



Mid-Term Review of FAO-GEF Project

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**Implementation of Armenia's LDN commitments through
sustainable land management and restoration of degraded
landscapes**

Final Report

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ARM	Armenia
BH	Budget Holder
CO	Country office
DSS	Decision Support System
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FAO GEF CU	FAO GEF Coordination Unit
FLO	Funding Liaison Officer
FSP	Full-Sized Projects
GCP	Global Conservation Programme
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GFF	Global Forest Fund
LD	Land Degradation
LDN	Land Degradation Neutrality
SOC	Soil Organic Carbon
LTO	Lead Technical Officer
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOE	Ministry of Environment
MOEC	Ministry of Economy
MTR	Mid-Term Review
MTAI	Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure
MSP	Medium-Sized Projects
NPD	National Project Director
OED	FAO Office of Evaluation
PIU	Project Implementation Unit
PSC	Project Steering Committee
PTF	Project Task Force
RA	Republic of Armenia
TOC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference

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Executive Summary

Introduction

1. As per FAO and GEF requirements, a Mid-Term Review (MTR) is conducted for the FAO-implemented, GEF-funded project "Implementation of Armenia's Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) commitments through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes." The MTR was carried out by an independent evaluation team (one national and one international consultant) to assess project progress, identify challenges and opportunities, and support adaptive management.
2. The objectives of the MTR are to:
 - Assess the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact.
 - Identify challenges and recommend corrective measures.
 - Highlight success stories, good practices, and upscaling potential.

The MTR report is intended inform three main audiences:

- FAO-GEF stakeholders, such as the Budget Holder (BH), the Environmental Project Implementation Unit (EPIU), FAO GEF Coordination Unit (FAO GEF CU), Project Steering Committee (PSC) members, FAO country-level technical specialists, and the country's GEF Operational Focal Point.
 - National level stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Environment (MOE), Ministry of Economy (MOEC) and Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI).
 - Local level stakeholders, such as farmer groups and women groups, technical consultants and service providers.
3. A standard methodology was used during the MTR. The review followed FAO-GEF guidelines and UNEG standards, and used a consultative, mixed-methods approach. Analysis was based on the project's Strategic Results Framework (SRF) and Theory of Change (TOC). Data collection involved desk reviews, stakeholder interviews, field visits, and direct observation of project activities in Lori and Syunik regions. Gender considerations and social/environmental safeguards were integrated throughout the review process which was carried out by a two-person team and supported by the FAO OCBP.
 4. The MTR was designed to provide credible and evidence-based information to assess the project against the FAO-GEF Criteria of: Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability, Factors affecting performance, and Cross-cutting dimensions. A list of MTR questions, grouped under these criteria, informed and directed the MTR.
 5. The MTR took place between April and June 2025 with field visits taking place between 7 – 14 April 2025.

Main findings

RELEVANCE

Finding 1: The LDN project is relevant across the national, GEF programmatic and FAO policy framework.

Finding 2: There is less coherence with the stated policy objectives in the project's strategy and interventions especially where they relate to the SLM measures in component 2, the means to deliver project interventions and the choice of pilot sites.

EFFECTIVENESS

Finding 3: The project was designed for a three-year implementation period which is unrealistic for a complex LDN project.

Finding 4: The criteria for selecting pilot sites does not provide the best justification for demonstrating LDN.

Finding 5: The SLM activities introduced do not necessarily represent innovative approaches or in some instances approaches which will have a significant effect on LDN.

Finding 6: The project has prepared management plans for each community using the FAO Land degradation Assessment in Drylands (FAO-LADA) approach including resource mobilisation.

Finding 7: The level of beneficiary investment in SLM activities is very low leading and raises questions regarding the sustainability of the activities post project.

Finding 8: Considerable work has been carried out under Outcomes 1.2 and 1.3. This will need to be accelerated if it is to be completed before the close of the project.

Finding 9: There is unconvincing progress with the value chains. While the 2024 Project Implementation Report (PIR) reports that work has commenced on the value chains there is contradictory evidence, and the project still plans to engage a technical Consultant to produce these value chains. Women are likely to be the greatest beneficiaries of the value chain activities.

Finding 10: There is low or absent SLM or LDN recognition at the community level who appear to regard the objective of the project as a rural development goal.

EFFICIENCY

Finding 11: There have been significant delays encountered in the first part of the project.

Finding 12: The project design is complex and arguably better suited to a direct implementation modality rather than an Operational Partner Implementation Modality (OPIM) which has reduced the efficiency of implementation.

Finding 13: The main project components (activities, outputs and deliverables) are, on the whole, either not fully implemented to the expected mid-term levels or are works in progress.

Finding 14: The project has a large EPIU - 9 positions (4 full time, 6 part time and 1 service contract). Some of the project outcomes may have been more effectively and efficiently achieved through contracting service providers.

Finding 15: There is a significant contrast between the project's presence within the communities in Syunik and Lori.

Finding 16: The efficiency of the project has increased considerably since 2023 and the appointment of current PC.

Finding 17: There is an unrealistic understanding of the status of the project. While the efficiency and effectiveness of the project has improved dramatically since early 2024 there are still considerable challenges to achieving the expected results.

Three **barriers** are identified by the MTR which may prevent the project from achieving its objective:

- i. **Structural weaknesses in the OPIM arrangement prevent the project from utilising FAO's technical resources:** FAO has considerable experience in implementing LDN projects and in particular LDN and SLM interventions and represents an important pool of technical capacity. However, due to the way that the project is set up it seems to be unable to utilise this experience because of the financial arrangements reducing the comparative advantage of the FAO.
- ii. **Unrealistic assessment of project results leading to confused monitoring and evaluation and unrealised project risks:** The project's monitoring and evaluation reporting is over-optimistic. The time remaining to achieve the project's results is very short. While the project has made considerable progress in the last year, in a large part

due to the present PC and with a FAO M&E Specialist in place, assessments of progress are still over-optimistic.

- iii. **Low awareness of LDN at the community level and weak linkages between LDN and rural development challenges:** The SLM activities, in the main, do not provide sufficient innovation and SLM benefits or may create environmental risks (for instance ploughing and fertilizer application). They may provide rural development benefits but even these are restricted and, in some cases, greater buy-in by the community could result in upscaling the impact.

FACTORS AFFECTING PROGRESS

Finding 25: The Project Document analysis is confusing and has a number of inherent weaknesses which may reduce the effectiveness of the interventions.

Finding 26: This was the first OPIM project carried out in Armenia. The project was designed in a way that would better suit direct implemented by FAO, according to KI feedback and would have benefitted from a simpler design.

Finding 27: The project was designed for a three-year implementation which is an overly optimistic expectation given the proposed interventions, the number of outcomes (7) and outputs (18) and the complexity and adaptive nature of the intervention.

Finding 28: The Project Document risk assessment was weak and does not appear to have been adequately addressed during the inception phase and subsequent Project Implementation Report (PIR).

Finding 29: The project's TOC is confusing and un-necessarily complicated making it hard to follow the logic of any causal pathways.

Finding 30: The project has experienced procurement challenges especially in engaging technical assistance.

Finding 31: There have been three PCs during the life of the project which has significantly impacted the progress. The third PC was appointed in March 2024 and has proven to be very effective significantly increasing the rate of delivery.

Finding 32: There have been significant delays in establishing the project which have affected the project's performance.

Finding 33: The project has a large Project Implementation Unit and technical assistance component including 9 positions (4 full time, 6 part time and 1 service contract).

Finding 34: Annual Work Plans and Budgets (AWP/B) are preprepared by the EPIU and agreed by the PSC. Budget execution in the first and second year was very low (2022 \$12,064, 2023 \$128,901). Expenditure has increased in 2024 (\$519,570) and at 31/12/2024 there was 33% budget delivery. The Workplan and Budget 2025 – 2026 shows a forecast of \$1,150,618 for 2025 and \$185,224 to June 2026. Based on the historic data this is very ambitious.

Finding 35: The slow start up and delays in addressing implementation and execution challenges does not indicate that the project is sufficiently adaptive in its management.

Finding 36: Poor communication between FAO and the PSC and EPIU on the challenges facing the project and a belief that the Project Document must be rigidly adhered to militate against adaptive management.

Finding 37: There has been a budget revision without any deviation in budget categories to accommodate the project extension. Financial management is through the BH Financial Assistant. All re-allocated funds remain within the original budget line. Budget execution. Budget execution (up to 31/12/2024) is \$658,374 (33%) of the total \$1,996,380 with a remaining \$1,338,006. Co-financing delivery has been low \$2,170,370 or 18% of the co-financing at the CEO approval. The Workplan and Budget 2025 – 2026 shows a forecast of \$1,150,618 for 2025 and \$185,224 to June 2026.

Finding 38: According to the FAO Project Team an audit has already been carried out and another is planned after the MTR. No financial issues were raised with the MTR by KIs during the MTR.

Finding 39: The risk assessment in the Project Document is insufficient and lacks the level of critical analysis necessary to identify risks and ensure sufficient preparedness in project responses.

Finding 40: Risk management has been poor resulting in the project reaching a stage where it has very limited time to address structural and implementation issues.

Finding 40: Risks are not being identified and adding to the risk register and the project's overall risk rating has remained the same through successive PIRs despite a lack of progress in achieving its mid-term targets.

Finding 41: There is a confusion of roles within the FAO-OPIM arrangements which results in a diffuse responsibility and reduces the effectiveness of the project oversight role.

Finding 42: While stakeholder feedback indicated that there is a general opinion that there are weaknesses in the Project Document there is also a belief that the implementation cannot deviate from the Project Document.

Finding 43: There is an underestimation of the GEF Agency effort and resources required to provide oversight to an OPIM project such as this.

Finding 44: It is hard to assess how effective the project partnerships are given the delays, but it is likely that weak project partnerships at the higher institutional level have contributed to some of the delays.

Finding 45: The PSC membership is largely institutional and does not have any community, private sector or non-governmental representation on it.

Finding 46: The logical hierarchy, activities, outputs, outcomes, objective as presented in the Project Document's SRF are confusing.

Finding 47: Project M&E is taking place according to the M&E plan but compounded weaknesses in the system are not identifying implementation issues and challenges.

Finding 48: Weaknesses inherent in the Project Document SRF make it difficult for the project's management to effectively monitoring progress towards results.

CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

Finding 49: Gender dimensions are being addressed but there is limited tangible evidence that this is having a significant impact in the piloted communities.

Finding 50: There was little tangible evidence of impact on women's equality in SLM activities and resource management at the community level.

Finding 51: There is confusion surrounding the Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM). It is not clear how it relates to the project communities and no grievances have been reported.

Progress challenges and outcomes of stakeholder engagement

6. The project has faced a number of challenges which have slowed progress. Even with the extension until July 2026 and the effective personnel changes and additions (PC, M&E Specialist, Awareness Specialist), the project achievements are still vulnerable. Many of the activities are still underway and have not yet reached the level expected by the at the mid-term by the project's SRF making the project vulnerable. Additional time to complete these activities may reduce risks, particularly the procurement challenges related to technical assistance. Additional time for implementation would also allow the project to review the social and environmental procedures and identify any implementation and residual risks against the GEF 2024 Risk Appetite as well as strengthening the stakeholder buy-in of SLM and LDN.

Progress on gender-responsive measures, indicators and intermediate results

7. The project addresses gender dimensions in design and documentation, but this does not appear to translate into impacts on gender equality (within the project's limited gender remit, likely a GEN1 marker) at the community level. Interventions intended to promote women's equity (for instance, value chains, vegetable production) may pose risks of unintended consequences, suggesting the need for an Environmental and Social Commitment Plan (ESCP). Support has mostly targeted traditional income-generating roles (for instance, vegetable growing, beekeeping) without challenging gender norms.
8. Cultural and traditional barriers are often cited as limiting women's involvement in project activities at the community level, but the project lacks active strategies to address or overcome these obstacles.
9. Therefore, gender considerations are present in theory but are not translating into effective, inclusive practices at the community level. While the project has a gender action Plan, this needs to be operationalised through practical engagement at the community level in order to generate pragmatic experience and knowledge regarding the LDN-gender nexus. Furthermore, the work on value chains needs to be accelerated because this would likely provide a stronger basis for engagement of women in the community.

Knowledge activities/products and lessons learned

10. The knowledge products and gender sensitive materials are all in the draft stage or under finalization and the MTR is unable to assess.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1 Relevance: The LDN project demonstrates strong formal alignment with national policies, the GEF programmatic framework, and FAO strategic priorities. This relevance is more apparent in high-level documentation than in on-the-ground implementation. The project is well-framed within Armenia's national environmental and sustainable development goals, particularly its LDN Strategy and UNCCD commitments, and is supported by a range of policy instruments and programmatic goals. However, the project's strategic design and choice of SLM measures under Component 2 lack sufficient grounding in localized land degradation issues and their underlying drivers and rather lean towards conventional rural development approaches. Furthermore, feedback from key informants suggests a focus on increasing agricultural production rather than addressing the core issues of land degradation.

Conclusion 2 Progress towards outcomes: The LDN project has made progress in several areas, particularly with increased activity in 2024 under the recently appointed PC. However, foundational design flaws, slow early implementation, and limited strategic alignment with the complexities of LDN are all affecting delivery. A three-year implementation period was overly ambitious for a project of this scope, failing to account for known start-up challenges, seasonal constraints, and the time required for stakeholder engagement and systems development. The selection of pilot sites and interventions, while generating rural development benefits, often lacks clear relevance to LDN objectives, with many activities reflecting traditional agricultural support rather than innovative, SLM solutions.

Moreover, the MTR challenges the sustainability of these interventions due to low beneficiary investment and heavy reliance on project resources. The limited community awareness of LDN and climate change, as well as weak integration of local perspectives into planning and decision-making, further undermines the project's long-term impact. Efforts under GIS/mapping and planning (Outcomes 1.2 and 1.3) show promise but require accelerated progress and more

capacity-building to meaningfully support decision-making frameworks. Similarly, while value chain activities may have potential—especially for women—the current strategy lacks clarity and a grounded understanding of existing capacities and constraints as well as tangible results.

Without stronger alignment between high-level goals and field-level implementation, deeper stakeholder engagement, and with the unrealistic remaining timeframe the project's ability to achieve lasting LDN outcomes remains uncertain but may be improved if given additional time to consolidate outputs and outcomes.

Conclusion 3 Efficiency: There have been recent improvements in project coordination and activity delivery which are commendable, especially since the appointment of the current PC in March 2024 and the FAO M&E Specialist in 2023. The project remains significantly behind schedule and faces substantial structural and operational challenges. Delays in early implementation, high staff turnover, and a mismatch between design complexity and technical procurement needs with the implementation modality have collectively undermined the project's efficiency, particularly in procurement, technical assistance, and adaptive management. Although progress has accelerated in 2024, only 13 months remain before the revised end date of July 2026, and most components remain either incomplete or in early stages of execution.

The ambitious and complex project design, coupled with a large project EPIU, may have benefited from greater delegation to specialized service providers or non-state actors to ensure more efficient and community-centered delivery. A disparity in community engagement between Lori and Syunik highlights the unevenness of implementation and the need for more tailored and inclusive local facilitation strategies. While there is broad stakeholder consensus that project efficiency has improved, the perception that the project is now "on track" may obscure the reality and without a dramatic increase in delivery pace, improved resource use, and stronger focus on outcome achievement, the project may not fully meet its objectives.

Conclusion 4 Sustainability: There are substantial concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the LDN project's outputs and outcomes. While some recent progress is evident, particularly since 2023, the project remains at risk across financial, socio-political, institutional, and environmental dimensions. Financial sustainability is undermined by the incomplete implementation of key components, such as the enabling environment and DSS, and the lack of clear post-project funding mechanisms. Limited institutional embedding, stakeholder reliance on ongoing external support and minimal beneficiary investment are further compounding these risks. Socio-political sustainability is also uncertain, as KIs at both institutional and community levels show limited engagement with LDN principles *per se*, instead prioritizing infrastructure development and production-focused approaches that may be incompatible with long-term land stewardship.

Institutionally, the project has not had sufficient time to foster the adaptive capacity or collective understanding required to address land degradation as a complex, adaptive challenge. The continued dominance of conventional, top-down approaches hampers the behavioural changes envisioned in the Theory of Change. Meanwhile, environmental sustainability cannot be assessed meaningfully due to the late start of field interventions and the lack of a formal environmental risk analysis. Overall, there is a significant risk that many SRF targets will remain unmet by the revised project end date in July 2026. Rather than prioritizing completion of all outputs, the project should focus its remaining time and resources on delivering a smaller number of high-quality, sustainable outcomes, particularly in enabling policy frameworks and institutional capacity. Alternatively, it

might seek to obtain a further extension to reduce the vulnerabilities inherent in utilising the remaining 67% of the budget in the remaining 18 months.

Conclusion 5 Factors affecting progress – design and strategy: The project's design and readiness were marked by several critical weaknesses that have constrained its effectiveness and efficiency. The Project Document lacks a robust and coherent problem analysis, particularly in identifying and articulating the complex and interrelated root causes of land degradation. This shortcoming has led to an intervention logic that is unclear and not fully aligned with the realities on the ground, weakening the strategic direction of the project from the outset.

The strategic and technical complexity of the design may have reflected FAOs considerable experience of GEF LDN projects, but it was not accompanied by corresponding adjustments to the project design, risk management, or implementation experience necessary to fit the project to OPIM. As a result, the project inherited a complex and ambitious framework better suited to an international agency, creating implementation challenges that national systems were not fully equipped to manage within the three-year timeframe.

The initial project risk assessment was weak and failed to anticipate or mitigate key institutional and operational risks, particularly those related to inter-sectoral coordination, policy reform, and project governance. These risks have materialized during implementation and compounded the project's challenges. The overly complex TOC provided little practical value to the project team, further hindering strategic coherence and adaptive management.

The project's design suffered from a combination of overly ambitious targets, underestimated risks, and a poor match between complexity and implementation modality. These factors have reduced the project's readiness and its capacity to deliver sustainable results.

Conclusion 6 Factors affecting progress – management arrangements and implementation: The project's implementation, execution and management have been marked by a slow start, delays in mobilizing technical assistance, limited adaptive response, and persistent structural challenges. Despite recent improvements under the current PC and with support of the FAO M&E Specialist, these issues have hindered progress and highlight broader concerns with oversight, risk management, and stakeholder engagement. While institutional responsibilities were defined in formal agreements, practical coordination challenges and procedural delays—particularly related to the OPA modality—contributed to missed or delayed opportunities for adaptive management. In the remaining time left for the project, a clear, time-bound recovery strategy and improved coordination across project partners will be essential to maximize results within the remaining project period.

Conclusion 7 M&E and project SRF: The project's M&E systems are weak and lack the rigor needed to effectively track progress and inform adaptive management. Confusion within the SRF and a lack of utility in the TOC, combined with weak indicator design and limited data, has hindered meaningful assessment of outcomes. Reporting has at times been overly optimistic and not sufficiently evidence-based, particularly in areas such as land restoration. These weaknesses reflect broader issues in project planning and oversight and underscore the need for clearer roles, stronger data systems, and more realistic performance assessment in the project reporting.

Conclusion 9 Stakeholder engagement: Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement is hard to determine given that there have been significant delays, however they appear to have been

limited and uneven, contributing to delays in implementation and weakening institutional awareness of LDN issues and solutions. While the PSC is intended to support inclusive governance, its composition lacks representation from key groups such as the private sector, civil society, and community stakeholders as well as the FAO which has resulted in limited participation from local representatives, suggesting that opportunities for broader engagement and ownership have been missed. Strengthening stakeholder involvement and awareness of LDN and the accelerating effects of climate change at all levels is essential to improving project performance and sustainability.

Conclusion 10 Overall performance and outlook: While recent improvements under the current PC have accelerated delivery and coordination, the project remains significantly behind schedule and faces major challenges related to strategic clarity, efficiency, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. Project design weaknesses, particularly an overambitious scope, weak risk analysis, and poor alignment between high-level goals and local realities have constrained progress from the outset.

Key components such as stakeholder engagement, the enabling environment and the DSS remain underdeveloped given the time remaining. Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak, reporting is overly optimistic, and the sustainability of interventions is doubtful due to limited community ownership and unclear post-project support mechanisms. With only 13 months remaining until the revised project end date, it is unlikely that the project will fully meet its original targets.

To achieve the greatest impact in the time remaining, the project should consider shifting the focus of effort from completing all outputs to delivering a smaller set of high-quality, sustainable outcomes such as those that strengthen institutional frameworks, enhance local capacities, and support strategic policy development. Alternatively, the project might seek an additional extension to reduce these risks. A clear exit strategy, more inclusive stakeholder engagement, and improved coordination will be critical to achieving this.

Conclusion 11 Conclusion Cross-cutting: While gender considerations are included in the project's design and documentation, there is limited evidence that these efforts are translating into meaningful or measurable impact at the community level. Gender-sensitive language and frameworks are present, but implementation remains weak, with few tangible outcomes observed, particularly in women's participation in sustainable land management or decision-making. Cultural barriers to women's involvement are acknowledged but not actively addressed through adaptive strategies. The project's GRM is unclear and not accessible to community members, undermining its potential role in safeguarding rights and equity. Greater awareness and specific actions to address existing socio-cultural prejudices are needed to ensure that gender equity and social safeguards are not only included on paper but also realized in practice.

Table 1 Recommendations

Rec. no.	Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation	Responsibility	Time/dates for actions
Strategic relevance				
1.	This is the first OPIM FAO-GEF project in Armenia. There has been confusion in the implementation and execution arrangements (for instance these have extended to carrying out the logistics of the MTR). This has impacted on the project (see finding 38) and it is worth noting that that when this is linked to the financial resources available to the Implementing Agency (see lesson 2) it is further compounded. According to the FAO these exist. However, in the MTR experience these may not be to the practical, every day, problem solving level necessary to prepare a CO and PIU for the challenges of OPIM under often very different circumstances.	Develop clear practical day to day operational guidelines on OPIM for Country Offices. This should include standardised training materials and procedures for OPIM PIUs ¹ .	FAO	Long term.
Effectiveness				
2.	The communication between FAO and the EPIU are not properly structured, possibly due to the confusion in the roles of Implementing and Executing Agencies under an OPIM arrangement. This leads to inefficiencies and critically the weak monitoring of risks (see section 4.2.2, (ii)).	Develop a communication protocol between the FAO Country Office and the EPIU including shared folders and events timetable as well as summaries of all project's technical reports in English.	FAO & EPIU	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Factors affecting performance				
3	FAO is not included in the PSC which lessens the project assurance and oversight role and reduces internal communications (see section 4.2.2, (ii), findings 35, 36 & 45).	FAO should be included in the PSC	MOE & FAO	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Efficiency				

¹ In the experience of the MTR team, a UNDP Country Office engaged a previous member of staff from another Country Office to conduct internal training on the Direct Implementation Modality (UNDP equivalent of OPIM) under very similar circumstances.

4	The Work Plan and Budget 2025 – 2026 is extremely ambitious and will only take in one more agricultural season. There is a risk that activities are rushed and as has been stated in this report, there are very likely compound risks and stochastic events which make the project extremely vulnerable. The forecast budget burn rate for the remaining period of the project - 67% forecast execution in 18 months versus the competed 33% in 34 months (see finding 34 & 47).	Consider a further extension of the project to allow a more realistic delivery of project results and reduce the risk of even minor externalities and unidentified risks on a project which is already under pressure.	MOE & FAO, PSC to approve	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
5	The project has experienced considerable procurement challenges, especially as these relate to technical services. These include Civil Service constraints on fee rates, identifying very niche technical expertise and experience and identifying and contracting technical services (see finding 12 & 26).	Request for a hybrid procurement agreement to utilise the considerable resources available to the GEF Agency and reduce the procurement and delivery risks during the remaining implementation time.	EPIU & FAO, PSC to approve	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Sustainability & catalytic effect/replication				
6	Despite the efforts of the project in the previous year the delivery of project results is still very vulnerable. Realistically, even with an additional extension to the project there is a risk that a number of outputs will be incomplete or will be rushed increasing the risk of sustainability. The TE will recognize this and it is better to have a smaller number of tangible and sustainable results than to try to complete everything (see section 4.2.1).	Review the project outputs and activities in the 2025-26 AWP&B and any further AW&B. Identify outputs and activities which can be: i. Completed by the EOP ii. Realistically handed over and continued after the EOP iii. Will not be completed or continued after the EOP State clearly which outputs are to be completed and which will not be, develop an exit plan demonstrating how any activities and outputs not completed will be continued post EOP.	EPIU, PSC & FAO	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Cross-cutting dimensions				
7	The MTR considers that the social and environmental risks as presented in the Project Document related to the SLM interventions are under-rated leading to the possibility that there are unrealized, and compound social and/or environmental risks related to the component 2 SLM activities (see sections 4.5.5.2 & 4.6.2).	Carry out a rapid social and environmental risk assessment on the field SLM activities and value chains.	EPIU	Immediate as part of the Management Response.

Table 2 MTR Ratings and achievements summary table

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	Rating	Summary comments
A Strategic relevance		
A1 Overall Strategic Relevance	S	See below.
A1.1 Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	S	The project is aligned with key international frameworks, including the GEF focal area objectives on sustainable land management (SLM) and UNCCD land degradation neutrality (LDN), the FAO Country Programme Framework (2024–2025), and the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31, supporting goals related to sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, biodiversity, and inclusive rural development.
A1.2 Relevance to national, regional and global beneficiary needs	S	The LDN project is broadly aligned with Armenia's national policy objectives and international commitments, including the UNCCD obligations.
A1.3 Complementarity with existing interventions	S	The project is co-financed by the Forest resilience of Armenia through enhancing adaptation and rural green growth via mitigation project funded by Geen Climate Fund (GCF) project.
B Effectiveness		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MS	There has been a low rate of delivery during the first half of the project making it hard for the MTR to assess the effectiveness of the project in achieving its objectives and many of the project's outputs are still in progress with considerable risks that they may not be completed before the projects close. A Moderately Satisfactory rating is given at the MTR with the caveat that this can be increased if there is additional time to complete many of the outputs and outcomes. However, this will need a clear and coherent plan in place to achieve this.
B1.1 Delivery of project outputs	MS	As above, most outputs are still under way and behind schedule considering the remaining time available for their completion. Of the 17 SRF indicators the MTR rates, 9 MU, 4 MS, 3 S, and 2 are un-reported on at the MTR.
B1.2 Progress towards outcomes and project objective	MS	As above, most outcomes are still under way and behind schedule considering the remaining time available for their completion. 6 indicators are MU, 6 indicators are MS and 3 are not able to be reported. 5 outcomes are rated MS and 2 are rated MU
- Outcome 1.1: Enhanced enabling environment for LDN at national level	MS	Moderately Satisfactory. A key mid-term target (development of one policy) has not yet been achieved, partly due to a lengthy stakeholder consultation process. Although work on policy review, gap analysis, and gender-responsive legislation is ongoing, there are concerns about completing them before the project's end. The MTR suggests referring to "draft" policies or laws, as final approval lies outside the project's control. Additionally, the resource mobilization plan faced significant stakeholder criticism. Despite this, progress on drafts and processes boosts confidence in eventually achieving the outcome. However additional time for this process would be beneficial.
- Outcome 1.2: Enhanced understanding of land degradation drivers informs LDN target setting at the national and community level	MS	Moderately Satisfactory. Progress is mixed. While LADA assessments have been completed and baselines established, key analyses, such as cost assessments and gender variations, still need to be completed and integrated before the end of the project and additional time would be useful before project closure. However, targets remain undefined, and it's unclear if enough data and stakeholder input exist to reach a consensus, raising concerns about completion.
- Outcome 1.3: Enhanced capacity to implement LDN at national and local levels	MS	Moderately Satisfactory. Progress is mixed. Indicator 5 appears on track with training materials and a gender module developed, though gender-disaggregated data is missing. The LDN National Capacity Building Programme has begun but faces coordination issues. Indicator 6 is harder to assess, with work delayed until later

		in the year, however TOR have been prepared There is confusion around the Decision Support System (DSS) due to overlap with other outcomes and outputs, highlighting issues in the project's logical framework
- Outcome 2.1: Resilient SLM practices and investments introduced on degraded land in target areas	MS	Moderately Satisfactory. Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans using participatory methods have made progress, with 601 hectares (ha) of degraded land reportedly improved across two communities. However, improvements are based on limited evidence (only one round of soil testing) and clearer, standardized indicators (for instance, LDN measures like cover, productivity, and SOC) are needed. Environmental risks of interventions (ploughing, fertilizer use) must also be assessed for long-term sustainability. The alignment of these actions with broader landscape restoration goals needs to be more embedded. Additionally, several targets were not reported at mid-term, gender disaggregation is missing, and there is confusion around reported outreach figures.
- Outcome 2.2: Key land-based value chains strengthened and made more resilient and equitable.	MU	Moderately Unsatisfactory. While some work is underway, there is insufficient evidence that the project will establish credible, sustainable value chains. Key issues include limited impact at beneficiary level (for instance, only 3 beehives per beneficiary), beneficiary investment (for instance, the berry farms) and sustainability (for instance, beneficiaries stating clearly that they would not continue to purchase fertilizer) and lack of structural support for long-term viability. Planned activities such as life cycle assessments and business plans have faced delays, mainly due to technical services procurement issues. Although the project team referenced earlier work, no supporting evidence was available at the mid-term review.
- Outcome 3.1: Project monitoring and evaluation and monitoring and assessment of global environmental benefits and LDN.	MS	Moderately Satisfactory. There is confusion around the indicator's purpose. It should relate to project monitoring and global environmental benefits (GEBs), while UNCCD LDN indicators should be tracked through the DSS. SLM practices have been implemented, with 14 community-level management plans in place and expert reports confirming rollout. However, adoption levels remain unclear. M&E challenges are partly due to reporting issues but also due to a confusing strategic results framework and TOC.
- Outcome 3.2: Lessons learned and dissemination of knowledge to support scaling up of LDN.	MU	Moderately Unsatisfactory. Key informant (KI) feedback revealed low awareness of SLM and LDN. Stakeholders were primarily focused on conventional rural development, infrastructure and productivity, with little connection to sustainability or systemic resilience.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/ outcomes	MS	There are aspects of the project that are behind schedule and very vulnerable without additional time to complete them. However, the present PIU provides a degree of confidence that these can be completed in time.
B1.3 Likelihood of impact	N/A	Not rated at MTR
C. Efficiency		
C1. Efficiency	MU	The project has faced major delays, complex implementation challenges, coordination issues and low early efficiency. While recent improvements under new leadership have accelerated delivery, the project remains significantly behind schedule, with many outputs still incomplete and a risk that key outcomes will not be achieved by the extended end date.
D. Sustainability of Project Outcomes		
D1. Overall likelihood of or risks to sustainability	ML	There are significant risks to the sustainability and completion of project outcomes, and with limited time remaining, efforts should prioritize quality delivery of key activities over completing all outputs, despite recent improvements in implementation. See below.
D1.1 Financial risks	MU	Financial sustainability of the project is uncertain, with most activities still incomplete and early signs indicating significant risks, particularly due to weak institutional embedding, limited stakeholder ownership, and a lack of clear post-project financing mechanisms.

D1.2 Socio-political risks	ML	Despite alignment with national policies, stakeholder feedback suggests limited socio-political support for LDN objectives, with a stronger focus on production over resilience; progress on policy integration is slow, and reliance on future project support and the current status of the National Resource Mobilization Plan do not provide a convincing case for sustainability.
D1.3 Institutional and governance risks	MU	The project has lacked sufficient time and focus to foster a collective, adaptive understanding of SLM and LDN, with stakeholders largely defaulting to conventional, technical solutions shaped by past systems, hindering the behavioural change (highlighted in the project's Theory of Change) needed for long-term impact.
D1.4 Environmental risks	N/A	Unable to assess.
D2 Catalyst and replication	MU	Unable to assess. Due to the incompleteness of the activities, outputs and outcomes and the time remaining for the project's completion the MTR is unable to comment on any replication and catalytic effects.
E. Factors affecting performance		
E1. Project design and readiness	MU	The project design has a number of critical weaknesses, including a weak analysis of land degradation drivers, an overly complex and unclear theory of change, unrealistic three-year timeframe, insufficient risk assessment, and procurement challenges especially when it comes to technical assistance that reduced efficiency which have compounded to undermine the project's effectiveness and progress.
E2. Quality of project implementation	MS	The project has faced major delays due to procurement challenges, turnover in project coordinators, and slow initial setup, including late hiring and administrative hurdles; while recent progress has improved under new leadership, the project remains significantly behind schedule.
E2.1 Quality of project implementation by FAO (BH, LTO, PTF, etc.)	MS	There appears to be a confusion of roles and responsibilities regarding the oversight and project assurance. Decisions on issues affecting progress have not been taken expeditiously. FAO initially carried out this role through the BH and Finance Assistant. A FAO M&E Specialist was appointed in September 2023 leading to improvements.
E2.2 Project oversight (PSC)	MS	The PSC has met twice (according to the Project Document it should meet twice yearly). Decisions on issues affecting progress have not been taken expeditiously. The FAO, local communities and NGOs do not appear to have representation on the PSC.
E3. Quality of project execution	MS	See below.
E3.1 Project execution and management (PCU, partner performance, administration, staffing, etc.)	MS	There have been 3 Project Coordinators, the most recent appointed in March 2024 since which the implementation has improved considerably. However, critical roles such as an Awareness Specialist have only been filled since April 2025. While AWP&Bs are developed there have been delays in budget execution and procurement challenges which have affected the rate of delivery (to 31/12/2024: 2022 \$12,064, 2023 \$128,901, 2024 \$519,570 or 33% budget execution and 18% of the co-financing at the CEO approval).
E4. Financial management and co-financing	MS	Financial management is through the BH Financial Assistant. There has been a budget revision without any deviation in budget categories to accommodate the project extension. All re-allocated funds remain within the original budget line. Budget execution. Budget execution (up to 31/12/2024) is \$658,374 (33%) of the total \$1,996,380 with a remaining \$1,338,006. Co-financing delivery has been low According to the BH the project is audited once a year. The June 2024 PIR states that US\$ 2,170,370 co-financing (18% of the co-financing confirmed at CEO approval) has been delivered.
E5. Project partnership and stakeholder engagement	MU	Project partnerships have been weakened by delays and limited stakeholder engagement, particularly at the institutional level which have affected component 1 delivery. Both design and implementation appear to have underestimated the challenge of stakeholder coordination and involvement. The PSC is largely

		institutional it is hard to see how stakeholders are effectively and equitably involved in decision-making on issues related to the component 1 and 2 activities.
E6. Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products	MU	The project has produced a communications strategy. However, this does not appear to have developed a collective understanding of LDN and the accelerating effect of climate change. Where there is an understanding, it does not appear to have developed shared approaches to the means to address these challenges and build resilience.
E7. Overall quality of M&E	MS	See below.
E7.1 M&E design	MU	Project M&E is taking place but compounded weaknesses in the system are not identifying implementation issues and challenges. Confusing indicators (the logical hierarchy, activities, outputs, outcomes, objective as presented in the Project Document's Strategic Results Framework (SRF)), and overly optimistic assessments; structural flaws in the SRF further reduce the effective tracking of progress and informed decision-making.
E7.2 M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources)	MS	The project's M&E system is weak, with limited and unclear reporting (possibly due to the slow delivery of activities), overly optimistic evaluations, and a confusing results framework (SRF), making it difficult to monitor real progress or identify challenges; these issues suggest a lack of strategic oversight and clarity in project roles and responsibilities. There does not appear to have been any critical analysis of the project's SRF.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	MU	The project appears to have been affected by compound issues – <i>inter alia</i> : poor design, mismatch of implementation modalities, unrealistic timeframes, confusing TOC (for instance, the four assumptions or drivers identified are arguably things the project was expected to achieve, the drivers of land degradation identified in the Project Document - deforestation, the collapse of old grazing regimes and, land fragmentation and land tenure, all three of which are quite likely to be factors in causing land degradation - are themselves complex and resulting from multiple and unpredictable cause and effect relationships and in the case of "the collapse of old grazing regimes" subject to a number of assumptions and challenges regarding their suitability and sustainability) and SRF, turnover of key staff, late delivery of activities. However, the critical issue being that key points in the project cycle have been missed when remedial actions could have been taken by the project partners such as during the inception phase and when it was clear that the project was struggling an extension was decided without a significant critical analysis and recovery plan.
F. Cross-cutting concerns		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	MU	Gender considerations are integrated into the project's design and planning, there is limited evidence of meaningful impact on women in pilot communities.
F2. Human rights issues	N/A	
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	MU	There is confusion around the project's Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM). FAO states that it is compliant with the GEF and FAO guidelines, the EPIU has its own institutional GRM, but there is no discernible "project-level GRM. With no clear link to community stakeholders and no reported grievances; current channels are limited and may discourage women from raising potential concerns. There may also be unidentified and compound social and environmental risks in the component 2 SLM activities.

1 Introduction

11. The FAO and GEF monitoring and evaluation (M&E) policies and procedures require that all medium-sized (MSP) and full-sized projects (FSP) FAO-implemented and GEF-funded projects to undergo a Mid-Term Review (MTR) upon reaching the halfway point of the project's implementation. Therefore, FAO has commissioned the MTR by contracting an independent evaluation team consisting of a National Consultant and an International Consultant. The MTR will be conducted following the FAO-GEF Monitoring and Evaluation Policy and facilitated by the commissioning office, the Budget Holder (BH), and the FAO Country Office in Armenia.

1.1 Purpose and scope of the MTR

12. The purpose of the MTR of the "Implementation of Armenia's Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) commitments through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes"² project are set out in the FAO guidelines (FAO 2020) on conducting FAO-GEF MTRs as three primary purposes:
 - i. To assess progress made towards achievement of a project's planned results in terms of its relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, sustainability and impact. Key questions include: "What results, intended and unintended, has the project achieved to date?" and "Is the project on track to achieve its planned results?"
 - ii. To identify any problems or challenges the project is encountering, understand the causes of any underperformance and leverage project strengths and good practices to overcome them. The MTR makes recommendations for corrective measures, if needed, to overcome challenges and ensure the expected deliverables and results are achieved by the end of the project. Key questions include: "What can be done to improve project delivery and to increase the likelihood of longer-term sustainability of project results?"
 - iii. To identify/highlight any success stories, key contributions, good practices and areas with the potential for upscaling and replication, and to promote knowledge-sharing and learning between FAO and project stakeholders, including the identification of lessons to improve future project formulation and implementation.

1.2 Objective of the MTR

13. The MTR is primarily a monitoring and adaptive management tool designed to identify challenges and outline corrective actions to ensure that a project is on track to achieve maximum results by its completion. The primary output/deliverable of this MTR process is the MTR report. The MTR report will provide evidence-based information that is credible, reliable, and useful.

1.3 Intended users

- 1 The MTR report is intended inform three main audiences:
 - FAO-GEF stakeholders, such as the Budget Holder (BH), the Environmental Project Implementation Unit (EPIU), FAO GEF Coordination Unit (FAO GEF CU), Project Steering Committee (PSC) members, FAO country-level technical specialists, and the country's GEF Operational Focal Point.

² Herein after referred to as the "LDN project" or "the project".

- National level stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Environment (MOE), Ministry of Economy (MOEC) and Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI).
- Local level stakeholders, such as farmer groups and women groups, technical consultants and service providers.

1.4 Methodology

14. This section presents the overall review and evaluation methodology, specifying the approach to different components of the review process and data sources consulted during the evaluation process. The review adheres to the UNEG Norms and Standards and is in line with FAO/GEF Manual and methodological guidelines and practices. The review adopted a consultative and transparent approach with internal and external stakeholders throughout the evaluation process.
15. This methodology involved analyzing the strategic results framework³ (SRF) of the project intervention, assessing whether the expected outputs and outcomes are being achieved based on the values of the indicators against the end of project (EOP) targets. The TOC (both from the Project Document and the revised TOC from the MTR) was used in identifying the causal mechanisms and contextual factors that have, and may continue to, influence these outcomes as well as providing the basis to determine the longer-term impacts of the project intervention. The review used this analysis to triangulate the feedback from Key Informant Interviews (KII), focus group discussions and document review to assess project's results, their sustainability and plausible future impact and implications and identify any remaining barriers to their achievement.
16. Based on these findings and conclusions the review is able to assess the achievement of project results and to draw lessons that can both improve the sustainability of the benefits from this project, and aid in the overall enhancement of FAO and Government programming, provide recommendations for future direction of programming and to enhance the likelihood of sustainability of project outcomes.
17. The methodology did not involve randomized control trials or experimental designs but relied on qualitative and quantitative data to assess the effectiveness and impact of the interventions.
18. The review was guided by the evaluation matrix included in (Annex XX). The matrix is made up of, and expanded on, the evaluation questions provided in the TOR for the MTR under the GEF evaluation criteria: Relevance (rated), Coherence (rated), Effectiveness (rated), Efficiency (rated), Implementation (rated), Execution (rated), Additionality, Sustainability (rated), M&E design (rated), M&E implementation (rated), Co-financing, Application of GEF policies and guidelines and Lessons learned. Rated criterion were assessed using the rating scheme provided in Annex 8.
19. The evaluation matrix expands and clarifies upon the agreed evaluation questions and develops corresponding indicators, relevant sources of evidence and data collection tools. This mixed-methods evaluation relies on descriptive analyses of qualitative and quantitative data from the primary and secondary data sources described below. The evaluation questions were developed through a constructive dialogue with the OCBD and EPIU and guided by the GEF evaluation criteria above.
20. The MTR carried out a **desk review** of the documentation covering project design, implementation progress reports, project reports, monitoring and review studies, local and national development plans, policies and regulatory instruments.

³ Also known as the log frame

21. **Interviews and stakeholder consultations** were carried out to collect additional information and validate information collected through remote⁴ and face-to-face⁵ consultations with a range of stakeholders, using "semi-structured interviews" involving a key set of questions in a conversational format. These were conducted with staff from: FAO at regional and country levels, members of the PSC and the other national project partners. Interviews were also conducted with regional and local stakeholders where the project implemented sustainable land management (SLM) activities. The review team, prior to the field missions, developed interview protocols tailored to each group of stakeholders, namely, the management team, experts from scientific community, partner organizations, donors, government officials and external (to the project) stakeholders. A list of stakeholders interviewed is provided in Annex 3.
22. The review undertook a **field mission** (07/04 – 14/04/2025) to the project area to hold meetings with the local Self-Governing Bodies (Lori and Syunik Regions). The review also visited the villages of Gorayk and Sarnakunq in the Sisian community, Syunik Region, and Chkalov and Dsegh villages in the Tumanyan community, Lori Region to meet with project beneficiaries mainly through focus group discussions and informal meetings and inspect on the ground activities under Component 2 of the project.
23. Wherever possible the review visited the project sites to make **direct observations of project results and activities** in the project area including consultations with local government and local agencies, local community representatives, project partners, service providers and participants in field activities. The purpose of these site visits was to make direct observations of the field activities and to speak directly with beneficiaries including women's groups to obtain beneficiary feedback and a better understanding of the project impacts at this level, to validate compliance with the GEF and FAO social and environmental safeguarding procedures and to directly quantify and qualify the benefits and their relevance to the project objective. In particular, the review sought to understand the linkages between the enabling environment, beneficiaries and changes in land use and land users' behaviour and approaches to agricultural production and their livelihoods.
24. **Gender equality and women's empowerment** was assessed through gender-disaggregated results (wherever possible) arising from project activities, inclusion of women participants and relevant women's groups in the review interviews and specific questions regarding the extent to which they are included in project implementation and/or benefiting from the project were collected through interview and documentation review. This was assessed not only on the gender balance of stakeholders and beneficiaries, but to determine effective inclusiveness and empowerment.
25. Gender and other cross-cutting issues were examined through the project's social and environmental screening process (SESP) and the Environmental and Social Safeguards assessment accompanying the Project Document (the Project Risk Certification (PRC)) including an assessment of any grievances and any safeguarding measures including the "generalized gender analysis of the targeted regions and the gender analysis (2023) conducted in the target settlements to determine compliance with the FAO Policy on Gender Equality (2020 – 2030) (FAO, 2020)ⁱ.
26. The two-person (one male and one female) Review Team included a native Armenian speaker to ensure that the MTR was able to reach out to women stakeholders.
27. Following the data collection phase, the MTR team analysed the information according to the MTR guidelines (FAO 2020)ⁱⁱ and the ToR to draw conclusions and propose any recommendations. The review approach used the diverse information sources (desk review, KII,

⁴ Remote interviews were carried out using an appropriate media such as Zoom or Teams. Wherever possible interviews were held face to face.

⁵ All district-level interviews with beneficiaries will be carried out through personal face to face interviews or with focus groups.

direct observations, supporting information) arranged against the GEF evaluation criteria (Annex 8) question matrix groups (Annex 4) to consolidate and where necessary cluster information and feedback to cross-reference or triangulate information sources in order to validate findings. The MTR team further confirmed, validated, analysed and debated the emerging understanding and conclusions through an iterative process including where necessary, further follow up with project stakeholders to ensure that there is a logical and evidence-based progression from findings, conclusions through to recommendations.

28. Following the field mission there was a debriefing, to cross-check and validate the preliminary findings and conclusions, and to discuss practicable recommendations.
29. The MTR followed and adhered to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines for evaluations⁶.

1.5 Limitations

30. The MTR encountered and identified the following constraints and limitations:

- The MTR encountered difficulties in meeting sufficient beneficiary stakeholders during the field mission to the project sites, in particular women respondents. This resulted in a very small sample size of respondents (11 male farmers, 5 women beneficiaries and 1 women non-beneficiary respondent/not involved in the project, N = 17, 11 men and 6 women⁷).
- Due to delays in the project effectively starting activities, the field activities have only been in progress since early 2024 making it hard to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of project outputs, especially in component 2.
- Documentation, particularly relating to project deliverables were not available in time to the MTR team making it hard to assess and validate project activities, especially the technical aspects of all the components as well as the cross-cutting (social and environmental) aspects of the project.
- The LDN project includes both technical (geospatial information systems) and adaptive interventions (SLM practices including a mix of practical agricultural techniques, social and organisational aspects, behavioural changes, finance, amongst others). Evaluating such a diverse range of project issues would necessitate a much larger and multi-disciplinary team than the project M&E budget would support. Therefore, there are inevitably limitations on the two-person evaluation team, particularly in respect to the highly technical and specialist aspects of the geospatial data systems in component 1.

1.6 Structure of the MTR report

31. This report is structured in line with the guidance (FAO 2020) given on conducting MTRs of FAO-GEF projects and in accordance with the MTR's TOR (FAO 2024):

The **executive summary** provides basic information on the project, a brief description of the project and its progress to date, a summary of key findings, conclusions and recommendations and the MTR ratings and achievement table.

Section 1 provides a description of the evaluation scope, objectives, methodology and limitations.

⁶ <https://www.unevaluation.org/unevaluation/publications/unevaluation-ethical-guidelines-evaluation>

⁷ The Project Document variously mentions training to 100 women at the national level, 500 women at the sub-national level. 2 value chains with at least one focused on women, 2,500 direct beneficiaries (50% women, amongst other gender targeted project beneficiaries. This would give 5% of women trained and 0.4% of women direct beneficiaries). Of three women interviewed at one project site: one had received 3 beehives but had given them to someone else because she was engaged in a paid job and another unrelated business, one was the mother of a farmer who was participating in the fodder production and couldn't speak directly on the intervention and the third was not involved in the project but was involved in beekeeping herself and was able to provide information on beekeeping *per se*, but not on the project's activities.

Section 2 describes the background and context of the LDN project, a description of the project components and implementation arrangements, and the project's theory of change.

Section 3 describes the projects intervention strategy and the theory of change (TOC).

Section 4 presents the evaluation findings on the project's performance against the FAO-GEF evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, efficiency (implementation and execution), effectiveness, GEF additionality and the contribution of co-financing.

Section 5 provides the evaluation's conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned.

2. Project background and context

2.1 Environmental context

32. According to the Project Document (FAO-GEF 2021) about 24,353 km² of the territory of Armenia, 81.9% (excluding the surfaces of Lake Sevan and water reservoirs), are to a varying extent exposed to desertification: 26.8% of the total territory faces extremely severe desertification; 26.4%, severe desertification; 19.8%, moderate desertification; and 8.8%, slight desertification. In the "National Strategy and Action Program to Combat Desertification in the Republic of Armenia" (2015) two drivers of desertification are identified: natural and anthropogenic. Natural drivers include droughts in the Ararat valley and some areas of Vayots Dzor and Syunik Marzes (Districts), sandstorms in the Ararat valley, VayotsDzor and Syunik Marzes. Moisture deficit caused by unequal distribution of seasonal and regional rainfall as well as geomorphological features, landslide processes, floods and naturally occurring salinization are common land degradation problems. Anthropogenic drivers include urban development, unsustainable agriculture practices related to ploughing, absence or inappropriate application of crop rotation techniques, ineffective use of irrigation water and nutrients, overgrazing of pastures; road construction, illegal logging, mining, especially with open-pit methods, and unsustainable use of artesian water resources.
33. Water erosion occurs on almost half of all croplands in all regions of the country (220,000 ha), except orchards and vineyards. Wind erosion is observed on small cropland areas in the Ararat plain (22,000 ha). The total area of eroded land by wind erosion has increased between 2000 - 2010 by 20,000 ha. Artificialized land has also increased by 27,230 ha and now represents about 3.5% of the total area of Armenia. Chemical pollution occurs on 272,000 ha, with most of the land contaminated by mineral substances used in agriculture, and by chemicals in urban areas. Pollution by minerals has increased due to the relative low cost and incorrect application of chemical fertilizers, especially nitrate. The area of contaminated land has increased in all rural areas of the country. Acidification is mainly associated with natural soil properties, while salinization has intensified in recent years. Particularly secondary salinization occurs in the Ararat valley, where artesian water is abundantly used for irrigation. Currently, the area of secondary salinization affects 27,000 ha. Improper use of agricultural machinery with improper irrigation methods has led to the appearance of soil compaction processes on vast areas - almost half of all agricultural land is currently in various stages of compaction. Areas prone to overgrazing have not increased in recent years, but the consequences of overgrazing in the past have not been eliminated, and degraded pastures now covers about 170,000 hectares. Under-grazing of pastures - particularly in proximity to remote villages - is also present on about 20,000 ha. Deforestation has largely ceased, and reforestation and afforestation of non-forest areas is planned on at least 200-300 ha per year until 2030.
34. In addition to the on-going land degradation processes, climate change poses a serious risk to the vitality of the agriculture sectors in the country. These changes in climate are expected to

exacerbate land degradation processes in the country unless action is taken. The Third National Communication (TNC) to the UNFCCC reports evidence of a 1.1 C° rise in average summer temperature and a 10% reduction in average precipitation over the past 80 years (1934-2012).

2.2 Development context

35. Armenia gained independence from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in 1991. The country faced significant socio-economic challenges including the dissolution of the collective (kolkhoz) farms. High energy costs resulted in unsustainable use of forest resources and agricultural infrastructure fell into disrepair resulting in significant overgrazing close to villages and under-use of distant summer pastures. Land privatization resulted in land fragmentation and a small average farm size. Lack of access to proper agricultural technology as well as scientifically based zoning of crops has contributed to land degradation. The intensive development of the mining industry has led to the degradation of large areas occupied by both open pits and tailings. In recent years, the Government of Armenia has made significant attempts to correct the existing situation, taking the necessary decisions, attracting the help of various international organizations, and implementing international projects. But in general, the land degradation situation is still challenging and complex to address⁸.
36. The country is a net importer of food and fuel, and highly vulnerable to global price fluctuations. Agriculture is the main source of economic activity in rural areas and generates around 20% of GDP, accounts for some 2% of economic growth, and employs about 35% of the working population of whom nearly 56% are female farmers. Women are over-represented in seasonal and precarious employment and 82% of all women working in agriculture do so informally. This informality, which leads to reduced access to social protection schemes, along with limited access to land and other agricultural assets compared with men, leave women in a vulnerable situation. Smallholders constitute the vast majority in the country, representing around 95% of all farms with the average size of 1.4 ha, usually fragmented into three or four plots. Smallholders produce the larger part of the gross agricultural product, accounting for around 97%, according to the Project Document.

2.3 Policy and institutional context

37. Management and monitoring of land and natural resources in Armenia is spread over several sectors, ministries and agencies (at least 8 according to the Project Document), making it challenging to establish a coherent and well-functioning LDN monitoring system and to follow up on implementation of SLM.
38. Improvements in legislation (LDN report of Armenia) related to combating of desertification are consistent with the 2nd operational objective of the strategy of the "Convention to combat desertification...", which implies creation of favourable conditions for decision-making concerning mitigation of land degradation and drought consequences and harmonization of the legal basis targeted at sustainable land use. The following actions based on this for 2015-2020 were: Elaboration of draft law on "Legal regime of areas exposed to desertification"; Elaboration of draft law on changes and amendments in RA Land Code; Elaboration of draft law on "Strategic planning of environmental issues"; Elaboration of draft law on making amendments and supplements in RA Law on "Environmental education and upbringing of population"; Elaboration of draft law on "Economics of ecosystem services". The legislative framework of laws, resolutions, and decrees aimed at agricultural and environmental considerations, and particularly those addressing land degradation (LD) and environmental protection, are provided in Annex 11 according to the Project Document.

⁸ Source: Project Document (FAO-GEF 2021)

39. There is currently no agreed method of assessing or monitoring LDN voluntary targets or guidelines at a national level, and apparently little national or regional planning processes in which LD or LDN accounting and protocols could be incorporated. National strategies exist, but do not have the authority, autonomy or funding to self-organise and act at landscape or regional scales in efforts to reduce LD extent and rate.
40. Land use and activities on the land are largely determined by legal and not policy instruments.

2.4 Description of the project

41. Armenia's LDN strategy includes four targets: (1) arrest cropland degradation and promote agro-ecology (conservation plus modern "organic" technology); (2) afforest and/or reforest two-thirds of the degraded land; (3) arrest deforestation and improve forest management on 100% of the national territory; and (4) arrest overgrazing and improve grassland management on 100% of the national territory. Despite recognizing land degradation issues, Armenia currently lacks national programs to promote LDN.
42. According to the Project Document (FAO-GEF, 2021), the project adopts a landscape approach to integrate sectors, engage stakeholders, and address the root causes of land degradation. It focuses on strengthening the enabling environment, scaling resilient sustainable land management practices, and monitoring and disseminating lessons learned with the objective of achieving Armenia's LDN targets equitably and sustainably. To achieve this the project is expected to: support the formulation of comprehensive land-use planning to rationalize land use in a way that addresses interconnectedness and trade-offs across multiple ecosystems, promote good governance to align policy directives at both the national and sub-national level, and foster innovations in SLM⁹.

2.5 Project objective and scope

43. According to the Project document the project follows a landscape approach in line with GEF's vision to foster sustainable integrated landscapes to achieve LDN. Working at landscape level allows issues to be addressed in a multifaceted way, integrating sectors, involving stakeholders and working at different scales – tackling the underlying causes of land degradation and challenges related food security and not just the symptoms. In this context, the project is intended to support the formulation of comprehensive land-use planning to rationalize land use in a way that addresses interconnectedness and trade-offs across multiple ecosystems, promote good governance to align policy directives at the national and sub-national level, and promote innovations in sustainable land management (SLM).

2.5.1 Threats and barriers to land degradation neutrality

44. The Project Document identifies three threats to achieving LDN:
 - i. **Weak Enabling Environment:** Armenia lacks national programs, regulations, and legal frameworks to promote LDN. According to the Project Document, the revision of the Agriculture Policy (2019-2029) lacked LDN considerations with grassland, and pastureland management are scattered among several legal frameworks and Codes. There are no comprehensive laws governing pastureland management, and land-use planning is fragmented. Planning for abandoned agricultural lands is insufficient, leading to costly land restoration. There is also inadequate national funding for LDN, and local communities lack resources to invest in sustainable agricultural practices, relying mainly on international projects for funding.

⁹ Source, Project Document.

- ii. **Limited Knowledge and Awareness of SLM:** While land degradation is recognized, the specific interactions between sector management systems and land degradation are not well understood. Many land users are unaware of alternative, beneficial sustainable land management practices, especially on small to medium-sized farms. Additionally, there is a lack of cost-effective reforestation methods and sustainable livestock management practices, such as rotational grazing. Despite some progress, rural communities are often risk-averse and lack financial mechanisms to shift from subsistence farming to more market-oriented agriculture.
- iii. **Poor Capacity to Identify and Monitor SLM Benefits:** There is insufficient real-time data on land conditions and natural resources, with no unified national monitoring system to track land degradation or restoration progress. Data discrepancies hinder effective decision-making, and there is no decision support system to evaluate the success of SLM practices or to balance land degradation with restoration efforts or to set national targets for LDN. This lack of monitoring systems prevents the scaling up of successful LDN practice

2.6 Project strategy: objective, outcomes and expected results

45. To remove the barriers to SLM and implementation of LDN in Armenia, the project was designed with three components (see Table 3):

- iv. **Component 1:** Strengthening of the enabling environment for LDN,
- v. **Component 2:** Support to scaling up of resilient SLM practices in degraded landscapes in Lori and Syunik districts.
- vi. **Component 3:** Monitoring, evaluation, dissemination and communication of lessons learned supporting behavioural and institutional change that leads to adoption and implementation of LDN principles at national level and balancing of gains and losses of productive land to achieve LDN.

Table 3 Project objective, outcomes and outputs

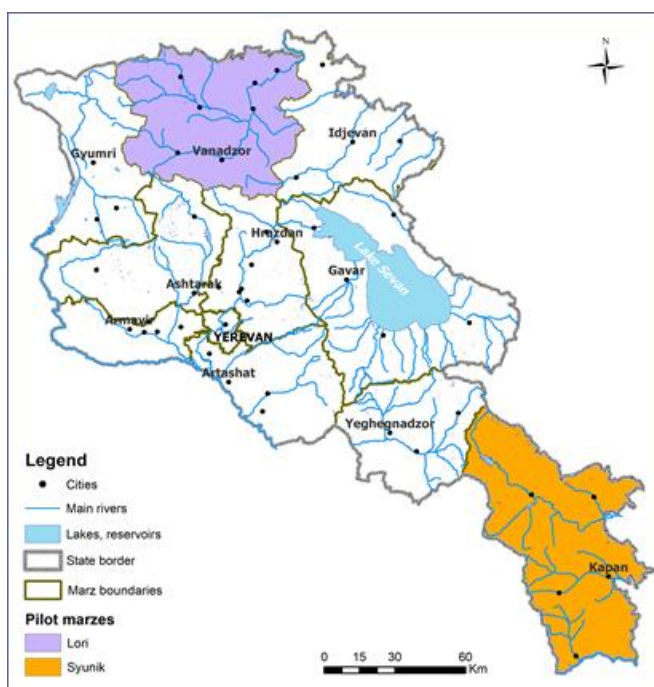
Objective: To support the national efforts to implement the LDN targets of Armenia through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes	Indicator
	No indicators given
Component 1: Strengthened enabling environment and capacity at national level for evidence-based implementation of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)	
Outcome 1.1: Enhanced enabling environment for LDN at national level	Indicator 1: New cross-sectoral policies/laws Indicator 2: Intersectoral coordination mechanisms for LDN
Output.1.1.1: Assessment of LDN policy gaps and development of cross-sectoral policies/legal framework supporting LDN principles	Output indicator: LDN Policy assessment Policy framework supporting LDN
Output.1.1.2: Strengthened intersectoral coordination mechanisms at two levels: national level, and between the national level and local decision makers and farmer groups	Output indicator: Horizontal intersectoral coordination mechanism at national level Output indicator: Vertical intersectoral coordination mechanisms
Outcome 1.2: Enhanced understanding of land degradation drivers informs LDN target setting at the national and community levels	Indicator 3: LD mapping that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation Indicator 4: LDN targets set in Lori and Syunik
Output.1.2.1: Assessment of the current status, trends, drivers, including impacts of climate change and migration, and costs of land degradation based on existing data and information (using LADA, WOCAT, ELD)	Output indicator: LD assessment and cost assessment that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation
Output.1.2.2: LDN indicators (land cover, land productivity, and soil organic carbon) in target Regions assessed and mapped (using Trends.Earth, CollectEarth)	Output indicator: LDN indicator assessment and maps from target regions
Output.1.2.3: Monitoring system for LDN indicators integrated into the national land use monitoring systems	Output indicator: LDN monitoring system
Outcome 1.3: Enhanced capacity to implement LDN at national and local levels	Indicator 5: Number of people, including women, with enhanced capacity in LDN implementation Indicator 6: DSS for LDN
Output.1.3.1: LDN training material developed for decision makers as well as practitioners	Output indicator: LDN training modules, including one dedicated to gender issues
Output.1.3.2: National capacity building program on LDN for key decision-makers and practitioners at national and sub-national level	Output indicator: National capacity building programme in LDN Output indicator: Number of people trained, including women
Output.1.3.3: LDN decision support system for target-setting, planning and strengthening of governance arrangements together with national and local stakeholders established	Output indicator: DSS for intersectoral and gender equitable governance of land and natural resources for LDN
Component 2: Scaling up of resilient Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices and approaches to meet LDN targets in degraded landscapes in Armenia	
Outcome 2.1: Resilient SLM practices and investments introduced on degraded land in target Regions	Indicator 7: Number of ha of land with restored grasslands Indicator 8: Number of ha of land with restored forest land

	Indicator 9: Number of ha of land under SLM, including forest land, grasslands and croplands Indicator 10: Amount of carbon sequestered through restoration and SLM Indicator 11: Number of beneficiaries (households in pilot districts)
<u>Output.2.1.1:</u> Integrated land-management plans developed using participatory approaches and integrated with existing Community land use planning processes in target regions (Lori, Syunik)	Output indicator: Number of ILM plans that reflect priorities of both women and men Output indicator: Number of ha covered by ILM plans
<u>Output.2.1.2:</u> 'LDN Learning Landscapes' established with SLM best practices and integrated restoration of landscapes that provide carbon benefits.	Output indicator: Number of learning landscapes established Output indicator: Ha of land covered by restoration and SLM
<u>Output.2.1.3:</u> Resource mobilization plans developed for scaling up of best practices that incorporate National and target Regions Government and contributions from donors	Output indicator: Number of resource mobilization plans that prioritize approaches that benefit/are accessible by women as well as men
<u>Outcome 2.2:</u> Key land-based value-chains strengthened and made more resilient and equitable	Indicator 12: Number of value chains strengthened; number of VCs focused on women Indicator 13: Number of value-chain actors with enhanced capacity in value-chain management
<u>Output.2.2.1:</u> Life Cycle Assessment of the land-based value chains (e.g. dairy, organic non-traditional vegetables, etc.)	Output indicator: Number of life cycle assessment of value chains (SLCAs and LCSAs) Output indicator: Number of business plans for the selected value chains that work for women
<u>Output.2.2.2:</u> Training programs on value-chains management (e.g. marketing, processing, certification) for local communities' extension services, farmers, women groups, and youth	Output indicator: Number of curricula modified to include management of the whole value chain Output indicator: Number of value-chain actors with enhanced capacity in whole value-chain management
Component 3: Monitoring, Evaluation and lessons learned	
<u>Outcome 3.1:</u> Project monitoring and evaluation and monitoring and assessment of global environmental benefits and LDN	Indicator 14: M&E system in place for monitoring of project progress and GEBs
<u>Output.3.1.1:</u> Project mid-term and final evaluation conducted	Output indicator: Mid-term evaluation Output indicator: Final Evaluation
<u>Output.3.1.2:</u> Global Environment Benefits, co-benefits and costs of SLM in degraded landscapes monitored and assessed using gender disaggregated data	Output indicator: M&E system ensuring timely delivery of project benefits in terms of GEBs and gender disaggregated co-benefits
<u>Output.3.1.3:</u> Monitoring system for LDN indicators (land cover, soil productivity and soil organic carbon) in place	Output indicator: Monitoring system established under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment
<u>Outcome 3.2:</u> Lessons learned and dissemination of knowledge to support scaling up of LDN	Indicator 15: Direct and indirect beneficiaries with improved knowledge and increased awareness on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles
<u>Output.3.2.1:</u> Communication strategy developed and implemented to support SLM scaling up to meet LDN targets	Output indicator: Number of people reached by public awareness raising campaign Output indicator: Number of appearances in local media and partner websites
<u>Output.3.2.2:</u> Lessons analyzed, and knowledge management products developed and disseminated to promote replication of the LDN approach	Output indicator: Knowledge products developed on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles (at least 50% tailored to women)

2.7 Project sites

46. The project activities are focused in the northern and southern regions of Armenia, in Lori and Syunik Marzes. The Project Document does not develop a criteria for interventions under component 2. Information on the project sites in the Project Document is expansive at the Marzes level but lacks clarity at the community intervention level.
47. The Autonomous Region of Syunik is located in the southernmost reaches of Armenia (Figure 1). The administrative territory of the region has an uneven relief, being the region with the most significant differences in altitude in Armenia. Evidence of this can be seen in the difference between the highest peak (3 904 m. Kaput Jugh mountain) and the lowest valley (375 m. Meghri gorge) which are 3529 m. The majority of settlements in the region are located at an altitude of 400-2100 m above sea level. The extreme relief and the large differences in altitude have led to extraordinary climatic diversity, with moderately hot and dry subtropical climates in the lower parts, a cold mountainous climate prevailing in the higher parts, and moderate mountainous climates in the middle parts. In the lowlands of the region, the annual precipitation does not exceed 260-300 mm, and the highland landscapes are characterized by relatively humid climates.
48. The Region of Lori is located in the north of Armenia (Figure 1). The administrative area of the region has an uneven relief, with approximately 80% of the area being composed of mountainous foothills and ranges. The settlements in the region are located at an altitude of 520-1800 m above sea level. Moderately hot climates are found in the lower parts of the region, cold mountainous climate prevails in the higher parts, and temperate mountainous climates are present in the middle parts. The region is characterized by relatively humid climatic conditions, the amount of annual precipitation is 600-700 mm.

Figure 1 Project Areas



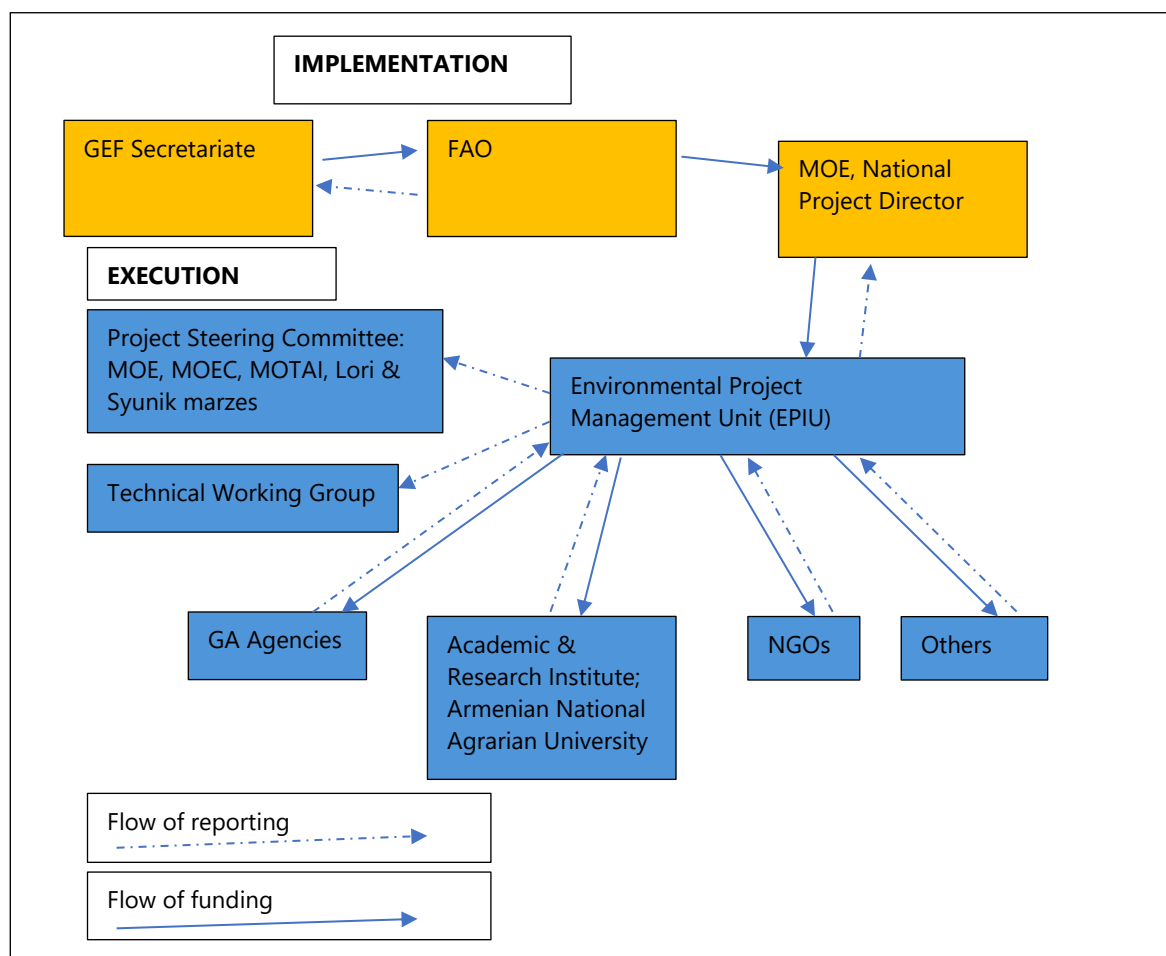
2.8 Implementation arrangements

49. The MoE has the overall executing and technical responsibility for the project. FAO provides oversight as the GEF Agency as described below. The MoE acts as the lead executing agency and is responsible for the day-to-day management of project results entrusted to it in full compliance with all terms and conditions of the Operational Partnership (OPIM) Agreement signed with FAO. As OP of the project the MoE is responsible and accountable to FAO for the timely implementation of the agreed project results, operational oversight of implementation activities, timely reporting, and for effective use of GEF resources for the intended purposes in line with FAO and GEF policy requirements.
50. A National Project Director (NPD) is located in the Ministry of Environment and responsible for coordinating the activities with all the national bodies related to the different project components, as well as with the project partners. They are responsible for supervising and guiding the Project Coordinator (PC) on the government policies and priorities. The PSC was expected to meet twice yearly¹⁰.
51. The PSC is chaired by the NPD. The PSC approves Annual Work Plans and Budgets (AWP/B) and provides strategic guidance to the Project Management Team (PMT) and to all executing partners. The PSC is comprised of representatives from MoE, MoEc, MoTAI and the Lori and Syunik marzes¹¹. The members of the PSC will each assure the role of a Focal Point for the project in their respective agencies. The PC is the Secretary to the PSC.
52. An Environmental Project Implementation Unit (EPIU) is co-funded by the GEF and established within the Ministry of Environment as a semi-autonomous unit. The main functions of the EPIU are to ensure overall efficient management, coordination, implementation and monitoring of the project through the effective implementation of the AWP/B. The EPIU is composed of a full-time PC and a full-time Project Assistant supported by part-time national experts on M&E, policy and land tenure, SLM, value-chain development, gender analysis, and communication. Two community facilitators are based in Lori and Syunik.
53. The FAO is the Implementing Agency (IA) for the Project, providing project cycle management and support services as established in the GEF Policy. As the GEF IA, FAO holds overall accountability and responsibility to the GEF for delivery of the results. In the IA role, FAO will utilize the GEF fees to deploy three different actors within the organization to support the project the BH provides oversight of day to day project execution; the Lead Technical Officer(s) (LTO), drawn from across FAO provide oversight/support to the projects technical work in coordination with government representatives participating in the PSC, the Funding Liaison Officer(s) (FLO) within FAO will monitor and support the project cycle to ensure that the project is being carried out and reporting done in accordance with agreed standards and requirements.

¹⁰ Project Document, p. 51

¹¹ The FAO is not represented on the PSC.

Figure 2 Implementation arrangements



Source: Project Document, p. 50

2.9 Project timing and milestones

Table 4 Project timing and milestones

Event	Date
CEO Endorsement	16/08/2021
Expected start date	01/10/2021
Actual start date	11/02/2022
Operational Partner Agreement (OPA) signed	22/09/2022
Inception Workshop	05/10/2022
Project qualified as a charitable (exemption from value added tax) project	18/01/2023
Expected end date	01/10/2024
Revised end date	11/02/2025
Actual end date	31/07/2026
Expected MTR	04/2023
Current PC appointed	March 2024
Actual MTR	04/2025
PSC meetings	Undated 2022 ¹² , 05/12/2023, 05/12/2024

¹² The MTR has only seen Minutes of Meetings for 2023 and 2024

2.10 Main stakeholders

54. The Project Document (pp. 41 – 45) provides an account of stakeholder engagement in the project preparation Project Identification Form (PIF) and Project Preparation Grant (PPG) phase of developing the Project Document along with a list of stakeholders is provided (see Annex 10) and their role in the project. A stakeholder Engagement Matrix and Grievance Redress Mechanism is included as Annex J of the Project Document but was not available to the MTR.
55. The PSC, a project structure which allows stakeholder engagement in the implementation of a project, includes the MOE, MOEC, MOTAI and Lori and Syunik marzes. Notably it does not include any local community, FAO or non-governmental organisation representation or specific user groups or women representation.
56. The main stakeholders identified by the MTR are, the MOE, MOEC, MOTAI, local Lori and Syunik Regional Village Administrations and the FAO and the individual project beneficiaries.

2.10 Project finance

Table 5 Project finance

Financing Plan: GEF allocation (USD):	
GEF financing:	US\$2,183,105
Co-financing:	
Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia	US\$ 100,000
Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia	US\$ 1,000,000
"Environmental Project Implementation Unit" (EPIU) State Institution	US\$ 48,000
Forest Committee of the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia	US\$ 10,000
Gorayq community of Syunik Marz	US\$ 50,000
Armenian National Agrarian University	US\$ 10,000
FAO/GCF project	US\$ 10,800,000
Sub-total co-financing:	US\$ 14,201,105
Total Budget:	
Total GEF grant disbursement as of December 31 2024 (US\$¹³)	US\$ 658,374 (33%)

3. Theory of change

57. The project's strategy, as explained in the Project Document's Theory of Change (TOC) identifies the drivers of LD in Armenia as: i) "deforestation", ii) "collapse of old grazing regime" and iii) "land fragmentation and land tenure". To address this, it provides the three components (strengthening the enabling environment, implementing and scaling SLM practices and monitoring, learning and communication), repeating the outputs and the outcomes from the projects SRF. These are expected to result in two intermediate states or behavioural changes, namely: "behavioural and institutional changes lead to adoption of LDN principles at national and district levels" and "balancing of gains and losses of productive land in Lori and Syunik districts to achieve LDN. These will ultimately lead to a long-term goal or impact: "Armenia's national LDN targets are met in a sustainable and equitable way through implementation and scaling up of SLM".
58. Four assumptions or impact drivers are identified (the MTR notes that these appear to be largely assumptions and not drivers): i) "strengthening of governance mechanism and capacity for LDN have support from central government and pilot districts, ii) "capacity to implement LDN at national and district level available", iii) "local communities see benefits of SLM and scale up best practices to achieve improved livelihoods and LDN", and iv) "continuous

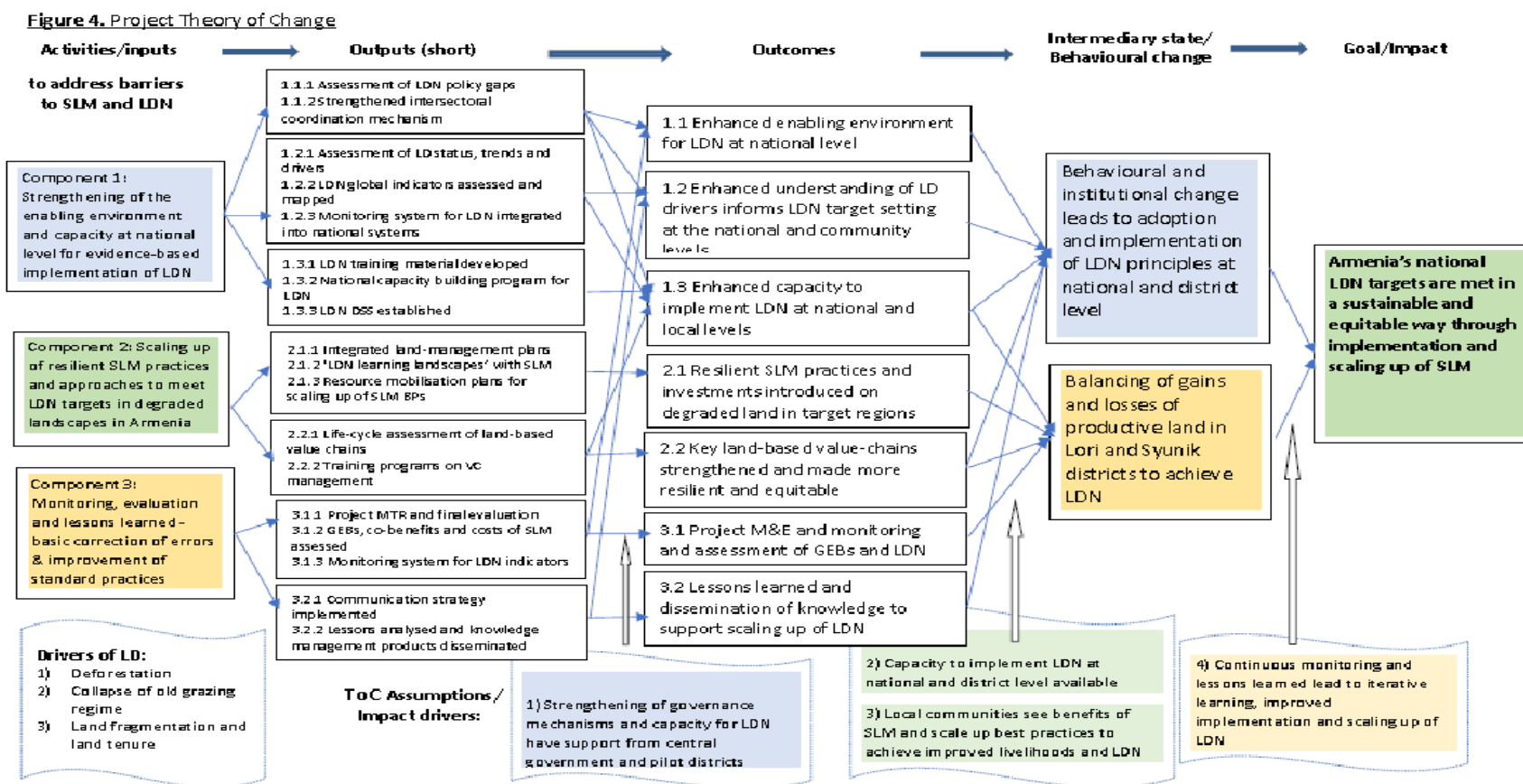
¹³ Source: The 3rd six-month project narrative report (July–December 2024)

monitoring and lessons learned lead to iterative learning, improved implementation and scaling up of LDN"¹⁴.

59. This is schematically explained in the project's TOC (Fig. 3). The MTR considers that there is a degree of confusion in the project's strategy as represented in the TOC. For instance, the four assumptions or drivers identified are arguably things the project was expected to achieve. It is worth noting that it isolates the drivers of land degradation identified in the Project Document: deforestation, the collapse of old grazing regimes and, land fragmentation and land tenure, all three of which are quite likely to be factors in causing land degradation. However, these three drivers are themselves complex and resulting from multiple and unpredictable cause and effect relationships and in the case of "the collapse of old grazing regimes" subject to a number of assumptions and challenges regarding their suitability and sustainability.

¹⁴ Drivers represent the broad areas of focus within a system that, when influenced, will contribute to the desired outcome. In this sense, "strengthening of governance mechanism and capacity for LDN have support from central government and pilot districts, iii) "local communities see benefits of SLM and scale up best practices to achieve improved livelihoods and LDN", and iv) "continuous monitoring and lessons learned lead to iterative learning, improved implementation and scaling up of LDN" are not necessarily drivers in as much as they do not have extreme values, they are more like desired outcomes. A driver may go both ways (for instance, governance might be restrictive or supportive and, local communities may prefer to trade short term profit maximisation over longer term ecosystem resilience). Local communities realising the benefits of LDN might be unpackaged into a range of drivers such as *agricultural markets and subsidies* and trade-off decisions – subsidies from the project had, according to beneficiary feedback encouraged farmers to take up practices and they had also made it abundantly clear that without those project subsidies their activities would be unprofitable. Similarly, the socio-economic resilience aspects of LDN and the threats related to climate change were not well understood at the farmer level. Admittedly, the EPIU appointed an Awareness Specialist to the team on 01/04/2025. However, at the time of the MTR field mission, the beneficiary feedback was focused on market forces and continued project support

Figure 3 Theory of Change from Project Document



4. Key findings

4.1 Relevance

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE	
A1 Overall Strategic Relevance	S
A1.1 Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	S
A1.2 Relevance to national, regional and global beneficiary needs	S
A1.3 Complementarity with existing interventions	S

Finding 1: The LDN project is relevant across the national, GEF programmatic and FAO policy framework.

60. The Project Document provides an account of the relevance of the LDN project within the national regulatory and policy framework (Project Document, pp. 15 – 17) it is reasonable to conclude that the LDN project is aligned with the national policy objectives and direction citing 17 normative documents (Annex 12) and six policy or government programmes including the Land Degradation Neutrality Strategy and Action Plan (2015). Section 7 of the Project Document (pp. 54 – 55) links the project objectives to a range of sector ministries and stresses alignment with The Land Code and Armenia’s national commitments to the UNCCD and national targets as well as Armenia’s LDN Target Setting Report, national goal *“By the year 2040, the carbon stock lost between 2000 and 2010 will be recover and increase by 2,8% in relation to present”* and states that the project is responding to the two of the four targets, *Stop deforestation and improve forest management in 100% of national territory by 2050* and *Stop overgrazing and improve grassland management in 100% of national territory by 2040*.
61. According to the Project Document the project is aligned with the GEF LD-1 focal area objective to Support on-the-ground implementation of SLM activities to achieve LDN:
- LD-1-1 Maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services to sustain food production and livelihoods through Sustainable Land Management
 - LD-1-4 Reduce pressures on natural resources from competing land uses and increase resilience in the wider landscape.
62. It also aligns with the GEF LD-2 focal area objective Creating and enabling environment to support voluntary LDN target implementation
- LD-2-5 on Create enabling environments to support scaling up and mainstreaming of SLM and LDN
63. The project is also aligned with the FAO Country Programme Framework (CPF), 2024 – 2025:
- CPF Output 1.1. Inclusive and sustainable local development enabled and promoted through development of nutrition-sensitive and green agribusinesses and value chains, leaving no one behind.
CPF Outcome 2. Ecosystems are managed sustainably, and people benefit from participatory and resilient development and climate smart solutions (UNSDCF Outcome 5).
 - CPF Output 2.1. National capacities to apply ecosystem-based approaches and land degradation neutrality enhanced.
 - CPF Output 2.2. Climate resilience policies and adaptation and mitigation measures implemented

64. The outcomes are broadly aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 (FAO 2021) in the following Programme Priority Areas (PPAs): PPA: Better Production, BP1: Innovation for sustainable agriculture production, PPA: Better Environment, BE1: Climate change mitigating and adapted agri-food systems, BE2: Bio-economy for sustainable food and agriculture, BE3: Biodiversity and ecosystem services for food and agriculture and PPA: Better Life, BL1: Gender equality and rural women's empowerment, BL2: Inclusive rural transformation, while adding to the four cross-cutting sectional accelerators identified as: innovation, technology, data and complementary accelerators (governance, human capital and institutions).

Finding 2: Component 2 strategy and interventions show limited coherence with its stated policy objectives, particularly in relation to SLM measures under this component. Feedback from key informants (KIs), especially at the community level, indicates confusion between increasing agricultural production and addressing land degradation. While linkages between these issues exist, community-level feedback primarily emphasized increasing production rather than tackling land degradation, except for limited concern regarding pastures.

65. KI feedback especially at the community level, but also at higher levels in the project hierarchy appear to be confusing increasing agricultural production and, to some extent, rural development (for instance, infrastructure) with land degradation *per se*. While there are linkages between these aspects, the KI feedback at the community level focused on increasing production and did not raise issues of land degradation, except in the instance of pastures, but this was not to any great concern. Furthermore, the interventions, in both Syunik and Lori project areas were not necessarily innovative (for example, ploughing and fertilizer applications to fodder crops, beekeeping, berry orchards). As far as the MTR could ascertain, there was insufficient analysis of the land use issues and the drivers of land use and possibly land degradation. For instance, in Syunik communities farm manure and residues are burnt for domestic heating while the project is providing fertilizers to farmers. In Lori, the project was providing fertilizers whereas the community indicated a mechanical manure spreader was needed (in Lori communities there is an allocation of firewood and domestic heating is not a constraint and manure and farm residues can be applied to pastures and meadows).
66. Similarly, the drivers of LD, such as the "collapse of old grazing regime" (see section 3) are not sufficiently examined in order to develop effective project interventions. Arguably, LDN requires a mix of adaptive and technical approaches however, many KIs¹⁵ expressed a need for investment in agricultural infrastructure over technical assistance and adaptive change.

4.2 Effectiveness

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
B Effectiveness	
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MS
B1.1 Delivery of project outputs	MS
B1.2 Progress towards outcomes and project objective	MS
- Outcome 1.1	MS
- Outcome 1.2	MS
- Outcome 1.3	MS
- Outcome 2.1	MS
- Outcome 2.2	MU
- Outcome 3.1	MS
- Outcome 3.2	MU
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/ outcomes	MS
B1.3 Likelihood of impact	Not rated at MTR

¹⁵ Including the Ministry of Economy

67. There has been a low rate of delivery during the first half of the project making it hard for the MTR to assess the effectiveness of the project in achieving its objectives and many of the project's outputs are still in progress. This makes it challenging to differentiate what the factors are the result of late delivery and what issues may be caused by internal structural weaknesses within the project. The project's activities have accelerated considerably (see section 4.3) during 2024 and the MTR findings need to be viewed in this context.

Finding 3: The project was designed for a three-year implementation period which is unrealistic for a complex LDN project.

68. Arguably, this short implementation period does not recognise the lessons from other projects which indicate that most projects will experience delays in establishing a PIU and harmonizing financial, monitoring and reporting systems between implementing and executing agencies, amongst other implementation challenges¹⁶ encountered in the first year. Neither does it acknowledge the challenges of a prolonged process of policy formulation and adaptation, stakeholder engagement and mobilization, amongst others¹⁷. Similarly, high levels of seasonal uncertainty in agricultural systems as reported by KIs that in 2023 an unusually cold and wet spring delayed field implementation.

Finding 4: The criteria for selecting pilot sites does not provide the best justification for demonstrating LDN.

69. The project pilot sites do not appear to have particularly severe LD issues. While there is justification for pasture management the other SLM interventions do not necessarily represent the most effective means to address LDN. Arguably, the interventions were more related to rural development (beekeeping, ploughing, provision of fertilizer, vegetable growing, etc.). In Syunik villages there is a more relevant and systemic issue related to the use of farm residues and manure for domestic heating. Supplying fertilizer to replace this loss of nutrients and organic material from the system may not necessarily represent an effective or efficient strategy to reduce LD (see Finding 2). As mentioned before (see Finding 2) many of the interventions may have a direct rural development gain but are not necessarily the most effective means to achieve LDN. In the case of Lori, it is apparent that many of the communities supported by the project have already received considerable project support in the past and LDN benefits might have been better achieved with lower levels of investment. For instance, providing a mechanical manure spreader rather than ploughing and fertilizer applications because manure and other farm residues are not burnt in this region (see Finding 2 and Tables 6 and 7 of Project Document).

Finding 5: The SLM activities introduced do not necessarily represent innovative approaches or in some instances approaches which will have a significant effect on LDN.

70. While the SLM interventions appear welcome by the beneficiaries, many reported that they are already doing many of these activities (e.g. beekeeping, vegetable growing, berry orchards, etc.). The treatment of fields for fodder appears to include, according to several KIs and the PIR, ploughing and fertilizer application, both of which they said were unlikely to continue without external financial support and raises questions in terms of ecological sustainability¹⁸. Most of the farmers interviewed were grateful and comfortable with these treatments because they remembered them from the former kolkhoz times, however, it is arguable that that level of farm support was either economically or ecologically sustainable (all farmers interviewed

¹⁶ For instance, see PIR 2023, p. 15

¹⁷ See PIR 2024, p. 13

¹⁸ The Field Facilitator in Syunik stated that there was an increase in biodiversity due to fertilizer application which would be unlikely in the short space of time and the application of fertilizer is generally not associated with an increase in species diversity, for instance see Boch *et al* 2021.

said that they would not be able to continue ploughing or fertilizer application without project support)¹⁹.

Finding 6: The project has prepared management plans for each community using the FAO Land degradation Assessment in Drylands (FAO-LADA) approach including resource mobilisation.

71. The project has prepared resource mobilization plans for each community using the FAO-LADA approach. The plans are in Armenian. There was some recognition of the plans (mostly related to pasture management) by the KIs at the community level but there did not seem to be a high level of understanding regarding the plans. From a brief review of the plans, they are very similar in nature despite significantly different agricultural, social, economic and ecological circumstances between Syunik and Lori areas. The National Resource Mobilization Plan was presented to stakeholders and received considerable criticism (see Annex 6).

Finding 7: The level of beneficiary investment in SLM activities is low and raises questions regarding the sustainability of the activities post project.

72. While beneficiaries appeared very appreciative of the project's support there was low investment by beneficiaries. For instance, the MTR team was shown a berry orchard in Lori district where the project had purchased fencing and support posts, fencing wire, planting material, land preparation and actual planting of bushes for a single beneficiary. This represented a significant investment by the project and very little commitment by the beneficiary. Cultivation of fodder crops involved hiring of tractors and machinery as well as purchasing and distribution of fertilizers. The MTR interviewed one respondent who had received three beehives but had given them to another person because they did not have time to look after them because they were busy with another salaried job and running another business.

Finding 8: Considerable work has been carried out under Outcomes 1.2 and 1.3. This will need to be accelerated if it is to be completed before the close of the project.

73. Activities relating to mapping and other GIS aspects has accelerated in 2024 including mapping and distribution of pastureland in the target villages, creation of databases and data verification for beneficiaries in the Syunik region, collaboration with project experts to define mapping procedures for improved lands and pastures, verifying and aligning land improvement beneficiaries' data, mapping lands in Syunik region using Maparmenia, and consulting with project coordinators and experts on technical and mapping procedures and mapping and data verification tasks with Maparmenia for Chkalovka and Karinji villages in the Lori region, and coordinating with experts on methodologies for mapping restored lands and pastures.

74. However, this will need to be accelerated with considerable technical training if it is to contribute to a decision support system by the end of the project.

Finding 9: There is unconvincing progress with the value chains. While the 2024 Project Implementation Report (PIR) reports that work has commenced on the value chains there is contradictory evidence, and the project still plans to engage a technical Consultant to produce these value chains. Women are likely to be the greatest beneficiaries of the value chain activities.

75. The MTR team did not meet a sufficiently large enough number of women to develop a full understanding of the impact of the project activities targeted at women beneficiaries neither is there sufficient information to understand the effectiveness of value chains in improving the socio-economic status of women. Without this information it is hard to understand what value chains will be sustainable and how these will specifically support women. However, the main project activities women were involved in, such as beekeeping and vegetable growing might be better supported by a bottom up capacity building approach rather than a detailed value chain study because women are already involved in these activities and at least in the case of beekeeping, there appears to be an existing well-formed value chain with good understanding

¹⁹ The MTR notes that these communities appear to be experienced in receiving project benefits for their development.

of the technical aspects, economics, processing and marketing. The critical limiting factor is the cost of hives and obtaining new colonies²⁰.

Finding 10: There is low or absent SLM or LDN recognition at the community level who appear to regard the objective of the project as a rural development goal.

76. The MTR considers that this is the result to a low level of engagement with community stakeholders prior to commencing with the SLM and value chain activities and weak consensus building or collective recognition of land degradation as an issue and SLM as a solution.

77. The EPIU appears to recognise this and has appointed an Awareness Specialist to the team on 01/04/2025. This important because there was a pervasive belief amongst most of the beneficiaries that a the solution to their current economic and agricultural challenges can be resolved by a return to the agricultural practices of the former Soviet Union without the understanding that this would not be possible in a market economy, the results of LD cannot be economically or societally discounted and climate change should be factored into their livelihoods planning.

4.2.1 Progress towards outcomes

Table 6 GEF-7 Core indicators

Core Indicator 3	Area of land restored			(Hectares)
	PIF stage	Endorsement	MTR	TE
	11,300	11,300	Not given	N/A
Core Indicator 4	Area of landscapes under improved practices (hectares; excluding protected areas)			(Hectares)
	PIF stage	Endorsement	MTR	TE
	166,000	166,000	Not given	N/A
Core Indicator 6	Greenhouse gas emission mitigated			(Metric tons of CO₂e)
	PIF stage	Endorsement	MTR	TE
Expected CO ₂ e (direct)	19,000,000 tCO ₂ e	32,274,507 tCO ₂ e	Not given	N/A
Core Indicator 11	Number of direct beneficiaries disaggregated by gender as co-benefit of GEF investment			(Number)
	PIF stage	Endorsement	MTR	TE
Female	750	1,250	Not given	N/a
Male	1,750	1,250	Not given	N/A
Total	2,500	2,500	Not given	N/A

²⁰ Some beneficiaries did state that they were impressed with the colonies provided by the project because they had superior honey production.

Table 6 Outcomes progress towards results

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
Objective: To support the national efforts to implement the LDN targets of Armenia through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes					
Objective Rating					
Objective indicator:	None	None	None	None	None given
Indicator 1: New cross- sectoral policies/laws	LDN principles are not part of the SLM enabling environment in Armenia	One cross- sectoral policy on LDN developed	Two cross- sectoral policies/One law integrating LDN principles	The Policy and Land Tenure Expert summarized the study results, creating a basis for developing cross-sectoral policies for achieving LDN through integrated landscape management with a focus on pastures. Based on the analysis of policy gaps, work is being done to strengthen and develop the Land Code. Policy and Land Tenure Experts, in combination with other experts, are developing gender-balanced horizontal and vertical intersectoral coordination mechanisms at national and sub-national levels. State management of the land fund in the Republic of Armenia and its programming as a function of public administration, Land monitoring and legal acts regulating related legal relations, Cadastral land driving details, Types, grounds, and procedures of land construction in the Republic of Armenia. Stakeholder meetings and discussions with residents of target communities	Moderately Satisfactory – the mid-term target of one policy developed has not been achieved yet. The stakeholder consultation process, according to KIs, has been very time-consuming. Work has been carried out on a policy review and gap analysis and gender-responsive legislation is ongoing. The MTR notes that these targets should refer to “draft” policies or Laws to reflect that normal parliamentary process are outside the project’s sphere of influence. However, there are still concerns as to whether these can be completed before the close of the project. (see Annex 6 for a detailed analysis of outputs) The resource mobilization plan (Output 2.1.3 which arguably belong under this Outcome of should have a financial mobilization indicator here) received considerable criticism when it was presented to stakeholders (see Annex 6).

²¹ One PPR was available marked 1st PPR 2023, a second file marked 2nd PPR was in fact a the 2024 PIR. No other PPRs were available for 2025

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
					Drafts and process advancements supports higher confidence in outcome achievement.
Indicator 2: Intersectoral coordination mechanisms for LDN			Functioning intersectoral coordination mechanisms for LDN (horizontal and vertical)	Outputs 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 of Outcome 1.3 have been merged into a consolidated effort to implement the project titled "Development and Implementation of a National Capacity Building Program on Land Degradation Neutralization for Key Decision Makers and Practitioners." The technical task for this initiative is currently being finalized, with 10% completion.	Moderately Unsatisfactory No mid-term target given but insufficient evidence at the MTR that the indicator is on track. A working paper is being prepared but there is weak evidence of an effective UNCCD/LDN coordination mechanism. It is reasonable to state that creating these coordination structures at a national and sub-national level may not be possible within the remaining timeframe.
Indicator 3: LDN mapping that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation	There is no comprehensive LD mapping available that builds on a consensus map and understanding of drivers.	LD trends and drivers mapped using a gender lens; LDN local baseline established and mapped	LD trends and drivers mapped using a gender lens; LDN local baseline established and mapped	<u>No progress given</u>	Moderately Satisfactory. The LADA assessments have been carried out but the analysis of data to develop important aspects such as cost assessments and gender variations is yet to be completed. Given that baselines have been established this may be completed by the close of the project.
Indicator 4: LDN targets set in Lori and Syunik	LDN targets are only set at national level		LDN targets established in target communities in Lori and Syunik	<u>No progress given</u>	Moderately Unsatisfactory. As above – targets still need to be determined and it is not clear if there is sufficient data and stakeholder participation to determine a consensus on targets.
Indicator 5: Number of people, including women, with	There is limited understanding of the LDN concept and its implementation	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of		Moderately Satisfactory – indicator appears to be on track, however, the MTR does not have figures or gender disaggregated training numbers.

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
enhanced capacity in LDN implementation	and no DSS for LDN in place	which 50% are women	which 50% are women)		Stakeholder feedback indicates that training materials are developed. There is a gender module developed and the training materials will be used during the remaining period of the project. The development of the LDN National Capacity Building Programme has started but appears to be facing challenges with stakeholder coordination
Indicator 6: DSS for LDN			DSS for LDN in place		Moderately Unsatisfactory Not on track 2025 PPR states - <i>The TOR is ready</i> <i>The work has not yet started and according to the schedule, the works will start in the second half of the year.</i> <i>Not applicable.</i> This is a substantive deliverable in terms of reporting to the UNCCD and target setting (e.g. land cover, productivity and SOC). There appears to be considerable confusion regarding a DSS and some of the work relating to this (e.g. the UNCCD targets – cover, productivity and SOC) is covered under Output 3.1.3. The logical hierarchy of the project's SRF is questionable.
Indicator 7: Number of ha of land with	A baseline FAO/GCF project is supporting forestry	Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans for the two target	4,000 ha of degraded grasslands restored	1.Two Sustainable Land Management (SLM) plans were developed for the Sisian community in the Syunik region and the Tumanyan community in Lori region, following the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) response hierarchy.	Moderately Satisfactory The development of Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
restored grasslands	investments in the two target districts, but SLM and restoration using an integrated landscape approach is not practiced in the two target districts Status of degradation was assessed using rapid LADA during the PPG	districts with identification of restoration and SLM activities in different land-use classes for achieving LDN finalised Now reads²²: LD trends and drivers mapped using a gender lens; LDN local baseline established and mapped		2. Twelve drafts of pasture management and livestock development plans, along with two draft Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans, were discussed with community leaders, administrative officers, and beneficiaries. Based on recommendations, these drafts are currently being revised. An expert on gender issues is working to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches into the plans. 3. To improve degraded arable land and establish a stable feed base, sainfoin, alfalfa, spring barley oats and corn was sown: - 49 hectares of degraded arable land were improved in the Tumanyan community. - 251 hectares of degraded arable land were improved in the Sisian community. 4. The work to improve pastures and meadows has been completed: - 170 hectares of degraded pastures and meadows were improved in the Tumanyan community. - 130 hectares of degraded pastures and meadows were improved in the Sisian community. - Improvement was achieved through the use of organic and mineral fertilizers, as well as by sowing seeds of grasses typical to the area. 5. A total of 34,000 seedlings of tomato, hot and sweet pepper, eggplant, lettuce, broccoli, and 2.0 kg of cucumber seeds were distributed to residents of Tumanyan and Sisian regions. 6. Orchards in process of establishment. The fence is built and planting took place in autumn 2024. In the end will be established 1.2 ha berries orchards 7. To develop value chains, 120 beehives along with all necessary tools were provided to the beneficiaries. 8. The technical task for implementing the "Development of three resource mobilization plans to scale up best practices, and presentation of comprehensive land management and pasture management plans to stakeholders" has been developed, along with the purchase application. Land Management (LM) and value chain experts have been hired and have commenced work. Visits were organized with SLM and value chain experts to communities included in the program. During these visits, experts	using participatory approaches has made significant progress MTR reports 601 ha: - 49 hectares of degraded arable land were improved in the Tumanyan community. - 251 hectares of degraded arable land were improved in the Sisian community. 4. The work to improve pastures and meadows has been completed: - 170 hectares of degraded pastures and meadows were improved in the Tumanyan community. - 130 hectares of degraded pastures and meadows were improved in the Sisian community - 1.2 ha berries orchards (see indicator 7 above). The MTR notes that the measures of improvement need to be more clearly defined, for instance LDN indicators – cover, productivity, SOC, or by other measures. The MTR can confirm the areas treated (presuming that there is not double counting in the figures provided), but it would be imprudent to state that these areas have been improved after just one year (for instance only one soil testing is available²³). Clearer measure of improvement

²² SRF from 2025 PPR²³ "Տեղեկակ 201-Լ.pdf" soil testing report conducted on January 11, 2024, Armenian National Agrarian University.

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
				presented clear schedules for data collection and implementation of work to community leaders (75% completion). It aims to provide a clearer structure and flow to the information presented, making it easier to understand the progress and activities of the project.	need to be developed and environmental risk assessments made on interventions such as ploughing and fertilizer applications vis a vis a range of downstream and future risks such as eutrophication or loss of diversity as well as economic sustainability. Furthermore, it is unclear, given the risks discussed previously, how these actions align with the broader landscape restoration objectives and whether they can truly be considered part of a transformative shift towards sustainable land management at the larger landscape scale.
Indicator 8: Number of ha of land with restored forest land	As above	As above	7,300 ha of forest lands restored within the State Forest Fund and established in abandoned lands		Not reported at MTR (see Table 3 above).
Indicator 9: Number of ha of land under SLM, including forest land, grasslands and croplands	As above	As above	166,000 ha under SLM practices in target regions (of which: 110,000 ha forests; 50,000 ha grasslands; 6,000 ha croplands)		Moderately Satisfactory (see indicator 7)
Indicator 10: Amount of carbon	As above	As above	32,274,507 tCO ₂ -eq sequestered		Not reported at MTR (see Table 3 above). Annex L of the Project

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
sequestered through restoration and SLM					Document provides a detailed methodology for the calculation.
Indicator 11: Number of beneficiaries (households in pilot districts)	As above	As above	2,500 beneficiaries (target households in Lori and Syunik districts)		Not reported at MTR (see Table 3 above). No discernible MTR target given and no gender disaggregation. There is considerable confusion in the reporting through the project's SRF which claims that 2,500 people were reached through a communications campaign, but the MTR has not seen evidence to support this.
Indicator 12: Number of value chains strengthened; number of VCs focused on women	Value addition to agricultural products from the two selected districts is limited, which negatively affects income generation and equity	None given (in Project document) Now reads: Draft at least on value chain for each target region	Two value chains (at least one focused on women) improved through LDN principles and SLCAs and LCSAs	1. "Population awareness activities have been implemented to acknowledge population and increase the level of knowledge regarding the program and the scheduled activities, 262 beneficiaries participated in awareness raising courses. 2. 491 beneficiaries participated in training of "Development and implementation of training programs on value chain and sustainable land management for farmers, women's groups and youth in the administrative units included in the project of Tumanyan and Sisian communities". Information leaflets, booklets were developed, courses were held in all settlements. All participants were provided with certificates of participation. As a part of the course, three university curricula were developed for the National Agrarian University of Armenia, in with relevant LDN topics were introduced. In Syunik and Lori regions, the value chain expert provided detailed information about value chains to the leaders of the settlements and the staff members of the local self-government bodies. The value chains that are most acceptable for the settlements were discussed. (80 %)	Moderately Unsatisfactory This work appears to be in progress but the MTR did not find sufficient evidence that the project is going to develop credible and sustainable value chains. Issues such as the number of beehives (3 beehives per beneficiary are insufficient to stimulate viable enterprises), neither is there evidence of the sort of structural support to a value chains necessary to make a sustainable impact. Stakeholder feedback indicated that while the development of TORs for the life cycle assessments (SLCAs and LCSAs) and business plans was planned, the actual implementation faced several setbacks. These appeared to be related to the procurement of technical services. The project team spoke about value chain

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
					assessments and business plans which had been developed earlier there was no evidence of these presented to the MTR.
Indicator 13: Number of value-chain actors with enhanced capacity in value-chain management	As above	None given	350 value-chain actors with strengthened capacity (disaggregated by gender and youth)		Moderately Unsatisfactory 3 beehives per beneficiary, 4 beneficiaries per community @ 24 beneficiaries, assuming all are women. Indicator is not on track.
Indicator 14: M&E system in place for monitoring of project progress and GEBs	No system in place Added: No monitoring system for LDN exist	Implementation of the project based on adaptive results-based management	Project delivers expected results and GEBs and co-benefits established Functioning LDN reporting to the UNCCD	A technical task and purchase request titled "Establishment and integration of a monitoring system of land degradation neutralization indicators (land cover, soil productivity, and soil organic carbon) into national land use monitoring systems" were developed combining Output 1.2.2 and Output 1.2.3, as well as Output 3.1.3 of Outcome 3.1 (10 %)	Moderately Satisfactory There would appears to be some confusion regarding this indicator. This indicator should apply to the project monitoring and the GEBs/Core Indicators (see Table 3). The UNCCD LDN indicators (land cover, productivity and SOC) should be monitored through the DSS (indicator 6 activities). The SLM practices have been rolled out in the target areas, management plans exist but adoption levels are unclear from KI feedback. 14 community-level SLM management plans have been produced and SLM Expert's reports substantiate rollout. The project has also produced outreach materials such as posters, brochures, etc. Confusion over M&E possibly, is in part due to the reporting but also due to the confused logical hierarchy (activities, outputs,

Objective/ Outcome indicator	Baseline	MTR target	End of project target	MTR assessment (from June 2023, 2024 PIR and the July – December PPR ²¹ , KI feedback and MTR observations	MTR rating
					outcomes, objective) in the SRF and the confusing TOC.
Indicator 15: Direct and indirect beneficiaries with improved knowledge and increased awareness on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles	0	5 knowledge products and training/awarene ss raising materials on SLM and LDN	10 knowledge products and training/awarene ss raising materials on SLM and LDN public awareness raising campaign reaches 2,500 people	The communication strategy and action plan were presented to the residents of target communities and discussed with them. A list of 10 informational events and media outreach activities has been compiled by the project's communication expert. Informative material on the work carried out under the project has been developed for distribution in the mass media. Communication expert the works according to the requirements of the technical task A technical task for the implementation of knowledge raising and dissemination activities is being developed. (30 %)	Moderately Unsatisfactory The KI feedback showed a very low awareness of SLM and LDN, as mentioned throughout this report, there was a focus of interest in conventional rural development and increasing productivity, but this was not linked to sustainability or resilience (see Annex14) for a more detailed analysis of the outputs under this Outcome).

4.2.2 Remaining barriers to achieving results

78. Based on the findings of the MTR the following four barriers are identified:

- iv. **Structural weaknesses in the OPIM arrangement prevent the project from utilising FAO's technical resources:** FAO has considerable experience in implementing LDN projects and in particular developing DSSs as well as access to technical expertise and experience in implementing complex LDN and SLM interventions and represents an important pool of technical capacity. However, due to the way that the project is set up it seems to be unable to utilise this experience because of the financial arrangements reducing the comparative advantage of the FAO.
- v. **Unrealistic assessment of project results leading to confused monitoring and evaluation and unrealised project risks:** The project's monitoring and evaluation reporting is over-optimistic. The time remaining to achieve the project's results is very short. While the project has made considerable progress in the last year, in a large part due to the present PC and with a FAO M&E Specialist in place, assessments of progress are still over-optimistic. The project's SRF needs to be clearer in what the indicators are and how the targets are being met so that progress and performance is clearly articulated and understood (see section 4.5.3, 4.5.4, 4.5.4.1).
- vi. **Low awareness of LDN at the community level and weak linkages between LDN and rural development challenges:** The SLM activities, in the main, do not provide sufficient innovation and SLM benefits or may create environmental risks (for instance ploughing and fertilizer application). They may provide rural development benefits but even these are restricted and, in some cases, greater buy-in by the community could result in upscaling the impact (for instance the investment in a single berry farm could be distributed across a larger number of farmers through negotiations between project and local community). In the opinion of the MTR these issues will be picked up by the Terminal Evaluation.

4.3 Efficiency

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
C. Efficiency	
C1. Efficiency	MS

Finding 11: There have been significant delays encountered in the first part of the project.

- 79. KI feedback and a review of the Project Progress Reports (PPR) and PIRs indicate that effective coordination of the EPIU has been challenging. The EPIU has experienced three PCs. The most recent PC was appointed in March 2024 and the pace of progress has increased considerably. However, there project is significantly behind schedule (see finding 13 and 37) and an 18-month extension has already been approved (16/09/2022) giving an end date of July 2026²⁴.
- 80. The project started in February 2022. The MTR is taking place in April/May 2025 and with the revised (extended end date of July 2026), it has only thirteen months remaining.
- 81. Of the 17 SRF indicators the MTR rates 2 unsatisfactory, 8 moderately unsatisfactory, 4 satisfactory and 3 are un-reported on at the MTR. Of the 17 outputs, 12 were moderately unsatisfactory, 2 moderately satisfactory and 2 were satisfactory (one was not applicable at the MTR).

²⁴ Operational Partnership Agreement, Amendment 1, 10/02/2025. Article XVI of the Operational Partnership Agreement (16/09/2022) provides for a no-cost extension without specifying the length of any such extension. The Project Document does not provide any detail of duration of any extension nor a requirement to inform the GEF.

Finding 12: The project design is complex and arguably better suited to a direct implementation modality rather than an Operational Partner Implementation Modality (OPIM)²⁵ which has reduced the efficiency of implementation.

82. The project design is complex and multi-faceted including considerable technical assistance procurement²⁶ and some expertise and experience which would require international procurement. The project complies with the GEF policies on project implementation²⁷. However, the complexities of the design are arguably better suited to a direct GEF Agency implementation. This appears to have contributed to the low efficiency through procurement challenges especially related to international technical assistance, monitoring, and the evaluation and adaptive management and limiting the options for implementing certain outputs and outcomes using FAO's tried and tested systems. For instance, FAO has developed a Farmer Field Schools (FFS) approach²⁸ which are an effective means of delivering capacity building, technical services and material support to farmers at scale. They have been utilized in other FAO-GEF LDN projects regionally and with good effect.

83. This does not imply lesser or greater capacities and capabilities in either project partner, rather it reflects the challenges of complex GEF LDN projects, the different administrative, M&E and reporting protocols and procedures, procurement systems, experiences and access to very high-level technical assistance. This appears to be recognised in the GEF policy and the Project Document which includes the Note for Formulator: *"In OPIM projects, procurement activities may be carried out by FAO, the OP or a mix of the two, depending on the results of the capacity assessment negotiations between FAO and the OP, and the approval of the procurement outsourcing by the Deputy Director General of Operations (DDG-O)"*²⁹.

Finding 13: The main project components (activities, outputs and deliverables) are on the whole either not fully implemented to the expected mid-term levels or are works in progress.

84. The project is significantly behind where it should be at the mid-point³⁰ and will need to dramatically increase the rate of delivery (2022 \$12,064, 2023 \$128,901, 2024 \$519,570 or 33% budget execution) if it is to complete sufficient of the activities by the close of the project.

Finding 14: The project has a large EPIU³¹ - 9 positions (4 full time, 6 part time and 1 service contract)³². Some of the project outcomes may have been more effectively and efficiently achieved through contracting service providers.

85. Some of the outcomes, outputs and activities might have been more efficiently bundled into service contracts during the PPG and implemented by the non-state sector (Contractors or non-governmental organisations). These would have included the DSS³³, the SLM activities (including awareness) and the value chains studies and implementation. This may have resulted in a more organic or bottom-up approach by the project communities.

²⁵ According to FAO feedback.

²⁶ According to the Project Budget Consultants totalled \$529,100 – including \$121,000 international and \$408,100 national.

²⁷ https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/2025-05/EN_GEF_C.69.12_Policy%20Amendments%20to%20Streamline%20the%20GEF%20Project%20Cycle-May%202025.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.fao.org/agriculture/ippm/programme/ffs-approach/en/>

²⁹ Project Document, p. 92

³⁰ In fact, the project is past the mid-point

³¹ During the mission, the MTR team met with several positions from the EPIU and the project team and triangulated this with Annex 2 (list of meetings) to form its conclusions about staffing. In addition, on 24 February 2025 the project sent the MTR team the Excel file "WP and budget 2025–2026," which included a list of Detailed National Consultants (Project Coordinator, Project Assistant, Community Facilitators, Policy & Land Tenure Expert, SLM Expert, VC Development Expert, Gender Expert, Communication Expert). This information allowed the team to understand that there are multiple budgeted positions within the EPIU setup; however, the MTR team does not have access to processed payment documentation (contracts, payroll, receipts, etc.) to verify exactly who was paid or to what extent. Only the audit or an official confirmation from EPIU can establish that with certainty. The MTR report therefore reflects its findings based on the evidence made available at the time of review.

³² The budget for Technical Assistance is \$529,100

³³ This was the case in 2024.

Finding 15: There is a significant contrast between the project's presence within the communities in Syunik and Lori.

86. While there are significant differences between the circumstances of the two project areas. Lori communities appeared to be better organized and facilitated being more aware of the project with (given the very small sample of stakeholders that the MTR met with), a better representation of women stakeholders. Syunik, on the other hand was less well-organized and facilitated.

Finding 16: The efficiency of the project has increased considerably since 2023 and the appointment of current PC.

87. There is a consensus amongst stakeholders at all levels in the project expressed through KI feedback that the efficiency and delivery of project activities has significantly improved since 2023.

Finding 17: There is an unrealistic understanding of the status of the project. While the efficiency and effectiveness of the project has improved dramatically since early 2024 there are still considerable challenges to achieving the expected results.

88. Given the current status of the project (see finding 11) there is a degree of complacency amongst higher level stakeholders, possibly based upon the last years improved delivery, that the project is now doing well. KIs at this level repeatedly stated that the project was "now doing well" and that "things had improved". While both of these statements are correct, albeit qualified, this does not equate to achieving the outcomes (see Table 6 and Annex 6 – outcomes and outputs coloured red in the "traffic lights" are unlikely to be achieved by the close of the project).

4.4 Sustainability

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
D. Sustainability of Project Outcomes	
D1. Overall likelihood of or risks to sustainability	ML
D1.1 Financial risks	MU
D1.2 Socio-political risks	ML
D1.3 Institutional and governance risks	MU
D1.4 Environmental risks	Not assessed
D2 Catalyst and replication	Not assessed

4.4.1 Financial

Finding 18: It is too early to make definitive statements regarding the financial sustainability with most outputs and activities still in progress (e.g. GIS and DSS) and with an incomplete agricultural cycle as well as the confusing situation surrounding the value chains. However, the early signs indicate that there are significant risks to the financial sustainability of the project outputs and outcomes.

89. As stated above, the component 1 activities are still uncompleted, but there is insufficient evidence of the sort of institutional embedding and policy and regulatory framework support to indicate that establishing a monitoring system for LDN indicators, the harmonization and digitization of land cover data, along with the integration of land productivity monitoring using remote sensing (NDVI) and national soil fertility data, which will be an ongoing and iterative process post project, will continue to be financed post project. While data on land cover is being collected, the overall monitoring system and an operation LDN monitoring system (DSS) is not a static feature and will need to be upscaled nationally and temporally. It is not clear whether the National Resource Mobilization Plan covers this, but the MTR considers this to be improbable.

90. Stakeholder feedback regarding the SLM interventions, almost unanimously, indicated that fertilizer and ploughing would be unlikely to continue without project support³⁴. Vegetable growing and beekeeping are already well-established, and these are likely to be sustainable, but the project's interventions will have had a minimal impact on this. In the absence of tangible evidence of the work on value chains there is little to support a case for financial sustainability.
91. The National Resource Mobilization Plan was poorly received by technical and sector stakeholders. Arguably this would be a significant indicator of financial sustainability. However, in the event it was quite strongly criticized and still a work in progress.

4.4.2 Socio-political

Finding 19: While the project objectives appear to be relevant with the policy framework (see finding 1) and would presumably have strong socio-political support, this is not borne out from stakeholder and KI feedback (see finding 2). Interest in rural communities and agriculture appears to be focused on increasing production rather than developing socio-ecological resilience.

92. Stakeholder feedback indicated that the project has made efforts to address policy gaps and integrate LDN principles into the legal and policy frameworks. However, despite some positive steps, the pace of progress has been slower than expected. The existing policy was reviewed, and gaps in the integration of LDN were identified. Furthermore, work is ongoing to prepare gender-responsive legislation, which is an important aspect of the project. Stakeholder interviews conducted during the MTR revealed that while the drafting of the new legislation is in progress, it has taken longer than anticipated due to additional discussions with stakeholders. The lack of visible evidence of significant progress on the ground raises concerns regarding the socio-political sustainability. As mentioned in finding 2, there is a mismatch between the sorts of approaches needed to invest in LDN and the stated aims of, for instance the MoEc, which are largely directed towards infrastructure and intensification of production which might militate against LDN and environmental resilience.

Finding 20: There is a pervasive understanding that project activities may be supported by future projects which militates against financial sustainability.

93. Stakeholder feedback both at high level and the community indicated an expectation of future project support. In one instance a high-level KI stated *"when we implement an activity at a project site, we ensure that the previous project site is included in any future project"*.

4.4.3 Institutional & governance

Finding 21: The project has not had sufficient time to build the sort of collective understanding of SLM and LDN to address the drivers of land degradation, and the effect of climate change as an accelerator, as a collective adaptive challenge. This is likely to be a combination of a project design flaw (three years) and the delays in starting effective project implementation.

94. Stakeholder feedback suggested that there is a retained memory of previous agricultural systems under a command-and-control economy which shapes the expectations of farmers and communities, and to some extent institutional stakeholders, in the delivery of agricultural services. This view was pervasive amongst stakeholders and to some extent institutional KIs. In the interviews this manifested as an expectation of continued dependency on support to increase production and infrastructure, very often through conventional measures and technical solutions which might not necessarily contribute towards SLM *per se*. Arguably this over-reliance on an existing technical solution, rather than an adaptive solution, may be counter to the intermediate stage described in the project's TOC (see figure 3) which refers to a behavioural change.

³⁴ As noted earlier, the communities appeared to have experience of interacting with projects and this may have been a "play" for further project support.

95. A technical challenge is a challenge that can be addressed with existing expertise, protocols, and operations. Implementing solutions to technical challenges often falls to someone with the authority to address them. An adaptive challenge is when stakeholders encounter situations for which solutions lie outside the current way of operation, and possibly, thinking. Applying existing procedures and understanding does not necessarily provide the solution needed and stakeholders must be involved in developing and implementing solutions. Adaptive solutions lie not in the application of expertise, but rather from a process of learning and adapting. Adaptive challenges require time for adaptive solutions to have an effect and stakeholders cannot expect to react too quickly because of the discomfort that comes with not knowing³⁵ and solving non-rules-based problems.

4.4.4 Environmental

Finding 22: Given that the late start of field activities it is not possible for the MTR to provide a concrete assessment of environmental sustainability without an environmental risk assessment on treatments such as ploughing and fertilizer applications.

96. The MTR is unable to assess the environmental sustainability at this stage.

4.4.5 Risks to sustainability

Finding 23: Based on sections 4.4.1 – 4.4.4 there are considerable risks to the sustainability of the project outputs and outcomes. Further, it is likely that a number of the SRF targets may not be completed by the close of the project (see 6 and Annex 6).

97. Following the MTR the project will need to move quickly to prepare a Management Response addressing the findings and recommendations of the review. Ordinarily, this can take six weeks due to the need to consult stakeholders and the PSC. Following this the project will need to prepare for the TE. Given the time remaining it would be prudent to focus on ensuring that some of the key aspects of components 1 and 2 are completed before July 2026 and to avoid starting any activities which cannot be completed to a high quality in the remaining time available. These might include component 1 activities focusing on the enabling environment.

98. Project expedience, that is, the project focusing on completing all the outputs may affect the quality and sustainability of the work in progress or already underway. An example of this might be the work still to be done on the value chain analysis.

99. The MTR recognises that there has been considerable progress during 2024 and largely attributes this to the hard work of the PC and EPIU. This is commendable effort and progress; however, this does not necessarily translate into sustainable outcomes.

4.4.6 Replication and catalytic effects

Finding 24: Due to the incompleteness of the activities, outputs and outcomes and the time remaining for the project's completion the MTR is unable to comment on any replication and catalytic effects (see section 4.2, Table 6 and Annex 6).

4.5 Factors effecting performance

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
E. Factors affecting performance	
E1. Project design and readiness	MU
E2. Quality of project implementation	MS
E2.1 Quality of project implementation by FAO (BH, LTO, PTF, etc.)	MS
E2.2 Project oversight (PSC)	MS

³⁵ See: Heifetz, Ronald A.; *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994)

E3. Quality of project execution	MS
E3.1 Project execution and management (PMU, partner performance, administration, staffing, etc.)	MS
E4. Financial management and co-financing	MS
E5. Project partnership and stakeholder engagement	MU
E6. Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products	MU
E7. Overall quality of M&E	MS
E7.1 M&E design	MU
E7.2 M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources)	MS
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	MU

4.5.1 Project design & readiness

Finding 25: The Project Document analysis is confusing and has a number of inherent weaknesses which may reduce the effectiveness of the interventions.

100. The Project Document does not provide a convincing analysis of the root causes of LD for instance the four assumptions or drivers identified are arguably things the project was expected to achieve. The identified drivers of land degradation in the Project Document: deforestation, the collapse of old grazing regimes and, land fragmentation and land tenure, all three of which are quite likely to be factors in causing land degradation. But these three drivers are themselves complex and resulting from multiple and unpredictable cause and effect relationships and in the case of "the collapse of old grazing regimes" subject to a larger number of assumptions and challenges regarding their suitability and sustainability.

101. Without a clear analysis the proposed project intervention logic lacks strategic clarity (see section 3). Furthermore, certain sections, such as those relating to value chains (Outcome 2.2. Key land-based value-chains strengthened and made more resilient and equitable, Output 2.2.1. Life Cycle Assessment of the land-based value chains, and 2.2.2. Training programs on value-chains management (e.g. marketing, processing, and certification) for local communities [sic] extension services, farmers, women groups, and youth³⁶) were intended to be implemented by the Expert who wrote them and targets such as: "*Training targeting women and youth (1,750 people)*³⁷" did not transfer across to the project's SRF, for example.

Finding 26: This was the first OPIM project carried out in Armenia. The project was designed in a way that would better suit direct implemented by FAO, according to KI feedback and would have benefitted from a simpler design.

102. According to KI feedback this has also contributed to the challenges that the project has faced (see findings 11 and 12). In the experience of the MTR team there is a significant difference in the capacities of national implementation and GEF Agency implementation in terms of meeting the GEF expectations. This is not to say that one is better than the other, but to state the fact that government agencies and GEF Agencies *per se*, hold different sets of skills and access to different resources when it comes to implementing GEF projects which at their very heart, are expected to bring about global change according to an agreed set of objectives. According to GEF guidelines procurement activities may be carried out by FAO, the OP or a mix of the two depending on the capacity assessment of the OPIM partner. However, in the experience of the MTR team, a capacity assessment might not identify issues which might militate against effective national implementation such as the access to a small pool of specific expertise, familiarity with existing approaches and tools, as well as differing institutional risk tolerances.

³⁶ Project Document, pp. 33 – 35.

³⁷ Project Document, p. 35.

Finding 27: The project was designed for a three-year implementation which is an overly optimistic expectation given the proposed interventions, the number of outcomes (7) and outputs (18) and the complexity and adaptive nature (see finding 18) of the intervention.

103. The three-year project duration ignores the challenges of establishing a PIU, promoting stakeholder coordination and buy-in, harmonizing accounting, M&E and reporting systems (across government, FAO and GEF). Neither does the three-year timeframe allow for basic implementation challenges such as the complex and time-consuming process of policy formulation, stakeholder engagement and mobilization, procurement challenges³⁸ and agricultural cycles and stochastic events which may disrupt these cycles (see finding 3). Three years do not allow for the inevitable externalities (for instance the loss of pastures in border areas, changes in government, institutional restructuring, turnover of key staff, etc.) which may affect the dynamics within a project.

104. Furthermore, three years would require an annual average expenditure of US\$ 727,035, of which US\$ 529,100 would be technical assistance. This would place a heavy administrative burden on any project management, much more so on one starting from fresh.

Finding 28: The Project Document risk assessment (Project Document pp. 48 – 50) was weak and does not appear to have been adequately addressed during the inception phase and subsequent PIR.

105. A number of risks could have been included or better articulated and the risk mitigation built into the project's architecture. For instance, the risk of "*weak cooperation between key institutional stakeholders (i.e. Environment and Agriculture sectors)*" was considered to be a moderate impact on the project with a low likelihood of occurring and the risk was mitigation was: "*This risk will be mitigated under Component 1 of the project that will strengthen the intersectoral coordination mechanism to enhance cooperation on LDN*". The mitigation ignored the fact that cooperation between the sectors needed to be established first in order to mitigate the risk. Arguably, the risk could undermine the mitigation measures. The risk is further compounded by a poor assessment of both the impact, which would be high (moderate in the Project Document) and the likelihood which was also high (low in the Project Document). In a complex project such as this, plus the unrealistic short timeframe, plus the likelihood in facing challenges establishing an effective PIU in order to drive collaboration; these risks were compound, complex and not properly articulated.

Finding 29: The project's TOC (figure 3) is confusing and un-necessarily complicated making it hard to follow the logic of any causal pathways.

106. In the experience of the MTR, the TOC has little utility at the project management level. However, it is the FAO-GEF's chosen means of articulating the project strategy. At the country project management level there is greater reliance on the SRF outcomes and outputs. While there is admittedly a risk that this can lead to a focus on products (outputs and deliverables) and less attention on the process of change towards an agreed objective, when a TOC as complicated as the one in the Project Document is provided it is of little utility in understanding the purpose and pathways of the project. The MTR has provided a simplified TOC (Annex 11). It is reasonable to state that if the logical hierarchy (activities, outputs, outcomes, objective) of the project's SRF and the causal pathways and stages of the TOC are not immediately apparent, then there is a weakness in the project design which will negatively impact the projects effectiveness, efficiency and progress towards results.

4.5.2 Quality of project execution & management effectiveness

Finding 30: The project has experienced procurement challenges especially in engaging technical assistance.

³⁸ The procurement process for the international value chain expert was announced four times according to KI feedback.

107. The project now appears to have effective technical assistance deployed for component 1, especially the GIS/DSS work. However, issues were raised by KIs stating that sourcing and procurement of adequate technical assistance had delayed work in these areas (see finding 14). Critical aspects of the project's implementation strategy still appear to be lacking, for instance the situation regarding the value chains in component 2 are ambiguous (see finding 9, section 4.2, Table 6 and Annex 6) and the EPIU only appointed an Awareness Specialist to the team on 01/04/2025.

Finding 31: There have been three PCs during the life of the project which has significantly impacted the progress. The third PC was appointed in March 2024 and has proven to be very effective significantly increasing the rate of delivery.

108. The MTR recognises that the current PC has made significant efforts to advance the rate of delivery. However, the project still remains far behind where it might have been expected to be by this stage, according to the Project Document.

Finding 32: There have been significant delays in establishing the project which have affected the project's performance.

109. The project started approximately four months (see table 4) after the expected start date. It took approximately seven months to sign the Operational Partner Agreement (OPA). The Inception Workshop was held approximately eight months after the start date, and it took a further eleven months to obtain the exemption from value added taxes (VAT)³⁹.

4.5.2.1 Management arrangements

Finding 33: The project has a large Project Implementation Unit and technical assistance component including 9 positions (4 full time, 6 part time and 1 service contract).

110. According to the MR TOR, PIR and KI feedback, the project is managed through the Environmental Project Implementation Unit (EPIU). This is a separate entity within the MOE. The National Project Director (NPD) nominated by the Ministry of Environment is responsible for coordinating the activities with all the national bodies related to the different project components, as well as with the project partners. The NPD also supervises and guides the PC (on the government policies and priorities).

111. The NPD chairs the Project Steering Committee (PSC) which is the main governing body of the project. The PSC approves Annual Work Plans and Budgets on a yearly basis and provides strategic guidance to the Project Management Team and to all executing partners. The PSC is comprised of representatives from MoE, MoEc, MoTAI and local authorities of the Lori and Syunik marzes. The Project coordinator is the Secretary to the PSC.

112. The EPIU is co-funded by the GEF and established within the Ministry of Environment. The main functions of the EPIU, following the guidance of the Project Steering Committee, are to ensure overall efficient management, coordination, implementation and monitoring of the project through the implementation of the annual work plans and budgets (AWP/Bs). The EPIU composes of a PC, Project Assistant and part-time national experts on policy and land tenure, SLM, value-chain development, gender analysis, and communication. Two community facilitators are based in Lori and Syunik, respectively (see figure 2).

113. The Project coordinator oversees daily implementation, management, administration and technical supervision of the project, on behalf of the Operational Partner (OP) and within the framework delineated by the PSC⁴⁰.

4.5.2.2 Work planning

Finding 34: Annual Work Plans and Budgets (AWP/B) are preprepared by the EPIU and agreed by the PSC.

³⁹ See Project Document, p. 94: "Exemption from the payment of any sales or other tax on local purchases of equipment, materials and supplies for use in connection with the project".

⁴⁰ Source: MTR TOR.

114. The MTR does not have sufficient information to compare forecast and actual expenditure. However, budget execution in the first and second year was very low (2022 \$12,064, 2023 \$128,901). Expenditure has increased in 2024 (\$519,570) and at 31/12/2024 there was 33% budget delivery. The Workplan and Budget 2025 – 2026 shows a forecast of \$1,150,618 for 2025 and \$185,224 to June 2026. Based on the historic data this is very ambitious.

4.5.2.3 Adaptive management

Finding 35: The slow start up and delays in addressing implementation and execution challenges does not indicate that the project is sufficiently adaptive in its management.

115. A review of the PIRs (2023, 2024) and PSC minutes of Meetings (2023, 2024) do not reflect the urgency and adaptive decision-making which might be expected in a project that was under performing. While the project does appear to have become more adaptive under the current PC and this is recognized by the MTR, the project is not addressing substantive challenges quickly enough. There are some indications of adaptive management, for instance engaging a service provider for the component 1 GIS/DSS activities, there are other instances, such as engaging an Awareness Specialist on the EPIU which only took place in April 2025 and the MTR would argue that raising awareness of LD and climate change at all levels was critical to build an early groundswell of support and understanding.

116. Similarly, the value chain activities do not appear to have a coherent strategy to address the issues. The project document presented a somewhat confusing account in the Project Document (see finding 24). An adaptive management response would be to clarify the project's position on value chains and put in place a coherent plan to address these design weaknesses. The MTR cannot find evidence of this happening and the situation remains ambiguous.

Finding 36: Poor communication between FAO and the PSC and EPIU on the challenges facing the project and a belief that the Project Document must be rigidly adhered to militate against adaptive management.

117. This is the first nationally implemented FAO-GEF project in Armenia. The MTR received mixed messages regarding the communication between FAO and the OPIM. There was a general consensus that communication has improved, and this may be attributed to the appointment of the current PC. However, the MTR reflects that the FAO Manager was only appointed in September 2023 which might reflect a misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of GEF Agency and OPIM in a nationally implemented project, there is no FAO representation on the PSC and according to FAO feedback, the GEF Agency fee does not reflect the degree of support and assistance that these complex projects require⁴¹. \$58,000 was provided in the Project Document M&E framework⁴² as noted earlier in this report, a FAO M&E Specialist was only appointed in September 2023. This should improve coordination, however, as expressed in this report (sections 4.2.2, 4.3), the 2025 – 2026 Workplan and Budget are very ambitious.

118. The MTR notes that several critical points in the project cycle which provide an opportunity for adaptive management have been missed. These were:

- i. During the PPG – there could have been a critical review of the PIF and the scope and strategy could have been scaled down in recognition that this would be a nationally implemented project and therefore not directly under the technical and procurement resources of the GEF Agency with considerable experience in implementing GEF projects. It could also have recognized the unrealistic timeframe, weak risk analysis and

⁴¹ Based on experience from other FAO and other GEF Agency project evaluations the MTR team broadly agree that there is a misconception regarding the magnitude of effort required by a GEF Agency to adequately oversee these complex and unpredictable projects and that the amount of work involved by the GEF Agency is not reflected in the Agency Fee.

⁴² Project Document, Table 12, p. 59

confusing TOC. In short, the project could have been simplified. However, the MTR cannot identify any significant adaptive changes between PIF and PPG.

- ii. During the inception phase – the inception phase and Inception Report are a critical point in the project cycle when changes can be made to a project's design. This does not mean abandoning the outcomes and objectives, but it does allow a real time assessment of changes in circumstances a deeper analysis of the many assumptions relating to the how the system is working and adaptive change in strategy wherever necessary. The Inception Report in this instance largely re-states the Project Document strategy and there is little by way of critical analysis resulting in the Project Document strategy moving forwards unchallenged.
- iii. The MTR – the MTR is the final opportunity to make adaptive changes to a project strategy in order to ensure that it achieves its objective and targets. In this instance, the MTR is taking place just over a year before the project ends having already had an extension granted (i.e. more than halfway through the project implementation cycle). A more adaptive approach might have recognized that there were issues with the project strategy and implementation and organized either an independent internal review or an early MTR to allow the project the greatest time to take remedial actions.

4.5.2.4 Financial management

Finding 37: There has been a budget revision without any deviation in budget categories to accommodate the project extension.

119. Financial management is through the BH Financial Assistant. All re-allocated funds remain within the original budget line. Budget execution. Budget execution (up to 31/12/2024) is \$658,374 (33%) of the total \$1,996,380 with a remaining \$1,338,006. Co-financing delivery has been low \$2,170,370 or 18% of the co-financing at the CEO approval (see Table 8)⁴³. The Workplan and Budget 2025 – 2026 shows a forecast of \$1,150,618 for 2025 and \$185,224 to June 2026.

Finding 38: According to the FAO Project Team an audit has already been carried out and another is planned after the MTR⁴⁴. No financial issues were raised with the MTR by KIs during the MTR.

The Project Document sets out the financial management responsibilities of FAO and the OP (Project Document, Annex Q, pp. 90 – 94 FAO and Annex R, pp. 94 – 95). According to Annex Q and the Operational Partner Agreement (pp. 21 – 22).

Table 7 Project budget by component in Project Document

Component	GEF funds	Co-financing	Total
Component 1: Strengthened enabling environment and capacity at national level for evidence-based implementation of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)	\$504,450	\$2,183,500	\$ 2,687,950
Component 2: Scaling up of resilient Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices and approaches to meet LDN targets in degraded landscapes in Armenia	\$1,345,150	\$8,183,000	\$ 9,528,150
Component 3: Monitoring, Evaluation and lessons learned	\$230,350	\$1,045,600	\$ 1,275,950
Project management	\$ 103,155	\$600,900	\$704,055
Total	\$2,183,105	\$12,013,000	\$ 14,196,105

⁴³ PIR June 2024

⁴⁴ The MTR has not seen the Audit Report.

Table 8 Co-financing

Sources of co-financing	Name of co-financer	Type of co-financing	Amount confirmed at CEO endorsement/ approval		Actual amount materialized as of (May 2024 MTR ⁴⁵)		Expected total disbursement by the end of the project
			In-kind (mill US\$)	Cash (mill US\$)	In-kind (mill US\$)	Cash (mill US\$)	In-kind + Cash (mill US\$)
National Government	Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia	In-kind	100,000	-	30,000	-	-
	Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia	In-kind	1,000,000	-	1,000,000	-	-
	"Environmental Project Implementation Unit" (EPIU) State Institution	In-kind	48,000	-	30,000	-	-
	Forest Committee of the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia	In-kind	10,000	-	6,000	-	-
Civil Society	Gorayq community of Syunik Marz	In-kind	50,000	-	15,000	-	-
Non-governmental	Armenian National Agrarian University	In-kind	10,000	-	10,000	-	-
GEF Agency	FAO-GCF Project	Grant	10,800,000	-	1,079,370	-	-
Totals			12,018,000	-	2,170,370	-	-

4.5.2.5 Risk management

Finding 39: The risk assessment in the Project Document is insufficient and lacks the level of critical analysis necessary to identify risks and ensure sufficient preparedness in project responses.

120. The project's risk rating was Low, arguably it was at least Moderate, and certain aspects might have required an Environmental and Social Commitment Plan (ESCP)⁴⁶ or further risk analysis and closer monitoring. The Project Document risk table (Project Document pp. 48 – 49, Table 9) is superficial and lacks the degree of critical analysis necessary to address the levels of uncertainty which are inherent in a complex project such as this. It underplays or omits a number of risks and risk articulation; risk ratings and the proposed mitigations are not necessarily coherent (see Annex 13). Furthermore, it does not include any specific social and environmental risks which might be expected from a thorough social and environmental screening process of the project intervention (arguably these might include, *inter alia*, the involvement of women in the agricultural workforce, SLM procedures including fertilizers and ploughing of fallow lands, pasture management and women's participation, unequal distribution of project benefits within communities, to name but a few).

Finding 40: Risk management has been poor resulting in the project reaching a stage where it has very limited time to address structural and implementation issues.

121. Risks that were either poorly identified or not identified have occurred (for instance the delays in the project starting up, changes in key personnel) and there does not appear to have been an appropriate response by FAO or the EPIU (see findings 35 and 36).

122. Reporting of risks through the PIR appears to have been underestimating the risks and the effectiveness of the risk response. For example, the project has obtained an extension due to its earlier underperformance without carrying out the critical path analysis and setting out an effective recovery plan. This could have been achieved by instigating an earlier MTR or other

⁴⁵ Source: PIR June 2024 – no recent information was available to the MTR.

⁴⁶ Environmental and Social Management Guidelines, FAO, Rome, 2015, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a5ca44db-0cdd-43a4-bf87-9e063e6d8252/content

similar independent internal review of the project and developing a recovery plan prior to obtaining an extension.

Finding 40: Risks are not being identified and adding to the risk register and the project's overall risk rating has remained the same through successive PIRs despite a lack of progress in achieving its mid-term targets.

123. The MTR identified a number of emerging or potential risks (see sections 4.2.2, 4.4 and 4.4.5) as well as issues such as the loss of meadows in some communities following the 2023 conflict, low delivery of co-financing, strategic weaknesses in the intervention logic, etc. Despite this, stakeholder feedback was on the whole positive. Most stakeholders believe that the project is doing well. There is some substance to this as the PC in place since March 2024 has made considerable progress, but this was starting from a low baseline.

4.5.3 *Project oversight by FAO as the GEF Agency & National Partners*

Finding 41: There is a confusion of roles within the FAO-OPIM arrangements which results in a diffuse responsibility and reduces the effectiveness of the project oversight role.

124. According to stakeholder feedback this is the first instance of FAO-GEF OPIM in Armenia. As reflected on already, according to the some high level KI feedback the project design did not give sufficient weight to the differences and challenges of OPIM compared to the more familiar direct (GEF-Agency) implementation modality. There appears to have been no FAO country office representative directly in control of the project between its startup in February 2022 until the current FAO M&E Specialist was appointed in September 2023. During that time, the project had two PCs, the second appointee apparently in charge of this project and the Forest resilience of Armenia through enhancing adaptation and rural green growth via mitigation project funded by Green Climate Fund (GCF), (SAP014)⁴⁷ as well as the LDN project.

125. According to stakeholder feedback the relationship between the GEF Agency FAO and the OP is good. For instance, FAO was able to participate in the selection of the present PC and there are monthly monitoring meetings and ad-hoc meetings, typically held every 10 to 15 days between FAO and the EPIU. As well, FAO is in day-to-day contact with the PC regarding the project's progress.

126. However, this does not appear to have translated into effective oversight measures. For instance, there was no evidence of a shared folder of project documents (technical reports, workshop reports, etc.) and FAO does not appear to be represented on the PSC. Section 6 (pp. 50 – 52) of the Project Documents sets out the project oversight roles and responsibilities which are standard arrangements, but there is no evidence that there has been an attempt to define exactly how these translate to on-the-ground arrangements, something which should have been included in the Inception Report⁴⁸.

Finding 42: While stakeholder feedback indicated that there is a general opinion that there are weaknesses in the Project Document there is also a belief that the implementation cannot deviate from the Project Document.

127. While the overall objectives and outcomes in a GEF project cannot be changed without high-level approval and very strong justifications; the means to achieve those outcomes can be adaptive and according to circumstances and rigorous testing of the assumptions on which the intervention strategy has been built on. However, this does require considerable experience in GEF project cycle management and clear reporting based upon the internal monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, it is hard to see just how adaptive any project of this size and complexity can be in the very short timeframe of three years.

⁴⁷ <https://www.greenclimate.fund/project/sap014>

⁴⁸ "Implementation of Armenia's LDN commitments through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscape " project's inception workshop report, Yerevan, 05/10/undated (2022).

128. That said, it would be reasonable to expect a critical analysis of the challenges the project was facing and a plan to address these challenges prior to seeking an extension. It would be prudent at this stage to communicate such a plan for the remaining lifetime of the project to the GEF in the next PIR.

Finding 43: There is an underestimation of the GEF Agency effort and resources required to provide oversight to an OPIM project such as this.

129. KI feedback from FAO indicated that the GEF Agency fee (US\$ 207,395) does not reflect the real costs and resources needed to provide oversight to the project⁴⁹. There is some validity in this view given that this was a very complex intervention with technical aspects which are not widely held at any country level (for instance the DSS) and a GEF project is marrying together three different institutional cultures, M&E and reporting systems. These characteristics are typical of GEF projects due to their complex and innovative nature and, as argued by a number of KIs, the necessary partnerships between Implementing Agency and Executing Agency need to be adequately resourced.

4.5.4 *Project partnerships & stakeholder engagement*

Finding 44: It is hard to assess how effective the project partnerships are given the delays. KI feedback stated that weak project partnerships at the higher institutional level have contributed to some of the delays.

130. Challenges in stakeholder engagement are given as reasons for the delay in elements of component 1, especially in reaching a consensus with regards to the enabling environment as reported in both the 2023 and 2024 PIRs. This was also reiterated by KI feedback. It is reasonable to assume that the project design underestimated the challenge of building a coalition of interests across institutional partners as well as other stakeholders (see findings 3, 10 and 27). These risks were identified in the Project Document (see finding 28) however, the proposed mitigation measures in the Project Document do not provide a convincing mitigation.

Finding 45: The PSC membership is largely institutional and does not have any community, private sector or non-governmental representation on it.

131. The PSC, a project structure which allows stakeholder engagement in the implementation of a project, has only met three times. Minutes of meetings exists for two of these meetings (2023, 2024) and it is assumed that the third meeting was related to the project's Inception Workshop. According to the Project Document (p. 51) the PSC should meet "at least" twice a year.

132. The PSC includes the MOE, MOEC, MOTAI and Lori and Syunik marzes. Notably it does not include FAO or non-governmental organisation representation or specific user groups or women representation. The local community is represented on the PSC by the local Lori and Syunik Regional Village Administrations however, it is not clear from the minutes of meetings if they actually attend the meetings.

4.5.5 *Monitoring & evaluation, including M&E budget & design*

4.5.5.1 *Strategic Results framework & indicators*

Finding 46: The logical hierarchy, activities, outputs, outcomes, objective as presented in the Project Document's SRF are confusing.

133. Indicators appear to be combined with shared targets. There are no higher-level objective indicators and some aspects of the project, such as the DSS, are spread across the components in the SRF (see Annex 13).

⁴⁹ In the experience of the MTR this is common issue raised by other FAO-GEF projects and at least one other GEF Agency. In the opinion of the MTR it is a valid observation.

4.5.5.2 Project level M&E systems

Finding 47: Project M&E is taking place according to the M&E plan but compounded weaknesses in the system are not identifying implementation issues and challenges.

134. The Project Document (pp. 56 – 60) provides a standard FAO-GEF M&E framework with a budget of \$ 147,350. This includes an annual PIR and six-month PPR. The project has produced two PIRs (which is one less than expected) but the MTR has only seen one (12/2023) PPR whereas it might be expected that there would be at least three PPRs by this stage⁵⁰.
135. Table 12 of the Project Document (p. 59) provides \$58,000 for a M&E Expert; however, it is not clear whether this is an FAO, OPIM or technical assistance service. In any event, a M&E Specialist was engaged by the FAO Country Office in September 2023. This has made a positive difference to the M&E; however, it was 19 months into a 32-month project with 7% budget execution and already with a second PC, shortly followed by the third PC. To be clear, M&E has improved since that point (09/2023) and the appointment of the third PC (02/2024), but the overall project M&E does not translate into adaptive management actions.
136. The reporting against indicators is at times confusing, possibly because of the lack of progress until very recently, and the critical assessment of progress (evaluation) overly optimistic (for instance moderately satisfactory ratings are masking the seriousness of where the project is in relation to the time available to complete activities) and the forecast budget burn rate for the remaining period of the project (67% forecast execution in 18 months versus the completed 33% in 34 months).
137. Furthermore, reporting on land treatments in the PIR states that land has been improved. In reality, the areas of land have received a treatment and one season. There would need to be a range of variable monitored (for instance, cover, productivity, SOC) over time to justify statements that these areas have been improved. The 2024 PIR reports one standard soil testing, KI feedback indicated that there had been 2 testing events, however, this would need more data points over time to provide convincing evidence of efficacy of treatments and KI feedback also indicated that testing was unlikely to be repeated after the project due to financial constraints, certainly the farmers interviewed stated that they would not continue testing.
138. For example, the 2024 PIR response to the risk that: *Natural changes in agro-ecological zones due to gradual changes in climate and the incidence of extreme events*⁵¹ elicits the reporting response: *During the project implementation, 320 hectares of demonstration land are under restoration The showcased sustainable land management (SLM) practices have proven effective in mitigating the negative effects of climate change.* The MTR challenges that anything could be proven given that the activities had only been ongoing for one year.

Finding 48: Weaknesses inherent in the Project Document SRF make it difficult for the project's management to effectively monitoring progress towards results.

139. The project SRF is confusing, especially where it relates to the DSS (spread between all three components for some reason) and the value chains (component 2) which appear to have been specifically designed in the Project Document but then not intelligibly carried over into the SRF. The point being that if the SRF is to be the primary M&E tool for a project then it needs to add up, more so if the TOC is to be added to the mix. A measure of the project level M&E system might be that at no point was a decision taken to pause the project and rationalize the project's SRF. In the view of the MTR this would have been a reasonable course of action.

⁵⁰ This does not mean that they haven't been produced, but the MTR has not seen them. It would appear that the project is producing one PPR per year as well as the PIR which is quite reasonable and a common practice in FAO-GEF projects as the PIR serves a M&E tool and 2 PPRs plus a PIR every year is arguably too much reporting.

⁵¹ Risk 5

That this did not happen suggests that there is not a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities within the overall project hierarchy.

4.6 Cross-cutting issues

GEF criteria/ sub-criteria	MTR Rating
F. Cross-cutting concerns	
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	MU
F2. Human rights issues	N/A
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	MU

4.6.1 Gender and other equity dimensions

Finding 49: Gender dimensions are being addressed but there is limited tangible evidence that this is having a significant impact in the piloted communities.

140. No gender marker was given in the Project Document; however, it is likely that the project would have a GEN 1 Marker: *Promoting gender equality is relevant. Gender dimensions are systematically integrated in the project, even if the promotion of gender equality is not the main objective of the intervention*⁵². The Project Document mentions gender 189 times, mostly in relation to gender-responsive or gender-sensitive policy and legislation or gender-responsive SLM approaches and gender-responsive value chains, all of which are not yet at a stage where the MTR can evaluate effectiveness.

141. The Project Document has an extensive section (pp. 46 – 49) including a table (Table 8, p. 47) demonstrating how the project contributes to the objectives of FAO Policy on Gender (2013).

142. The EPIU includes a Gender Specialist and Gender Action Plan (GAP) was prepared during the PPG⁵³ and a subsequent GAP was issued in 2023 (2023 – 2025) but it is not clear whether this is the same Project Document Gap, an updated version or a new document. The MTR has not seen any reporting on the GAP. A Power Point Presentation "Gender and Land Rights" (undated) has been prepared which is an important document, but it does not specifically detail the Syunik and Lori communities.

143. Certain interventions, such a resource management plans, distribution of project benefits at the community level and the development of value chains, while intended to address issues of gender inequality, would likely require an ESCP⁵⁴ due to risks of unintended consequences arising during implementation.

Finding 50: There was little tangible evidence of impact on women's equality in SLM activities and resource management at the community level.

144. Stakeholder feedback and direct observations during the field mission did not reveal any significant impact on the lives of women in the communities. While the MTR was only able to reach a very small number of women (see section 1.5), in these instances the project had provided some support for relatively traditional income-generating activities (e.g. vegetable growing, beekeeping, etc.) but there was little to suggest that this was more than basic support to rural communities along existing gendered activities. Arguably, the work on value chains may have a more significant impact, however, the work around these is incomplete.

145. KI feedback frequently reiterated that it was challenging to reach women in the communities because of traditional and cultural norms and barriers. This is a reasonable

⁵² FAO. 2024. Guide to mainstream gender in the FAO project cycle. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0350en>

⁵³ This document was not available to the MTR.

⁵⁴ Environmental and Social Management Guidelines, FAO, Rome, 2015, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a5ca44db-0cdd-43a4-bf87-9e063e6d8252/content

observation; however, the MTR did not find in place any strategies which might positively alter this *status quo*.

4.6.2 Human rights issues

146. No human rights issues were identified during the PIF and the PPG. No further issues were found during the MTR.

4.6.3 Environmental and social safeguards

Finding 51: There is confusion surrounding the Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM). It is not clear how it relates to the project communities and no grievances have been reported.

147. The Project Document provides a detailed description of the FAO GRM (Annex P, pp. 87 – 89) including a project-level GRM. According to the EPIU there is a MOE GRM for the EPIU although it was not explained if this extended to the project community stakeholders, the consensus was that it was an internal GRM for EPIU staff. Further questioning revealed that the GRM will be managed by FAO and is expected to be completed by the end of May. None of the community stakeholders indicated that they knew about a GRM.

148. The MTR was informed that grievances could be raised by the Field Facilitators and the information relayed to the EPIU. Arguably this is insufficient as the Field Facilitator may act as a gatekeeper and furthermore, both Facilitators are male and therefore women complainants might not be prepared to discuss issues with them⁵⁵.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Conclusion 1 Relevance: The LDN project demonstrates strong formal alignment with national policies, the GEF programmatic framework, and FAO strategic priorities. This relevance is more apparent in high-level documentation than in on-the-ground implementation. The project is well-framed within Armenia's national environmental and sustainable development goals, particularly its LDN Strategy and UNCCD commitments, and is supported by a range of policy instruments and programmatic goals. However, the project's strategic design and choice of SLM measures under Component 2 lack sufficient grounding in localized land degradation issues and their underlying drivers and rather lean towards conventional rural development approaches. Furthermore, feedback from key informants suggests a focus on increasing agricultural production rather than addressing the core issues of land degradation.

Conclusion 2 Progress towards outcomes: The LDN project has made progress in several areas, particularly with increased activity in 2024 under the recently appointed PC. However, foundational design flaws, slow early implementation, and limited strategic alignment with the complexities of LDN are all affecting delivery. A three-year implementation period was overly ambitious for a project of this scope, failing to account for known start-up challenges, seasonal constraints, and the time required for stakeholder engagement and systems development. The selection of pilot sites and interventions, while generating rural development benefits, often lacks clear relevance to LDN objectives, with many activities reflecting traditional agricultural support rather than innovative, SLM solutions.

Moreover, the MTR challenges the sustainability of these interventions due to low beneficiary investment and heavy reliance on project resources. The limited community awareness of LDN and climate change, as well as weak integration of local perspectives into planning and decision-making, further undermines the project's long-term impact. Efforts under GIS/mapping and

⁵⁵ For the avoidance of doubt, no grievances were raised by any KIs during the MTR visit to the field.

planning (Outcomes 1.2 and 1.3) show promise but require accelerated progress and more capacity-building to meaningfully support decision-making frameworks. Similarly, while value chain activities may have potential—especially for women—the current strategy lacks clarity and a grounded understanding of existing capacities and constraints as well as tangible results but may be improved if given additional time to consolidate outputs and outcomes.

Without stronger alignment between high-level goals and field-level implementation, deeper stakeholder engagement, and with the unrealistic remaining timeframe the project's ability to achieve lasting LDN outcomes remains uncertain.

Conclusion 3 Efficiency: There have been recent improvements in project coordination and activity delivery which are commendable, especially since the appointment of the current PC in March 2024 and the FAO M&E Specialist in 2023. The project remains significantly behind schedule and faces substantial structural and operational challenges. Delays in early implementation, high staff turnover, and a mismatch between design complexity and technical procurement needs with the implementation modality have collectively undermined the project's efficiency, particularly in procurement, technical assistance, and adaptive management. Although progress has accelerated in 2024, only 13 months remain before the revised end date of July 2026, and most components remain either incomplete or in early stages of execution.

The ambitious and complex project design, coupled with a large project EPIU, may have benefited from greater delegation to specialized service providers or non-state actors to ensure more efficient and community-centered delivery. A disparity in community engagement between Lori and Syunik highlights the unevenness of implementation and the need for more tailored and inclusive local facilitation strategies. While there is broad stakeholder consensus that project efficiency has improved, the perception that the project is now “on track” may obscure the reality and without a dramatic increase in delivery pace, improved resource use, and stronger focus on outcome achievement, the project may not fully meet its objectives.

Conclusion 4 Sustainability: There are substantial concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the LDN project's outputs and outcomes. While some recent progress is evident, particularly since 2023, the project remains at risk across financial, socio-political, institutional, and environmental dimensions. Financial sustainability is undermined by the incomplete implementation of key components, such as the enabling environment and DSS, and the lack of clear post-project funding mechanisms. Limited institutional embedding, stakeholder reliance on ongoing external support and minimal beneficiary investment are further compounding these risks. Socio-political sustainability is also uncertain, as KIs at both institutional and community levels show limited engagement with LDN principles *per se*, instead prioritizing infrastructure development and production-focused approaches that may be incompatible with long-term land stewardship.

Institutionally, the project has not had sufficient time to foster the adaptive capacity or collective understanding required to address land degradation as a complex, adaptive challenge. The continued dominance of conventional, top-down approaches hampers the behavioural changes envisioned in the Theory of Change. Meanwhile, environmental sustainability cannot be assessed meaningfully due to the late start of field interventions and the lack of a formal environmental risk analysis. Overall, there is a significant risk that many SRF targets will remain unmet by the revised project end date in July 2026. Rather than prioritizing completion of all outputs, the project should focus its remaining time and resources on delivering a smaller number of high-quality, sustainable

outcomes, particularly in enabling policy frameworks and institutional capacity. Alternatively, it might seek to obtain a further extension to reduce the vulnerabilities inherent in utilising the remaining 67% of the budget in the remaining 18 months.

Conclusion 5 Factors affecting progress – design and strategy: The project's design and readiness were marked by several critical weaknesses that have constrained its effectiveness and efficiency. The Project Document lacks a robust and coherent problem analysis, particularly in identifying and articulating the complex and interrelated root causes of land degradation. This shortcoming has led to an intervention logic that is unclear and not fully aligned with the realities on the ground, weakening the strategic direction of the project from the outset.

The strategic and technical complexity of the design may have reflected FAOs considerable experience of GEF LDN projects, but it was not accompanied by corresponding adjustments to the project design, risk management, or implementation experience necessary to fit the project to OPIM. As a result, the project inherited a complex and ambitious framework better suited to an international agency, creating implementation challenges that national systems were not fully equipped to manage within the three-year timeframe.

The initial project risk assessment was weak and failed to anticipate or mitigate key institutional and operational risks, particularly those related to inter-sectoral coordination, policy reform, and project governance. These risks have materialized during implementation and compounded the project's challenges. The overly complex TOC provided little practical value to the project team, further hindering strategic coherence and adaptive management.

The project's design suffered from a combination of overly ambitious targets, underestimated risks, and a poor match between complexity and implementation modality. These factors have reduced the project's readiness and its capacity to deliver sustainable results.

Conclusion 6 (Factors affecting progress – management arrangements and implementation: The project's implementation, execution and management have been marked by a slow start, delayed technical assistance, limited adaptive response, and persistent structural challenges. Despite recent improvements under the current PC and with support of the FAO M&E Specialist, these issues have hindered progress and highlight broader concerns with oversight, risk management, and stakeholder engagement. Key opportunities for adaptive management were missed or delayed at various stages, and institutional arrangements, including the roles of FAO and the OP, were not clearly and sufficiently defined early enough to ensure effective implementation. In the remaining time left for the project, a clear, time-bound recovery strategy and improved coordination across project partners is needed to maximize results within the remaining project period.

Conclusion 7 M&E and project SRF: The project's M&E systems are weak and lack the rigor needed to effectively track progress and inform adaptive management. Confusion within the SRF and a lack of utility in the TOC, combined with weak indicator design and limited data, has hindered meaningful assessment of outcomes. Reporting has at times been overly optimistic and not sufficiently evidence-based, particularly in areas such as land restoration. These weaknesses reflect broader issues in project planning and oversight and underscore the need for clearer roles, stronger data systems, and more realistic performance assessment in the project reporting.

Conclusion 9 Stakeholder engagement: Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement is hard to determine given that there have been significant delays, however they appear to have been limited and uneven, contributing to delays in implementation and weakening institutional awareness of LDN issues and solutions. While the PSC is intended to support inclusive governance, its composition lacks representation from key groups such as the private sector, civil society, and community stakeholders as well as the FAO which has resulted in limited participation from local representatives, suggesting that opportunities for broader engagement and ownership have been missed. Strengthening stakeholder involvement and awareness of LDN and the accelerating effects of climate change at all levels is essential to improving project performance and sustainability.

Conclusion 10 Overall performance and outlook: While recent improvements under the current PC have accelerated delivery and coordination, the project remains significantly behind schedule and faces major challenges related to strategic clarity, efficiency, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. Project design weaknesses, particularly an overambitious scope, weak risk analysis, and poor alignment between high-level goals and local realities have constrained progress from the outset.

Key components such as stakeholder engagement, the enabling environment and the DSS remain underdeveloped given the time remaining. Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak, reporting is overly optimistic, and the sustainability of interventions is doubtful due to limited community ownership and unclear post-project support mechanisms. With only 13 months remaining until the revised project end date, it is unlikely that the project will fully meet its original targets.

To achieve the greatest impact in the time remaining, the project should consider shifting the focus of effort from completing all outputs to delivering a smaller set of high-quality, sustainable outcomes such as those that strengthen institutional frameworks, enhance local capacities, and support strategic policy development. Alternatively, the project might seek an additional extension to reduce these risks. A clear exit strategy, more inclusive stakeholder engagement, and improved coordination will be critical to achieving this.

Conclusion 11: Conclusion Cross-cutting: While gender considerations are included in the project's design and documentation, there is limited evidence that these efforts are translating into meaningful or measurable impact at the community level. Gender-sensitive language and frameworks are present, but implementation remains weak, with few tangible outcomes observed, particularly in women's participation in sustainable land management or decision-making. Cultural barriers to women's involvement are acknowledged but not actively addressed through adaptive strategies. The project's GRM is unclear and not accessible to community members, undermining its potential role in safeguarding rights and equity. Greater awareness and specific actions to address existing socio-cultural prejudices are needed to ensure that gender equity and social safeguards are not only included on paper but also realized in practice.

5.3 Recommendations

149. Given the slow progress of the project and the short time remaining until closure the MTR is constrained in the type and number of recommendations which will be feasible and effective before the TE. Based on the findings and conclusions of the MTR the following recommendations are made:

Table 9 Recommendations

Rec. no.	Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation	Responsibility	Time/dates for actions
Strategic relevance				
1.	This is the first OPIM FAO-GEF project in Armenia. There has been confusion in the implementation and execution arrangements (for instance these have extended to carrying out the logistics of the MTR). This has impacted on the project (see finding 38) and it is worth noting that that when this is linked to the financial resources available to the Implementing Agency (see lesson 2) it is further compounded. According to the FAO these exist. However, in the MTR experience these may not be to the practical, every day, problem solving level necessary to prepare a CO and PIU for the challenges of OPIM under often very different circumstances.	Develop clear practical day to day operational guidelines on OPIM for Country Offices. This should include standardised training materials and procedures for OPIM PIUs ⁵⁶ .	FAO	Long term.
Effectiveness				
2.	The communication between FAO and the EPIU are not properly structured, possibly due to the confusion in the roles of Implementing and Executing Agencies under an OPIM arrangement. This leads to inefficiencies and critically the weak monitoring of risks (see section 4.2.2, (ii)).	Develop a communication protocol between the FAO Country Office and the EPIU including shared folders and events timetable as well as summaries of all project's technical reports in English.	FAO & EPIU	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Factors affecting performance				

⁵⁶ In the experience of the MTR team, a UNDP Country Office engaged a previous member of staff from another Country Office to conduct internal training on the Direct Implementation Modality (UNDP equivalent of OPIM) under very similar circumstances.

3	FAO is not included in the PSC which lessens the project assurance and oversight role and reduces internal communications (see section 4.2.2, (ii), findings 35, 36 & 45).	FAO should be included in the PSC	MOE & FAO	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Efficiency				
4	The Work Plan and Budget 2025 – 2026 is extremely ambitious and will only take in one more agricultural season. There is a risk that activities are rushed and as has been stated in this report, there are very likely compound risks and stochastic events which make the project extremely vulnerable. The forecast budget burn rate for the remaining period of the project - 67% forecast execution in 18 months versus the competed 33% in 34 months (see finding 34 & 47).	Consider a further extension of the project to allow a more realistic delivery of project results and reduce the risk of even minor externalities and unidentified risks on a project which is already under pressure.	MOE & FAO, PSC to approve	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
5	The project has experienced considerable procurement challenges, especially as these relate to technical services. These include Civil Service constraints on fee rates, identifying very niche technical expertise and experience and identifying and contracting technical services (see finding 12 & 26).	Request for a hybrid procurement agreement to utilise the considerable resources available to the GEF Agency and reduce the procurement and delivery risks during the remaining implementation time.	EPIU & FAO, PSC to approve	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Sustainability & catalytic effect/replication				
6	Despite the efforts of the project in the previous year the delivery of project results is still very vulnerable. Realistically, even with an additional extension to the project there is a risk that a number of outputs will be incomplete or will be rushed increasing the risk of sustainability. The TE will recognize this and it is better to have a smaller number of tangible and sustainable results than to try to complete everything (see section 4.2.1).	Review the project outputs and activities in the 2025-26 AWP&B and any further AW&B. Identify outputs and activities which can be: i. Completed by the EOP ii. Realistically handed over and continued after the EOP iii. Will not be completed or continued after the EOP State clearly which outputs are to be completed and which will not be, develop an exit plan demonstrating how any activities and outputs not completed will be continued post EOP.	EPIU, PSC & FAO	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
Cross-cutting dimensions				

7	The MTR considers that the social and environmental risks as presented in the Project Document related to the SLM interventions are under-rated leading to the possibility that there are unrealized, and compound social and/or environmental risks related to the component 2 SLM activities (see sections 4.5.5.2 & 4.6.2).	Carry out a rapid social and environmental risk assessment on the field SLM activities and value chains.	EPIU	Immediate as part of the Management Response.
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6. Lessons learned

150. The MTR draws three lessons from the evaluation process:

Lesson 1: The time allocated for GEF projects is unrealistic. GEF LDN projects, and other GEF programme area projects are complex multi-faceted interventions in socio-ecosystems which are themselves complex with multiple-drivers interacting unpredictably and in a non-linear way resulting in considerable uncertainty. Project implementation is in itself a considerable undertaking. In the case of an OPIM project it involves aligning the M&E and reporting procedures of three different organisations with different operational perspectives and projects may be encountering situations in which solutions lie not in the application of expertise, but rather from a process of learning and adapting. This requires time for adaptive solutions to have an effect and stakeholders cannot expect to react too quickly because of the discomfort that comes with not knowing (see finding 3 and 21).

Furthermore, the process of establishing an effective PIU is time-consuming and invariably uses up most of the first year. Add to this that there are annual cycles which may not be synchronised with project cycles and are themselves highly unpredictable as well as the impact of stochastic events or external influences and events, three years is hopelessly optimistic.

Lesson 2: The level of effort required by a GEF Agency to perform an effective project assurance and oversight role is underestimated in the allocation of resources in the project budget (see section 4.2.2). The Implementing Agency role in an OPIM project requires considerable effort by the GEF Agency in mentoring and building the capacity of the PIU to align the three organisations' M&E and reporting procedures and protocols as well as aligning budget reporting and bringing the considerable global GEF project implementation experience and expertise which is not normally held at the national government level. Furthermore, the necessary social and environmental screening process required by the GEF may not be as well-developed at the national level. The GEF Agency project assurance and oversight role can provide a safety net in these circumstances and help to align the safeguarding and reporting to an agreed standard. However, the financial resources made available in the agency fee mitigate against this type of implementing partnership. In these cases, the GEF Agency role appears to fall back on administering the project rather than entering into a implementing partnership with the OP in which the considerable comparative advantages of the GEF Agency (experience sharing, mentoring, problem solving and access to considerable technical assistance resources) cannot be brought to bear on the project due to the financial constraints. Without sufficient financial resources for the assurance and oversight role resembles more of an administrative function than an effective partnership.

Lesson 3: When a project is under-performing it is important to hold the MTR (or similar rapid independent and external review) earlier rather than waiting until the mid-point or until there is some progress to report. While it is human nature to hold on until there is something to show, arguably it is more effective to carry out a structured critical review while there is still time to take adaptive actions. Very often, individuals within the project are aware of the issues and challenges, however, sometimes it takes the formal review process to identify an "elephant in the room"⁵⁷ and develop structured adaptive responses.

⁵⁷ An "elephant in the room" is English idiom for an obvious truth that is being ignored or goes unaddressed. It is based on the idea that an elephant in a small room would be impossible to overlook. It sometimes is used to refer to a question or problem that very obviously stands to reason, but which is ignored for the convenience of one or more involved parties. The idiom also implies a value judgement that the issue *should* be discussed openly.

Annexes

Annex 1. Terms of reference for the MTR

B. FAO Armenia - Mid-Term Review of Armenia FAO-GEF project (GCP /ARM/010/GFF) (35 days)

FAO Armenia Reporting Lines

Under the overall guidance of the Project's Budget Holder and the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit (FAO GEF CU) MTR focal point, the senior evaluation specialist (hereafter referred to as "specialist") will work in consultation and in agreement with the appointed MTR Manager.

FAO Armenia Responsibilities

The Mid-term Review team (including the senior evaluation specialist, the national MTR consultant, and the MTR manager) will be responsible for the Mid-Term Review covering the life of the project to mid-point of implementation and that will respond to the needs of the project team, FAO and the donor.

Once designed, the specialist will be responsible for the overall delivery of the Mid-Term Review, as described in the TORs of that

MTR. He will work in close collaboration with the MTR manager, and other member of the MTR team. He will be instrumental to

designing the MTR further in the inception phase, executing data collection and analysis, and report-writing with full support and

substantive inputs from the MTR Manager.

Specific responsibilities include:

- *Review relevant background documentation made available by budget holder or designated MTR manager (RM) and project team, including the project document, the project's logframe, progress and final reports, workshop and technical reports, among others as listed in the MTR terms of reference;*
- *Review and complement (expand as appropriate) the methodology described in the terms of reference, contribute to the preparation of data-collection tools, including questionnaires, checklists and interview protocols as appropriate;*
- *Under the overall guidance of the MTR manager, prepare the MTR inception report, including an MTR matrix, theory of change and stakeholder table, and participate in the finalization of the team's work programme;*
- *Under the overall guidance and supervision of the Evaluation Manager, support the collection of primary data by the MTR team through participation in interviews and meetings (face-to-face or virtual) with key stakeholders of the project as appropriate, as described in the terms of reference of the MTR;*
- *Under the overall guidance and supervision of the Evaluation Manager, support the collection of primary data by the MTR team during country visits and relevant secondary data, according to the methodology presented in the MTR terms of reference and detailed in the inception report;*
- *Participate in analysis and discussion of evidence collected within the MTR team to identify key findings and preliminary conclusions that respond to the MTR's issues and questions, and formulate preliminary recommendations in line with the findings and conclusions;*
- *Participate in meetings and workshops with internal stakeholders as required (e.g. the preliminary MTR findings presentation);*
- *Prepare all deliverables planned in the MTR terms of reference, according to specifications provided in the terms of reference and detailed in the FAO-GEF MTR Guide and annexes;*
- *Collaborate with other team members in all deliverables, as required;*

- Prepare the first and second drafts of the MTR report, integrate comments received, as appropriate, from the BH, FAO GEF CU, other FAO and government agency staff, and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, based on guidance from the MTR manager and other team members;
- Liaise with the MTR manager for the finalization of the MTR report and collaborate in the coordination of the inputs of other members of the MTR team into the final version, as needed.

In terms of reporting, or if information, advice or guidance is required from FAO by the specialist, he should address requests to both the BH, the MTR Manager and the FAO GEF CU focal point.

Key performance indicators	
Expected outputs	Required completion date
A. OED Expected Outputs	January 2025 – 21 days
1. Data-collection	2. February 2025 – 12 days
2. Evaluation report first draft	3. March 2025 – 8 days
3. Final evaluation report and comment matrix	4. February 2025 (5 days)
B. FAO Armenia Expected Outputs	5. March 2025 (12 days)
4. Inception report, including MTR questions	6. April 2025 (12 days)
5. Briefing on preliminary findings of the MTR following the field mission(s)	7. April 2025 (3 days)
6. First draft of the report	
7. Second draft of the report	
8. Final MTR report, including comments matrix/audit trail	

Annex 2. MTR itinerary, including field missions (agenda)

Trip Participants: Agnesa Karapetyan, Francis Hurst

Dates: 8 – 14 April 2025

Purpose: Field visits and consultations for the Mid-Term Review of the GEF-funded Project

8 April 2025 – Gorayk Village, Sisian Community, Syunik Region

Name	Position	Contact	Gender	Place
Karen Petrosyan	Village Administrative Head	93019076	Male	Gorayk
Armen Antonyan	Beneficiary farmer	93602746	Male	Gorayk
Artush Aghajanyan	Beneficiary farmer	94999382	Male	Gorayk
Sos Karapetyan	Beneficiary farmer	93238221	Male	Gorayk
Gagik Tovmasyan	SLM Expert, ANAU / EPIU	98428079	Male	Gorayk
Hayk Khachatryan	GIS Expert, EPIU	93868637	Male	Gorayk
Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	Gorayk
Norayr Harutyunyan	Field Facilitator, Syunik Region	77334303	Male	Gorayk
Arustam Arustamyan	Beneficiary farmer	94405252	Male	Gorayk

9 April 2025 – Sarnakunq Village, Sisian Community, Syunik Region

Name	Position	Contact	Gender	Place
Arsen Toroyan	Village Administrative Head	93728182	Male	Sarnakunq
Manuchar Mkrtchyan	Beneficiary farmer	93331256	Male	Sarnakunq
Arsen Avetisyan	Beneficiary farmer	55545184	Male	Sarnakunq
Emma Torosyan	Beneficiary, Library Worker	98178182	Female	Sarnakunq
Varditer Allahverdyan	Beneficiary, Operator, Administrator	77543955	Female	Sarnakunq
Melanya Ghazaryan	Beneficiary, Cleaning Lady	98455155	Female	Sarnakunq

10 April 2025 – Yerevan

Event: Presentation of the National Resource Mobilization Plan for Land Degradation Neutrality

Venue: Ani Plaza Hotel, Yerevan

Name	Position	Contact	Gender	Organization
Hrachya Zakoyan	Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, ANAU	—	Male	ANAU
Gagik Tovmasyan	SLM Expert, ANAU / EPIU	98428079	Male	ANAU
Sona Hakobyan	Gender Specialist, EPIU	93602464	Female	EPIU
Meri Hovhannisyan	Awareness Raising Specialist, EPIU	33052140	Female	EPIU
Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	EPIU
Narine Hakobyan	Ministry of Environment	—	Female	MoE
Irina Panosyan	Ministry of Economy	—	Female	MoEcon

11 April 2025 – Lori Region (Chkalov & Dsegh Villages, Tumanyan Community)

Name	Position	Contact	Gender	Place
Sevada Vardanyan	Field Facilitator, Lori Region	77704017	Male	Chkalov
Ruzanna Evoyan	Beneficiary farmer	93450639	Female	Chkalov
Hamest Nazlukhanyan	Beneficiary farmer	94521902	Female	Chkalov
Grigor Karapetyan	Beneficiary farmer	94256165	Male	Chkalov
Hamlet Kocharyan	Beneficiary farmer	94170057	Male	Dsegh
Anna Atyan	Beneficiary farmer	93808287	Female	Dsegh
Gor Goginyan	Beneficiary farmer	94585761	Male	Dsegh

14 April 2025 – Yerevan (Debriefing)

Name	Position	Contact	Gender	Organization
Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	EPIU
Armen Yesoyan	Director, EPIU	—	Male	EPIU
Tigran Gabrielyan	Ministry of Environment	—	Male	MoE
Gayane Simonyan	MTR Manager, FAO	91421719	Female	FAO

Debriefing Location: FAO Armenia Office (hybrid format)

Annex 3. Stakeholders interviewed during the MTR

Date	Name Surname	Position	Contact Details	Gender	Place
08/04/2025	Karen Petrosyan	Village administrative head	93019076	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Armen Antonyan	beneficiary farmer	93602746	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Artush Aghajanyan	beneficiary farmer	94999382	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Sos Karapetyan	beneficiary farmer	93238221	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Gagik Tovmasyan	SLM Expert, ANAU, EPIU	98428079	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Hayk Khachatryan	GIS expert, EPIU	93868637	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Norayr Harutyunyan	Field Facilitator, Syunik Region	77334303	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
08/04/2025	Arustam Arustamyan	beneficiary farmer	94405252	Male	Gorayk village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Arsen Toroyan	Village administrative head	93728182	Male	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Manuchar Mkrtyan	beneficiary farmer	93331256	Male	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Arsen Avetisyan	beneficiary farmer	55545184	Male	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Emma Torosyan	beneficiary, lybrary worker	98178182	Female	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Varditer Allahverdyan	beneficiary, operator, administrator	77543955	Female	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
09/04/2025	Melanya Ghazaryan	beneficiary, cleaning lady	98455155	Female	Sarnakunq village, Sisian community, Syunik Region
10/04/2025	Presentation of the National Resource Mobilization Plan for Land Degradation Neutrality			NA	Yerevan, Ani Plaza
10/04/2025	Hrachya Zakoyan	Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, ANAU		Male	Yerevan, ANAU
10/04/2025	Gagik Tovmasyan	SLM Expert, ANAU, EPIU	98428079	Male	Yerevan, ANAU
10/04/2025	Sona Hakobyan	Gender specialist, EPIU	93602464	Female	Yerevan, EPIU
10/04/2025	Meri Hovhannisyan	Awareness raising specialist, EPIU	33052140	Female	Yerevan, EPIU
10/04/2025	Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	Yerevan, EPIU
10/04/2025	Narine Hakobyan	Ministry of Environment		Female	Yerevan, MoE
10/04/2025	Irina Panosyan	Ministry of Economy		Female	Yerevan, Mo Economy
11/04/2025	Sevada Vardanyan	Field Facilitator, Lori Region	77704017	Male	Chkalov village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Ruzanna Evoyan	beneficiary farmer	93450639	Female	Chkalov village, Tumanyan

					community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Hamest Nazlukhanyan	beneficiary farmer	94521902	Female	Chkalov village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Grigor Karapetyan	beneficiary farmer	94256165	Male	Chkalov village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Hamlet Kocharyan	beneficiary farmer	94170057	Male	Dsegh village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Anna Atyan	beneficiary farmer	93808287	Female	Dsegh village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
11/04/2025	Gor Goginyan	beneficiary farmer	94585761	Male	Dsegh village, Tumanyan community, Lori Region
14/04/2025	Gevorg Ter Grigoryan	Project Coordinator, EPIU	77509991	Male	Yerevan, EPIU
14/04/2025	Armen Yesoyan	Director, EPIU		Male	Yerevan, EPIU
14/04/2025	Tigran Gabrielyan	Ministry of Environment		Male	Yerevan, MoE
14/04/2025	Gayane Simonyan	MTR Manager, FAO	91421719	Female	Yerevan, FAO
14/04/2025	Debriefing	FAO		NA	Yerevan, FAO (hybrid)

Annex 4. MTR matrix (review questions and sub-questions)

GEF Criteria	Evaluative question	Indicator	Sources	Methodology
1. Relevance (rating required)	Are the project outcomes congruent with country priorities, GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, the FAO Country Programming Framework and the needs and priorities of targeted beneficiaries (local communities, men and women, and indigenous peoples, if relevant)? Has there been any change in the relevance of the project since its formulation, such as the adoption of new national policies, plans or programmes that affect the relevance of the project's objectives and goals? If so, are there any changes that need to be made to the project to make it more relevant? How well do the project outcomes align with Armenia's current land degradation priorities and national policies related to sustainable land management (SLM)? Has the project remained relevant to the needs of key stakeholders, including local communities, women, and vulnerable groups, since its initiation?	Coherence with national & regional policy frameworks, GEF/LDCF/SCCF strategic objectives: LD-1-1 LD-1-4 LD-2-5 FAO programmes & Country Programme Coherence of project design and implementation approach	Document review, Key Informant Interviews (KII), analysis Project Document, Inception Report, PIRs, minutes of SC meetings, MTR. Implementation arrangements Level and type of co-financing	Critical analysis of the project design. Critical reflection on the measures of project success. Emphasis on constructive analytical dialogue An examination of process: critically examining the project's actions and activities to ensure that there has been sufficient effort in ensuring that elements of capacity building and participation, establishing processes
2. Effectiveness of project results (rating required)	To what extent has the project delivered on its outputs, outcomes and objectives? What broader results (if any) has the project had at regional and global level to date? Were there any unintended consequences? Is there any evidence of environmental stress reduction (for example, in increased LD) or environmental status change (such as an improvement in SLM), reflecting global environmental benefits or any change in policy, legal or regulatory frameworks? To what extent can the achievement of results be attributed to the GEF-funded component?: - What changes are being made to the enabling environment? - Are they cross-cutting? - What changes in institutional capacities have occurred? - What is the status of integrated land use planning? - What resources are being mobilised?	SRF indicators – level of achievement.	Project results – PIR, direct field observations, KII at all levels (global, national, provincial, site...), feedback from other stakeholders,	Examination of process. Analysis of PIR/SRF results, EOP target achievements, KII. Critical reflection on the measures of project success.

GEF Criteria	Evaluative question	Indicator	Sources	Methodology
	- What is the status of the value chains? - Has the project had a positive impact on rural livelihoods? - To what extent is the project achieving its key outputs and outcomes, particularly in strengthening the enabling environment for LDN and scaling up SLM practices? - What evidence exists of the project's impact on reducing land degradation and improving livelihoods in target regions (Lori and Syunik)? Are there any visible signs at the mid-term? Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards and the achievement of the project's longer-term objectives? What can be done to increase the likelihood of positive impacts from the project? To what extent can the progress towards long-term impacts be attributed to the project? - What major barriers or challenges have delayed the achievement of project results, and how have they been addressed? - What has been the effect of any incorrect assumptions or changes to the context to achieving the project results as outlined in the Project Document? (For programme assessments) (Coherence) How coherent is the programme with its child projects' theories of change, indicators and expected/achieved results? What is the added value of bringing the different interventions together under one programme (compared with the same level of investment made through comparable alternatives)? - How does the design, interventions & results compare with other LDN projects?			
3. Efficiency (rating required)	To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently and cost effectively? To what extent has project management been able to adapt to any changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation? - Is the project cost-effective in converting inputs to results in a timely and economical manner Has the project utilized resources effectively, and were the planned outputs delivered on time and within budget? - How well has the project adapted its management approach in response	Budget execution Co-financing PSC actions Integration into existing structures and programmes	SRF EOPs, budget execution, co-financing PSC minutes Potential for scaling up	Value for money analysis. Examination of process: critically examining the project's actions and activities with regards to adaptive management.

GEF Criteria	Evaluative question	Indicator	Sources	Methodology
	to changing conditions or emerging challenges (e.g., personnel turnover, delays)? - How does the FAO/OP partnership influence project efficiency? - Does the strategy provide the most effective route towards expected/intended results? To what extent has the project built on existing agreements, initiatives, data sources, synergies and complementarities with other projects, partnerships, etc. and avoided duplication of similar activities by other groups and initiatives? If the project is executed under the OPIM modality, add relevant OPIM questions, for example, whether the execution agreement was followed efficiently. - Have there been any changes to project outputs? - Has M&E been on time and realistic? - How well do the project implementation arrangements work? - Are there effective communications between project partners? - Has there been sufficient oversight?	Risk management Linkages with other programmes, projects & initiatives		
4. Sustainability (rating required)	<i>(Sustainability)</i> What is the likelihood that the project results will be useful or persist after the end of the project? What are the key risks that may affect the sustainability of the project results and its benefits (consider financial, socioeconomic, institutional and governance, and environmental aspects)? <i>(Replication and catalysis)</i> What project results, lessons or experiences have been replicated (in different geographic areas) or scaled up (in the same geographic area, but on a much larger scale and funded by other sources)? What results, lessons or experiences are likely to be replicated or scaled up in the near future? - How well are the project outputs and outcomes integrated into OP work programmes? - What is the likelihood that the project's outcomes will be sustained after its completion, particularly in terms of local ownership and integration into national policies or programs? - How well has the project prepared stakeholders (including government and local communities) to continue the work on land degradation neutrality beyond the project period?	Enabling environment Status of SLM interventions Adoption of approaches & technologies Co-financing Awareness	SRF EOPs, direct field observations, key informant interviews, focus groups. Critical reflection on the measures of project success.	Synthesizing plausible future impacts: using analytical methods to identify plausible future outcomes resulting from the impact of the project in the future and how these might affect the project's TOC Developing criteria for Legacy Plan.

GEF Criteria	Evaluative question	Indicator	Sources	Methodology
5. Factors affecting progress (ratings required)	Is the project design suited to delivering the expected outcomes? Is the project's causal logic (per its theory of change) coherent and clear? To what extent are the project's objectives and components clear, practical and feasible within the timeframe allowed? To what extent was gender integrated into the project's objectives and results framework? Were other actors – civil society, indigenous peoples or private sector – involved in project design or implementation and what was the effect on project results? To what extent did the executing agency effectively discharge its role and responsibilities in managing and administering the project? What have been the main challenges in terms of project management and administration? How well have risks been identified and managed? What changes are needed to improve delivery in the latter half of the project? - How effective has the project design been in addressing land degradation drivers and enabling sustainable land management practices? What have been the financial-management challenges of the project? To what extent has pledged co-financing been delivered? Has any additional leveraged co-financing been provided since implementation? How has any shortfall in co-financing or unexpected additional funding affected project results? To what extent has FAO delivered oversight and supervision and backstopping (technical, administrative and operational) during project identification, formulation, approval, start-up and execution? To what extent have stakeholders, such as government agencies, civil society, indigenous populations, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, people with disabilities and the private sector, been involved in project formulation and implementation? What has been the effect of their involvement or non-involvement on project results? How do the various stakeholder groups see their own engagement with the project? What are the mechanisms of their involvement and how could these be improved? What are the strengths and challenges of the project's partnerships? Has the stakeholder engagement plan been adhered to and documented? Have all stakeholders been made aware of the ESS plan and the grievance complaint mechanism? How effective has the project been in communicating and promoting its key messages and results to partners, stakeholders and a general audience? How can this be improved? How is the project assessing, documenting and sharing its results and lessons learned and	Preliminary results		

GEF Criteria	Evaluative question	Indicator	Sources	Methodology
	experiences? To what extent are communication products and activities likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results? Is the project's M&E system practical and sufficient? How has stakeholder engagement and gender assessment been integrated into the M&E system? How could this be improved? Does the M&E system operate per the M&E plan? Has information been gathered in a systematic manner, using appropriate methodologies? To what extent has information generated by the M&E system during project implementation been used to adapt and improve project planning and execution, achieve outcomes and ensure sustainability? - What adjustments or improvements are needed in the second half of the project to ensure successful implementation and the achievement of long-term goals? Are there gender-disaggregated targets and indicators? How can the M&E system be improved?			
6. Cross-cutting priorities	To what extent were gender considerations taken into account in designing and implementing the project? Has the project been designed and implemented in a manner that ensures gender-equitable participation and benefits? Was a gender analysis done? To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project? Has the project been implemented in a manner that ensures the ESS Mitigation Plan (if one exists) has been adhered to? - To what extent has the project integrated gender equality and social inclusion into its activities and outcomes? - How has the project ensured that environmental and social safeguards have been followed, particularly in its interventions with vulnerable groups?			

Annex 5. List of documents consulted

Documents were received from the project team on four occasions:

20 February 2025 – Shared by M&E Specialist

A folder titled "MTR" was shared and contained the following:

- Project TOR, PIF, Inception Report, Concept Note, ProDoc, CEO Endorsement
- Operational Partners Agreement (OPA) and Amendment
- FAO-GEF PIRs for 2023 and 2024
- Annual and Six-Month Progress Reports
- Steering Committee Decisions (2023, 2024)
- Work Plan and Budget (2025–2026)

23 April 2025 – Shared by EPIU PC

The "EPIU" folder included:

- Technical and expert reports (SLM, Gender, GIS, Communication)
- Financial reports for 2023 and 2024
- Land improvement and soil testing reports
- Resource Mobilization Plans
- WOCAT assessments
- Management Plans for 14 communities
- Training materials and posters
- Legislative and legal draft packages
- Steering Committee documentation

Please note that requests for documents were made orally and in writing before and during the field visit on 8–14 April 2025. Written requests to PC, copying M&E Specialist, were sent on 14 April and followed by a reminder on 22 April. The documents were received on 23 April.

08 May 2025 Agreed submission of 0 Draft MTR Report

08 May 2025 Actual submission of 0 Draft MTR Report

08 May 2025 – Shared by REU

- The 3rd six-month project narrative report (July–December 2024)

27 May 2025 – Shared by REU

Following the call on 26 May and the submission of the 0 draft on 8 May, a folder titled "test MTR" was shared. It contained:

- An Armenian government letter regarding GRM-related coordination
- The 3rd six-month project narrative report (July–December 2024)

A folder titled "Experts" with subfolders (Combined Expert Reports, Communication Expert, Gender Expert, GIS Expert, SLM Expert) — **this folder duplicated the same content previously received from PC on 23 April**

Further documents examined or cited in this report:

FAO. 2021. "Strategic Framework 2022–31". 10/2021. Rome.

[www://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a75d575e-9f7e-45ad-afd9-a2cbfda37ad7/content](https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a75d575e-9f7e-45ad-afd9-a2cbfda37ad7/content)

¹ FAO. 2020. *Guide for planning and conducting mid-term reviews of FAO–GEF projects and programmes*. Rome.

Boch et al 2021, Steffen Boch, Yasemin Kurtogullari, Eric Allan, Malie Lessard-Therrien, Nora Simone Rieder, Markus Fischer, Gerard Martínez De León, Raphaël Arlettaz, Jean-Yves Humbert,

Effects of fertilization and irrigation on vascular plant species richness, functional composition and yield in mountain grasslands, Journal of Environmental Management, Volume 279, 2021,111629, ISSN 0301-4797,

Annex 6. Results matrix showing achievements at mid-term and MTR observations

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
Component 1					
Outcome 1.1					
Output 1.1.1: Assessment of LDN policy gaps and development of cross-sectoral policies/legal framework supporting LDN principles	LDN Policy assessment Policy framework supporting LDN	LDN has not been assessed and LDN principles are not yet integrated in the existing national legal and policy frameworks	LDN policy assessment that includes a gender lens Draft LDN cross-sectoral policy framework	LDN policy assessment that includes a gender lens LDN cross-sectoral policy framework agreed by key Government sectors and LDN principles integrated into the revised Land Code	Moderately Satisfactory (MS) Stakeholder feedback indicated that the project has made efforts to address policy gaps and integrate LDN principles into the legal and policy frameworks. However, despite some positive steps, the pace of progress has been slower than expected. The existing policy was reviewed, and gaps in the integration of LDN were identified. Furthermore, work is ongoing to prepare gender-responsive legislation, which is an important aspect of the project. Fieldwork conducted during the MTR revealed that while the drafting of the new legislation is in progress, it has taken longer than anticipated due to additional discussions with stakeholders. The lack of visible evidence of significant progress on the ground has raised concerns. Overall, the development of the LDN policy framework is moving forward, but more tangible results are needed to meet the project's objectives. The slow pace and limited on-the-ground impact of these efforts is a risk to completion, however, the draft draft policy frameworks under preparation; gender lens applied; detailed field reports confirm progress. (Training and legislative documents, community consultation records from expert folders; WOCAT baseline and follow-up reports (2024, 2025); GIS mapping outputs) validate an improvement in implementation

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
<u>Output.1.1.2:</u> Strengthened intersectoral coordination mechanisms at two levels: national level, and between the national level and local decision makers and farmer groups	Horizontal intersectoral coordination mechanism at national level Vertical intersectoral coordination mechanisms	The existing UNCCD coordination mechanism at national level is weak and does not include LDN There is no vertical coordination mechanism	Gender-balanced horizontal and vertical intersectoral coordination mechanisms at national level and sub-national levels	Gender-balanced horizontal and vertical intersectoral coordination mechanisms at national level and sub-national levels fully functioning with agreed terms of reference	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while some progress has been made in strengthening intersectoral coordination mechanisms, the existing coordination structures still face significant challenges. The national UNCCD coordination mechanism remains weak, and there is no formal vertical coordination mechanism in place. While discussions between experts have taken place and the drafting of the working paper is in progress, there is insufficient evidence from the fieldwork to demonstrate that the horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms are fully functioning at the national and sub-national levels. The necessary structures are not yet fully operational, and there is a lack of clear implementation at the ground level. The slow pace of development and limited progress in the fieldwork support the "Moderately Unsatisfactory" rating.
Outcome 1.2					
<u>Output.1.2.1:</u> Assessment of the current status, trends, drivers, including impacts of climate change and migration, and costs of land degradation based on existing data and information (using LADA, WOCAT, ELD)	LD assessment and cost assessment that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation	There is no LD assessment available that uses global standard tools, such as LADA, WOCAT and ELD	Draft LD assessment and cost assessment that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation	LD assessment and cost assessment that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation finalised and presented to the Government	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while progress has been made towards assessing the current status and trends of LD, including the impacts of climate change and migration, there is a significant delay in completing the full assessment. The use of global standard tools such as LADA, WOCAT, and ELD has not yet led to the finalization of the LD and cost assessments. LADA fieldwork completed, draft cost assessments initiated but not finalized, gender considerations in field assessments

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
					have been done but full assessments not delivered. While significant efforts were made to collect data from the field and assess degradation, the actual process of implementing LADA and completing the necessary assessments has been delayed. This delay, combined with the lack of finalization of the assessment, supports the "Moderately Unsatisfactory" rating.
<u>Output.1.2.2:</u> LDN indicators (land cover, land productivity, and soil organic carbon) in target Regions assessed and mapped (using Trends.Earth, CollectEarth)	LDN indicator assessment and maps from target regions	There is no LDN assessment or maps available from Lori and Syunik	LDN indicator assessment and maps from Lori and Syunik using Trends.Earth	LDN indicator assessment and maps from Lori and Syunik using all available data and integrated into Collect Earth	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Output 1.2.3 and 1.2.2 combined in the one TOR and will be implemented at Q3 and Q4 of 2024 Stakeholder feedback indicates that while some progress has been made towards the assessment and mapping of LDN indicator in target regions, significant delays have hindered full implementation. The necessary data collection has started, and mapping is in progress, but the activities have been delayed. Data collection has been initiated; draft maps are under preparation and the use of Trends.Earth is confirmed. Although progress has been made, the start of the work was delayed which has impacted the timeline for completing the LDN indicator assessment and mapping. The delays thus far contribute to a "Moderately Unsatisfactory" rating.
<u>Output.1.2.3:</u> Monitoring system for LDN indicators integrated into the national land use monitoring systems	LDN monitoring system	National land-use monitoring system does not monitor LDN	Analysis of how to monitor LDN	LDN monitoring system forms part of the national land-use monitoring system	Not able to assess TOR prepared, procurement underway ofr implementation phase.
Outcome 1.3					

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
<u>Output.1.3.1:</u> LDN training material developed for decision makers as well as practitioners	LDN training modules, including one dedicated to gender issues	There are no LDN training modules available	LDN training material and modules developed including one dedicated to gender	LDN training material and modules finalised and available in hard and soft copies	Satisfactory Stakeholder feedback indicates that the development of LDN training materials, including a module dedicated to gender issues, has progressed well. The training materials have been developed as reported, and national experts have prepared relevant content for the training modules, which will be /is used during the implementation phase. The materials are now finalized and ready for distribution in both hard and soft copies, marking satisfactory progress in the development of LDN training resources.
<u>Output.1.3.2:</u> National capacity building program on LDN for key decision-makers and practitioners at national and sub-national level	National capacity building programme in LDN Number of people trained, including women	There is no national programme for capacity building in LDN	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of which 50% are women)	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of which 50% are women)	Satisfactory (S) The development of the National Capacity Building Program on LDN for key decision-makers and practitioners has faced some delays, but there has been progress reported in the planning phase. Despite the delay, some training activities have already been conducted and integrated into the ANAU curricula, partially prepared training delivery is documented which is an encouraging sign of progress towards the expected outcomes. However, the full implementation of the program is still pending.
<u>Output.1.3.3:</u> LDN decision support system for target-setting, planning and strengthening of governance arrangements together with national and local stakeholders established	DSS for intersectoral and gender equitable governance of land and natural resources for LDN	There is no DSS for LDN in Armenia	Architecture of DSS for LDN agreed based on the DS-SLM framework	DSS platform in place for intersectoral and gender equitable governance of land and natural resources based on the three LDN indicators and DS-SLM framework	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) The architecture for the DSS has been agreed upon based on the DS-SLM framework. As of the latest report, there is no tangible progress in implementing the DSS, and it

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
					remains to be seen how the system will be integrated into land governance processes. The actual execution is still pending.
Component 2					
Outcome 2.1					
<u>Output 2.1.1:</u> Integrated land-management plans developed using participatory approaches and integrated with existing Community land use planning processes in target regions (Lori, Syunik)	Number of ILM plans that reflect priorities of both women and men Number of ha covered by ILM plans	No ILM plans to achieve LDN exist in target districts	Methodology and outline for ILM plans developed and validated with key stakeholders	Two gender sensitive ILM plans covering at least 166,000 ha that follow the LDN response hierarchy developed and presented to district and central authorities	Satisfactory The development of Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans using participatory approaches has made significant progress. The plans are aligned with the LDN framework, and the inclusion of gender-sensitive measures demonstrates a clear commitment to addressing gender disparities in land management. The stakeholder consultation process and the approval of the ILM plans represent solid progress in addressing the land management challenges in the target regions.
<u>Output 2.1.2:</u> 'LDN Learning Landscapes' established with SLM best practices and integrated restoration of landscapes that provide carbon benefits.	Number of learning landscapes established Ha of land covered by restoration and SLM	A baseline FAO/GCF project is supporting forestry investments in the two target districts, but SLM and restoration using an integrated landscape approach is not practiced in the two target districts		Two LDN local transformative gender sensitive projects/programmes of actions (Learning Landscapes) covering a total of 166,000 ha in Lori and Syunik districts Restoration of 4,000 ha of degraded grasslands and 7,300 ha of forest land SLM practices on 110,000 ha of forest land; 50,000 ha of grasslands; 6,000 ha of croplands	Moderately Satisfactory (MS) While the activities under Output 2.1.2 have been implemented as reported, with improvements made to degraded arable land, pastures, and meadows in Tumanyan and Sisian communities, the overall contribution to land restoration and carbon benefits remains somewhat questionable. The work completed—such as the improvement of 49 hectares in Tumanyan and 251 hectares in Sisian—certainly reflects an effort to apply SLM best practices. However, it is unclear how these actions align with the broader landscape restoration objectives and whether they can truly be considered part of a transformative shift towards sustainable land management at the larger landscape scale.

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
					Moreover, while the projects have included gender-sensitive measures, their long-term effectiveness in restoring ecosystems and providing significant carbon benefits is yet to be fully demonstrated. More comprehensive monitoring and data collection will be needed to assess the true impact of these interventions on land restoration and ecosystem resilience.
<u>Output 2.1.3:</u> Resource mobilization plans developed for scaling up of best practices that incorporate National and target Regions Government and contributions from donors	Number of resource mobilisation plans that prioritize approaches that benefit/are accessible by women as well as men	No resource mobilisation plans for achieving LDN exist at neither national nor district level	Draft resource mobilization plans to attract additional investments are developed with national and local stakeholders	Final versions of three LDN resource mobilisation plans (1 national, 2 district) and presented to national governmental and international financial institutions for funding	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) During the MTR field phase, the "Resource Mobilization Plans" were presented under the "Implementation of Armenia's LDN commitments through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes" grant project, specifically focusing on the "Presentation of the National Resource Mobilization Plan for Land Degradation Neutrality" held on April 10, 2025. The event received significant criticism from the public. The main concern was that the presentation lacked in-depth analysis and appeared more as a presentation of already existing concepts rather than a comprehensive, actionable plan. This limited the effectiveness and perceived value of the presentation, and while it served as an initial step, it did not meet the expectations for developing actionable and well-supported resource mobilization strategies.
Outcome 2.2					
<u>Output 2.2.1:</u> Life Cycle Assessment of the land-based value chains (e.g. dairy, organic non-traditional vegetables, etc.)	Number of life cycle assessment of value chains (SLCAs and LCSAs)	Value chains are not well analysed, making it difficult to identify opportunities for value addition and	2 value chains with life cycle assessment (SLCAs and LCSAs)	4 business plans (2 for each district) that work for women finalised for the selected value chains	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while the development of TORs for the life cycle assessments (SLCAs and LCSAs) and

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
	Number of business plans for the selected value chains that work for women	development of equitable business plans			business plans was planned, the actual implementation faced several setbacks. The project encountered difficulties in hiring the necessary international gender and value chain experts due to the lack of applicants for the procurement bids. While the project team mentioned that the value chain assessments and business plans were developed, during the MTR, these documents were neither presented nor clearly defined to the evaluators. As a result, the expected deliverables remain incomplete, and the lack of timely progress hindered the achievement of the planned outcomes.
<u>Output.2.2.2:</u> Training programs on value-chains management (e.g. marketing, processing, certification) for local communities extension services, farmers, women groups, and youth	Number of curricula modified to include management of the whole value chain Number of value-chain actors with enhanced capacity in whole value-chain management	Training curricula do not adequately address management of the whole value chain Capacity among stakeholders to manage the whole value chain is low	Three university Curricula modified to include relevant LDN topics and adopted by the National Agrarian University of Armenia	350 training certificates obtained (disaggregated by gender and youth)	Moderately Satisfactory (MS) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while three university curricula were modified to include relevant LDN topics and were intended to be adopted by the National Agrarian University of Armenia (ANAU). Practical training on VC management has been initiated with training and VC awareness suggesting progress.
Component 3					
Outcome 3.1					
<u>Output.3.1.1:</u> Project mid-term and final evaluation conducted	Mid-term evaluation Final Evaluation	0	Mid-project review recommendations implemented	Final evaluation	NA
<u>Output.3.1.2:</u> Global Environment Benefits, co-benefits and costs of SLM in degraded landscapes monitored and assessed using gender disaggregated data	M&E system ensuring timely delivery of project benefits in terms of GEBs and gender disaggregated co-benefits	0	Timely monitoring of project outcomes, outputs, and activities	Timely monitoring of project outcomes, outputs, and activities	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while both the EPIU and FAO claim to have an M&E system in place, it is unclear who is responsible for conducting the M&E of the project and how it is being executed. There is no clear delineation of roles or a transparent process for monitoring the project's progress, which has created uncertainty regarding the effective tracking

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
					of outcomes, outputs, and activities. While intermediate monitoring has taken place, the lack of clarity in the M&E responsibilities and the absence of a detailed framework for gender-disaggregated data collection remain challenges that need to be addressed.
<u>Output.3.1.3:</u> Monitoring system for LDN indicators (land cover, soil productivity and soil organic carbon) in place	Monitoring system established under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment	No monitoring system for LDN exists Rapid assessment of land cover and productivity indicators during PPG using LADA methodology	Harmonisation and digitization of land cover data together with the Land Cadaster, and of land productivity monitoring using remote sensing (NDVI) and national data on soil fertility	LDN monitoring system based on the three global indicators functioning	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that while work on establishing a monitoring system for LDN indicators is ongoing, significant challenges remain. The harmonization and digitization of land cover data, along with the integration of land productivity monitoring using remote sensing (NDVI) and national soil fertility data, are still in progress. While data on land cover is being collected, the overall monitoring system is not yet fully functional. The lack of a complete and operational LDN monitoring system, particularly one based on the three global indicators, is hindering effective tracking and assessment of land degradation.
Outcome 3.2					
<u>Output.3.2.1:</u> Communication strategy developed and implemented to support SLM scaling up to meet LDN targets	Number of people reached by public awareness raising campaign Number of appearances in local media and partner websites	0	TBD	Public awareness raising campaign reaches 2,500 people (50% women) At least 10 informational events and media outreach activities	Moderately Satisfactory (MS) Stakeholder feedback indicated that a communication strategy for scaling up SLM to meet LDN targets was reportedly developed and implemented and ongoing. The communication strategy has been updated with additional outreach activities and campaigns are active and expert support enhanced since the project has a communication specialist, and as of April 1, 2025, an awareness-raising expert has also been hired to support these efforts.

Output	Indicator	Baseline	MTR target	EOP target	MTR assessment
<u>Output.3.2.2:</u> Lessons analyzed and knowledge management products developed and disseminated to promote replication of the LDN approach	Knowledge products developed on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles (at least 50% tailored to women)	No knowledge products available	5 knowledge products – to be determined at Project Inception meeting	10 knowledge products and awareness raising material (at least 5 tailored to women)	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU) Stakeholder feedback indicated that knowledge products on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles are under development. However, during the MTR, it was reported that no finalized knowledge products were available at the time of evaluation. The project has indicated that 10 knowledge products, including awareness-raising materials (with at least 5 tailored to women), are in progress. The communication expert, awareness-raising expert, and gender specialist are all involved in the development of these materials. While progress is being made, the absence of completed products during the MTR period raised concerns about the timely dissemination of lessons and best practices for replication of the LDN approach.

Annex 7. Co-financing – see Table 7

Annex 8. GEF evaluation criteria rating table and rating scheme

Ratings for Progress Towards Results: (one rating for each outcome and for the objective)		
6	Highly Satisfactory (HS)	The objective/outcome is expected to achieve or exceed all its end-of-project targets, without major shortcomings. The progress towards the objective/outcome can be presented as "good practice".
5	Satisfactory (S)	The objective/outcome is expected to achieve most of its end-of-project targets, with only minor shortcomings.
4	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	The objective/outcome is expected to achieve most of its end-of-project targets but with significant shortcomings.
3	Moderately Unsatisfactory (HU)	The objective/outcome is expected to achieve its end-of-project targets with major shortcomings.
2	Unsatisfactory (U)	The objective/outcome is expected not to achieve most of its end-of-project targets.
1	Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	The objective/outcome has failed to achieve its midterm targets, and is not expected to achieve any of its end-of-project targets.

Ratings for Project Implementation & Adaptive Management: (one overall rating)		
6	Highly Satisfactory (HS)	Implementation of all seven components – management arrangements, work planning, finance and co-finance, project-level monitoring and evaluation systems, stakeholder engagement, reporting, and communications – is leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive management. The project can be presented as "good practice".
5	Satisfactory (S)	Implementation of most of the seven components is leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive management except for only few that are subject to remedial action.
4	Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	Implementation of some of the seven components is leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive management, with some components requiring remedial action.
3	Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	Implementation of some of the seven components is not leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive, with most components requiring remedial action.
2	Unsatisfactory (U)	Implementation of most of the seven components is not leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive management.
1	Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	Implementation of none of the seven components is leading to efficient and effective project implementation and adaptive management.

Ratings for Sustainability: (one overall rating)		
4	Likely (L)	Negligible risks to sustainability, with key outcomes on track to be achieved by the project's closure and expected to continue into the foreseeable future
3	Moderately Likely (ML)	Moderate risks, but expectations that at least some outcomes will be sustained due to the progress towards results on outcomes at the Midterm Review
2	Moderately Unlikely (MU)	Significant risk that key outcomes will not carry on after project closure, although some outputs and activities should carry on
1	Unlikely (U)	Severe risks that project outcomes as well as key outputs will not be sustained

Annex 9. Core Indicators as MTR – see Table 6

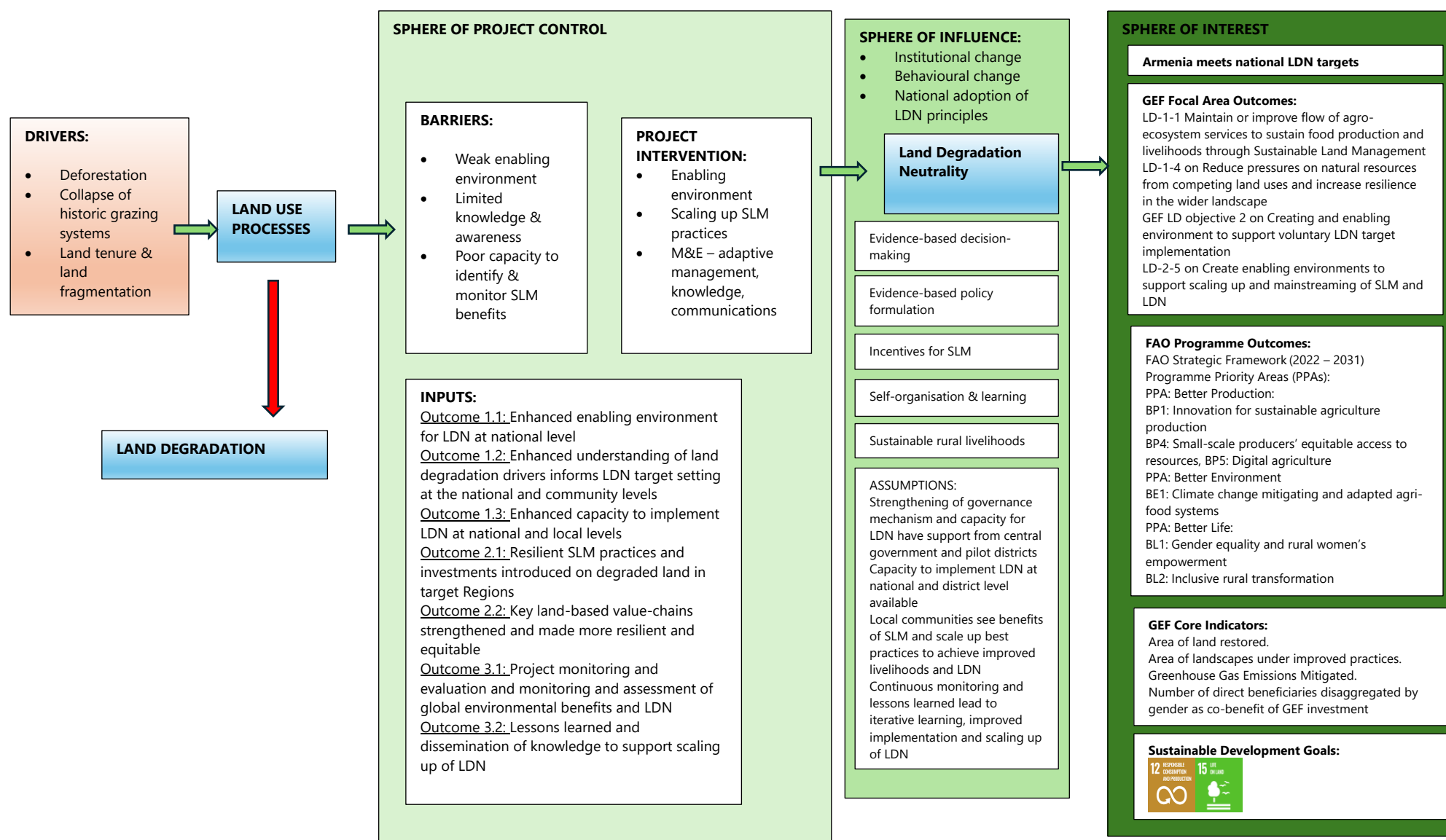
Appendix 10. Institutional framework (from Project Document)

Sector/Stakeholder group	Mandate (or activities)	Potential role in Project
Ministry of Environment	The Ministry is the focal point for UNCCD, UNFCCC and CBD, and is responsible for the monitoring and implementing of land degradation neutrality in Armenia.	Provide technical and logistical support for the project implementation, support the identification of demonstration sites, benefit from capacity building activities. Mainstream sustainable management and restoration of degraded grasslands landscapes into the NBSAP
Environmental Project Implementation Unit, State Agency of the Ministry of Environment	It is the agency in the Ministry of Environment responsible for liaison with government authorities from different sectors. It will oversee integration of conservation measures	Coordinate project implementation, Liaison and internal coordination among the governmental stakeholder and support to the implementation of the coordination mechanisms at both national and local level

	and monitoring system into the Integrated Forest and Land Use Plans and annual work plans, and contribute to capacity building of stakeholders (public/private/community).	
Bioresources Management Agency (Ministry of Environment)	Responsible to deliver up-to-date information on the country's ecosystems. Also responsible for preparing the NBSAP.	Mainstream sustainable management and restoration of degraded grasslands landscapes into the NBSAP
Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure	It is the central body of executive authority that develops and implements the policy of the Government of the Republic of Armenia in the field of territorial administration and infrastructure management.	Responsible for the coordination with Local Self-Governing Bodies (Lori, Syunik regions) and the cross-sectoral policies/legal framework supporting LDN principles implementation at national level (building on the UNCCD mechanism) and benefit from capacity building activities
Ministry of Economy (merged with the Ministry of Agriculture)	The agricultural division of the Ministry is responsible for the country agrarian policy, rural extension service and all activities related to food production, processing and value chains.	Support the implementation of the activities related to agriculture, also they will be responsible for mainstreaming LDN principles in the agricultural sector and to assure that the implementation of the Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural Development will be coordinated with the project implementation. And benefit from capacity building activities
Forest Committee (Ministry of Environment)	Responsible for conservation, protection, restoration, afforestation and effective use of state forests; ensuring sustainable forest management, the implementation of measures to increase the productivity of the state forests; the protection of biodiversity of state forests; efficient use of the environmental, social and economic potential of state forests; provision of complete and reliable information on the forest lands and forests	Support the project implementation and all activities related to forest management, restoration and new practices, also the Forest Committee be involved in the policy review process and will be important stakeholder in the cross-sectoral coordination mechanism
State Committee of Real Estate Cadastre	It maintains state registry of real estate and geospatial information systems, promotes development of real estate market, as well as development and implementation of land policy.	Responsible for the implementation of the monitoring system of the LDN targets and the proposed changes in the Land Code
Armenian National Agrarian University	State university and higher educational institution based in Yerevan. The university trains and prepares specialists for the agricultural sphere.	The Armenian National Agrarian University will contribute to the knowledge generation and knowledge transfer of the project including development of knowledge products and training content
Local Self-Governing Bodies (Lori and Syunik Regions)	They are responsible for the development and implementation of the Integrated Forest and Land Use Plans in each region. They also are responsible for monitoring land use practices in the areas under the jurisdiction of the self-governing bodies.	Support the cross-sectoral policies/legal framework supporting LDN principles implementation at regional level and be part of the coordination mechanisms (building on the UNCCD mechanism) between the national level and local decision makers as well as the coordination mechanism with farmer groups/extension.
Local small producers' organizations	Main beneficiary of the project and involved in land use and management	Benefit from support and capacity building and targeted producers will be responsible for transforming land management systems and adopting SLM/LDN.

Private sector actors	Promote sustainable value chains and foster innovative markets.	Responsible to support the enabling environment needed for the sustainability of the values chains
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Annex 11 MTR revised Theory of Change



Annex 12 National Regulatory Framework

Date	Name of law or regulations	Areas /law regulation applies to
2005	The Forest Code	In order to achieve the strategic objectives of the RA National Forest Policy the Forest Code was developed (2005), which regulates the legal relations in the field. According to the Code the forests of Armenia are state property (though it is possible to have community and private forests, Article 4) and they are managed by state structures. The Forest Code clarifies the competences of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, state authorized bodies, territorial bodies of state management and local self-governing bodies in the field of sustainable forest management.
2001	The RA Land Code	Land Code includes the state regulation and state policy of legal relations of land resources management, ownership and use. The LC defines the composition of the forest land, forest land classification and general conditions of use of forest land. This means that the Land code and Forest code are the acts having equal legal force, but it is a fundamental regulation of RA laws for the whole of the natural resources. The Land Code is of special importance for the nature protection field. It classifies land areas by different categories, by the level of importance and use purposes as well as sets forth the competences of state management bodies and land users (nature users), land protection functions, the status and structure of the state land cadastre and others.
2011	RA governmental decision N 1192-N	This secondary legislation outlines the monitoring methodology for industrially polluted soils.
2012	RA Mining Code	The Code provides a number of provisions relating to the protection of land relations and incorporates the concept of "re-cultivation" which assumes restoration measures aimed at the recovery of disturbed lands and bringing them into safe state to be viable for economic use and for conserving the environment envisaged by the design of extraction of minerals or geological exploration program.
2008	RA Law on Control Over Use and Protection of Lands	The Law defines the issues of effective use and protection of land, supervision of compliance with the requirements of land legislation, forms, supervisory authorities, rights and responsibilities of inspectors and inspectors, procedures for inspections. It oversees the protection and use of lands within the respective jurisdiction by the highest body of professional supervision established by the RA Law on Local Self-Government-State Authorized Body; the governors and community leaders.
2014	RA Law N 135-N on Food Safety	This law regulates food safety relationships and activities related to foodstuffs, food materials, food chains and trade and public catering, as well as provides for state guarantees for human health related with harmful substances and dangerous effects of foodstuffs and food materials. It regulates the basic principles and features of state control over food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary rights and obligations, duties of state controllers, as well as other relations related to state control.
2014	RA Law N 140-N on Plant Sanitary	The Law regulates the phytosanitary field in Armenia. It provides management relations, fixes mandatory phytosanitary requirements and the basic principles of phytosanitary process in the cultivation, storage, transportation or marketing of plants, plant products and other regulated articles, as well as obligations of natural and legal persons engaged in the cultivation of land.
2015	RA Government decree N 23 Dated May 27, 2015	Strategy and National Action Plan to Combat Desertification in the RoA
2019	Government decision N431-N as of April 11, 2019	"On approving the procedure for classification of land cover of the Republic of Armenia".
2020	Government decisions N2015-N as of December 10, 2020	"Land classification of the RoA".
2017	Government decision N1404-N as of November 2, 2017	"On determining the requirements/norms for removing the fertile layer of soil and defining the requirements for the preservation and use of the fertile layer, and on recognition of losing the legal force of #1026-N decree of the RoA Government as of July 20, 2006, which defines the requirements for norms for removing the fertile layer of soil and the preservation and use of soil fertile layer for improving the less productive soil.

2008	RA Law on Organic Agriculture	The Law regulates the production, preservation, processing, transportation and sale of agricultural products and materials as well as the storage of wild plants, and defines the principles of and legal grounds for the management of organic agriculture, its main circulation demands, directions of state support, and the duties of the authorized body. One of the stipulated principles refers to natural way of land physical, chemical and biological state improvement and fertility enhancement.
2011	RA Government Decree N 256-N on Approving the List of the Permitted Pesticides and Agrochemicals for Using in RA	The decree provides information on over 1400 materials and substances under 12 headings such as pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides, biologically active materials, etc. It details on the sales names, affecting material, content of the affecting material, the forms and producers.
2011	RA Government Decision N1396-N on Regulating the Use of Soil Fertile Layer	The Law regulates the relations related to efficient and purposeful use of the soil fertile layer, particularly the responsibilities of landowners and land users, jurisdictions of community heads and governors, counting and recording of data on removal, storage, transportation and use of the fertile layer of soil.
2006	RA Law on Specially Protected Natural Areas	The Law aims at setting forth the legal principles of State Policy for sustainable development, restoration, conservation and use of ecosystems, nature complexes and separate objects of Specially Protected Natural Areas of the Republic of Armenia representing environmental, economic, social, scientific, historical-cultural, aesthetic, health, climate regulating, recreational and spiritual values. Article 4 provides that Specially Protected Natural Areas in the RA are State ownership. It is prohibited to transfer the state ownedlands of specially protected natural areas to a private ownership. Article 4 provides that Specially Protected Natural Areas are taken into account for elaboration of economic and social development programs, territorial planning designs, land zoning and usage schemes, land, forest and city planning project documents and definition of boundaries of administrative units.
1995	RA Law on Environmental Impact Assessment Law (1995)	The Law provides that the objectives of environmental impact assessment are as follows: analysis of intended activities, concepts and the possibility of their alternatives and expediency, considering all ecological restrictions. appraisal of the possible effect and the degree of their danger of the intended activity, concept and their alternatives; inspection of the degree of the possible ecological effect of intended activities, concepts and the possibility of their alternatives.
	RA Law on Nature Protection and Nature Utilization Payments	The Lw provides obligatory payment to the state or community budget for implementation of nature protection measures, use and (or) sale of natural resources, which are considered state property. According to the law the nature utilization fee is a payment to the state budget for efficient, complex use of natural resources considered state property or a compensation payment for use and (or) sale of these natural resources.

Annex 13 Project Document Risk Assessment and MTR Assessment

Description of risk	Impact ⁵⁸	Probability of occurrence ³	Mitigation actions	Responsible party	MTR Assessment
Project execution under the new government that is reviewing procedures for management of international funds	M	L	The Ministry of Environment (Executing Entity) has assured that changes will only involve the legal definition of the Project Implementation Unit and it will not change its functions or composition.	Ministry of Environment (MoE)	This was a risk however it should have been better phrased and addressed the preparedness of the EPIU to implement a complex project. It is evident from the performance of the project that this was a risk and there was no recognition of the assumptions that a project designed to be directly implemented by FAO could be easily implemented by a OP (for instance the high turnover of PCs). MTR assessment of EPIU preparedness: Moderate to High
Weak cooperation between key institutional stakeholders (i.e. Environment and Agriculture sectors)	M	M	This risk will be mitigated under Component 1 of the project that will strengthen the intersectoral coordination mechanism to enhance cooperation on LDN.	MoE, Ministry of Economy (MoEc)	This is a frequent risk in most projects with an enabling environment component. This was arguably minimized or underplayed during the PPG (see finding 2). Furthermore, the stated risk mitigation action was arguably a "chicken and egg" situation – the intersectoral coordination mechanism to enhance coordination could not be developed until there was inter-sectoral cooperation. Arguably this risk should now be raised (see finding 3 & 6). MTR assessment: High
Lack of political support to LDN and SLM in the context of grasslands and pastures	L	L	Political support is high in Armenia for SLM and LDN, which is demonstrated by policy reform processes initiated both in the agriculture and forestry sector. This project will provide an opportunity to strengthen the LDN framework that requires inter-sectoral coordination and to demonstrate good practices in the field.	MoE, MoEc	The MTR notes that while there may be high political support, the means of achieving LDN are not universally understood (see finding 2). MTR assessment: Moderate Furthermore, the issue of grasslands and pasture management should have, at a minimum, triggered an additional social risk assessment due to equality of access to resources, amongst other triggers.
Low technical capacity in operationalizing LDN at national, regional and landscape level affecting project implementation	L	L	Capacity development for LDN will be provided under Components 1 and 2, which will mitigate the risk. Component 3 will in addition provide capacity building for replication of the LDN in other regions.	Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MoTAI)	This may have been correct under a FAO direct implementation modality (supported by the very high technical advice component in the project budget (\$529,100)). However, under an OPIM arrangement this risk is significantly increased and could have been mitigated by utilizing FAO resources to procure specific subject matter experienced technical assistance.
Natural changes in agro-ecological zones due to gradual changes in climate	M	H	SLM practices to be demonstrated and scaled up by the project are proven to enhance resilience to climate change, such as improved grazing rotation and and multi-purpose agroforestry practices.	MoTAI	The risk is poorly articulated, and the mitigation is irrelevant. The project is a 3-year duration. Short term variations in local circumstances are arguably a more immediate risk to the project outcomes. Simply missing a planting season because there was not a PIU in place was far more likely and would

⁵⁸ H: High; M: Moderate; L: Low.

and the incidence of extreme events					reduce the project's impact by 30%. A poor spring and late planting season the following year would reduce the project's effectiveness by 60%. The mitigation is worthy but meaningless in terms of project outcomes.
Lack of local stakeholder engagement and commitment to adopt SLM to achieve LDN	L	L	Implementation will be undertaken through community-based participatory approaches that address local cultural, socio-economic and ecological concerns. The project will provide incentives to farmers to engage in various activities that target LDN, involving both capacity building, awareness raising, and value chains strengthening. The local stakeholders have already participated in the stakeholder consultation meeting that took place on September 12, 2019 and have been consulted in all steps of the PPG process.	MoEc	This is a complex risk: capacity building, awareness raising, and value chains strengthening. Furthermore, it includes incentives (see findings 18 & 22). The risk could have been better unpacked or at least raised to moderate. Furthermore, the risk owner is not in a position to address the risk. It does not unpack the complex issues related to community dependency, neither does it disaggregate the risk by gender. The MTR would raise this risk considerably to High – engaging in receiving three beehives and engaging in SLM are, based on the limited community-level stakeholder feedback, two different motivational pathways.
Impacts of climate change and associated hazards threatens agricultural production and peoples livelihoods	H	M	The condition of the land is highly variable temporally, largely due to climate variability. Progress toward LDN will take climate change impacts into consideration in both the monitoring of drivers of LD and the implementation of SLM practices that will be selected based both on their productivity enhancing impact as well as their resilience to climate change.	MoE	The risk is real, and both the impact and likelihood are arguably high. The problem lies in the mitigation. These need to be framed within the project intervention, the means by which the project could intervene and the time available for the project (just 3 years).
Impact of COVID-19 causes significant economic downturn that impacts project outcomes	M	M	Globally this is a real risk for ABD conservation and can threaten landrace product value chain enhancement and this will be monitored, and adaptive management applied if necessary. The potential availability of co-financing could also be affected by changes in government fiscal priorities and exchange rates.	MoE, Ministry of Economy (MoEc)	Presumably this is a copy paste from an agricultural biodiversity project PPG. The second part of the mitigation statement: <i>"The potential availability of co-financing could also be affected by changes in government fiscal priorities and exchange rates"</i> remains valid.
Impact of COVID-19 would affect the engagement of local farmers and communities	M	M	At the national level, Government has its protocols in place for staff, and is requiring a full normal workload. Meetings are being conducted in small groups and via video. Nevertheless, response times are normal, The Ministry of Environment (MoE) is fully engaged on this proposal and is expecting FAO to move forward with the work. At the district level, precautions will be taken adhering to normal protocols established by the government	The Ministry of Environment (MoE)	At the time of the PPG this is quite reasonable. However, it is worth remarking that no protocols for Covid-19 were included as annexes to the Project Document and this was not translated into a social risk with regards to the community and their ability to attend meetings, participate in project activities or risk of exposure due to project activities. There was, given the level of risk at the time, no budget allocation for stakeholder, especially community stakeholders, safety in relation to Covid-19 exposure due to project activities.
Consequences derived from the Nagorno-Karabakh	M	M	At national level Strong focus on the recovery of the conflict and lack of capacity of the executing organization in follow up		The mitigation is impressive (but possibly outside the project's resource and time envelope). The MTR cannot find where this is in the Inception Report and therefore presumes that it wasn't carried out. In 2023 some of the

conflict and potential resurgence of conflict			with all projects activities. During the inception phase a structured context analysis will be undertaken to inform the project's design /implementation and identify the leading causes and drivers of localized disputes, tensions and conflicts, map local stakeholders and detail localized conflict lines and the perception of the concerned actors		Syunik communities lost meadows for fodder production (which did not need ploughing or fertilizer application according to the KI feedback) due to the conflict. The risk register was not updated to reflect this. And furthermore, the only time this was raised was during community stakeholder feedback interviews.
Support to COVID-19 recovery efforts in the context of this project	L	L	It is expect that the project can increase resilience of food system, strengthen a land-based value chain and generate income for local communities. This can generate a positive response to the post-COVID-19 recovery process of the targeted communities.		As a measure of the seriousness with which the risk analysis was being taken this literally states that the "Support to COVID-19 recovery efforts in the context of this project" is "low" and its impact on this recover is equally "low". This may seem facetious, but it suggests that there was little attention being paid to the project risks at the time of the PPG (the risk is actually more suited as a SRF output) and in the experience of the MTR, the more relevant the identified risks are in the Project Document the more likely that the project will monitor and avoid them.

Annex 14 Indicator Analysis

Indicator	Baseline	MTR	End of Project	SMART Analysis					MTR comment
Objective: To support the national efforts to implement the LDN targets of Armenia through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes				s	m	a	r	t	
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No objective-level indicators in SRF
Component 1: Strengthened enabling environment and capacity at national level for evidence-based implementation of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)									
Outcome 1.1: Enhanced enabling environment for LDN at national level									
Indicator 1: New cross-sectoral policies/laws	LDN principles are not part of the SLM enabling environment in Armenia	One cross-sectoral policy on LDN developed	Two cross-sectoral policies/One law integrating LDN principles	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	The MTR argues that this was unrealistic based on the situational analysis in the Project Document and a realistic understanding of what is achievable within a three-year project. Furthermore, a Law would need an act of Parliament or similar which is beyond the responsibilities of a project, therefore a draft Law would be more realistic.
Indicator 2: Intersectoral coordination mechanisms for LDN	As above	As above	Functioning intersectoral coordination mechanisms for LDN (horizontal and vertical)	Q	Q	Q	✓	✓	The Project Document and the SRF are vague on describing this and the terms appear interchangeable at times with the DSS. To measure this the indicator would need to "unpack" what an intersectoral coordination mechanism is and use these as milestones or baseline, mid-term and EOP targets.

Outcome 1.2: Enhanced understanding of land degradation drivers informs LDN target setting at the national and community levels									
Indicator 3: LD mapping that specify how gender differences and inequalities contribute to land degradation	There is no comprehensive LD mapping available that builds on a consensus map and understanding of drivers	LD trends and drivers mapped using a gender lens	LD trends and drivers mapped using a gender lens	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Final target re-states mid-term target. While it is important to understand the role of gender inequalities in driving LD other drivers are also important. The indicator's utility could be improved by un-packing the gender aspects more specifically.
Indicator 4: LDN targets set in Lori and Syunik	LDN targets are only set at national level	LDN local baseline established and mapped	LDN local baseline established and mapped LDN targets established in target communities in Lori and Syunik	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Outcome 1.3: Enhanced understanding of land degradation drivers informs LDN target setting at the national and community levels									
Indicator 5: Number of people, including women, with enhanced capacity in LDN implementation	There is limited understanding of the LDN concept and its implementation and no DSS for LDN in place	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of which 50% are women)	100 people trained at national level and 500 at sub-national level (of which 50% are women)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Final target re-states mid-term target. Indicator would be more accurate as "Number of people, including women, trained in LDN implementation". "Enhanced capacity" needs to be explained better so that it can be measured.
Indicator 6: DSS for LDN	As above	None given	DSS for LDN in place	✓	Q	✓	✓	✓	It is not clear whether this DSS will incorporate the LDN indicators i) land cover, ii) productivity & iii) soil organic carbon (SOC) and how this relates to the intersectoral coordination mechanism (see indicator 2). A better description of the DSS and its purpose would improve the targets.
Component 2: Scaling up of resilient Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices and approaches to meet LDN targets in degraded landscapes in Armenia									
Outcome 2.1: Resilient SLM practices and investments introduced on degraded land in target Regions									
Indicator 7: Number of ha of land with restored grasslands	A baseline FAO/GCF project is supporting forestry investments in the two target districts, but SLM and restoration using an integrated landscape approach is not	Integrated Land Management (ILM) plans for the two target districts with identification of restoration and SLM activities in different land-use classes for achieving LDN finalised	4,000 ha of degraded grasslands restored	✓	Q	Q	✓	✓	This is a Core Indicator No mid-term target given comparable against the final target. A repeat of the LADA survey for the final target would provide a better assessment of change.

	practiced in the two target districts Status of degradation was assessed using rapid LADA during the PPG								
Indicator 8: Number of ha of land with restored forest land	As above	As above	7,300 ha of forest lands restored within the State Forest Fund and established in abandoned lands	✓	✓	Q	Q	✓	Incorporates GEF Core Indicators. The focus of the project was not on forests, forests appear, as far as can be determined from the Project Document to be addressed through the GCF project. No mid-term target given comparable against the final target. A baseline would be useful?
Indicator 9: Number of ha of land under SLM, including forest land, grasslands and croplands	As above	As above	166,000 ha under SLM practices in target regions (of which: 110,000 ha forests; 50,000 ha grasslands; 6,000 ha croplands)	Q	Q	Q	✓	✓	It is not clear how these areas would be differentiated from the indicators 7 & 8 and could lead to "double accounting" No mid-term target given comparable against the final target
Indicator 10: Amount of carbon sequestered through restoration and SLM	As above	As above	32,274,507 tCO ₂ -eq sequestered	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	No mention is made in the Project Document as to which methodology was to be used (e.g. AFOLU?) unless this is in the Annexes to the Project Document which were not available to the MTR, It would be useful to include the methodology in the indicator otherwise all aspects of the target are questionable. No mid-term target given comparable against the final target, but this is not really an issue.
Indicator 11: Number of beneficiaries (households in pilot districts)	As above	As above	2,500 beneficiaries (target households in Lori and Syunik districts)	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	This is a Core Indicator. For the purpose of project evaluation this indicator is indistinct and needs to be "unpacked" for greater clarity – how were they benefiting, how were they measured, what constitutes a household, is there gender disaggregation in this data? It is a complex indicator and simply packaging it into one bundle can conceal important data. No mid-term target given comparable against the final target
Outcome 2.2: Key land-based value-chains strengthened and made more resilient and equitable									

Indicator 12: Number of value chains strengthened	Value addition to agricultural products from the two selected districts is limited, which negatively affects income generation and equity	None given	Two value chains (at least one focused on women) improved though LDN principles and SLCAs and LCSAs	Q	Q	Q	X	Q	Baseline (for all indicators in outcome) is ambiguous. No mid-term target given comparable against the final target. Actual values in the baseline and targets would improve the measurability of the indicator. Output 2.2.1 provided a midterm target 2 value chains with life cycle assessment (SLCAs and LCSAs), in fact the outputs appear to give different targets from the outcomes. The language used requires a level of technical understanding which would require re-assessing and defining these baselines, midterm and EOP targets during the inception phase. This was not included in the Project Document, monitoring framework and hasn't happened since.
Indicator 13: Number of VCs focused on women	As above	None given	As above	Q	Q	✓	✓	✓	No mid-term target given comparable against the final target. MTR presumes this is one VC focused on women (as above final target) – in which case the indicator is repetitive. The term "focused on women" lacks the accountability necessary for a gender disaggregated indicator.
Indicator 14: Number of value-chain actors with enhanced capacity in value-chain management	As above	None given	350 value-chain actors with strengthened capacity (disaggregated by gender and youth)	Q	Q	Q	✓	✓	"Enhanced capacity" – indicators are using ambiguous language. Needs clearer definition. No mid-term target given comparable against the final target. Final target is gender disaggregated but does not provide targets for gender.
Component 3: Monitoring, Evaluation and lessons learned									
Outcome 3.1: Project monitoring and evaluation and monitoring and assessment of global environmental benefits and LDN									
Indicator 15: M&E system in place for monitoring of project progress and GEBs	No system in place	Implementation of the project based on adaptive results-based management	Project delivers expected results and GEBs and co-benefits established	X	X	X	X	X	This indicator relates to the project implementation and is assessed through the MTR and TE and not through the SRF <i>per se</i> . Monitoring the GEBs would take place through the MTR and TE and subsequently through a DSS.
		None given	Functioning LDN reporting to the UNCCD	Q	Q	Q	Q	Q	Presumably refers to DSS. See indicators 2, 4 & 6

									No mid-term target given comparable against the final target.
Outcome 3.2: Lessons learned and dissemination of knowledge to support scaling up of LDN									
Indicator 16: Direct and indirect beneficiaries with improved knowledge and increased awareness on restoration and SLM in line with LDN principles	0	5 knowledge products and training/awareness raising materials on SLM and LDN	10 knowledge products and training/awareness raising materials on SLM and LDN Public awareness raising campaign reaches 2,500 people	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mid-term and final targets would benefit from measuring actual awareness of stakeholders (possibly through questionnaires or Knowledge, Attitudes & Practices (KAP) survey.
SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound Green: SMART criteria compliant; Yellow: questionably compliant with SMART criteria; Red: not compliant with SMART criteria									
Q Questionable	✓ SMART	× Not SMART							

Annex 15 Project risks under GEF's Risk Appetite Framework

All risks in the Project Document are re-assessed below the GEF 2024 Context, Innovation and Execution risk appetite thresholds.

Dimension	CONTEXT	INNOVATION	EXECUTION
	Climate	Institutional and Policy	Capacity for Implementation
Category	Environmental and Social	Technological	Fiduciary
	Political and Governance	Financial and Business Model	Stakeholder

Risk	Dimension	Category	Nature of Risk	Project Document		MTR Adjustment	Mitigation Measures (Project Document)
				Rating			
1	Political and Governance	CONTEXT	Project execution under the new government that is reviewing procedures for management of international funds	M	L	No longer relevant	The Ministry of Environment (Executing Entity) has assured that changes will only involve the legal definition of the Project Implementation Unit and it will not change its functions or composition.
2	Capacity for Implementation	EXECUTION	Weak cooperation between key institutional stakeholders (i.e. Environment and Agriculture sectors)	M	M	M	This risk will be mitigated under Component 1 of the project that will strengthen the intersectoral coordination mechanism to enhance cooperation on LDN. MTR – this risk assessment in the Project Document focuses on the technical capacity for implementing outcomes. It ignores the operational capacities of the OP (e.g. the complex procurement challenges).
3	Political and Governance	CONTEXT	Lack of political support to LDN and SLM in the context of grasslands and pastures	L	L	L	Political support is high in Armenia for SLM and LDN, which is demonstrated by policy reform processes initiated both in the agriculture and forestry sector. This project will provide an opportunity to strengthen the LDN framework that requires inter-sectoral coordination and to demonstrate good practices in the field.
4	Capacity for Implementation	EXECUTION	Low technical capacity in operationalizing LDN at national, regional and landscape level affecting project implementation	L	L	L	Capacity development for LDN will be provided under Components 1 and 2, which will mitigate the risk. Component 3 will in addition provide capacity building for replication of the LDN in other regions. MTR – see risk 2
5	Climate	CONTEXT	Natural changes in agro-ecological zones due to gradual changes in climate and the incidence of extreme events	M	H	M	SLM practices to be demonstrated and scaled up by the project are proven to enhance resilience to climate change, such as improved grazing rotation and multi-purpose agroforestry practices.
6	Stakeholder	EXECUTION	Lack of local stakeholder engagement and commitment to adopt SLM to achieve LDN	L	L	L	Implementation will be undertaken through community-based participatory approaches that address local cultural, socio-economic and ecological concerns. The project will provide incentives to farmers to engage in various activities that target LDN, involving both capacity building, awareness raising, and value chains strengthening. The local stakeholders have already participated in the stakeholder consultation meeting that took place on

Risk	Dimension	Category	Nature of Risk	Project Document		MTR Adjustment	Mitigation Measures (Project Document)
				Rating			
							September 12, 2019 and have been consulted in all steps of the PPG process.
7	Climate	CONTEXT	Impacts of climate change and associated hazards threatens agricultural production and peoples livelihoods	H	M	H	The condition of the land is highly variable temporally, largely due to climate variability. Progress toward LDN will take climate change impacts into consideration in both the monitoring of drivers of LD and the implementation of SLM practices that will be selected based both on their productivity enhancing impact as well as their resilience to climate change. MTR – this risk should have been further unpackaged to identify an operational risk due to unpredictable seasonal trends which may interrupt field activities within a 3-year project window
8	Stakeholder	EXECUTION	Impact of COVID-19 causes significant economic downturn that impacts project outcomes	M	M	Now L Mitigation is confusing and seemingly unrelated to this project	Globally this is a real risk for ABD conservation and can threaten landrace product value chain enhancement and this will be monitored, and adaptive management applied if necessary. The potential availability of co-financing could also be affected by changes in government fiscal priorities and exchange rates.
9	Stakeholder	EXECUTION	Impact of COVID-19 would affect the engagement of local farmers and communities	M	M	Now L	At the national level, Government has its protocols in place for staff, and is requiring a full normal workload. Meetings are being conducted in small groups and via video. Nevertheless, response times are normal, The Ministry of Environment (MoE) is fully engaged on this proposal and is expecting FAO to move forward with the work. At the district level, precautions will be taken adhering to normal protocols established by the government
10	Political and Governance	CONTEXT	Consequences derived from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and potential resurgence of conflict	M	M	M	At national level Strong focus on the recovery of the conflict and lack of capacity of the executing organization in follow up with all projects activities. During the inception phase a structured context analysis will be undertaken to inform the project's design /implementation and identify the leading causes and drivers of localized disputes, tensions and conflicts,

Risk	Dimension	Category	Nature of Risk	Project Document		MTR Adjustment	Mitigation Measures (Project Document)
				Rating			
							map local stakeholders and detail localized conflict lines and the perception of the concerned actors
11	Stakeholder	EXECUTION	Support to COVID-19 recovery efforts in the context of this project	L	L	Risk is poorly articulated	It is expect that the project can increase resilience of food system, strengthen a land-based value chain and generate income for local communities. This can generate a positive response to the post-COVID-19 recovery process of the targeted communities.

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