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Mid Term Review of the Project:

Strengthening the Resilience of Multiple-Use Protected Areas for the Generation of Multiple Global Environmental Benefits

GCP/NIC/049/GFF

GEF ID: 5277

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION

FAO Nicaragua

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AOP	Annual Operations Plan
BD	Biodiversity
BO	Budget Officer
CAPS	Drinking Water and Sanitation Committees
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCM	Climate Change Mitigation
CO	Country Office
DT	Land Degradation
ENDE-REDD+	National Avoided Deforestation Strategy – Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAO-GEF CU	FAO-GEF Coordination Unit
FAONI	FAO Nicaragua
FPMIS	Field Programme Management Information System
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GHG	Greenhouse Gases
GIS	Geographic Information System (GIS)
HA	Hectares
INAFOR	National Forestry Institute
INETER	Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies
INTUR	Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism
LO (RM)	Liaison Officer (Resource Mobilization)
LTO	Lead Technical Officer
LULUCF	Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry
MAG	Ministry of Agriculture
MARENA	Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources
MEFCCA	Ministry of Family, Community, Cooperative and Associative Economy
MTR	Mid-Term Review

MUPA	Multiple-Use Protected Areas
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPC	National Project Coordinator
OPA	Operational Partnership Agreement
OPIM	Operational Partners Implementation Modality
PMU	Project Management Unit
PRODOC	Project Document
PSC	Project Steering Committee
PST	Project Steering Team
RO	Regional Office
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
SFM/REDD+	Sustainable Forest Management/REDD+
SINAP	National System of Protected Areas
SLM	Sustainable Land Management
SO	FAO Strategic Objective
SRO	Subregional Office
STAR	System for Transparent Allocation of Resources
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USD	US Dollars
WB	World Bank

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- RE1. Following is the executive summary of the Mid Term Review (MTR) report for the project implemented in Nicaragua with the title "Strengthening the Resilience of Multiple-Use Protected Areas for the Generation of Multiple Global Environmental Benefits" - hereinafter referred to as the "Project".
- RE2. The Project is financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) with 5,885,515 USD and co-financed by various government agencies with 19,919,718 USD; the total budget is 25,805,233 USD.
- RE3. Since 2019, the Project is being implemented by the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) under the responsibility of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as GEF implementing agency.
- RE4. The MTR's objective was to undertake an independent evaluation of the strategic relevance of the Project's design and actions, its effectiveness in achieving outputs, outcomes and objectives, its efficient use of resources, factors which may have had negative effects on its performance, the incorporation of cross-cutting approaches, and the probabilities that the obtained effects will persist after the funding ends (sustainability). All this should then serve to extract lessons learnt and recommendations which will help to improve the impact potential of the present initiative and, possibly, future ones.

MAIN FINDINGS BY EVALUATION CRITERIA

STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

- RE5. The Project satisfactorily addresses the needs for capacity-development, productive efficiency and access to information and knowledge about the legal framework and instruments for the regulation and planning of protected areas in Nicaragua. The Project is also aligned with the GEF-5 focal areas Biodiversity, Land Degradation, Climate Change Mitigation, and Sustainable Forest Management; it is coherent with FAO's global goals for 2022-2031, and includes various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a cross-cutting manner.

EFFECTIVENESS

- RE6. The majority of indicators for objectives and outcomes show a significant delay in the implementation compared to the targets established in the PRODOC, making it difficult to clearly see any significant advances in the fulfilment of the Project's objectives and associated outcomes.
- RE7. Although only limited programmatic advances have been made so far, and the expected effects of the Project have not yet been tangible, incipient progress can be observed as to the improvement of the capacities for planning, monitoring, collaborative management and financial management of Multiple-Use Protected Areas (MUPA) as a result of the development of spaces for trainings and the design of planning instruments,

EFFICIENCY

- RE8. Programmatic delays are reflected in the financial execution as well: The Project's budget execution level is at 25% of the financial plan established for the year 2022 in the PRODOC, and at 58% of the accumulated Annual Operations Plans (AOP) for 2020, 2021 and 2022.
- RE9. The main reasons for this situation are: a) Restrictions to mobility and meetings to confront the COVID 19 health crisis in 2020; b) The letters of agreement, which were the partnership modality between FAO and MARENA at the beginning of the Project implementation, did not contribute to agile and smooth expenditure; c) Slow acquisition and hiring processes; for the most part of the period from 2020 to 2022, these were made on the basis of national rules and regulations, and then reviewed and authorized by FAO; the ROP for the management of GEF projects was approved in September 2022; d) A certain degree of discontinuity in the technical and financial execution as a consequence of vacancies in key posts and/or delays in contract renewals; e) A management model that was more focused on the execution of specific activities than on results; f) The organizational structure of the team was insufficient for the challenges of executing the Project strategy, and; g) A slowdown of the implementation cycle of field activities, due to - besides the previous mentioned points - the modality of direct and exclusive execution of project actions by MARENA, without including the participation of any third parties.

FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

- RE10. **Project Design.** The logic of the result matrix has been maintained coherently since its design in the year 2012. There is a need to undertake actions aiming at strengthening the horizontal logic (indicators-targets-baselines-sources of verification). For example, 13 MUPA and an area of 241.728,73 ha to generate multiple global benefits, represents an ambitious goal to work on for a period of 5 years; however, the targets related to farms and subprojects are rather limited, which requires a very precise focalization strategy to have a higher probability of reaching the project targets.
- RE11. **Implementation.** FAO has complied with the basic functions described by the GEF for implementing agencies; however, this compliance has not yet resulted in better project performance. For the remaining years of project implementation, the challenges lying ahead for the implementing agency are: to establish and/or strengthen formal spaces for the exchange of institutional experiences, a higher technical involvement, and a more systematic support to the follow-up on and monitoring of effects.
- RE12. **Execution.** MARENA has committed to and fulfilled its role in managing and executing daily project activities. In spite of this compliance, some aspects need to be strengthened: the quality of technical assistance and its follow-up on the effects of the Project, accountability, and quality assurance of programmatic aspects, as well as the speediness of the hiring and acquisitions processes.
- RE13. **Monitoring and evaluation.** Until now, the Project has lacked a monitoring and evaluation system that allows to systematically follow up on the technical execution, monitor the (environmental, social and economic) effects of the Project, take informed and timely decisions, facilitate access to sources of verification, and a regular accountability of quality.

In this aspect, FAO as implementing agency can play a fundamental role. Although evidence was obtained from FAO of the design of a planning, follow-up and evaluation system, which is still in the process of internal validation, it is urgent to involve MARENA as well.

- RE14. **Co-financing.** The percentage of executed co-financing is 1.7% of the amount committed to at the time of the original formulation of the Project in 2012: 345,636.95 USD of the total amount of 19,991,990 USD (see Appendix 8). This is due to the fact that the amounts established at the beginning do not correspond to the institutional financing capacities ten years after the commitment was made, and underreporting of the contributions made in kind and in cash.
- RE15. **Stakeholder involvement.** Stakeholders, particularly those with a national scope of action, have participated and had access to information throughout the project design and execution phases.
- RE16. **Communication and knowledge management.** The Project has deployed a communications strategy and created products that have helped to give visibility to the implemented actions to a large public through social media. Strengthening knowledge management (sharing learning experiences and lessons learnt, incorporating good practices of other experiences) is the main challenge for the future execution of the initiative in this aspect.

GENDER

- RE17. The Project designed a gender strategy and a robust gender action plan; however, in the reviewed reports, no systematic evidence of their implementation was found. The elimination of weaknesses in the follow-up on their implementation is indispensable to reach the gender equality goals the instrument wants to achieve. This implies that reports need to include sections, result tables and an analysis of the implementation of this strategy and its action plan.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

- RE18. In line with national and FAO guidelines on the participation of indigenous peoples, the Project has made a plan and developed consultation processes to obtain the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of eight communities belonging to the Mayangna Sauni Bas territory of the Mayangna people in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SAFEGUARDS (ESS)

- RE19. In accordance with the categorization as **low-risk**, and in alignment with the GEF safeguards policy and the guidelines for its application, the Project has taken into consideration the opinion of persons that it could affect negatively, made consultations among indigenous peoples respecting their traditional bodies of representation and deliberation, developed a gender strategy, and taken safeguard measures in order not to harm any persons as a result of the implementation.

SUSTAINABILITY

- RE20. During the review, some risks were identified for the sustainability of the Project processes and outcomes. The most significant are the low levels of execution, the scope of outcomes achieved to this date, and the guarantees for funds to finance and embed the initiative in the state once the Project ends.
- RE21. Due to the commitment of the Nicaraguan state in general, and MARENA in particular, to decidedly drive forward a robust climate agenda, these risks have a high chance of being mitigated.
- RE22. A good level of individual ownership of trained persons can be observed, they display the willingness to employ their acquired skills in their respective areas of competence.
- RE23. The same can be said for the developed institutional skills: management plans for the MUPA and creation of collaborative management committees with due accompaniment, promotion and/or strengthening, have good possibilities of sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

- RE24. The main findings of the review, as a result of its questions and analysis, lead to the following conclusions:

Conclusion 1 (Strategic Relevance): The MTR identifies a *Highly Satisfactory* strategic relevance. The Project is consistent with national and international commitments related to climate change, biodiversity conservation, environmental management and sustainable development, and in line with areas prioritized by the Nicaraguan state, the SDGs, and GEF and FAO strategies. This high level of relevance constitutes an opportunity for the Project, because it guarantees high levels of stakeholders' interest, commitment and participation, thereby laying a fertile ground for the establishment of synergetic relations with different institutions, groups and individuals.

Conclusion 2 (Effectiveness): The MTR identifies that indicators show lower achievement levels than the targets established in the PRODOC and that their mid-term programmatic progress is limited. However, it recognizes that the Project has boosted processes and obtained some outputs with the potential of contributing to its objectives. Due to this, the MTR rates the Project's efficacy as *Moderately Satisfactory*.

Conclusion 3 (Efficiency):

The efficiency is rated as *Moderately Unsatisfactory*. The Project has been underspending its budget due to constraints such as the COVID-19 health emergency, the partnership modality based on letters of agreement during the first year of implementation, excessive bureaucratization of acquisition and hiring processes, prolonged vacancies of key posts and/or delays in the renewal of contracts, and a management model focused more on the execution of specific actions than on results.

Conclusion 4 (Factors hampering project performance):

- **Project Design.** The Project's vertical logic has maintained its consistency since its design in 2012; its horizontal logic, however, presents deficiencies and inconsistencies as to some indicators, targets, baselines and sources of verification, which need to be corrected. For example, the size of the project territory, 13 MUPA and an area of 241,728,73 ha, is highly ambitious for a project duration of 5 years.
- **Implementation.** FAO has complied with the basic functions described by the GEF for implementing agencies. For the remaining years of project implementation, the challenges lying ahead for the implementing agency are: to establish and/or strengthen formal spaces for the exchange of institutional experiences, the support to technical follow-up on and monitoring of effects.
- **Execution.** The MTR concludes that MARENA has complied with its role in the management and execution of daily project activities. However, it is necessary to accelerate its processes for acquisitions, hiring and annual contract renewals, and to strengthen the technical follow-up and general monitoring of the project.
- **Monitoring and evaluation.** The inexistence of a follow-up, monitoring and evaluation system with adequate components and quality standards has been detrimental to the quality of accountability, and has hampered decision-making to correct the speed and quality of the project implementation.
- **Co-financing.** At the date of the MTR, the committed co-funding differed from the reported co-funding. This is a result of weak follow-up by the implementing agency and executing entity, and, most of all, due to the fact that the amounts agreed upon in the formulation phase do not correspond to the financing capacities ten years after the commitment was made.
- **Stakeholder involvement.** Stakeholders, particularly those with a national scope of action, have been able to freely express their points of view, without interference, discrimination or intimidation, and have been continuously informed of all project activities.
- **Communication and knowledge management.** The Project has been able to disseminate its actions and make them visible by developing communications products, preferably published through digital media. Focusing on the management of knowledge regarding outputs, lessons learnt and good practices of the Project, as well as on the transfer of methodologies and work approaches which have obtained verifiable results in Nicaragua and other countries, will be the challenges for the future implementation of the reviewed initiative.

Conclusion 5 (Gender): The Project has made a gender assessment and developed a detailed gender strategy. However, the instrument in itself is not enough for the effective inclusion of the gender perspective, this requires systematic follow-up and regular accountability of its implementation.

Conclusion 6 (Indigenous people): The Project has developed consultation processes to obtain the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of eight indigenous communities belonging to the Mayangna Sauni Bas territory of the Mayangna people. In order to fully and

satisfactorily comply with national policies and the GEF mandate on this matter, it is important to also consult the people of Urbaite Las Pilas and El Viejo, which have not yet been included in the process.

Conclusion 7 (Safeguards): The Project has adopted the measures and has not generated any negative effects on the environment or the population covered by its intervention. In this sense, it has taken into consideration the opinion of persons that it could affect negatively, made consultations among indigenous peoples, and taken safeguard measures in order not to harm the populations as a result of the implementation.

Conclusion 8 (Sustainability): At the date of the MRT, the Project's sustainability is not guaranteed in all its dimensions (institutional, financial, environmental and community-related). Low levels of execution and the outcomes achieved to this date give the MTR no grounds for the expectation that the processes promoted by the Project can be sustained once the funding ends.

LESSONS LEARNT

RE25. The following lessons learnt can be drawn from the review:

Lesson learnt 1. In September 2019, the Project was transferred to FAO. Projects with a considerable time gap between their formulation (in this case in 2015) and the start of their implementation require an exhaustive review of their indicators, baseline and sources of verification, and an updating of their institutional commitments and implementation arrangements.

Lesson learnt 2. The design of the targets, outputs and territorial scope of this Project should have taken into consideration more criteria of feasibility in terms of time, funding and human resources, as well as a realistic analysis of their level of ambition and technical viability.

Lesson learnt 3. The creation of indicator cards is a practice that is worth replicating in other projects as well; they limit discretion in measurements and interpretation by teams who in most cases do not participate in the formulation process.

Lesson learnt 4. Due to the large size of the project territory, the geographical dispersion of protagonists and the high levels of ambition of their targets regarding time and resources, as well as the lack of a follow-up and evaluation system, it is difficult to determine effects and impacts that are attributable to the Project at a larger scale than the farm level.

Lesson learnt 5. The Project's objectives and the magnitude of its targets require the establishment and/or deepening of alliances and teams with sufficient personnel so as to ensure a timely, efficient, effective and high-quality implementation.

Lesson learnt 6. The System of Production, Consumption and Trade (SPCC) at the central level as well as in the territories constitutes an opportunity to invigorate the implementation of the Project.

Lesson learnt 7. The time frame of the agreement with farmers, the incentive mechanism and the methodology of technical assistance applied by the Project for its restoration and

conservation actions and to implement silvopastoral and agroforestry systems do not guarantee the sustainability of effects or the ownership of protagonists in the medium and long term.

Lesson learnt 8. In order for sustainable forest and land management to be incorporated by stakeholders and turned into a widespread practice in the communities living within the MUPA and in the corridors, the Project needs the capacity to demonstrate in situ the economic, social and environmental benefits generated by the practices it promotes.

Lesson learnt 9. The implementation of sustainable practices in farms is an opportunity for the Nicaraguan state with a view to the fulfilment of international commitments, as the generate environmental effects that can contribute to the indicators of the national AFOLU sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RE26. The MTR considers it opportune to make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1. To MARENA, FAO and other stakeholders, on adjustments to the Project's programmatic and territorial strategy:

To generate a formal space for reflections (MARENA-FAO-PARTNERS) with the aim of designing at least one **short-term** programmatic strategy and action and territorial plan for the Project, with the aim of improving efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and potential impacts; to pilot its performance and results in the different intervened territories; and to capture the learning experiences to include them the implementation of this Project, as well as other, present or future, GEF projects jointly implemented by MARENA and FAO (as implementing agency);

- **Suggestion 1.** Taking into account the willingness, territorial scope and previous experiences of the Project's partner institutions (esp. INAFOR, INTUR, MEFCCA and INTA), and with the aim of increasing coverage and furthering institutional embedding, collaboration and generation of synergies with some of these should be deepened. Considering the present level of progress of the Project, one or two alliances would mean an immediate higher added value.
- **Suggestion 2.** As the project territory is of considerable size, a focus should be set on prioritized areas in order to concentrate the Project's intervention mainly on investments on farms and in subprojects, to increase the probability of demonstrable outcomes and physical targets.
- **Suggestion 3.** To develop and implement a technical assistance approach that promotes sustainable practices; make use of institutional experiences in their design and broaden the range of promoted practices, including practices to improve family incomes.
- **Suggestion 4.** Prioritizing the work with cooperatives, associations and/or already existing farmer groups, exploring the possibilities of farmer field schools as transfer mechanisms, would facilitate a more territorial focus, as well as the technical assistance to groups, thus increasing the efficiency of the work of the Project technician.

- **Suggestion 5.** To identify protagonists in previously prioritized territories on the basis of criteria aiming at strengthening ecological connectivity in the project territory.
- **Suggestion 6.** To pursue a balance between small, medium and large landowners. The big farmers can make important contributions to the Project's physical targets.

Recommendation 2. To FAO and MARENA on the set-up of a Follow-up, Monitoring and Evaluation System:

To accelerate the process of designing, training on, ownership and operation of a Follow-up, Monitoring and Evaluation System that delivers information, consolidates data and regularly presents the state of the technical progress and effects generated by the Project;

- **Suggestion 1.** To be successful, the Follow-up, Monitoring and Evaluation System should to strengthen and/or develop IT support, a management structure, instruments for the technical follow-up and monitoring of effects, a detailed calendar with dates, roles and persons in charge, and standardization of planning tools.

Recommendation 3. To the regional and subregional FAO Office, and to the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit on capacity-building in the National Office:

Considering FAO's key role in the implementation of GEF's investment portfolio in Nicaragua, the recommendation is made to its Subregional Office for Mesoamerica (SLM), its Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (RLC), and the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit, to strengthen the mechanisms for technical capacity-building in FAO-NI and MARENA, and to facilitate actions for the exchange of proven and validated experiences in other countries of the region (LAC) in the framework of the implementation of GEF portfolio initiatives or other projects.

- **Suggestion 1.** MARENA and FAO should jointly create a capacity-building plan and road map in relation to the topics identified by both the implementing agency and the executing partner.

Recommendation 4. To MARENA and FAO about the Project's sustainability:

FAO and MARENA should jointly design and implement a strategy to ensure sustainability and upscaling of effects and processes driven by the Project.

This strategy should include at least the following lines of action: i) the design of an action plan and road map for institutional embedding, so as to give continuity to the Project's effects (technical assistance and counselling); ii) the establishment and formalization of mechanisms for interinstitutional, intersectoral and multilevel articulation between government actors in the MUPA (agreements, contracts); iii) the consolidation of governance bodies, mainly the collaborative management committees; iv) a communication and knowledge management plan, with a focus on the Project's protagonists and interest groups at the community level; v) actions for the upscaling of farming systems established with the protagonists and/or new farmers in the MUPA covered by the project, and vi) the search for alternative public and private financing.

Recommendation 5. To MARENA, FAO and the Project Team on capacity-building:

With the purpose of improving technical service and accompaniment in the field, it would be recommendable to start a systematic capacity-building process in the Project Team about how to promote sustainable practices.

Recommendation 6. To MARENA, FAO and the Project Team about adjustments to the result matrix

It is recommended to update and/or adjust some indicators, baselines and/or sources of verification, while at the same time strengthening the capacities of the Project Team on the use of some instruments for the measurement of the formulated targets (more details on suggested changes can be found in [Appendix 10. Recommended adjustments to the results matrix](#)).¹

Recommendation 7. To MARENA and FAO about the design and pilot of a farm-level Monitoring, Reporting and Verification System:

In the framework of the execution of the present and other projects of the GEF portfolio for Nicaragua, a design and pilot should be made of a farm-level MRV system, with a view to its potential compatibility with the national MRV system currently under construction.

Recommendation 8. To MARENA AND FAO about the possibility of extending the Project:

Due to the present state of the technical and financial implementation, adjustments are necessary, which will require some time; in order to consolidate ongoing processes and ensure programmatic quality, it is recommended to request an extension of at least one year.

Suggestion 1. Before making this request, it would be favourable to make some territorial and programmatic redefinitions and to work out a multi-annual plan for the technical and financial execution.

¹ The proposed adjustments are the results of a work and discussion session about the logical framework, with the participation of the MTR team, the Project team and MARENA and INAFOR officials.

Table A1 MTR ratings and achievements summary table

GEF criteria/sub-criteria	Rating	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	HS	
A1.1. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	HS	
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs	HS	
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	HS	
A1.4. Alignment with the interests of beneficiary groups	S	
B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MU	
B2 Progress towards outcomes	MU	
- Outcome 1	MS	
- Outcome 2	MU	
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/ outcomes	MU	
C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency	MU	
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	ML	
D1.1. Financial risks	MU	
D1.2. Sociopolitical risks	UA	
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	MU	
D1.4. Environmental risks	L	
D2. Catalysis and replication	ML	
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design and readiness	MS	
E2. Quality of project implementation	MS	
E3. Quality of project execution	MS	
E4. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	S	
E5. Communication, knowledge management and knowledge products	S	
E6. Overall quality of M&E	MU	

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E7. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	MS	
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	MS	
F2. Environmental and social safeguards	S	
F3. Indigenous people	S	
Overall project rating	MU	