overall information required to

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[29] At design, the phrasing of Component 2 was revised from "Component 2: Multifunctional Forest Management Leading to Carbon Sequestration, Improvement in Forest and Tree Resources and their Contribution to the Improvement of Social Welfare of Local Communities" to "Component 2: Forest Management Planning."

[30] According to key stakeholders and desk analysis, this change was caused by the changed priority of the MENR.

formulate forest-related policies and regulations and to monitor the sustainability of all forest functions in a country or subnational entity.[31]

The experts interviewed in the course of this evaluation pointed out that given the scope and complexity of the NFI- and FMP-related work, this type of technical assistance intervention (either NFI or FMP) was usually framed and presented as separate technical assistance projects/programmes with budgets varying from USD 1 500 000 to several million dollars, and lasting two or three years.[32] In addition, the project document addressed the existing capacity of the national forestry organization as follows: "While DFD employs a total of 25 staff, the whole forestry organization employs 480 forest engineers and 230 forest technicians. Overall, the organization has limited funds and is both technically and financially weak." It is also important to highlight that according to the project design, outcome 1.1 – a methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed – was scheduled for completion within the first month of the project's beginning (2018). Moreover, outcome 1.2 – an operational national forest assessment and monitoring system providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources – was expected to be achieved within a two-year period (between the beginning of 2018 and end of 2019). The budget allocated for the above work was USD 201 526 from the GEF Trust Fund, USD 300 000 from the MENR, and USD 200 000 from FAO sources. Overall, co-financing constituted about 71 percent of the total budget planned for Component 1.

Furthermore, outcome 2.1 (improved forest management planning in two regions) was expected to be achieved within a two-year period. Its total budget of USD 71 903 was provided through the GEF Trust Fund. The MENR had to contribute USD 900 000, and FAO's contribution was USD 50 000. Altogether, planned co-financing for outcome 2.1 was expected to be about 93 percent of the total budget for this outcome. The project progress and implementation report confirmed that the above-mentioned activities had not been completed in accordance with the set timeline.

Desk research revealed that the project design relied on significant co-financing contributions from the MENR and FAO. According to the stakeholders, the anticipated co-funding did not completely materialize, and this was perceived to be a challenge in the course of the project implementation.[33] Table 6 presents the project's financial plan disaggregated by outcomes and co-financier (such as FAO, the GEF and the MENR).

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[31]
https://rise.articulate.com/share/8rUkNFP51SYfsHIDW8aaPufTK8mpsmsy#/lessons/p4AzIDqh7rnXYEteDuzKxLFltcBr4peh.

[32] For example, National forest and wildlife inventory (IFFN), IVORY COAST - IGN FIIGN FI; Guatemala launches its second National Forest Inventory | REDD+ Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (fao.org); Participatory Sustainable forest management project successfully implemented | FAO in Mongolia | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

[33] Co-financing details are discussed in the relevant section of this evaluation.

Table 6. Financial plan (by component, outcome, and co-financier)

Component/Outcome	Co-financing by source				GEF Trust Fund		Total funding
	MENR	FAO	Total co-financing	% Co-financing	GEF	% GEF	
Component 1: Forest Resource Information Management System	300 000	200 000	500 000	71%	206 830	29%	706 830
Component 2: Multifunctional forest management leading to carbon sequestration, improvement in forest resources and their contribution to improvement of social welfare of local communities	5 100 000	450 000	5 550 000	85%	960 500	15%	6 510 500
Component 3: Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing	300 000	200 000	500 000	73%	181 985	27%	681 985
Project management	300 000	150 000	450 000	77%	134 932	23%	584 932
Total Funding	6 000 000	1 000 000	7 000 000	83%	1 484 247	17%	8 484 247

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku.

Neither desk research nor in-person interviews confirmed any significant changes in national policies that affected the project objectives and its goal. The majority of the interviewed national stakeholders (state sector representatives) believed that the project goal and objectives were highly relevant to the country throughout the project's implementation. Different groups of stakeholders identified different priority areas. Some mentioned that forest protection measures were among the national priorities and that fruit gardens (so-called agroforestry) were a cross-regional priority. Others emphasized that forest inventory and forest management remained among the top priorities in the sector. It is also noteworthy that in the course of the project implementation, FAO proposed to the MENR that the National Forest Programme developed in 2013 be revised. The FAO Country Office reported conducting a number of consultations with the MENR and a National Forest Policy Dialogue entitled Updating the National Forestry Programme and restructuring the forestry institutions in Azerbaijan was organized in July 2018. During the event, participating parties talked through the problems and needs regarding forest management with respect to the National Forest Programme and its action plan for 2015–2030.

It is also important to highlight that in 2019, Azerbaijan joined the Bonn Challenge on forest landscape restoration and committed to restoring 170 000 ha of forests by 2030. The Government of Azerbaijan also started strengthening its forestry sector with a new ten-year national forestry programme. It is noteworthy that the National Forest Programme for 2020–2030 was developed with the support of FAO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE),[34] providing a legal basis for forest management and the development of relevant institutional

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[34] By the time of this evaluation, the National Forest Programme (2020–2030) was in the process of being adopted by the Government of Azerbaijan.

capacities.[35] The project objectives and outcomes echoed the key priorities of the National Forest Programme 2020-2030, which are as follows:

- Maintenance of the ecological and protective functions of the forests, and sustainable management and efficient use of forest resources through the involvement of stakeholders and the population.
- Reduction of negative impacts on forests, strengthening measures on the protection of forest reserves and biodiversity, and undertaking activities pursuant to climate-change adaptation.
- Significant expansion of the areas covered with forests through forest restoration and forestation.
- Improvement of forest legislation, enhancement of institutional and staff capacity through the application of integrated management, and improvement of financial supply.
- Elaboration and application of multi-purpose management plans on the basis of modern methodologies in the inventory and assessment (monitoring) of forest reserves.
- Awareness-raising about the benefits of forests.

At the same time, desk research and in-person interviews confirmed certain adjustments to the project activity caused by changes to the priorities of the MENR. More specifically, the project changed the pilot area for nursery modernization (output 2.3.1: Shemkir nursery capacity is increased); it replaced Shemkir nursery with Absheron nursery on the grounds that the new pilot site was more suitable in terms of its climatic characteristics and closer to where the most demand for seedlings exists. Desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that this replacement was initiated by the MENR due to changes within the ministry and followed up revision of priorities related to the nursery location.

3.2   Effectiveness

Finding 5. The project fully achieved three out of seven outcomes and 11 out of 20 outputs.

Finding 6. Unintended results of the project were mainly associated with the capacity-development (individual and institutional) activities under the Triangular Cooperation Protocol between the Forest Development Department of the MENR and the OGM.

Finding 7. The actual achievements confirmed by this evaluation are directly attributable to the GEF-funded components.

To answer this question, the evaluation team assessed (to the extent feasible) the reported results against the targets set in the project's results framework (and used in the project implementation review reports, project progress reports, and the relevant GEF core indicators worksheet of the project).[36] It is also noteworthy that the evaluation identified certain discrepancies between the reported results (at the outcome and output level) and target indicators set at the design stage.

Overall, the evaluation team validated the achievement of three out of seven outcomes and 11 out of 20 outputs. The table below (Table 7) presents a snapshot of actual and reported achievements.

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[35] The National Forest Programme 2020–2030 was drafted within the framework of technical support revising the National Forestry Programme and the modernization of management system project, supported by the UNECE and jointly implemented by FAO and the MENR.

[36] Used by the project team to report on progress.

Table 7. Reported versus actual progress[37]

Outcomes and outputs	Reported progress	Actual progress
Component 1. Forest Resource Information Management System		
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.1.2: SFM GCC established.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.1.3: National level SFM criteria and indicators set, identified and agreed by stakeholders.	Achieved	Achieved
Outcome 1.2 An Operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring System providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.2.1: A capacity-development programme for cadres and stakeholders.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.2.1: A capacity-development programme for cadres and stakeholders.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.	Achieved	Achieved
Component 2. Forest management planning		
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two areas.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.	Achieved	Achieved
Outcome 2.2: Income generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites planned and rehabilitated.	Achieved	Partially achieved
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 2.3.1: Absheron nursery production capacity increased.	Achieved	Partially achieved
Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory modernized.	Achieved	Partially achieved
Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored.	Achieved	Partially achieved
Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected regions.	Achieved	Partially achieved
Component 3. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing		
Outcome 3.1: Project implementation based on RBM.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive M&E plan and system in place.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 3.1.2: Project final evaluation.	-	-
Outcome 3.2: Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 3.2.1: A communication strategy and action plan developed.	Achieved	Achieved
Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals for dissemination of improved practices, measures, and technologies.	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Output 3.2.3: A web portal established.	Achieved	Partially achieved[38]

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[37] Indicators and final targets were defined at design and presents in the results framework of the project. They were also used in the project implementation reviews.

[38] The evaluation team checked the web page to verify the achievement of output 3.2.3; however, as the web site is under the ownership of the Government of Azerbaijan, the evaluation team was unable to attribute the changes in its content to the project results. The details will be discussed in the core part of the evaluation report.

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document, Baku; and FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku; FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

Progress made against outcome indicators

The project reported achieving three out of seven outcomes (Table 8). Desk research and in-person interviews confirmed the full achievement of outcome 1.1, outcome 1.2, and outcome 2.1.

Table 8. Progress and achievements with respect to outcomes (against the targets set)

Outcomes	Indicator	Final target	Actual achievement
Component 1. Forest Resource Information Management System			
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.	At national level, SFM criteria and indicators assessed and reported by stakeholders including recommendations to the MENR.	SFM GCC established; Azerbaijan national SFM criteria and indicators identified, monitored, assessed and reported.	Achieved
Outcome 1.2: An operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring System providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.	Number of hectares covered by system.	Countrywide data and information were collected, analysed, classified and stored in a GIS-based database, covering 72 737 ha.	Achieved (86 600 ha covered)
Component 2. Forest management planning			
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two areas.	Number of stakeholders trained Number ha under improved SFM practices.	Ten persons, including members of the middle management teams trained as trainers. 38 405 ha under SFM practices.	Achieved (25 foresters trained, and 103 000 ha covered under SFM practices)
Outcome 2.2: Income-generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated.	Number of farmers (disaggregated by sex) with diversified and improved livelihood strategies reducing pressures to nearby forests.	Pastures rehabilitated – 1 500 ha. Income-generating activities demonstrated for ten farmers.	Partially achieved (100 ha pastures rehabilitated and ten farmers supported)
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land.	Number of ha of degraded forest rehabilitated using modern techniques. Number of ha of land afforested. Carbon stored and avoided emissions.	15 300 ha rehabilitated using modern techniques (GEF plus co-financing). 5 300 ha afforested using modern techniques (GEF plus co-financing).	Partially achieved 3 438 ha rehabilitated and 3 523 ha reforested
Component 3. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing			
Outcome 3.1: Project implementation based on RBM.	M&E system ensuring timely delivery of project results.	M&E system ensuring timely delivery of project results.	Partially achieved (five progress reports)
Outcome 3.2: Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up to date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.	Public perception of forest management is assessed and increased.	Public perception of forest management assessed and increased.	Partially achieved

Source: FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

More specifically, within the framework of outcome 1.1, the project supported the establishment of the SFM General Coordinating Committee (GCC). It also secured the development of the concept paper on SFM criteria and indicators, and set recommendations for those. The MENR approved the concept paper and set of recommended SFM criteria and indicators in November 2018. Outcome 1.2 of Component 1 was mainly focused on building the institutional and individual capacity of the targeted national stakeholders in gathering and reporting data related to the National Forest Inventory (NFI). The project implementation review reported overachieving this outcome indicator and collected, analysed, and classified data covering 86 600 ha using the Collect Earth programme.

Desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that under outcome 2.1 (improved forest management planning in two areas), the project supported the development of the guidelines on multifunctional forest management planning (methodology) and two forest management plans for Gakh and Aghdash regions, covering 103 000 ha under SFM practices.[39] In addition, the project organized two sets of training sessions for 25 local foresters and biodiversity experts.

Outcome 2.1 of the project has been partially achieved as the project supported rehabilitation of 100 ha of land, instead of the set target of 1 500 ha. Likewise, under outcome 2.3, instead of 15 300 ha rehabilitated (planned to be covered both by GEF funds and co-financing), the project reported rehabilitating 3 438 ha in total, of which 2 900 ha was rehabilitated through co-financing and 538 ha was attributable to the GEF-funded part. Furthermore, according to the project implementation review report (July 2020–June 2021), the project reforested 3 523 ha (courtesy of co-financing) out of a planned 5 300 ha and reforested 101 ha at project demo sites. The evaluation team could not validate the total area of the land rehabilitated and reforested by the MENR.[40] In addition, the evaluation team confirmed (via desk research and site observations) that only 93 ha of forest land was protected in Sheki region and 101 ha of land was reforested within the project framework (against the target set under output 2.3.4).

Finally, two outcome indicators under Component 3 were reported to have been partially achieved. The project's M&E system incorporated semi-annual progress reports and annual implementation review reports. Under outcome 3.1, the July 2020–June 2021 implementation review reported developing and uploading five progress reports covering January 2018 to December 2020. However, the evaluation was unable to validate the progress report for January–June 2020. The evaluation also confirmed the provision of three project implementation reviews. While the first review covered the period July 2018 to June 2019, the last one obtained by the team was for July 2020 to June 2021. The project also committed to carrying out supervision visits (on at least an annual basis) to rate the progress made in the progress reports and implementation reviews, and producing a terminal (final) report of the project no later than two months before the project's completion date. The latter (the terminal report of the project) was produced by the end of the project evaluation (in February 2022).

Under outcome 3.2, the project implementation review reported conducting a public survey to assess public perception, developing the communication strategy and action plan, conducting an awareness-raising campaign and activities, publishing the Collect Earth assessment report published in two languages (Azeri and English), and developing a web page on the basis of the MENR website. According to the progress reports, the awareness-raising campaign (which was

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[39] Within the framework of the Triangular Cooperation protocol signed between FAO, the Forest Development Department/MENR and the OGM.

[40] If validated, it would constitute 0.6 percent of the total forest land.

supposed to be concluded by December 2021) was postponed due to the pandemic. The evaluation team verified the production of the Collect Earth assessment report, entitled Detailed Collect Earth Assessment on Country Forest Resources of Azerbaijan, in Azeri and English. It also confirmed that the forest-related general data was presented on the web page of the MENR (http://eco.gov.az/az/meseler/olkenin-meseleri). However, the evaluation noted that the web page content was limited and lacked reference to the activities implemented within the framework of the project under evaluation (as reflected in the final report on the provision of web page development service).[41] Given that the MENR owns and manages the above-mentioned web page, the evaluation was unable to attribute any changes in the content of the web page to the project activities.

Progress made against output indicators

Under Component 1, the evaluation validated the achievement of all seven output indicators (Table 9). The project supported the establishment of the Forest Information Centre (GIS laboratory),[42] installing the relevant software and providing other equipment in the process. In addition, the international consultant developed a report entitled Detailed Collect Earth Report: A Case Study of Aghdash, Gakh and Azerbaijan, which presented the results of forest-related data collection, and described forest extent and land-use changes in Aghdash and Gakh regions in 2000–2016.[43] The project also supported the development of the NFI manual and action plan to launch the pilot NFI at country level.

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[41] For example, information about the NFI methodology, inventory data regularly updating (including national level data and data on the regional forestry unit level), information on the project, collaboration with FAO, plans, targets and achieved results, information on applied forestry inventory methodology, implemented activities, etc.
[42] The office space was provided by the MENR.

[43] 5 933 sample points were established over a national and subnational grid, and remotely assessed via Collect Earth software.

Table 9. Component 1 – progress made and achievements recorded (project outputs)

Outputs	Indicator	Final target	Progress (reported versus actual)
Component 1: Forest Resource Information Management System			
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed			
Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared.	Concept paper designed	N/A	Achieved (reported and actual). Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared & approved by the MENR in November 2018.
Output 1.1.2: SFM GCC established.	SFM GCC established and operational	SFM GCC operational (at least two meetings)	Achieved (reported and actual). GCC established in fall 2018.
Output 1.1.3: National level SFM C&I set identified and agreed by stakeholders.	National SFM C&I for Azerbaijan officially declared	National SFM C&I for Azerbaijan officially declared	Achieved (reported and actual). SFM C&I finalized and approved by the end of 2018.
Outcome 1.2: An Operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring System providing reliable and up to date information on forest resources.			
Output 1.2.1: A capacity development programme for cadres and stakeholders.	Number of trained cadres	10 trained cadres	Achieved (reported and actual). 2 sets of training sessions for 25 local foresters and biodiversity experts organized in 2018.
Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.	GIS lab established and operational	GIS lab established and operational	Achieved (reported and actual). GIS lab established in 2020.
Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis.	Data collected and analysed	A ground survey conducted, data stored and analysed.	Achieved (reported and actual). Collect Earth desk study to establish the baseline was completed (2021 Q4).
Output 1.2.4: Participatory C & I assessment.	SFM Criteria & Indicators assessed	SFM Criteria & Indicators assessed	Achieved (reported and actual). Instead of two separate events on November 23-24, a single two-day extended virtual workshop was organized on NFI data collection (2021 Q4).

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku; and FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

Furthermore, the project organized two training sessions for 25 foresters to build their capacity on forest inventory and using the Collect Earth – Open Foris tool.[44] The first training session on land use and forest assessment (with the application of the Collect Earth tool) was carried out from 21–31 January 2018 for 15 local foresters. The second training took place on 6–10 August 2018 for ten local foresters and five biodiversity experts to help them gain practical knowledge of the Collect Earth tool usage. The project reported the full achievement of output 1.2.3 (data collection and analysis), which was related to collecting and analysing national data to be used as a baseline for the NFI. It is noteworthy that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collection was postponed and some work was done remotely via online tools. Output 1.2.4 was also reported

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[44] This tool enables data collection through Google Earth and allows users analyse high and a very high-resolution satellite imagery for a wide variety of purposes, including: support multi-phase NFIs; land use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) assessments; validation of existing maps; collection of spatially explicit socioeconomic data; quantifying deforestation, reforestation and desertification.

to have been fully achieved and instead of two separate events on 23–24 November 2021 (as planned), the project organized one two-day extended virtual workshop on NFI data collection.[45]

Under Component 2, the evaluation validated the achievement of three out of eight outputs (Table 10). First and foremost, the project supported the development of guidelines on multifunctional FMP, adopted by the MENR. Under output 2.1.2, the project conducted capacity-development activities and some of them were carried out within the framework of the Triangular Cooperation Protocol signed by FAO, the Forest Development Department of the MENR, and the OGM. Thus, in September 2018, ten local foresters took part in a 12-day study tour to Bolu (Turkey). In November 2018, a joint team of Turkish experts and ten local foresters collected baseline data for the FMP process in two pilot regions (Aghdash and Gakh). At the same time, during the above-mentioned data collection, ten local foresters were given an opportunity to benefit from on-the-job coaching on forest management. In addition, two local foresters participated in the training sessions on FMP and database management in Turkey in November 2019. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, the project organized a five-day virtual training event for ten local forestry experts on forest management planning, spatial and relational forest databases, and the FMP data model.

Furthermore, under output 2.1.3, the project developed FMP guidelines and FMP for Aghdash and Gakh regions. In addition, the Forest Development Department of the MENR reported testing the guidelines on multifunctional FMP in Zaqatala region and developing the first FMP for the Zaqatala Forestry Unit (based on FAO's methodology). Furthermore, the project organized fieldwork data collection to finalize the FMP work for Zaqatala, Shamakhi, and Gabala regional forestry units,[46] which was expected to be completed by the end of 2021.[47] The project also reported FMP work being carried out in Sheki and Barda regional forest economy centres (RFECs). Meanwhile, based on the decision made at the third meeting of the steering committee, the project organized fieldwork to collect data and finalize FMP work for Sheki and Barda regional forestry units.

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[45] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop was organized in a virtual (online) format.

[47] According to the project reports, the Government of Azerbaijan applied the Turkish experience in FMP in Sheki and Barda regional forestry units.

[47] The Forest Development Department of the MENR reported this work completed.

Table 10. Component 2 – progress made and achievements recorded (project outputs)

Outputs	Indicator	Final target	Progress (reported versus actual)
Component 2: Forest Management Planning			
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two areas			
Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.	Guidelines on forest management planning developed and validated.	Guidelines on FMP was developed and validated.	Achieved *(reported and actual)*. The guidelines on multifunctional FMP was developed, and adopted by the MENR officially (2020).
Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained.	Number of foresters trained.	10	Achieved *(reported and actual)*. Ten local foresters participated in a study tour to Turkey (September 2018). Ten local foresters (two teams) coached during field work on forest management (2019). Two local foresters participated in database management training in Turkey. Ten local foresters participated in a five-day remote training (7–11 September 2020).
Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.	Number of forest management plans developed.	Two forest management plans developed.	Achieved *(reported versus actual)*. Forest management plans were developed for Gakh and Aghdash regions (2020). FMP work was done for additional pilot areas under Shamakhi and Gabala regional forestry units (2021).
Outcome 2.2: Income generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated			
Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are planned and rehabilitated.	Number of hectares rehabilitated.	1 500 ha rehabilitated (Gakh: 1 000 ha; Aghdash: 500 ha).	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual). 50 ha of grazing land (pasture) was rehabilitated near Aghdibir village of Aghdash region (Agzibir Forestry) (2019 Q4). 50 ha of grazing land (pasture) was rehabilitated in Zardab region (municipality lands) (2020 Q4). Seven beekeepers and three hazelnut growers were supported (2020).
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land			
Output 2.3.1: Absheron nursery production capacity increased.	Number of potted seedlings.	2 500 000 potted seedlings.	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual). Modernization plan developed; rehabilitation work carried out and equipment provided (2021 Q3).
Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory modernized.	N/A	Fully functional lab.	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual). Modernization plan developed, and equipment provided (2021 Q3).
Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored	Number of ha of degraded forest rehabilitated using modern techniques.	15 300 ha rehabilitated (300 with GEF resources plus 15 000 with	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual). 93 ha of forest land was protected with GEF resources in Sheki region (2020 Q3).

Outputs	Indicator	Final target	Progress (reported versus actual)
		co-financing resources).	
Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected regions.	Number of ha of land afforested.	5 300 hectares afforested (300 with GEF resources plus 5 000 with co-financing resources).	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual). Reforestation works (fruit plantations set up) on 51 ha in Sheki region (2020 Q3). Reforestation works (fruit plantations set up) on 50 ha in Aghdash region (Agzibir Forest) (2020 Q3).

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

Furthermore, the evaluation found certain inconsistencies in the achievements of other outcome indicators under Component 2 (such as outcome 2.2, outcome 2.3, and outcome 2.4) with the associated outputs. The progress reports pointed out 100 percent achievement of all associated outputs (output 2.2.1, output 2.3.1, output 2.3.2, output 2.3.3, and output 2.3.4). However, the detailed analysis of the indicators (expected results), as well as site visits and in-person interviews, revealed only partial achievement of the expected results/outcomes. Thus, at design, output 2.2.1 (pastures in two selected sites planned and rehabilitated) was linked with the target of "1 500 ha rehabilitated (Gakh: 1 000 ha; Aghdash: 500 ha)." However, the project reported rehabilitating only 100 ha of grazing land (pasture) in Aghdash and Zardab regions. More specifically, under output 2.2.1, the project contracted the Scientific Research Institute on Crop Husbandry within the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan to rehabilitate 50 ha of pastures in Aghdash region and 50 ha of pastures in Zardab region. Both activities were completed in November 2020. Under output 2.2.1, the project also supported seven beekeepers in Aghdash and Gakh region and three hazelnut growers in Gakh region selected from the most vulnerable members of the community.[48] The beekeepers were provided with apiculture equipment (including bee boxes) and benefited from a short training on apiculture, while hazelnut growers received seedlings. The evaluation team validated the support provided to local beekeepers and hazelnut growers. It is noteworthy that the beneficiary beekeepers interviewed in the course of the evaluation expressed their interest in attending advanced training sessions on apiculture.

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[48] Hazelnut planting works were completed in Ibakhli, Daymadaghli, and Gipchag villages of Gakh region.

Figure 4. Beneficiary beekeepers from Aghdash region

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Aghdash.

Furthermore, the project developed a plan to modernize Absheron nursery and carried out nursery rehabilitation activities (under output 2.3.1) and the seed laboratory's modernization, including the provision of equipment (under output 2.3.2). It is noteworthy that progress reports and project implementation reviews reported fully achieving the above output indicators. However, given the results achieved against the outcome targets set ("2 500 000 potted seedlings") and site observations, the evaluation confirmed only the partial achievement of output 2.3.1. While the project invested in modernization and rehabilitation activities and provided equipment, the nursery was still not operational by the time of the project evaluation. The figure below (Figure 5) demonstrates the condition of the Absheron nursery greenhouse as pictured by the evaluation team. According to the feedback received from key national stakeholders, the Government of Azerbaijan planned to allocate funds to secure the functioning of the nursery and had already supported the provision of seedlings. However, the evaluation team was not provided with any written evidence in support of the above claim.

Figure 5. Site observation of Absheron nursery

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Absheron.

Likewise, the project reported full achievement of output 2.3.2 ("seed laboratory modernized"). However, the evaluation team identified that due to external constraints associated with the reorganization of the Forest Development Department and the change in its premises, the seed laboratory was not operational by the time of the site observation carried out in the course of this evaluation (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Site observation of Forest Development Department seed laboratory

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

In addition, the project secured protection (fencing) of 93 ha of forest land in Kungut forest in Sheki region (under output 2.3.3), and undertook reforestation work (fruit plantations) in Sheki (51 ha) and Aghdash regions (50 ha) under output 2.3.4. While the project reported full achievement of the above outputs, the evaluation validated only partial achievement. Furthermore, under output 2.3.3 ("degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored"), the project was expected to rehabilitate 15 300 ha (300 ha using the GEF resources and 15 000 ha using co-financing resources). However, the project eventually covered 93 ha of degraded forest land in Sheki region. In addition, under output 2.3.4 ("afforestation of forest land across the selected regions"), the project had to afforest 5 300 ha in total (300 ha using the GEF resources plus 5 000 ha using co-financing resources). Overall, based on evaluation findings, the project supported afforestation of 51 ha in Sheki region and 50 ha in Aghdash region.

Component 3 of the project included five outputs and one of them (output 3.2.3) was reported to be fully achieved. It is noteworthy that output 3.1.2 incorporated this current evaluation and, therefore, is beyond the scope of this evaluation (Table 11). As discussed earlier, the project had to develop and implement a gender-sensitive M&E plan, which was not implemented. At the same time, the project prepared five progress reports (for January–June 2018, July–December 2018, January–June 2019, July–December 2019, and July–December 2020) and three project implementation reviews (for July 2018–June 2019, July 2019–June 2020, and July 2020–June 2021).[49] Under output 3.2.1, the project contracted the International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA), a local commercial service provider, to develop the communication strategy and action plan, and conduct an awareness-raising campaign about the socioeconomic and environmental benefits of the forests within the project. According to the project reports, IDEA prepared the strategy/action plan. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some public awareness-raising activities had to be postponed until June 2021. The project reported full achievement of output 3.2.1 and 60 percent of the achievement of output 3.2.2. It also reported integrating web-page content into the official MENR web portal (http://eco.gov.az/az/meseler/olkenin-meseleri). The evaluation team validated a general reference (top-level content) of the above-mentioned web page to the forestry sector, but the page did not provide all the second- and third-level content (as reported in the final report of the service contract). Taking into account that the web page was under the full possession of the MENR, the evaluation team was unable to attribute any changes in its content to project activities.

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[49] The project's M&E system will be thoroughly addressed under evaluation question number 13.

Table 11. Component 3 – progress made and achievements reported (project outputs)

Outputs	Indicator	Final target	Progress (as reported)
Component 3:			
Outcome 3.1: Project implementation based on RBM			
Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive M&E plan and system in place.	Monitoring system developed and operational.	Monitoring system developed and operational.	Partially achieved (reported and actual).
Output 3.1.2: Project final evaluation.	Final evaluation conducted.	Final evaluation conducted.	Ongoing. It is beyond the scope of this evaluation.
Outcome 3.2: Outcome 3.2: Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices			
Output 3.2.1: A communication strategy and action plan developed.	Communication strategy designed; number of communication pieces produced	Number of communication pieces produced will be determined in the communication strategy.	Achieved (reported and actual). A public survey was conducted, information materials were developed and published.
Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals for dissemination of improved practices, measures and technologies.	Number of dissemination material published.	500 manuals published	Partially achieved (reported). Manual and guidelines prepared for publication.
Output 3.2.3: A web portal established.	Web portal established and updated monthly.	Web portal established and updated monthly.[50]	Achieved (reported). Partially achieved (actual).

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

The GEF Trust Fund contributed across all components and budget lines of the project, including professional staff salaries, national and international consultancy fees, travel costs, training and workshop arrangements, and procurement of services and equipment. The evaluation team found no evidence of other donors implementing similar interventions (with similar goals and objectives) for the targeted state entities and communities. While many international organizations – such as the World Bank, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) – supported the forestry sector in Azerbaijan, none of them was focused on developing NFI and mapping for FMP purposes. It is also important to highlight that according to the Triangular Cooperation Protocol for forest management planning in the Republic of Azerbaijan (signed by FAO, the MENR, and the OGM), the OGM was responsible for providing technical support and training on the regulation of the exemplary management plans for Aghdash and Gakh regions (in the areas under the Forest Development Department's management). The OGM's support complemented the FMP work carried out in Aghdash and Gakh regions, and the project budget covered all the associated fees of activities implemented under the Triangular Cooperation Protocol.

In addition, no evidence was found that pasture and forest rehabilitation activities had been implemented in the targeted regions by other international organizations. This finding was validated by in-person interviews with national and local stakeholders, and community members.

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[50] Link to web portal: http://eco.gov.az/az/meseler/olkenin-meseleri.

Overall, both desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that this project was the only one supporting the creation of a systematic national-level forest inventory and NFP through the introduction of appropriate methodology and guidelines and building the institutional and individual capacity of the relevant government stakeholders (legal entities and their staff). It is also noteworthy that the GEF-funded activities under this project constituted about 3.3 percent of the total amount invested in the country under the GEF Trust Fund.[51]

3.3 Efficiency

Finding 8. The project design was aligned with the core principles of the FAO Project Cycle and Strategic Framework and was congruent with the provision of the Technical Assistance signed between the Government of Azerbaijan and FAO.

Finding 9. The project design addressed the implementation-related risks to a certain extent and outlined the general provisions for the project implementation and oversight.

Finding 10. The project design outlined the roles and responsibilities of the participating parties (legal entities) by providing ToR for the project team and international consultants. Roles and responsibilities were also defined in other relevant documents, such as contracts.

Finding 11. The Triangular Cooperation Protocol outlined the rules of engagement and the obligations of each constituent party.

Finding 12. The project experienced a delay of several months at the outset. It was caused by extended preparatory work. The project's workplan and budget were both subject to several revisions and adjustments contingent on the approval of the project's steering committee.

Finding 13. The project implementation was subject to two no-cost extensions caused by internal and external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic and design shortcomings.

Finding 14. The project was efficient in producing results given the scope and budget. Moreover, the project piloted the NFI and FMP work, thereby unleashing the potential to scale up.

To address this evaluation question, the evaluation assessed the extent to which the project design and implementation were aligned with the FAO's Project Cycle and Strategic Framework, which outlines guidelines for the first four main steps of the project cycle: (i) project identification (project proposal); (ii) development of a concept note; (iii) project document formulation; and (iv) project document appraisal and approval.[52]

Both desk research and the feedback of key relevant stakeholders interviewed in the course of this evaluation confirmed that the project was submitted and implemented in accordance with the core principles of the FAO's Project Cycle and Strategic Framework, the provisions of the Agreement for the Establishment of FAO Partnership and Liaison Office, and the Provision of Technical Assistance signed between the Government of Azerbaijan and FAO on 25 May 2015. First and foremost, the project was formulated by the Head of the FAO Partnership and Liaison Office in Azerbaijan in 2016. Furthermore, its concept preparation and pre-approval phase was conducted with the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including representatives of the MENR, the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit, FAO headquarters, and FAO Partnership and Liaison

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[51] Total funding provided by the GEF Trust Fund amounted to USD 45 364 317 (source: https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/country-profiles/azerbaijan).

[52] Oversight and stakeholder engagement thoroughly addressed under the criterion entitled "factors affecting performance."

Office in Azerbaijan. The project was aligned with the conceptual framework and principles of the FAO Country Programming Framework, as well as the GEF's SOs and country needs and priorities (as outlined under the relevance criterion of this evaluation). The table below (Table 12) demonstrates the extent to which the project was aligned with the FAO's Project Cycle and Strategic Framework.

Table 12. FAO project cycle and strategic framework compliance checklist

#	Checklist item	Status[53]
a	Project proposals must be proposed by FAO representative, subregional coordinator, regional representative, head of headquarters technical unit, or SO coordinator, who will be the project formulator.	Validated
b	Projects must be aligned with the conceptual framework and principles of the Strategic Framework.	Validated
c	Projects supporting country results should address priorities defined in the Country Programming Framework, and/or regional priorities, and should support the priorities and political processes of the country.	Validated
d	Regional projects should support implementation of actions addressing regional priorities and/or initiatives as expressed in regional conferences, regional technical commissions, and other relevant political processes and agreements.	Not relevant [54]
e	Projects should support and be embedded in the implementation of corporate priority programmes and, only exceptionally, be designed as a free-standing ad hoc set of actions that contribute to the achievement of corporate results.	Validated
f	The process of preparation and approval of projects must draw on the knowledge and capacities of the Organization available both in decentralized locations and at headquarters.	Validated
g	The decentralization and subsidiarity principles apply, with leadership entrusted to project formulators and lead technical officers who operate within the agreed priority framework and established technical quality control capacities and processes. The working philosophy of the Organization is that decentralized offices lead action in the field with the help and support from headquarters.	Validated
h	Project formulators are responsible and accountable for adhering to principles a to e above in proposing their project proposals.	Validated
i	Participating partners (government, donor, and implementing partners) are actively involved in all phases of project formulation, review and approval, in the true spirit of partnership.	Validated
j	The process must include quality control and accountability mechanisms.	Validated

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

The evaluation methodology also assessed the compliance of the project with the FAO's Free, Prior and Informed Consent Manual, designed to assist development organizations in respecting the rights of indigenous people. Site visits and detailed data collection identified that no indigenous people (as defined in the aforementioned manual) lived in these areas. The evaluation conducted focus group discussions with the community members in the target areas (Aghdash and Sheki regions) to identify their level of familiarity with the project goals and their level of satisfaction with the project activities. The community members who attended two focus group discussions (over 26 community members in total) demonstrated different levels of understanding of the project objectives – some possessed very generic information, while others were more familiar with the overarching goal of the project. In the meantime, all of the participants firmly supported the project activities related to income generation opportunities for community members. For example, forest land and pasture rehabilitation were carried out with the engagement of local villagers who did the planting and essential agricultural work. Moreover, female community members were engaged in the caretaking of trees planted.

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[53] This section was validated through thorough desk research.

[54] It was not a regional project.

It is also important to highlight that the project document, as well as its inception report, encompassed a project quality control and accountability mechanism (including the establishment of a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation system) as well as the project's other implementation arrangements. The latter defined the structure of the project, including the mandate of the steering committee, the composition and mandate of the project implementation unit, FAO's roles and responsibilities in the project governance structure, and the internal coordination setup. The project document and inception report also incorporated risk management and mitigation measures. These measures covered (to a certain extent) the dimensions of the existing policy, legal, and regulatory framework of Azerbaijan, the level of government engagement, the availability of financially sustainable models of forest management in the country, and brief environmental impact analysis.

Figure 7. **First meeting of project steering committee**

Source: FAO. 2018. Inception report. Baku.

The analysis of the steering committee meeting notes and in-person interviews confirmed that the project risks and challenges had been addressed as much as possible. The composition of the steering committee (consisting of top-level state officials, technical experts from the Government of Azerbaijan, FAO, and implementation unit staff) allowed for discussions regarding technical and operational challenges and the need for government engagement. Overall, the steering committee was mandated to make strategic decisions related to project implementation and to oversee the project's planning and implementation. More specifically, it was responsible for:

- monitoring and supporting the project implementation unit to ensure successful implementation of the project's components;
- coordinating and managing in-kind and/or in-cash contributions to the project and other funding sources;
- reviewing and agreeing on the project's strategy and methodology as submitted by the project implementation unit; and
- endorsing annual work plans and budgets, and progress reports prepared by the project implementation unit and FAO.

Steering committee meetings were usually organized semi-annually, with the identity of attendees subject to change (Table 13).

Table 13. Timeline of steering committee meetings

SC meeting #	Meeting date	Number of SC members
1st meeting of the SC	9 March 2018	8 (FAO and MENR)
2nd meeting of the SC	27 December 2018	15 (FAO and MENR)
3rd meeting of the SC	12 April 2019	16 (FAO and MENR)
4th meeting of the SC	4 December 2019	16 (FAO and MENR)
5th meeting of the SC	23 June 2020	14 (FAO and MENR)

Source: FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

The project task force meeting was organized in April 2020 and was attended by the FAO staff engaged in the project's activities. The meeting addressed the status of implementation of activities and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the project. Moreover, task force members discussed the revised project workplan and its extension. According to the key stakeholders, the task force meeting lacked technical discussions with technical experts from the relevant state agencies (mainly top-level officials) of the Government of Azerbaijan, who preferred to attend steering committee meetings instead. Moreover, the evaluation confirmed that this was the only task force meeting to be conducted in the course of the project implementation.

The project document presented a detailed project structure along with the roles and responsibilities of the engaged entities (FAO, steering committee, project implementation unit) and individuals (national project director, national technical coordinator, lead technical officer, national operations officer, procurement associate, finance associate, FAO officer at headquarters, and so on). Moreover, it outlined financial management and reporting procedures with respect to GEF resources, the FAO's role in securing procurement in accordance with the FAO rules and procedures, and monitoring and oversight responsibilities. The figure below (Figure 8) presents the project's overall management and governance structure.

Figure 8. Project management and governance structure
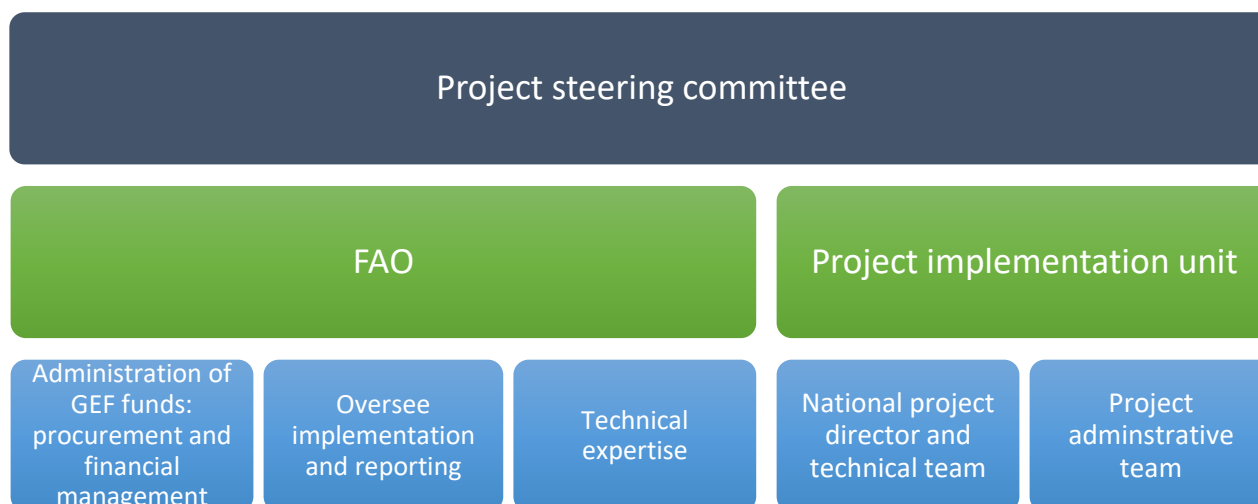
Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

In addition, the project document provided detailed ToR for recruiting the project team (such as administration and operations officer, HR and procurement officer, technical coordinator, field officer, and socioeconomic/gender specialist). Furthermore, the project inception report (prepared as requested by the project document) also incorporated ToR for the steering committee, SFM GCC, the international consultant on SFM criteria and indicators, and the international consultant on forest management planning. Finally, the Triangular Cooperation

Protocol signed by FAO, the MENR and the OGM outlined the level of engagement of the experts from the Turkish General Directorate of Forestry to support FMP activities. In-person interviews gathered positive feedback about the national stakeholders and their level of familiarity with their roles and responsibilities (both at central and local levels) within the project framework. At the same time, some key informants had noticed an uneven attitude among local stakeholders engaged in capacity development and data collection. Some were highly motivated professionals and others were uncertain about their mandate with regard to the project. The evaluation did not identify (either during in-person interviews or desk research) any delays directly associated with unclear roles and responsibilities. However, the evaluation acknowledged certain challenges associated with the Government of Azerbaijan staff turnover and structural changes in the government.

Desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that there were some delays with regard to the project start date, as well as several revisions of the project's workplan and budget. The project was subject to two non-cost extensions, the first in 2019 and the second in 2020. More specifically, the project started following a delay of several months and was launched in January 2018 instead of October 2017, as foreseen. According to key stakeholders, preparatory work and the project's kick-off phase took extra time, and activities started in February 2018 (the project was officially launched in January 2018). Additional causes for the delay were reported as follows:

- time-consuming approval procedures within the MENR related to nominations of GCC members and/or assigning tasks for relevant units of the MENR to support the project implementation;
- lengthy recruitment procedures of FAO affected the timely engagement of local consultants;
- administrative delays caused by the poor quality of the translation of technical materials;
- change to the incumbent of the office of the MENR in 2018 imposed certain delays and changes in priorities (for example, the location of the nursery under output 2.3.1);
- multifunctional forest management planning activities in Zaqatala region had to be postponed due to martial law imposed in the country. This activity was only finalized in December 2020; and
- COVID-19-related restrictions and delays.

Furthermore, according to key stakeholders, the project objectives and its workplan were quite broad and ambitious as the project had a multidimensional focus (for example, the project incorporated the development of methodologies and guidelines, NFI data collection and FMP development, investment in infrastructure and nursery rehabilitations, as well as income generation activities for local communities). Therefore, the project workplan was subject to several adjustments. The project's duration at design (two years in total) was not realistic because of the complexity of the work and the seasonal nature of the activities in the forestry area (which were not completed before the end of 2020). The evaluation team confirmed the above information through desk research. It is also noteworthy that the first revision of the workplan and budget was made at the inception phase and incorporated into the inception report of the project. Furthermore, the evaluation validated that any further budget and workplan revisions (listed below) were discussed and approved during steering committee meetings.

Overall, the evaluation team acknowledged that the budget change affected all budget items of the project. By September 2021, the budget expenditure rate was about 87 percent (USD 1 284 460 spent). Some examples of budget revisions are as follows:

- budget increase in inventory training and income-generating activities;
- budget decrease for implementing socioeconomic and gender assessment;
- budget increase for activities under outcome 2.1. (improved forest management planning in two pilot areas) as more financial allocations were required due to the engagement of Turkish experts,[55] as well as data collection and transfer into the electronic database. Likewise, the procurement and consultancy fees of the international expert on forest management was funded under outcome 2.1;
- budget increase for forestry inventory and management planning activities which shifted some funds from forest rehabilitation and reforestation budget lines, as well funds for additional equipment for five forestry teams; and
- budget increase for the modernization of Absheron nursery.

Table 14 presents a snapshot of the project's actual versus planned implementation timeline.

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[55] Within the framework of the Triangular Cooperation Protocol signed by the OGM, the MENR, and FAO.

Table 14. Project timeline (actual versus planned)

OUTPUTS	ESTIMATED COMPLETION	ACTUAL COMPLETION
COMPONENT 1. FOREST RESOURCE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM		
Outcome 1.1. A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.		
Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared.	2018 (Q1)	2018 (Q4)
Output 1.1.2: SFM General Coordination Committee (GCC) established.	2018 (Q1)	2018 (Q4)
Output 1.1.3: National level SFM criteria and indicators set identified and agreed by stakeholders.	2018 (Q1)	2018 (Q4)
Outcome 1.2. An operational national forest assessment and monitoring system providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.		
Output 1.2.1: A capacity development programme for cadres and stakeholders.	2018 (Q2)	2018 (Q3)
Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.	2018 (Q2)	2020 (Q3)
Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis.	2019 (Q3)	2021 (Q4)
Output 1.2.4: Participatory criteria and indicators assessment.	2019 (Q4)	2021 (Q4)
Outcome 2.1. Improved forest management planning in two regions.		
Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.	2018 (Q2)	2020
Output 2.1.2: Two forest management planning teams trained.	2018 (Q4)	2020 (Q3)
Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.	2019 (Q4)	2021 (Q4)
Outcome 2.2. Income-generating activities for small-scale local farmers demonstrated and possibilities for their application is investigated.		
Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are rehabilitated.	2019 (Q4)[56]	2020 (Q4)
OUTCOME 2.3. CARBON STOCK ENHANCED IN DEGRADED AND DEFORESTED FOREST FUND LAND		
Outcome 2.3. Carbon stock enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land..		
Output 2.3.1: Shemkir nursery capacity is increased.	2018 (Q3)	2021 (Q3)
Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory modernized.	2018 (Q2)	2021 (Q3)
Output 2.3.3: 300 ha of degraded forest land are rehabilitated.	2019 (Q4)	2020 (Q3)
Output 2.3.4: 300 ha land is afforested across the selected rayons.	2019 (Q4)	2020 (Q3)
COMPONENT 3. MONITORING EVALUATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING		
Outcome 3.1. Project implementation based on RBM.		
Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive project M&E plan and system in place.	2019 (Q4)[57]	N/A
Output 3.1.2: Project final evaluations.	2020 (Q1)	Ongoing
Outcome 3.2. Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.		
Output 3.2.1: Communication strategy and action plan to raise awareness developed.	2018 (Q4)	N/A
Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals or guidelines for forestry managers and technicians that captures and describe the improved practices, measures and technologies.	2019 (Q4)	N/A
Output 3.2.3: Web portal established.	2019 (Q4)	N/A

Source: FAO. 2018–2020. Project progress reports. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

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[56] Site selection had to be completed in 2018 (Q2).

[57] Had to be carried out semi-annually: in 2018 (Q2 and Q4), and 2019 (Q2 and Q4).

The evaluation team compared the project (its timeline and budget allocation) with two technical assistance interventions implemented in Nepal and Uganda that focused on developing NFI and SFM. Specifically, a project entitled Support to Institutionalization of NFMS for Redd+ was jointly implemented by FAO and the World Bank in Uganda and aimed to support the country in establishing and institutionalizing the National Forest Monitoring System (NFMS). The total budget of this two-year project was USD 1 479 112. The second project, entitled Forest for Prosperity Project, was implemented by the World Bank in Nepal. It focused on supporting the Nepalese government in moving from a conservation and subsistence-oriented approach toward SFM, and establishing smallholder forest plantations on public and private land. The total budget of this five-year initiative was about USD 24 million (Table 15).

Table 15. A snapshot of similar interventions in Uganda and Nepal

Project title	Goal and objectives	Duration	Budget
Support to institutionalization of NFMS for Redd+ in Uganda (World Bank and FAO)	Activity 1: National Forest Inventory (NFI) with updated data produced to improve carbon measurements and other relevant information on forest use and forest cover. Activity 2: Updated data series to produce activity data for 2017-2018. Activity 3: Improvements made to national forest reference level (estimation of emissions from forest degradation, inclusion of soil and litter pools and improved estimation of emissions due to fire). Activity 4: Strengthened institutional capacities and systems in order to institutionalize NFMS/MRV, including carrying out a pilot to explore the potential role of communities in MRV (for example, verifying NFI and AD results).	Two years	USD 1 479 112 (total). Activity 1: USD 458 346. Activity 2: USD 106 700. Activity 3: USD 172 328. Activity 4: USD 498 272.
Forest for Prosperity Project in Nepal (World Bank)	Component 1: Policy and capacity development support for new government structures and processes for sustainable forest management. Component 2: Community-based sustainable forest management and smallholder forest plantations. Component 3: Forest enterprise improvement and development. Component 4: Project management, monitoring and learning.	Five years	USD 24 million (total). Component 1: USD 2.9 million. Component 2: USD 10.76 million. Component 3: USD 7.35 million. Component 4: USD 2.99 million.

Source: FAO. 2019. Agreement for provision of technical assistance Support to Institutionalization of NFMS for Redd+ in Uganda. Rome; World Bank. 2020. Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Strategic Climate Fund Loan and Grant to Nepal for Forest for Prosperity Project. Washington.

Apparently, the project in Azerbaijan under this evaluation encompassed several activities similar to those of the two above-mentioned technical assistance interventions, namely providing support in developing the NFI system; investment in afforestation; and creation of income-generation opportunities for local community members. However, the above interventions in Uganda and Nepal were framed around certain dimensions. For example, the project in Uganda was focused on forest inventory matters, while the project in Nepal demonstrated a more complicated structure to support the creation of SFM practices across sectors (encompassing policy review, state sector capacity development, and private sector and community engagement).

3.4   Sustainability

Finding 15. Different stakeholders possessed different levels of ownership over the project results. At the national level, the Forest Development Department demonstrated its intellectual ownership over the NFI- and FMP-related work. At the local level, ownership perceptions varied depending on stakeholder priorities.

Finding 16. No evidence was received to demonstrate any interest in or use of NFI and FMP by other state agencies.

Finding 17. The sustainability and net benefit of the project results are directly linked to the political will to allocate adequate resources (financial and human) and to adjust the legal framework in accordance with the evolving needs of SFM.

Finding 18. The project significantly contributed to strengthening the capacity of the targeted institutions and individuals. However, the Government of Azerbaijan staffing pattern showed a high turnover and loss of several key staff trained within the project framework.

Given that some outcomes of the project provided thematically different deliverables, the evaluation team assessed the sustainability of the project's results across its outcomes. Thus, outcome 1.1, outcome 1.2, and outcome 2.1 were thematically quite close and focused on developing and institutionalizing the NFI and FMP system as well as building the institutional and individual capacity on the matter. The stakeholders highlighted several key factors in ensuring the sustainability of the above outcomes. The first was linked to the fact that the MENR approved the guidelines on multifunctional FMP (as a working document methodology) as well as guidelines on SFM and the SFM criteria and indicators. However, the evaluation team found no evidence of SFM criteria and indicators and corresponding factsheets being incorporated into the national legal acts. At the same time, the evaluation team was informed that the Forest Development Department expected an official decree from the MENR that would increase awareness and broaden the uses of the data across the relevant state agencies. Some key stakeholders pointed out that this project was expected to serve as an impetus for legal adjustments. For example, FMP should incorporate information about forest functions (social and economic use of forest zones), which had not been defined previously. They also claimed that forest functions had not been defined or reflected in the Forest Code (enforced in the 1990s).

Furthermore, the Forest Development Department/MENR provided space for the GIS and seed laboratories (both equipped within the project framework). In the meantime, the project trained the relevant Forest Development Department staff in gathering and reporting data related to NFI, FMP, and using the relevant equipment and software application (ArcGIS).[58] The staff also collected and analysed information on forest resources on 86 600 ha of land. Moreover, within the framework of the Triangular Cooperation Protocol, the GIS laboratory was provided with the Forest Management Planning Programme (APP),[59] which was developed and used by the OGM in Turkey. Turkish experts provided technical support in the adaptation (customization) of the APP to the specifics of Azerbaijan's forestry and APP database. Furthermore, the Triangular Cooperation Protocol was subject to renewal and depended on the interest and need of the Government of Azerbaijan to scale up FMP in other regions of the country (outside the pilot areas).

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[58] Two training sessions were conducted for 25 local foresters and biodiversity experts under output 1.2.1.

[59] As defined in the Cooperation Protocol.

Some interviewed stakeholders highlighted that staff turnover might jeopardize the continuity and scaling up of the work in the NFI and FMP areas as the country continued to lack qualified human resources (forestry experts).[60] The evaluation team was notified that several forest specialists (trained within the project framework) had left their jobs. In addition, key stakeholders also pointed to very limited cooperation among the Forest Development Department and other state agencies.

Several key stakeholders also mentioned that the Government of Azerbaijan was mainly focused on conserving forest resources and that it needed to intensify SFM approaches. In this regard, the stakeholders emphasized the need for consistent awareness-raising on the matter and strong leadership to strengthen national-level policy lobbying and advocacy. One of the priority objectives of the National Forest Programme (2015–2030),[61] promulgated in 2013, was that "institutional capacity, financial mechanisms and regulatory (legal) framework for sustainable forest management are improved and strengthened." However, this document has never been officially adopted by the Government of Azerbaijan.

Key stakeholders also underlined the issue of financial resources allocated by the Government of Azerbaijan to sustain the results achieved. They mentioned that according to the existing legal framework, the Forest Development Department is funded through the state budget and is not allowed to attract extrabudgetary resources to support its operational expenses. In the meantime, the national stakeholders consistently pointed to a very limited budget which did not allow for competitive salaries to attract and keep qualified staff. This also hindered them from preparing and planning to scale up the project results (across all outcomes, including outcome 2.2)[62] without donor support.

Figure 9. Reforestation work (fruit plantations) in Aghdash region

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Aghdash.

The community members interviewed in the course of the project evaluation did not envision any issues associated with the sustainability of activities related to pasture rehabilitation and afforestation of degraded forest land. They believed that good caretaking and water supply would secure the desired results. At the same time, some local stakeholders (such as community

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[60] The forestry sector is governed by the Government of Azerbaijan (there is no private forestry in the country) and the foresters usually work for the Government of Azerbaijan with an average salary of USD 200 to USD 300/month.

[61] http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/aze163873.pdf.

[62] "Income-generating activities for small-scale local farmers demonstrated and possibilities investigated."

members, foresters, and representatives of local government entities) believed that due to climate change, Kura River was running unusually low (and was thus unreliable), which affected farm water planning for these communities. In this regard, some local stakeholders strongly supported the idea of drip irrigation instead of canal irrigation applied by FAO in pilot areas. The scope of this evaluation did not allow for the gathering of additional qualitative evidence of the water level being affected by climate change.

3.5   Factors affecting performance

Finding 19: The M&E system of the project demonstrated certain shortcomings in design and implementation and lacked systematic and consistent reporting of GEF-funded interventions under this project.

Finding 20: While the project M&E system lacked any M&E plan, it was guided by the indicators of the results framework, which on the other hand, lacked GEF 7 core indicators. Also, the indicators were not aligned with the SMART framework.

Finding 21: The M&E system did not incorporate a framework to validate the results implemented through co-financing.

Finding 22: In some cases, M&E reporting was not aligned with the targets set, and yet the project perceived some results to be achieved. Moreover, the results reported under GEF Core Indicator 6 ("greenhouse gas emission mitigated") were not directly attributable to the project activities.

Finding 23: At its design and implementation stage, the project did not actively engage non-state entities.

The evaluation could not assess the extent to which the M&E plan was practical and sufficient as the project never developed an M&E plan. However, according to the project document, the M&E plan had to be prepared by the M&E expert in the first three months of the implementation and had to be validated by the steering committee. The first steering committee meeting was organized on 9 March 2018. However, the meeting notes did not show that the project's M&E was a topic for discussion during the meeting. Instead, the following was noted:

During the first steering committee meeting three main project issues were discussed and approved: terms of reference of steering committee; revised project work plan; and budget (steering committee meeting minutes attached). During the meeting, it was orally agreed that the ministry will provide a place to set up the GIS laboratory (Forest Information Centre) to be used for forest inventory and monitoring.

Furthermore, according to the feedback from the project team, no M&E plan was ever developed. Desk research also showed that the project reporting was guided by the indicators and targets designed at inception and incorporated into the results framework of the project document.

Likewise, the evaluation team could not assess the extent to which the M&E system and data collection was carried out in accordance with the M&E plan (which was never officially developed). The evaluation team also noted that the project document clearly stipulated the constituent parts of the M&E system as follows:

The monitoring and evaluation roles and responsibilities specifically described in the monitoring and evaluation table (see Table 3.4) will be undertaken through: i) day-to-day monitoring and project progress supervision missions (PCU); ii) technical monitoring of indicators to measure a reduction in land degradation (PCU and LTA in coordination with partners); iii) final evaluation (independent consultants and FAO Evaluation Office); and iv) monitoring and supervision missions (FAO).

The project document incorporated a results framework along with output and outcome indicators, baseline, and the targets to be achieved. The results framework also covered information about the means of verification and persons responsible for data collection. The evaluation analysed data collection and reporting practices applied in progress reports and project implementation reviews, and revealed the following key findings:

- The project implementation reviews and progress reports were guided by the indicators and targets predefined in the results framework of the project document.
- The indicators of the results framework were not defined in accordance with the SMART framework.
- On some occasions, project implementation reviews and progress reports reported the full achievement of results while the actual results were a long way short of the targets set (for example, output 2.3.1 and output 2.3.2).
- Output 2.3.2 ("Seed laboratory under the Forest Development Department of the Environment of Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources modernized") lacked indicators at the inception stage.
- On some occasions, there was a conceptual inconsistency between outcome and output indicators. For example, outcome 2.2 ("Income-generating activities for local small farm holders demonstrated") encompassed one output, namely output 2.2.1 ("Pastures in two selected sites are planned and rehabilitated"). However, the output indicators and target were focused only on the number of hectares of land rehabilitated, while the outcome indicator incorporated the number of hectares of land rehabilitated and income-generating activities demonstrated for the beneficiary farmers. Here, the evaluation wishes to highlight that while outputs (and associated indicators) deal with the direct and immediate results of activities, outcomes are linked to either mid-term or long-term results. Moreover, gathering output-level progress contributes to assessing the outcome-level results and the latter is not feasible without gathering and analysing output-level data.

The evaluation also acknowledges that the project team had to report progress according to the GEF 7 Core Indicator Worksheet:

- Core indicator 3 ("Area of land restored"): Indicator 3.1 ("Area of degraded agricultural land restored"), indicator 3.2 ("Area of forest and forest land restored");
- Core indicator 4 ("Area of landscapes under improved practices [hectares]; excluding protected areas"): Indicator 4.3 ("Area of landscapes under sustainable land management in production systems"); and
- Core Indicator 6 ("Greenhouse gas emission mitigated"): Indicator 6.1 ("Carbon sequestered or emissions avoided in the AFOLU sector").

According to the project team, core indicator 6 has been calculated by the MEND according to the UNFCC reporting cycle for the whole country. Therefore, the evaluation found no direct evidence of the reporting under this indicator being directly attributable to the project results. Overall, the above GEF indicators were not fully incorporated into the results framework defined at inception. According to the feedback received, this caused reporting confusion to a certain extent.

Furthermore, the evaluation found no evidence of the terminal report being produced two months prior to the completion of the project as requested. In addition, the evaluation was unable to assess the extent to which the supervisory missions were aligned with the M&E plan and if the project had collected and submitted all supervisory mission reports.

The evaluation also found no evidence of the engagement of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), indigenous populations, or the private sector in the project design. Moreover, according to many stakeholders, the NGO sector was underdeveloped in Azerbaijan and there was no expectation that it would be engaged in the project design. The evaluation also acknowledged that the project engaged International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA) to carry out awareness-raising activities under Component 3. IDEA is an international campaign that was launched by Leyla Aliyeva (the first daughter of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev) in July 2011 to raise awareness of environmental issues. The evaluation found no evidence of local community members being engaged in the project design. However, according to some key stakeholders, local members of the relevant municipalities also participated in identifying the project's pilot sites.

Finally, the interviewed stakeholders also highlighted that forestry had been fully governed by the Government of Azerbaijan and that there was no private forestry in the country. Therefore, it was unfeasible to engage private or independent forestry experts in the design or implementation of the project activities.

3.6 Environmental and social safeguards

Finding 24. The project design was aligned with the FAO's Environmental and Social Management Guidelines (2015), the GEF's Agency Minimum Standards on Environmental and Social Safeguards (2015), and the GEF's Policy on Stakeholder Engagement (2017).

Desk research revealed that the project document incorporated an environmental and social assessment as requested by the GEF's Agency Minimum Standards on Environmental and Social Safeguards. The above-mentioned assessment addressed the compliance of the project with environmental and social standards (ESS) and validated the compliance of the project with ESS 3 ("plant genetic resources for food and agriculture") and ESS 7 ("decent work") of the FAO's Environmental and Social Management Guidelines. Furthermore, in-person interviews confirmed that the relevant staff of the Forest Development Department and the MENR were involved throughout the project design and implementation, including the selection of pilot sites in Aghdash and Gakh regions. This engagement was aligned with the GEF's Policy on Stakeholder Engagement and was important to secure the country's ownership over the project's results. It also contributed to strengthening partnership among the participating parties.

3.7 Gender

Finding 25. The project design referred to a gender-sensitive approach to be applied during the project's implementation. Accordingly, the project implementation was carried out pursuant to the gender-equality principle to the extent possible. However, some activities under Component 1 and Component 2 were gender neutral, with a country-level focus.

To address this evaluation question, the evaluation teams assessed the extent to which gender-equality principles were incorporated either in the design or implementation of the project and the extent to which they were aligned with the relevant FAO Policy on Gender Equality. Key FAO stakeholders pointed out that the project design preceded the FAO Policy on Gender Equality modified in 2019.[63] They also pointed to certain limitations associated with engaging female participants or experts, as forestry remained a highly male-dominated sector.

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[63] FAO Policy on Gender Equality was first endorsed in 2012.

Revision of the project reports validated that (at design) gender equality was addressed through the explicit commitment of recruiting a national consultant to develop a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation plan (under Component 3), an international consultant to be hired to develop guidelines on multifunctional forest management planning (under Component 2) following a gender-sensitive approach, and developing a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation system as well as a gender-sensitive communications strategy and action plan. In addition, the ToR of the GCC (developed at project design and incorporated in the project inception report) highlighted that the GCC was responsible, inter alia, for elaborating "all quantitative, qualitative and sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive information needed to develop and implement the SFM criteria and indicators concept".

It is also noteworthy that the meeting notes of the first session of the steering committee also demonstrated the commitment to analysing the needs of women and men and collecting sex-disaggregated data, namely that "gender issues within this project will be analysed as well, and appropriate actions will be taken to address women and men's needs and sex-disaggregated data collection." Furthermore, while the project steering committee participants (representing FAO and the MENR) varied from meeting to meeting, most of them were male experts.[64] For example, at the third meeting of the steering committee, only three out of 16 participants were female, and two of them represented FAO. Likewise, the fourth session of the steering committee was attended by two female experts (out of 16 participants), one of whom represented FAO.

In-person interviews validated that project beneficiaries did not perceive that the project had an explicit women empowerment and equality focus, as some activities would benefit the country as a whole (both men and women). In the meantime, other activities were implemented with the support of the available human resources and entailed field data collection to finalize FMP, physical work related to planting pasture and forest land rehabilitation, and income generation activities (focused on beekeepers and hazelnut growers). Focus group discussions and in-person interviews conducted in pilot areas also confirmed that women were mainly engaged in caretaking of planted trees. At the same time, planting work was carried out predominantly by male community members.

Furthermore, in the course of the project implementation, the project's private contractor also conducted a public survey to identify gender-disaggregated data reflecting the perceptions of households and different stakeholders about forests, their socioeconomic and environmental benefits, the level of dependence of local communities on forest resources, and so on. The project's national consultant on socioeconomic and gender issues also submitted a report describing different roles and activities performed by male and female community members in agricultural or forest resource production, as well as barriers and constraints to be overcome. The report was used for the further project planning of activities related to enhancing income generation in the targeted communities. As a result, the income generation (apiculture) activities of the project were directly targeted at vulnerable groups of the population, and women.

3.8 Co-financing

Finding 26. The project reported about 68 percent of in-kind co-financing being secured (against what was anticipated) during the project implementation. However, the project did not demonstrate the application of co-finance validating tools or methods.

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[64] The composition of steering committee meeting participants varied from one meeting to the next.

Finding 27. The project did not produce any separate detailed co-financing reports apart from the co-financing tables attached to the project implementation reviews.

Desk research revealed that, at the project initiation stage (in 2017), the anticipated project cost was USD 8 484 247, of which USD 1 484 247 had to be secured through the GEF Trust Fund, and the rest had to be co-financed by other sources (Table 16). Co-financing sources – including both FAO and the Government of Azerbaijan (as the recipient government) – accounted for about 83 percent of the total budget. More specifically, at design the Government of Azerbaijan had to provide about 87 percent of both monetary (USD 3 500 000) and in-kind (USD 2 500 000) support, and FAO pledged 14 percent of co-funding.

Table 16. Project co-financing structure at design and approval

Component/outcome	Co-financing by source			
	MENR ($)	FAO ($)	Total co-financing ($)	% co-financing
Component 1. Forest Resource Information Management System				
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed	150 000	100 000	250 000	91%
Outcome 1.2: An operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring system	150 000	100 000	250 000	58%
Subtotal Component 1	300 000	200 000	500 000	71%
Component 2. Multifunctional forest management leading to carbon sequestration, improvement in forest and tree resources and their contribution to local livelihoods				
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two pilot areas	900 000	50 000	950 000	93%
Outcome 2.2: Income generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated	700 000	150 000	850 000	97%
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested Forest Fund land	3 500 000	250 000	3 750 000	81%
Subtotal Component 2	5 100 000	450 000	5 550 000	85%
Component 3. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing				
Outcome 3.1 Project implementation based on RBM	50 000	50 000	100 000	56%
Outcome 3.2 Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices	250 000	150 000	400 000	80%
Subtotal Component 3	300 000	200 000	500 000	73%
Project management	300 000	150 000	450 000	77%
Total funding	6 000 000	1 000 000	7 000 000	83%

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku; and FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

Initially, the government contribution was expected to materialize without any direct transfers of financial resources from the state budget. Instead, the Forest Development Department of the MENR was delegated to carry out USD 6 000 000 worth of activities, thereby making an in-kind contribution. This contribution included USD 3.5 million to be spent by the Government of Azerbaijan under its own programmes related to the afforestation rehabilitation programme (Component 2); operational costs for the seed laboratory and nursery (USD 700 000) to be implemented under Component 2; forest management plans (USD 400 000) and USD 2.5 million worth of contributions in the form of staff time both at central and local forest directorates engaged in project activities under all three components. FAO's contribution was provided in the form of technical staff (USD 1 000 000) from programmes currently under implementation in Azerbaijan running parallel with the project.

It is noteworthy that the project steering committee was in charge of revising and approving both the project workplan and its budget. Steering committee meeting notes revealed that the project budget approved during the meetings incorporated only the GEF-funded activities. Thus, the revised project budget discussed during the first meeting (on 8 March 2018) re-allocated a total of USD 1 484 247 across the activities and project components with a reference made to this amount being "original amounts indicated in the project document". Subsequent revisions of the project budget were still focused on the GEF-funded budget items. Likewise, the project progress reports also outlined the allocation of project budget funded through the GEF Trust Fund. At the same time, the co-financing section of the project implementation reviews presents the amount of co-financing to materialize in the course of the project implementation (Table 17). Thus, by 30 June 2020, the MENR and FAO both provided about 68 percent of the funds expected at approval.

Table 17. Co-finance tracking table (USD)

Source of co-financing	Type of co-financing	Amount confirmed at CEO endorsement/ approval	Actual amount materialized by			Expected total disbursement by the end of the project
			30 June 2019	30 June 2020	30 June 2021	
MENR	In-kind/financial	6 000 000	2 606 000	3 842 000	4 185 530	6 000 000
FAO	In-kind/financial	1 000 000	123 000	215 000	570 000	2 000 000[65]
Total		7 000 000	2 729 000	4 057 000	4 755 530	7 000 000

Source: FAO. 2018–2021. Project implementation reviews. Baku.

It is also important to highlight that the co-financing structure depended heavily on the USD 10 million FAO-Turkey partnership programme to support the forestry sector. This programme was developed to benefit countries in Central Asia and Azerbaijan and was to be implemented from 2016–2020. It was supposed to secure that FAO intended co-financing for forestation activities in 2020 to support the achievement of project targets and outputs. While the evaluation team found no probative evidence of this co-financing scheme having materialized, it did validate FAO's financial contribution within the framework of the Triangular Cooperation Protocol signed by FAO, the OGM, and the Forest Development Department/MENR as follows: "To warrantee that the expenses mentioned in the attached working plan prepared by OGM

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[65] Expected co-financing amount was adjusted in 2020.

and FAO of the OGM experts working in the project will be covered by FAO as mentioned in the letter."[66]

3.9 Progress to impact

Finding 28. The Forest Development Department reported that it continued to apply FDP methodology in other regions of the country (outside the project's pilot zones). The long-term impact of the investment in seed laboratory, Absheron nursery, and pasture rehabilitation and afforestation work, were not observable in the course of this evaluation, and their potential impact (although subject to state funding and support) was positively rated by the key stakeholders.

Finding 29. Due to the scope of the project activities, no measurable evidence of environmental stress reduction or environmental status change was obtained. Likewise, no evidence was gleaned with regard to any changes in the policy, legal, or regulatory framework directly attributable to the project results.

Finding 30. The project's M&E framework did not incorporate soil management indicators to inform reporting on changes in soil quality after pasture rehabilitation and afforestation work.

According to the feedback of key stakeholders, any progress made towards the long-term impact is linked to the capacity of the country to sustain and extend the project's achievements. The representatives of the Government of Azerbaijan reported scaling up the project results and carrying out a FMP in the Lankaran and Masalli regions of Azerbaijan. Thus, the Forest Development Department reported implementing FMP for a total area of 400 882 ha in seven regional forest economy centres (RFECs) in 2018–2021 (Table 18_Toc95162900).

Table 18. Forest management plans implemented, 2018–2021

RFECs	Year of implementation	Administrative district	Area (ha)
Barda	2018	Aghdash	7 470
Sheki	2018	Gakh	309 65
Barda	2019	Barda	8 893
		Yevlakh	4 479
		Zardab	3 446
Sheki	2019	Sheki	48 114
Zaqatala	2020	Balaken	12 553
		Zaqatala	54 103
Gabala	2021	Oguz	28 050
		Gabala	33 793
Shamakhi	2021	Agsu	5 460
		Ismayilli	35 557
		Shamakhi	6 712
Lankaran	2021	Lerik	40 306
		Lankaran	7 030
		Astara	19 510
Masalli	2021	Jalilabad	17 238
		Masalli	16 664
		Yardimli	20 536
Total			**400 879**

Source: Forest Development Department/MENR. 2021.

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[66] The evaluation team did not receive any specific co-funding report about FAO's contribution provided within the framework of this cooperation protocol.

The vast majority of the stakeholders mentioned that no other donor was supporting any activities related to NFI and FMP. Moreover, some key stakeholders mentioned that in the event that the Government of Azerbaijan keeps scaling up the NFI and FMP work, pursuant to the methodology introduced within the project framework, the achievements made could be directly attributed to the project. With regard to the long-term impact of other outputs of the project (such as output 2.2.1, output 2.3.1, output 2.3.2, output 2.3.3, and output 2.3.4), it largely depends on the commitment of the Government of Azerbaijan to allocate financial and human resources to efficiently operationalize the Absheron nursery and the seed laboratory, and keep investing in the afforestation of degraded forest and the rehabilitation of land to restore soil health and ecosystem function.

The site visits validated the rehabilitation and afforestation activities in the pilot areas. However, according to some key stakeholders, it was too early to report any significant environmental stress reduction or environmental status change. Local stakeholders emphasized the importance of scaling up the pasture rehabilitation and afforestation work to improve soil conditions and to address the problem of high levels of soil salinity in Aghdash region in particular (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Salted land in Aghdash region

Source: FAO. 2021. Evaluation dataset. Baku.

While developing projects with a focus on improving soil conditions, key stakeholders advised applying the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management and introducing the relevant soil management indicators to measure progress effectively.[67]

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[67]

https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/SSM/SSM_Protocol_EN_006.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2Ob5F2SaNyA1d473bL7p_jC14YNMbujT9IgnC5C7lRqhLRq3QhhVEt7RY.

3.10 Knowledge management

Finding 31. The project has invested resources and money in communication and outreach. However, the evaluation found the achievements in this regard to be inadequate.

The project document recognized communication, visibility, and knowledge sharing to be a key part of the project strategy. It was also reflected in the project design, under outcome 3.2. ("Sustainability and upscaled SFM ensured through provision/dissemination of up-to-date information on forest resources, their trends, lessons learned, and best practices"). The knowledge management activities had to be planned at the outset of the project and were directly linked to Component 1 and Component 2. The methodology and forest resource assessment and monitoring system, as well as systematic data collection mechanism, were acknowledged as innovative for the country and to be shared among national, regional, and international partners to increase awareness, secure sustainability, and upscale. In this regard, the project had to develop a communication strategy and action plan, and carry out an intensive awareness-raising and knowledge-sharing campaign (under Component 3). It is noteworthy that according to the strategy: *"Monitoring and evaluation of the communication strategy and action plan will be conducted by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan with the involvement of all related stakeholders, including NGOs, local communities, academic sector, international organizations involved and the media."* While the MENR was in charge of assessing the impact of communication and outreach, its real impact was not validated by the evaluation. However, focus-group discussions with community members revealed that the attendees possessed very generic information about the goals of the project; their main concerns were focused on their primary needs of supporting the family and generating additional income.

Moreover, the project reported only partial achievement of the associated indicators. Specifically, awareness-raising events were reported to have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the project reported full achievement of output 3.2.1 ("Communication strategy action plan to raise awareness developed") and output 3.2.3 ("A web portal established"). The project also reported partial achievement of output 3.2.2 ("A set of manuals or guidelines produced for forestry managers and technicians that captures and describes the improved practices, measures, and technologies").

The evaluation team validated only partial achievement of output 3.2.3 as the web page (http://eco.gov.az/az/meseler/olkenin-meseleri) was under full possession of the MENR, and lacked data related to the project's achievements. Therefore, the evaluation team was unable to attribute any changes in its content to project activities. Furthermore, local partners interviewed in the course of this evaluation confirmed being aware of the project goal and objectives, due to information shared via the MENR or FAO. However, the evaluation found no evidence of regular dissemination of the project newsletter or other briefing materials for partners and stakeholders. Very few presentations were held on the project to wider audiences. In addition, the evaluation confirmed that certain media covered the project activities and goal.[68] However, not all of the links reported in the project implementation reviews were valid.

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[68] https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/gundem/2927601.html;
http://milliyol.az/azerbaycanda_me_elerin_inventarla_d_r_lmas_na_ba_lan_l_b-32470-xeber.html;
https://www.azerbaycan24.com/azerbaycanda-meselerin-inventarlasdirilmasina-baslanilib/.

4.   Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Based on the data and evidence gathered, the evaluation presents the following conclusions:

Conclusion 1 (Relevance): The project was aligned with the overall strategic priorities of the partnering entities (the Government of Azerbaijan, the GEF and FAO), and its ownership rested primarily with the Forest Development Department and the MENR. The FMP results of the project have the potential to benefit other state agencies as their awareness of the project outputs and outcomes increases, and they become more familiar with the net benefit and impact of forest management planning on their mandate. The FMP allow defining key functions of the forest (such as economic, protective, beneficial, recreational function), which are linked to natural resource planning (such as nature conservation, forestry, recreation, eco-tourism, real estate, and sale of soil resources). The project design reflected needs at national and global levels. However, its scope, timeline, and budget proved to be inadequate. The project scope was scattered across either interlinked (for example, NFI and FMP) or not directly linked (such as NFI and income generation, FMP and Absheron nursery rehabilitation) dimensions.

Conclusion 2 (Effectiveness): Taking into account the broad and ambitious scope and budget allocated, the project fully and efficiently accomplished three core strategic outcomes which could have potential decision-making power at the national level (such as outcome 1.1., outcome 1.2, and outcome 2.1), if sustained and scaled up. The main strategic achievements of the project are associated with the introduced innovative solutions related to NFI (Component 1) and FMP (Component 2) and building the capacity of the Government of Azerbaijan (both institutional and individual) in the application of the above-mentioned innovative approaches. The scaling up of these approaches and the expansion of the work to encompass other areas of the country (beyond the pilot zones), and increasing visibility and awareness of the results, would serve multiple purposes. First and foremost, it would maintain sustainable forest and natural resource management. Second, it would support the country to fulfil its international obligations in terms of the SDGs, Paris Agreement, Bonn Challenge, and so on.

Conclusion 3 (Efficiency): Despite the very broad scope and limited timeline, as well as limited resources, the project efficiently addressed and secured full achievement of the most strategic parts of the project under Component 1 and Component 2. On the other hand, the project experienced certain delays due to external factors (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and martial law imposed in the country) and challenges associated with the project design. The engagement and contribution of their party (such as OGM) were not planned at the design stage. However, it demonstrated a flexible and efficient approach to consolidating human and intellectual resources to deliver on the targets set. The project governance and oversight related to steering committee and task force arrangements demonstrated mixed results in terms of the meeting frequency and thematic coverage.

Conclusion 4 (Sustainability): The sustainability of project results is still uncertain as it heavily depends on the political will of the Government of Azerbaijan to invest further in the achievements made – for example, investing in the activities related to NFI and FMP and following the methodology introduced within this project framework, maintaining and taking care of the pilot sites with the area forested and rehabilitated, investing in seed laboratory and Absheron nursery to secure their functioning and long-term impact. It also depends on the allocation of more financial resources (or identification of co-funding

options) as well as making necessary legal adjustments and policy changes to support SFM practices in the country, which also incorporates necessary adjustments to the outdated Forest Code and creation of a proper framework for addressing the financial needs of the Forest Development Department to maintain its mandate and refocus on SFM practices. In addition, the project's sustainability depends on the availability of qualified staff of the Government of Azerbaijan capable of applying the methodologies and approaches developed within the framework of the project.

Conclusion 5 (Factors affecting performance): The level of engagement with local stakeholders was exclusively associated with the state sector. The project M&E system proved inefficient to track, validate and adequately report the achievements. The weakness of the M&E system was linked to the unsatisfactory project design and its results framework, which lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to indicators, as well as some relevant indicators to measure the mid- and long-term impact of some activities related to SFM and soil quality (both of which are a long-term process). Moreover, failure to produce any M&E plan (as requested at design) with a revised indicators and results framework (along with detailed monitoring questions to identify the information needed to be collected, data verification means, and data collection timeline) resulted in data inconsistency and reporting on the indicators not directly related to the project activities (such as GEF Core Indicator 6 and GEF Core Indicator 7).[69] Furthermore, the M&E system and results framework also failed to apply the relevant soil management indicators to measure any improvement in soil conditions. Once again, while the project incorporated pasture rehabilitation activities, it was also important to include all the relevant indicators in the project's results framework, including soil erosion and management indicators.[70] Change in soil conditions is a long–term process. Therefore, the project's design phase had to take into account the shortcomings associated with the time constraints and project coverage area (area to be rehabilitated). The project also did not validate to what extent the Government of Azerbaijan contributed to pasture rehabilitation. In case of planning any future projects focusing on pasture rehabilitation activities, projects should be strategically designed to address timeline facets of soil and pasture management, the commitments of the national governments to sustain these practices in the targeted areas, and indicators to measure progress over time. Moreover, FAO developed a protocol for assessing sustainable soil management,[71] which provides a practical method for different stakeholders to determine if current soil management practices are sustainable and, if not, to identify possible actions to improve their sustainability.[72] In this regard, it is also advisable to consider the above-mentioned protocol at the design stage of activities and projects that incorporate elements related to pasture rehabilitation and sustainable forest and soil management. All of the above-mentioned factors contributed to the inefficient monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the project.

Conclusion 6 (Co-financing): The project's financing scheme was sensitive and dependent on exogenous factors (contingent to funding from the Government of Azerbaijan), which were beyond the project's control. Moreover, the applied operational approach did not consider validating the actual co-financing secured by the committed partners. The broad scope of the project made it challenging to concentrate and

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[69] Which was provided to the evaluation team as a set of indicators to be used for reporting.

[70] Environmental benefits of well-managed pasture include reduced soil erosion as well (source: http://livestocktrail.illinois.edu/pasturenet/paperDisplay.cfm?ContentID=6618)

[71] Which also recommends a set of sustainable soil management indicators.

[72] https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/SSM/SSM_Protocol_EN_006.pdf

consolidate resources (financial and human) on achieving strategic outcomes which could potentially have decision-making power at the national level (such as outcome 1.1., outcome 1.2, and outcome 2.1). The budget allocated at design was unrealistic and strongly relied on co-financing (83 percent). Therefore, it was subject to several adjustments. The Government of Azerbaijan pledged to contribute over USD 3 500 000 to support the work related to afforestation, pasture rehabilitation, and seed laboratory and nursery modernization. However, the government ultimately was expected to provide only USD 1 450 000 to the NFI and FMP work, which were acknowledged to be very resource- and time-consuming.

Conclusion 7 (Cross-cutting: gender mainstreaming and environmental and social safeguard): The project's focus on gender equality and opportunities for women was weak for several reasons. First, the sector remains male-dominated. Second, the project failed to produce a gender-sensitive M&E plan (as requested). The project design and implementation were straightforward and followed the relevant environmental and social safeguard frameworks developed by FAO and the GEF. The visibility of the project results and awareness-raising about the importance of the NFI and FMP in securing financial and economic benefits of forest resources remains underestimated as there has been little progress made with regard to visibility and outreach at the national and local levels.

Conclusion 8 (Progress to impact): The impact of the project activities can be observed only in the long run. Therefore, its impact is closely tied up with the project sustainability as the Government of Azerbaijan (an owner of the project results) is expected to scale up and replicate the project's achievements.

Conclusion 9 (Knowledge management): Several endogenous and exogenous factors affected the project's knowledge management and outreach to a certain extent. Many of these factors were beyond the project's control – for example, the COVID-19 pandemic postponed awareness-raising activities; and after completing the project, the MENR was the sole owner of the online content created within the project framework.

4.2 Recommendations

These are a set of strategic and operational recommendations to be taken into account for the further planning and design of similar interventions:

Recommendation 1 (operational): Narrow the scope and focus of the project and gradually scale up the project activities in similar strategic dimensions. In this regard, instead of merging different topics (such as NFI, FMP, income generation, and pasture rehabilitation), it is highly recommended to keep focused on one specific strategic dimension (for example, focusing on only NFI-related work and scaling it up to cover other regions of the country, or focusing only on FMP work and scaling it up). Moreover, the project design needs to address all three layers of capacity development (legal framework and policy, institutional, and individual capacity layers) along with a timeline approach to secure project sustainability. Altogether, these layers create a supportive ecosystem to strengthen and maintain state capacity over time to achieve different development objectives, including those related to SFM.

Recommendation 2 (operational): Taking into account that the GEF is more focused on developing integrated programmes and complex operations, it needs to increase its focus on measuring the mid- or long-term impact of its operations and advancing the approaches to safeguard the sustainability of its interventions. In this regard, the project design might incorporate SFM and sustainable soil management (SSM) protocols. In

addition, the national governments seeking to extend the project activities should be strongly encouraged to report progress made across SFM and SSM indicators, and validate their contribution (in-kind and/or financial) to the project sustainability.

Recommendation 3 (operational): FAO and the GEF should enhance stakeholder engagement approaches during further project planning. They also need to reconsider the approaches related to the frequency, composition, and agenda items of the task force meetings. While the steering committee meetings might be focused on the overall administrative and operational aspects of the project, the task force meetings have to be more technical, organized regularly, and engage the subject matter experts from the beneficiary country. It is also advisable to diversify the composition of the steering committee meeting and engage stakeholders from other relevant state agencies, line ministries, and non-state actors to the extent possible (depending on the country context and sector structure).

Recommendation 4 (strategic): FAO and the GEF should continue developing the capacity of the Government of Azerbaijan in the sustainable forest and soil management domains,[73] and encourage the participation of relevant staff in cross-country or regional technical working groups. Moreover, when it comes to the project's steering committee composition, it is also advisable to engage other relevant agencies, not only the Forest Development Department and the MENR, to increase awareness of the project activities and the topics related to SFM. Over time, this working group might serve as an advisory forum on climate change and degradation matters at the national level. It might even contribute to strengthening internal lobbying and advocacy on SFM issues.

Recommendation 5 (operational): FAO and the GEF need to reconsider the means of validating co-financing contributions from partners based on their actual involvement and monetary (or in-kind) contributions to the project. It also implies regularly collecting information and updated statements detailing co-financing contributions.

Recommendation 6 (operational): The FAO country office needs to improve the M&E system by developing a consolidated results framework with SMART indicators and targets. It also needs to ensure that the staff possesses the capacity to elaborate a detailed and gender-sensitive M&E plan. In this regard, it would also be highly advisable to strengthen the capacity of FAO staff on M&E practices with the support and guidance of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (for example, its experts providing advice on the results framework; reviewing, advising and validating the M&E plans, guiding the national M&E specialists throughout the process, and so on).

Recommendation 7 (strategic): It would also be advisable to continue dialogue with the Government of Azerbaijan about necessary legal and policy changes that would secure the sustainability of the project's achievements and address all associated risks to sustainability (such as financial-, legal-, and policy-level gaps). This dialogue might address either changes in the outdated Forest Code or the financial and human resources challenges faced by the Forest Development Department in scaling up the results of the project (given its dependence on the state budget and inability to attract additional resources to fulfil its mandate).

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[73] While the project incorporated pasture rehabilitation activities, it was also important to include all the relevant indicators in the results framework of the project, including soil erosion and management indicators. Change in soil conditions is a long–term process; therefore, the design phase of the project had to take into account the shortcomings associated with the time constraints and project coverage area (area to be rehabilitated).

5.   Lessons learned

Based on the key lessons learned in the course of this evaluation, the evaluation issued the following recommendations to enhance the impact of the FAO-GEF funded interventions:

- **Keep the projects or programmes focused on specific strategic interventions** (for example, developing NFI and FMP), first piloting them and gradually scaling them countrywide. The scale-up planning should be guided by the government's commitment expressed through the relevant legislative and policy-level adjustment and budget allocation.
- **Keep engaging a diverse group of stakeholders,** including the representatives of other relevant state agencies and ministries as well as non-state actors such as NGOs, the private sector, and academia. To amplify the results of the FAO-GEF interventions, the implementing partners need to increase the visibility of the project/programme results. They also need to make sure that additional voices beyond the direct beneficiaries are heard, including private-sector representatives, relevant NGOs, academia, local and international subject-matter experts, and even media representatives.
- **Pay particular attention to developing an adequate and efficient M&E system** to cover all the work carried out during and after a project and define, select, collect, analyse and use all of this information.

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Appendix 1. People interviewed

Last name	First name	Position	Organization
Abdullayev	Nureli	Forester of Kungut Forestry (Sheki district), Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	Forest Development Department (FDD)/MENR
Adilov	Shamsaddin	Chief Forester, Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	FDD/MENR
Ahmadov	Araz	Head of Agzibir village municipality, Aghdash district	Government of Azerbaijan
Ahmadov	Mahir	Forest Plant Engineer for Gakh Foresters, Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Aliyeva	Narmin	National Project Assistant	FAO
Aliyev	Zahid	Forestry watchman of Kungut Forestry (Sheki district), Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	FDD/MENR
Aleskerov	Nofel	Forester of Agzibir Forestry (Aghdash) of Barda Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Altrell	Dan	Senior forestry advisor, National Forest Inventory	FAO
Babayev	Akram	Director of Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	FDD/MENR
Babashzade	Orkhan	Deputy Director of Barda Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Cevirme	Murat	Head of Department	OGM
Ferro Vazquez	Maria	Global Soil Partnership (GSP) – Land and water division (NSLD)	FAO
Feyzullayev	Shirzad	Chief Forest Plant Engineer, Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	FDD/MENR
Gonzalez	Hernan	GEF Funding Liaison Officer, Investment Centre Division/FAO GEF Coordination Unit	FAO
Gurbanov	Bekir	Director of Barda Regional Forestry Economy Centre	FAO/MENR
Hasanov	Mubariz	Forester of Gipchag forestry (Gakh district), Sheki Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Huseynov	Sardar	M&E Specialist	FAO
Jafarov	Alish	Local executive authority representative in Agzibir village, Aghdash district	Government of Azerbaijan
Latifov	Ramin	Local Project Coordinator	FAO/MENR
Mammadov	Parvin	Gakh Local Coordinator	MENR
Metin Kocaeli	Gediz	Invited expert	OGM
Mehdiyev	Bariz	Assistant to the FAO Representative	FAO
Nasibov	Elnur	Forest Plant Engineer for Aghdash Foresters, Barda Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Ozturk	Yavuz	Invited expert	OGM
Pechacek	Peter	Lead Technical Officer and Forestry Officer (SECMD)	FAO

Last name	First name	Position	Organization
Sanchez	Carolina Olivera	International consultant on sustainable soil management, Global Soil Partnership (GSP) – Land and Water Division (NSLD)	FAO
Yunusov	Yusif	Forester Assistant of Agzibir Forestry (Aghdash) of Barda Regional Forestry Economy Centre	MENR
Tavani	Rebecca	Forestry Officer	FAO

Source: FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Budapest.

Appendix 2. Logical framework

Activity	Outputs	Outcomes	Results/final outcomes
Component 1: Forest Resource Information Management System			
Consultant prepares concept paper and guidelines with draft set of SFM criteria and indicators.	Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and Guidelines on SFM prepared.	Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.	Increased social and economic benefits from forests.

Improved quality of existing forests.

Increase carbon sequestration. |
Official call to stakeholders for nominations.	Output 1.1.2: SFM GCC established.		
Formal establishment of General Coordination Committee (GCC) at inception workshop (with ToR).			
Consultant presents the concept note at the SFM GCC workshop, moderates work group for identification of national SFM criteria and indicators set for Azerbaijan, and reports the final outcome to the MENR.	Output 1.1.3: National level SFM C&I set identified and agreed by stakeholders.		
Training prepared by FAO staff.	Output 1.2.1: A capacity development program for cadres and stakeholders.	Outcome 1.2: An operational National Forest Assessment and Monitoring system.	
10 cadres and stakeholders trained.			
GIS Lab established.	Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.		
Software installed.			
Satellite images and photos obtained, interpreted, sample plots identified, ground survey conducted, data stored and analysed.	Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis.		
Workshop organized to assess findings within the SFM criteria and indicators framework and reported with the recommendations for next steps.	Output 1.2.4: Participatory criteria and indicators assessment.		
Component 2: Multifunctional forest management leading to carbon sequestration, improvement in forest resources and their contribution to improvement of social welfare of local communities			
International consultant recruited to prepare guidelines for forest management planning.	Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.	Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two pilot areas.	
International consultant prepares training material.			
Training of foresters from management teams.	Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained.		
Forest management teams equipped with necessary tools and equipment.	Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh		

Activity	Outputs	Outcomes	Results/final outcomes
Team chiefs conduct reconnaissance work with the technical staff of FCRDs.	and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.		
Local workshops organized to understand needs of local people.			
Field work.			
Sites selected.	Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are planned and rehabilitated.	Outcome 2.2: Income-generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated and the possibility for their application is investigated.	
National consultant plans and supervises pasture rehabilitation.			
National consultant prepares nursery modernization plan.	Output 2.3.1: Shemkir nursery production capacity increased.	Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested Forest Fund land.	
Nursery modernization plan implemented.			
Necessary equipment procured.	Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory under the Forest Development Department on Environment of Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources modernized.		
Local villagers contracted to carry out the field work. National consultant supervises implementation.	Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored.		
Local villagers contracted to carry out the field work. National consultant supervises implementation.	Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected rayons.		
Component 3: Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing			
National consultant recruited to develop M&E plan.	Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive M&E plan and system in place.	Outcome 3.1 Project implementation based on RBM.	
M&E plan implemented.			
Consultant recruited.	Output 3.1.2: Project Final Evaluation.		
Final evaluation prepared.			
Public survey.	Output 3.2.1: A communication strategy and action plan developed.	Outcome 3.2 Sustainability and upscaled SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend, and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.	
Interviews with key stakeholders.			
Preparation of communication material.			
Consultants recruited to prepare manuals.	Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals for dissemination of improved practices, measures and technologies.		
Web portal designed and updated monthly.	Output 3.2.3: A web portal established.		

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku.

Appendix 3. Project structure at design and completion

AT DESIGN	AT COMPLETION
COMPONENT 1. Forest Resource Information Management System.	Component 1. Forest Resource Information Management System.
Outcome 1.1. A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.	Outcome: 1.1. A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.
Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared.	Output 1.1.1: Concept paper and guidelines on SFM prepared.
Output 1.1.2: SFM General Coordination Committee (GCC) established.	Output 1.1.2: SFM General Coordination Committee (GCC) established.
Output 1.1.3: National level SFM criteria and indicators set identified and agreed by stakeholders.	Output 1.1.3: National level SFM criteria and indicators set identified and agreed by stakeholders.
Outcome 1.2. An operational national forest assessment and monitoring system providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.	Outcome 1.2. An operational national forest assessment and monitoring system providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.
Output 1.2.1: A capacity development programme for cadres and stakeholders.	Output 1.2.1: A capacity development programme for cadres and stakeholders.
Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.	Output 1.2.2: An operational geographic information system for forest assessment and monitoring.
Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis.	Output 1.2.3: Data collection and analysis.
Output 1.2.4: Participatory criteria and indicators assessment.	Output 1.2.4: Participatory criteria and indicators assessment.
COMPONENT 2. Multifunctional forest management leading to carbon sequestration, improvement in forest and tree resources and their contribution to the improvement of social welfare of local communities.	Component 2. Forest management planning.
Outcome 2.1. Improved forest management planning in two regions.	Outcome: 2.1. Improved forest management planning in two areas.
Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.	Output 2.1.1: Guidelines for multifunctional management planning developed.
Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained.	Output 2.1.2: Five forest management planning teams trained.
Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.	Output 2.1.3: Multifunctional forest management plans for two regions (Gakh and Aghdash) developed and under implementation.
Outcome 2.2. Income-generating activities for small-scale local farmers demonstrated and possibilities for their application is investigated.	Outcome 2.2. Income-generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated.
Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are rehabilitated.	Output 2.2.1: Pastures in two selected sites are planned and rehabilitated.
Outcome 2.3. Carbon stock enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land.	Outcome 2.3. Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land.
Output 2.3.1: Shemkir nursery capacity is increased.	Output 2.3.1: Absheron nursery production capacity increased.
Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory modernized under the Forest Development Department on Environment of Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources modernized.	Output 2.3.2: Seed laboratory modernized.
Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored (300 ha of degraded forest land are rehabilitated).	Output 2.3.3: Degraded forest land rehabilitated and restored.
Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected rayons (300 ha land is afforested across the selected regions).	Output 2.3.4: Afforestation of forest land across the selected regions.

AT DESIGN	AT COMPLETION
COMPONENT 3. Monitoring evaluation and knowledge sharing.	Component 3. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing.
Outcome 3.1. Project implementation based on RBM.	Outcome: 3.1. Project implementation based on RBM.
Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive Project Monitoring & Evaluation Plan and system in place.	Output 3.1.1: Gender sensitive M&E plan and system in place.
Output 3.1.2: Project final evaluations.	Output 3.1.2: Project final evaluation.
Outcome 3.2. Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.	Outcome 3.2. Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.
Output 3.2.1: Communication strategy and action plan to raise awareness developed.	Output 3.2.1: A communication strategy and action plan developed.
Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals or guidelines for forestry managers and technicians that captures and describes the improved practices, measures and technologies.	Output 3.2.2: A set of manuals for dissemination of improved practices, measures and technologies.
Output 3.2.3: Web portal established.	Output 3.2.3: A web portal established.

Source: FAO. 2017. Project document. Baku; and FAO. 2018. Project inception report. Baku.

Appendix 4. Global Environment Facility evaluation criteria rating table

GEF criteria/sub-criteria	Rating	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance.	Highly satisfactory	Highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the country and local priorities.
A1.1. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities.	Highly satisfactory	It is fully aligned with the GEF and FAO strategic priorities.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs.	Highly satisfactory	Fully relevant to national, local and regional needs.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions.	Highly satisfactory	A unique project as no similar interventions were identified in Azerbaijan.
B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results.	Satisfactory	Mixed results, most strategic dimensions of the project were fully achieved.
B1.1 Delivery of project outputs.	Satisfactory	11 out of 20 output indicators were fully achieved; outputs of the most strategic dimensions of the project associated with the NFI and FMP were fully achieved.
B1.2 Progress towards outcomes and project objectives.	Satisfactory	Mixed results, the activities related to NGI and FMP were fully achieved.
Outcome 1.1: A methodological mechanism for data collection, assessment and reporting developed.	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 1.2: An operational national forest assessment and monitoring system providing reliable and up-to-date information on forest resources.	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 2.1: Improved forest management planning in two areas.	Highly satisfactory	Fully achieved.
Outcome 2.2: Income-generating activities for local smallholders demonstrated.	Moderately satisfactory	Partially achieved; actual area of pasture rehabilitated was less than planned.
Outcome 2.3: Carbon stocks enhanced in degraded and deforested forest fund land.	Moderately satisfactory	Partially achieved; Absheron nursery and seed laboratory was not fully functional (as expected); actual areas deforested were less than planned.
Outcome 3.1: Project implementation based on RBM.	Moderately unsatisfactory[74]	Partially achieved as the M&E plan was not developed, and the results framework demonstrated some shortcomings.
Outcome 3.2: Sustainability and upscale SFM ensured through provision of up-to-date information on forest resources and their trend and dissemination of lessons learned and good practices.	Moderately unsatisfactory	Partially achieved; web portal provided very general information about forestry and there was no reference to the project. Dissemination of information was not completed.
Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/ outcomes.	Satisfactory	The activities related to NFI and FMP were fully achieved.
B1.3 Likelihood of impact.	Moderately satisfactory	It depends on project sustainability and the willingness of the Government of Azerbaijan to scale up the project results.

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[74] A "moderately unsatisfactory" rating is given in cases of outcomes achieved being somewhat lower than expected, and/or with significant shortcomings.

C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency.[75]	Satisfactory	The project secured full achievement of the most strategic parts of the project under Component 1 and Component 2; activities under Component 3 were less efficient.
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability.	Moderately likely	It fully depends on the will of the Government of Azerbaijan to allocate funds and resources to secure SFM practices.
D1.1. Financial risks.	Moderately likely	While the Government of Azerbaijan did not officially report allocating financial resources to sustain the project results, it scaled up the FMP-related activities.
D1.2. Socio-political risks.	Low likelihood	A stable socio-political environment.
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks.	Highly likely	Structural changes and high staff turnover of the Government of Azerbaijan might affect institutional memory and scale-up of the project's achievements.
D1.4. Environmental risks.	Low likelihood	No environmental risks were identified whatsoever.
D2. Catalysis and replication.	Moderately likely	The Government of Azerbaijan replicated the FMP methodology and reported developing FMP for other regions of the country (beyond the pilot areas).
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design and readiness.[76]	Moderately satisfactory	The project was too ambitious and incorporated activities from different strategic dimensions (such as income generation and NFI).
E2. Quality of project implementation.	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results: full achievement of strategic activities and outcomes and partial achievement of others; shortcomings in M&E and co-financing validation.
E2.1 Quality of project implementation by FAO (BH, LTO, PTF, etc.).	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results: full achievement of strategic activities and outcomes and partial achievement of others; Shortcomings in M&E and co-financing validation.
E2.1 Project oversight (steering committee, project working group, etc.).	Satisfactory	Steering committee meetings were organized on a regular basis (semi-annually); just one task force meeting was conducted.
E3. Quality of project execution For DEX projects: Project Management Unit/budget holder; For OPIM projects: executing agency.	Satisfactory	Despite the broad scope of the project, its limited budget, and a number of external factors that caused certain implementation delays, the budget holder (FAO) managed to achieve fully three out of seven outcomes while requesting two non-cost project extensions.
E4. Financial management and co-financing.	Moderately satisfactory	The project lacked the system to validate co-financing.
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement.	Moderately satisfactory	Exclusively with the state sector.
E6. Communication, knowledge management and knowledge products.	Moderately unsatisfactory	Web protocol provided very generic information about forestry and there was no reference to the

[75] Includes cost efficiency and timeliness.
[76] This refers to factors affecting the project's ability to start as expected, such as the presence of sufficient capacity among executing partners at project launch.

		project. Dissemination of information was not completed.
E7. Overall quality of M&E.	Unsatisfactory	No M&E plan was developed, and the results framework lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to the project indicators.
E7.1 M&E design.	Unsatisfactory	No M&E plan was developed, and the results framework lacked a consolidated and SMART approach with respect to the project indicators.
E7.2 M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources).	Highly unsatisfactory	There was no M&E plan developed.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance.	Moderately satisfactory	Mixed results.
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions.	Satisfactory	The project applied the gender-equality principle to the extent possible.
F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples.	Satisfactory	Indirectly contributed to the human rights agenda; no indigenous people live in the pilot areas of the project.
F2. Environmental and social safeguards.	Highly satisfactory	The project was fully aligned with environmental and social safeguards.
Overall project rating	**Satisfactory**	

Source: FAO. 2022. Evaluation dataset. Budapest.