



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

Terminal evaluation  
of the project  
“Rehabilitation of  
forest landscapes and  
degraded land with  
particular attention to  
saline soils and areas  
prone to wind erosion”



**Project Evaluation Series  
07/2024**

**Terminal evaluation of the project  
“Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and  
degraded land with particular attention to  
saline soils and areas prone to wind  
erosion”**

**Project code: GCP/IRA/064/GFF  
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## Abstract

This is the terminal evaluation of the project *“Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and degraded land with particular attention to saline soils and areas prone to wind erosion”* in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This was funded by the Global Environment Fund (GEF) and executed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Key government institutions involved were the Forests, Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO) of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, and other relevant government and non-government sectors for their future planning and investment decisions.

The evaluation covers all aspects of the project period from July 2011 to December 2021 (the project has been unusually long-running due to significant external factors). A mid-term review was conducted in May 2016. The evaluation process was constrained by COVID-19 restrictions and data collection was carried out completely remotely, negatively affecting the range and numbers of stakeholders who could be involved. The evaluation was based on around 30 questions and subquestions. Thirty individuals were interviewed during the process, and photographic evidence was collected from various sources. Data collection consisted of i) an extensive desk review all of relevant documents and information; ii) semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders; iii) interviews with local community members involved in project activities.

The relevance of the project was found to be Satisfactory, aligning strongly with FAO and GEF priorities and with those of the Iranian Government. However, the design was found to be overambitious, with many risks and assumptions. Effectiveness was found to be Moderately Satisfactory, with successes in building capacity among the local communities of 14 pilot villages from two selected subwatersheds. Participatory, integrated SLFM activities were successful with Community institutions, and Village Resource Management and Development Committees with 41 sustainable community development funds established. These entities received formal government recognition. A wide range of alternative livelihood measures were supported. Work remains to assist communities in preparing and implementing their Village Level Plans (VLPs)

Efficiency was rated as Moderately Unsatisfactory. There were gains in adjusting the project to suit challenges arising, and community-driven processes. However, there were delays due to workplan endorsement and the release of funds from the Desert Affairs Bureau (DAB) hampering timely implementation, along with cumbersome administrative and financial processes. The project has promising prospects (Moderately Likely) of long-term sustainability, given the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM foundations established. The evaluation found that the sustainability of the project among the communities and their institutions is highly likely. It is, however, only moderately likely to be sustainable at the provincial institutional level.

The report provides four recommendations focused on i) completing unfinished project activities and outputs by the end of the project period; ii) providing technical support and assistance to the project executing agency; iii) commissioning a study focused on capturing and documenting the areas of apparent good practices, and iv) providing further training and support for staff on the Field Programme Management Information System (FPMIS).



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This terminal evaluation was launched in December 2019 but was postponed due to the widespread outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Islamic Republic of Iran and elsewhere. It was picked up again in June 2021. This evaluation was carried out remotely with the invaluable assistance of the FAO Representation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, the FAO Office of Evaluation, the Global Environment Facility Unit at FAO headquarters and the Project Management Unit in Tehran.

The evaluation benefitted from the guidance and support of Gerold Boedeker, FAO Representative in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Vahid Jafarian, National Project Director, and Mr. Abdolhosseini, National Project Coordinator, from the Project Management Unit of the Desert Affairs Bureau (DAB) in Tehran. Marjan Ghanbari and Sina Saemian from FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran provided all the necessary technical and logistic support for this evaluation. The untiring support and assistance of many other people from the Provincial Project Management Team (PPMT) of Kerman and the South Khorasan Province of the Islamic Republic of Iran is also highly acknowledged. The consultants would like to express their gratitude for their support in making this evaluation possible.

The contribution of all those mentioned above was invaluable for the successful accomplishment of this evaluation, and is highly appreciated. Last but not the least, the Evaluation Team expresses its gratitude to the respondents from among the beneficiary groups and their institutions for sharing their experience and insights obtained during project implementation.



## Abbreviations

DAB	Desert Affairs Bureau
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FRWO	Forests, Range and Watershed Management Organization
GEF	Global Environment Facility
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MTR	mid-term review
NRWMO	Natural Resources and Watershed Management Office
NWFP	non-wood forest product
PPMT	Provincial Project Management Team
PVRMDC	Participatory Village Resource Management and Development Committee
PVRMC	Participatory Village Resource Management Council
SLFM	sustainable land and forest management
TVTO	Technical and Vocational Training Organization
VLP	Village Level Plan
WLP	Watershed Level Plan
WRMD	Watershed Resources Management and Development

# Executive summary

## Introduction

1. The project “Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and degraded land with particular attention to saline soils and areas prone to wind erosion” GCP/IRA/064/GFF, aimed to document lessons in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These lessons can potentially guide the future actions of all participating entities and serve as an input to improve the formulation and implementation of future projects that may use similar approaches. An underlying purpose addressed planning for the last six months in order to maximize learning, secure sustainability and facilitate upscaling. It also provided recommendations to help the project’s executing agency and other government stakeholders institutionalize the results and disseminate information to the authorities that may benefit from it.
2. The project aimed to reduce land and forest degradation. Its design involved investing in sustainable land and forest management (SLFM) in two target provinces, and developing national and local capacity to support the widespread implementation of such techniques across the Islamic Republic of Iran. The project’s overall objectives were to remove barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM by: i) strengthening capacity of local communities, and provincial and local institutions to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives at the village and watershed scale; ii) adopting and implementing defined plans that include sustainable, alternative livelihood options with socioeconomic and environmental benefits that sustain ecosystem services; and iii) enhancing capacity at local and national levels to mainstream these approaches into national plans, policies and processes.
3. The intended users of this report are the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, at the regional level and at headquarters, as well as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), so that it can make strategic investment decisions. It is equally useful for the Forests, Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO) of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other relevant government and non-government sectors interfacing with it for their future planning and investment decisions.
4. This evaluation covered all aspects of project implementation at the national level for two provinces and their pilot sites. The project was implemented from November 2011 to December 2021. The evaluation focused on the assessment and analysis of efforts that had been made since the beginning of the project. Specifically, these efforts dealt with strengthening the capacity of local communities, and local and provincial institutions to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM approaches in pilot areas. These approaches were to be mainstreamed into national plans, policies and processes.
5. Relevant and available stakeholders in two provinces and their pilot sites, as well as the FRWO at national level, were consulted alongside the Project Steering Committee. Also consulted were the relevant professionals backstopping the project from both FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran and FAO headquarters, including the GEF Coordination Unit.
6. The evaluation was structured around key evaluation questions that corresponded to the main areas of analysis: i) relevance of the project objective and outcomes, including adequacy of design; ii) effectiveness of the project outcomes; iii) efficiency of project implementation and execution; and iv) sustainability of achieved results. It also focused on factors affecting performance, such as stakeholder engagement, monitoring and evaluation (M&E),

environmental and social safeguards, cofinancing and knowledge management. Furthermore, an assessment on gender and progress to impact was also undertaken.

7. Twenty-two key informants who were directly involved in project implementation provided details for the evaluation. This included project beneficiaries and field facilitators/staff engaged in the pilot sites of the two provinces. The other key informants were two from the FRWO/Project Management Unit, three from FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran and three from FAO headquarters.
8. A major limitation of this evaluation was the inability of the Evaluation Team to reach out to the full list of 48 identified key informants due to various reasons. These included the unexpected delay in getting clearance from the FRWO to interview the identified key informants, international and domestic travel restrictions, and difficulty in contacting these representatives due to limited communication facilities in the project villages. Some key informants could not be located.

## **Main findings**

### **Relevance**

Rating for overall relevance: Satisfactory.

9. The project objective and outcomes were fully congruent with national policies and plans, where the Islamic Republic of Iran had prioritized the removal of barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM approaches. The project outcomes were also in line with the GEF-4 Focal Area Strategies on Land Degradation and Biodiversity.
10. The project design was restructured at the project preparation grant stage. Community-based agroforestry in saline soils was dropped in the Yazd province since this issue was to be tackled in the selected two provinces of Kerman and South Khorasan. The project intervention area was redefined and downsized from watershed to subwatershed level at the project inception phase.
11. The project design was simple yet too ambitious. It included many risks and assumptions, many of which were drivers under the control of the project executing agency. The evaluation experienced difficulties due to the absence of baseline and quantitative indicators for the project outcomes.

### **Effectiveness**

Rating for overall effectiveness: Moderately Satisfactory.

12. To a large extent, the project was successful in building capacity among the local communities of 14 pilot villages from two selected subwatersheds. These sites implemented participatory and integrated SLFM activities. Community institutions, such as the Participatory Village Resource Management and Development Committees (PVRMDCs) (20) and the rural development funds/sustainable community development funds (41), were established. These entities received formal government recognition to give continuity to the participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. It was noted, however, that these communities and their institutions would need continued support from the local and provincial government to continue integrated SLFM initiatives after project closure.
13. The project strengthened the participatory and integrated SLFM-related capacities of the provincial and local government institutions through awareness raising, orientation and sensitization events. However, the institutional capacity ideally required within them to facilitate

and promote the participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives after project closure were not made evident.

14. The priority development needs of project beneficiaries in two pilot subwatersheds, per their participatory needs assessment, were addressed to a certain extent. However, the project lagged behind in enabling the local communities to prepare and implement their Village Level Plans (VLPs), especially the Watershed Level Plans (WLPs), even beyond the project's extended time frame.
15. Through various rehabilitation activities, the project succeeded in decreasing the severity of wind erosion in targeted areas and initiating an improvement in forest and rangeland conditions. It was reported that some globally important wild fauna species are recovering. However, there is more to be achieved in terms of floral diversity and non-wood forest products (NWFPs). Improvement in forest and rangelands and the control of wind erosion are likely to require continued efforts after project closure.
16. The project succeeded in promoting a wide range of alternative livelihood measures that can contribute to reducing pressure on forest and rangelands. However, the sustainability aspect of the promoted livelihoods needed more work with regard to value chains, financing and sustainable marketing potentialities.
17. The project succeeded in achieving the policy, institutional and interdepartmental linkages, as stipulated under Outcome 3, and meaningfully contributed to mainstreaming SLFM across different institutions and sectors. The Rules and Procedure of Section B, Article 29 of the Permanent Section of the National Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran was revised as a result of the project's work towards Outcome 3.

## **Efficiency**

Rating for overall efficiency: Moderately Unsatisfactory.

18. Adjustments were made to the project and its institutional arrangements in light of changes in the administrative and economic environment. The partnerships and intersectoral coordination established by the project contributed to achieving the objectives.
19. The community-based, participatory approach and the decentralized annual planning and implementation of project activities tended to make it cost-effective and time-efficient. However, delays due to workplan endorsement and the release of funds from the Desert Affairs Bureau (DAB) hampered the timely implementation of project activities and impacted its cost-effectiveness.
20. The project was not negatively impacted by a shortage of financial resources. Rather, it was negatively impacted by shortfalls such as:
  - i. constrained mobility, communication and service delivery opportunities as demanded by the participatory nature of the project;
  - ii. cumbersome administrative and financial processes, resulting in the delayed procurement of equipment and expert services; and
  - iii. restrictions imposed on travel and group activities due to the outbreak and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
21. Project management did its best to adapt to the changing conditions and improve the efficiency of project implementation. However, it could not achieve the desired level of efficiency due to

reasons beyond the control of both the executing and implementing agencies. This caused delays and an extension of the project for an additional five years. FRWO, the executing agency, performed its project management and administrative roles and responsibilities reasonably well. However, it could have done better.

22. The risks were identified and managed to a certain extent at the implementation level. However, they could not be managed to a desired extent at the strategic level. This was partly due to the international sanctions and partly to the prevailing administrative procedures constraining communication, coordination and adaptive project management.

## **Sustainability**

Rating for overall sustainability: Moderately Likely.

23. The project has promising prospects of long-term sustainability, given the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM that was embraced during implementation and concluded in the mid-term review (MTR). This evaluation finds that the sustainability of the project's achieved results among the communities and their institutions is highly likely. It is, however, moderately likely to be sustainable at the institutional level of the provinces with some extra investment and an adequate management of risks and challenges.
24. The overall likelihood of risks to sustainability is moderately likely. Despite the high possibility of sustaining the achieved results among the communities and their institutions, risks are likely unless all relevant service providers/government institutions at both the provincial and local level are reoriented to promote participatory and integrated SLFM. This also needs to be mainstreamed into the service delivery mechanism.

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

Rating for overall quality of M&E: Moderately Satisfactory.

25. The project lagged behind in establishing a practical, well-structured M&E plan. Nonetheless, the M&E system operated per the M&E plan provided in the project document. Although the project had delays in decisions and actions at the strategic level, the generated information was helpful in making timely decisions and fostering knowledge.

## **Stakeholder engagement**

Rating for stakeholder engagement: Satisfactory.

26. The project did not have a stakeholder engagement plan. However, it managed to engage with a wide range of stakeholders in a meaningful and effective way. This occurred at the provincial and local government level, and with the non-government institutions, the social welfare organizations, and the organizations that deal with nomadic issues, minority groups and business communities that were identified in the project document.

## **Knowledge management**

Rating for Knowledge Management: Satisfactory.

27. Communication of the project's objectives, achieved results and key messages were effective and will likely support sustainability and upscaling.

## Gender

Rating for Gender: Highly Satisfactory.

28. Gender was considered in project design and implementation. The latter ensured that both men and women had equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from project activities in an equitable manner.

## Overall progress on project implementation

29. The findings suggest that the project was successful in establishing the foundation for a participatory and integrated SLFM approach in two pilot subwatersheds that have a potential for long-term impact.

The overall rating for the project is Moderately Satisfactory.

## Conclusions

**Conclusion 1.** The project was fully relevant to the national priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in that it strived to eliminate sociopolitical, policy and institutional barriers to a participatory and integrated SLFM approach and achieve the conservation and development objectives at the watershed level.

**Conclusion 2.** It took a considerable amount of time to get this project endorsed by GEF. This was due to a delay in the submission of commitment for cofinancing. Moreover, the project could not be practically implemented until its inception in March 2012, even though it officially started in July 2011.

**Conclusion 3.** The project was successful in making the stakeholders realize the relative advantage of empowering the local communities and engaging them in SLFM initiatives. This realization resulted in the government's enactment of Paragraph B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of the Country Development Plans, which further enhanced the relevance of the project.

**Conclusion 4.** The project was successful in demonstrating that those impacting and/or impacted by the well-being of land, forests, rangeland and biodiversity resources in a landscape could be the best stewards and managers of those resources. It contributed significantly to developing the human and social capital at the project beneficiary level, and established the foundation for SLFM.

**Conclusion 5.** The sustainability of the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM in the project areas is ensured. It seems likely to be replicated in areas with a similar ecological setup. However, the human resources of the relevant provincial and local government institutions will need to be reoriented to assume the role of facilitator, motivator and technical service provider, rather than that of the implementer of SLFM.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** The remaining unfinished project activities and outputs should be completed in order to meet the commitment, consolidate the project achievements and strengthen the prospects for sustainability by the end of the project period.

30. This involves providing support and building endorsement for VLPs and finalizing the WLPs. A strengthened understanding of the successes and weaknesses of alternative livelihood businesses is key in addressing challenges. Moreover, a strengthened institutional capacity of the relevant provincial and local governments would be an important platform for future initiatives.

**Recommendation 2.** It is recommended that FAO provide the technical support and assistance to the project executing agency per its request to accomplish the recommendations made under paragraphs 171, 172 and 173.

**Recommendation 3.** FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran should commission a study to capture and document some areas' apparent good practices highlighted by the evaluation. This should take place before the project is completed and the staff departs in order to capture institutional memory and feed experience into future investments. These areas of enquiry include a participatory approach in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and its apparent influence), behavioural change and gender.

**Recommendation 4.** It is recommended to field test FAO's Field Programme Management Information System (FPMIS) in the project country and to provide the project team with hands-on training. They should also be enabled to use it prior to its execution for a better tracking of the results-based management of the project..

**Executive Summary Table 1. GEF rating table**

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating <sup>i</sup>	Summary comments
<b>A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE</b>		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	S	Refer to section 3.1.
A1.1. Alignment with the GEF and FAO strategic priorities	S	Fairly aligned.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities, and beneficiary needs	S	Fairly relevant.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	S	Complements the Islamic Republic of Iran's national desertification plan and sectoral development programmes.
<b>B. EFFECTIVENESS</b>		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MS	Refer to section 3.2.
B1.1. Delivery of project outputs	MU	Most outputs achieved with minor shortcomings. Outputs 1.3 and 2.1 had major shortcomings.
B1.2. Progress towards outcomes <sup>ii</sup> and project objectives	MS	Refer to sections 3.2 and 3.3
- Outcome 1	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 2	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 3	S	Level of outcome achieved more or less as expected.
- Outcome 4a	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 4b	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/ outcomes	MS	i) Capacity of project beneficiaries and their newly created institutions to plan and implement integrated SLFM using participatory approach enhanced, however, the pilot villages could not own and implement their VLPs and WLPs in its real sense. ii) The local and provincial institutions got oriented and sensitized on the participatory and integrated SLFM but could not institutionalize the concept of participatory and integrated SLFM within their operational systems and procedures. iii) Good efforts were made in reducing the pressure on lands, forests and rangeland and in eliminating threats to biodiversity, but the extent to which those efforts contributed to achieving the project objectives could not be assessed due to inadequate monitoring and unavailability of GEF tracking tool information.

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating <sup>i</sup>	Summary comments
B1.3. Likelihood of impact	ML	Institutionalized community-based capacity on SLFM is moderately likely to make an impact.
<b>C. EFFICIENCY</b>		
C1. Efficiency <sup>iii</sup>	MU	There were significant shortcomings and the quality of implementation or execution was somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
<b>D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES</b>		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	ML	Refer to section 3.4. Moderate risks to sustainability.
D1.1. Financial risks	L	Little risks likely.
D1.2. Sociopolitical risks	L	Little risks likely.
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	ML	Moderate risks likely.
D1.4. Environmental risks	UA	Incidences of natural disasters and their magnitude of risks to sustainability cannot be assessed.
D2. Catalysis and replication	L	Little risks to sustainability.
<b>E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE</b>		
E1. Project design and readiness <sup>iv</sup>	MS	There were shortcomings. See Findings 4 and 5.
E2. <b>Quality of project implementation</b>	MU	Quality of project implementation somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
E2.1. Quality of project implementation by FAO (Budget Holder [BH], Lead Technical Officer, Project Task Force [PTF], etc.)	MU	Lower than expected.
E2.2. Project oversight (Project Steering Committee, project working group, etc.)	MS	The Project Steering Committee failed to meet in regular intervals as planned.
E3. <b>Quality of project execution</b> For DEX projects: Project Management Unit/BH For Operational Partners Implementation Modality (OPIM) projects: executing agency	MS	Quality of project execution somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
E4. Financial management and cofinancing	MS	Not adequately decentralized, and relatively cumbersome financial management.
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	S	There were minor shortcomings.
E6. Communication, knowledge management and knowledge products	S	There were minor shortcomings.
E7. <b>Overall quality of M&amp;E</b>	MS	Refer to section 5.1.
E7.1. M&E design	MS	There were some shortcomings.
E7.2. M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources)	MU	There were significant shortcomings.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	MS	
<b>F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS</b>		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	HS	Refer to section 3.6.
F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples	S	No issues reported.
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	S	The project, to some extent, contributed to environmental and social goods.
<b>Overall project rating</b>	MS	

Notes: <sup>i</sup> See rating scheme at the end of the document.

<sup>ii</sup> Assessment and ratings by individual outcomes may be undertaken if there is added value.

<sup>iii</sup> Includes cost-effectiveness and timeliness.

<sup>iv</sup> This refers to factors affecting the project's ability to start as expected, such as the presence of sufficient capacity among executing partners at project launch.





# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Purpose of the evaluation**

1. This report presents the terminal evaluation of the project “Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and degraded land with particular attention to saline soils and areas prone to wind erosion” GCP/IRA/064/GFF, implemented in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This evaluation was carried out as a mandatory requirement for the Global Environment Facility (GEF). It was also demanded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for its monitoring and reporting purposes. This evaluation was conducted for the accountability and learning purposes of the GEF, FAO and other participating institutions.
2. An important purpose of this terminal evaluation was to document the lessons that can potentially guide the future actions of all participating entities and serve as an input to improve the formulation and implementation of future projects that may use similar approaches. An important underlying purpose involved optimal planning for the last six months in order to maximize learning, secure sustainability and facilitate upscaling. It also aimed at providing recommendations that can help the Forest, Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO), the project executing agency, and other government stakeholders institutionalize the project results, as well as disseminate information to authorities that may benefit from it.

## **1.2 Intended users**

3. As specified in the terms of reference (TOR), the main audience and intended users of this terminal evaluation are:
  - i. The project executing agency, FRWO, of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad and its Desert Affairs Bureau (DAB), which will use the findings and lessons learned for the sustainable accomplishment of the project’s intended results to institutionalize the approaches and disseminate the successful sustainable land and forest management (SLFM) practices for replication in similar ecological environments throughout the country.
  - ii. National government counterparts, such as the Iranian Department of Environment and the Research Institute for Forest and Rangelands (RIFR), and at the provincial level, the research centres for agriculture and natural resources and other government agencies involved as project partners/stakeholders for improving food security, vocational training and socioeconomic development, which will use the evaluation findings and conclusions for future planning.
  - iii. Project governance and implementation bodies, such as the Project Steering Committee, the Technical Committee, the SLFM platform and the provincial project planning committees, FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Project Management Team, members of the Project Task Force at FAO headquarters and the regional office, which will use the findings and lessons identified in the evaluation to finalize project activities, plan for the sustainability of results achieved, and improve the formulation and implementation of similar projects.
  - iv. The GEF Secretariat, which will use the findings to support portfolio learning and inform the strategic investment decisions in the design of future GEF projects.
  - v. Other donors, organizations and institutions interested in supporting and/or implementing similar projects.

### **1.3 Scope and objectives of the evaluation**

4. This evaluation covers all aspects of the GCP/IRA/064/GFF project and its implementation period from 1 July 2011 to 31 December 2021. Special attention was given to the efforts made to achieve the project's intended results after the mid-term review (MTR) in May 2016.
5. The objectives of this terminal evaluation were to:
  - i. examine the extent and magnitude of the project achieving its stated objectives and outcomes to date, and determine the likelihood of future impact – especially relating to environmental sustainability due to changes following the project's interventions;
  - ii. provide an assessment of the project's performance, gender disaggregated achievements, and the implementation of planned project activities and planned outputs against actual results; and
  - iii. synthesize lessons learned that may help in the design and implementation of future FAO and FAO-GEF SLFM-related initiatives.
6. The evaluation was structured around the: i) relevance of the project; ii) effectiveness of project outcomes; iii) efficiency of project implementation and execution; and iv) sustainability of achieved results. This terminal evaluation also covers: i) factors affecting project performance; ii) environmental and social safeguards; iii) gender; iv) cofinancing; iv) progress to impact; and v) knowledge management, which are mandatory for all FAO-GEF projects.
7. Efforts were made to understand and consider the preconditions and arrangements that either contributed to or hindered the implementation of the planned activities. This includes linkages and partnerships between the project and other major country initiatives.
8. In the context of its objectives, this evaluation was guided by the key evaluation questions listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Key evaluation questions**

<b>1) Relevance</b> (rating required)	<p>Were the project outcomes congruent with the GEF programme strategies (i.e. on Land Degradation and Biodiversity), priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the FAO Country Programming Framework?</p> <p>Does the terminal evaluation agree with the mid-term review's conclusions on project design? What recommendation and lesson learned can arise to anticipate or mitigate the long delay from conceptualization to the start of implementation of the project?</p> <p>Has there been any change in the project's relevance since its mid-term review, such as new national policies, plans or programmes that affect the relevance of the project's objectives and goals?</p>
<b>2) Effectiveness</b> (rating required)	<p>To what extent has the project objective aimed to reduce land and forest degradation by investing in sustainable land and forest management in three target provinces and develop national and local capacity to support the widespread implementation of these techniques across the Islamic Republic of Iran, been achieved? Subquestions for each outcome:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Has the project moved towards delivering on Outcome 1 through fulfilling the associated outputs? Have these output results truly had an effect on strengthened capacity of local communities in the select villages, and provincial and local institutions to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives? Why or why not?</li> <li>2. As a result of the project, A) have the status of forests and range improved? B) has the severity of wind erosion decreased? C) have natural resources been managed sustainability on the target 75 000 ha of land?</li> <li>3. Has the project moved towards delivering on Outcome 3 through fulfilling the associated outputs? As a result of these output results, can it be verifiably concluded that the project enhanced capacity at local and national levels to integrate SLFM across different institutions and sectors?</li> <li>4. Has the project been monitored and evaluated effectively and lessons learned and best practices disseminated widely (with a view of their replication in other areas)?</li> <li>5. Did the project produce any unintended results, either positive or negative?</li> <li>6. What recommendation/s can be drawn to aid the project in producing results which may still be pending and further delivering on its objective?</li> </ol>
<b>3) Efficiency</b> (rating required)	<p>How did the project activities, the institutional arrangements (national execution), the partnerships in place and the resources available contribute to, or impede, the achievement of the project's results and objectives?</p> <p>To what extent did the execution partner FRWO effectively discharge its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project?</p> <p>Has the project been implemented efficiently, cost-effectively, and management been able to adapt to any changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation? How well have risks been identified and managed?</p>
<b>4) Sustainability</b> (rating required)	<p>Does the terminal evaluation agree with the mid-term review's conclusions relating to the project's sustainability, as measured at the mid-term? Since that time, how has the likelihood of sustainability changed?</p> <p>The evaluation will analyse the reasons leading to increase or decrease in this likelihood, including the key risks which may affect sustainability.</p>
<b>5) Factors affecting performance</b> (rating required)	<p><b>Monitoring and evaluation</b></p> <p>Was the M&amp;E plan practical, well-structured and sufficient to capture all the aspects of the four components of the project?</p> <p>Did the M&amp;E system operate as per the M&amp;E plan? Was information gathered in a systematic manner, using appropriate methodologies?</p> <p>Was the information from this system appropriately used to make timely decisions and foster learning during project implementation? Why or why not?</p> <p><b>Stakeholder engagement</b></p> <p>Did the project include a stakeholder engagement strategy? How effectively and continuously has it been able to engage the relevant project stakeholders?</p>

	Were other actors, such as civil society, minority populations or private sector involved in project design or implementation? Does the evaluation have any recommendations to increase engagement with any of these stakeholders?
<b>Environmental and social safeguards</b>	To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?
<b>Gender</b>	To what extent were gender considerations taken into account in designing and implementing the project? Was the project implemented in a manner that ensures gender equitable participation and benefits?
<b>Cofinancing</b>	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran had to increase its contributions to the project to 144 percent (according to the mid-term review), in view of the difficulties in transferring the GEF funds to Iran 2011–2014. How did this affect the project's results? How has this situation changed thereafter, concerning both the government's in-kind and cash contributions? What relationship is there between some of the project positions being funded by the government and the foreseen sustainability of the project?
<b>Progress to Impact</b>	To what extent can the progress towards long-term impact be attributed to the project? Namely, as a result of the project, is there evidence that a) some of the existing threats to land and forest resources have been removed, b) biodiversity enhanced, c) capacity of degraded forests and lands to ensure sustainable livelihoods renewed, and d) desertification combatted? Has there been any change in policy/legal/regulatory framework, particularly as a result of project's work towards its Outcome 3? Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards long-term impact?
<b>Knowledge management</b>	How effective has the communication of project aims, progress, results and key messages been, along with any structured lesson-learning and experience-sharing between project partners and interested groups? To what extent are communication products and activities likely to support the sustainability and scaling-up of project results?

Source: Elaborated by the Evaluation Team.

## 1.4 Methodology

9. This evaluation adhered to the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards (UNEG, 2016) and followed the FAO Office of Evaluation Manual (FAO, 2019a), procedures and methodological guidelines throughout its process. It followed an interactive and transparent approach in the process of consultation with all internal and external stakeholders. Special attention was given to the triangulation of evidence and information gathered to ensure its validation, assessment and analysis.
10. This evaluation moved through the following stages: i) preparation for evaluation; ii) desk review; iii) information/evidence collection; iv) assessment, analysis and a debriefing presentation of the findings; v) zero draft of the evaluation report; vi) internal review of the zero draft and preparation of the first draft for circulation among relevant stakeholders; and vii) preparation and submission of the final report following comments and suggestions.
11. This evaluation was undertaken by a team made up of a national and an international consultant. As preparatory work, all project-related documents with regard to its design, approval and implementation were reviewed. It included the project document, project progress reports, project implementation reports and the mid-term review report. A detailed inception report was prepared and included a reconstructed theory of change for the purpose of this evaluation and a detailed evaluation matrix with evaluation questions and subquestions. It also included an elaborated methodology in line with the TOR. This had an evaluation strategy to enable information generation under the COVID-19 pandemic.

12. The key informants from among the project beneficiaries, community institutions and Provincial Project Management Team (PPMT) were randomly selected based on the detailed information received from and cleared by the Project Management Unit of the DAB. Information and evidence collection from provincial and local key informants was done remotely by the national consultant, partly online and partly through telephone conversations. The Evaluation Team was able to hold online interviews with two professionals at the central Project Management Unit level. The Project Management Unit, together with the two PPMTs in two provinces also provided information for this evaluation through a PowerPoint presentation. The categories of key informants included: male and female project beneficiaries from the two provinces; representative members of the community institutions, for example the Participatory Village Resource Management and Development Committees (PVRMDC) and the rural development funds; male and female field facilitators, experts and team leaders of the PPMTs from the two provinces; and the National Project Director and the National Project Coordinator from the Project Management Unit of the DAB.
13. Information was generated through online interviews with the Budget Holder (BH) and the two professionals engaged in backstopping this project from FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Information was also generated from the Lead Technical Officer, and Funding Liaison Officers from the GEF Coordination Unit at FAO headquarters.
14. Separate questionnaire sets were developed for each category of key informants to generate and validate information and evidence relating to the achievement of project outputs, outcomes, sustainability and impact. The emphasis was on understanding whether the project's achieved results were in line with the three impact pathways leading to its objectives, as determined in the theory of change constructed for this purpose.
15. Out of the 48 people originally identified for key informant interviews and focus group discussions, only 30 key informants could be interviewed due to various reasons, including the lack of communication facilities for the key informants. The 30 key informants contributed to the information and evidence collection – 22 of whom were from two provinces (11 each from Kerman and South Khorasan), two from the Project Management Unit, three from FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran and three from FAO headquarters. Out of the 30 respondents, 13 were from various stakeholder categories and 17 from among the project beneficiaries. Among the key informants, 7 out of 30 were female.

## **1.5 Limitations**

16. This evaluation was conducted at a time when countries all over the globe were struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, had enforced travel restrictions. Many regulatory measures were even imposed on domestic travel between cities, provinces and districts. As a result, the team leader could not conduct the field mission at the project site. The evaluation was essentially done remotely in order to collect and validate data and evidence. This meant that on-site verification and field-level observations could not be conducted. Some previously collected photographic evidence was useful for illustrating some of the project initiatives that had been undertaken.
17. It took a long time to gain the necessary permissions from the authorities to proceed with interviews among both officials and communities. This impacted the Evaluation Team's ability to adapt within the evaluation data collection time frame and address gaps that had emerged when certain stakeholders could not be engaged. The need for permissions also hampered the

Evaluation Team's capacity to "snowball", that is, get an informant's recommendation on interesting people to engage with who might not be on the key informant list.

18. Only 30 out of 48 key informants identified could be interviewed/consulted remotely. Some key informants could not be reached due to their remote location and lack of communication facilities. Some of those identified at the Project Management Unit level were not available due to various reasons. Since most of the interviews at the provincial and project pilot sites level were conducted by telephone, the facial impression and body language of the key informants could not be captured. This constrained the interviewer from raising follow-up queries, and consolidating and validating the interviewee's response.

## **1.6 Structure of the report**

19. The report is structured around six sections. Following this introduction, section 2 provides the background and context of the project, including the reconstructed theory of change. Section 3 reviews and analyses the findings on each key evaluation question, as per the TOR evaluative criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. This included factors affecting performance, gender and progress to impact. Section 4 presents the conclusions and recommendations, followed by lessons learned in section 5. The report is accompanied by appendices, and by the evaluation TOR in Annex 1 and photographic evidence of the project's rehabilitation activities in Annex 2.

## 2. Background and context of the project<sup>1</sup>

20. Forty-three percent of the Islamic Republic of Iran's population occupies 85 percent of the country's landmass that is under arid, semiarid and hyperarid conditions within its forests, rangeland and agricultural areas. These zones have been known for many wild relatives and landraces<sup>2</sup> of important food crops, fruit trees and pasture species for the past 10 000 years. Rich in biodiversity with many endemic species, it features 110 livestock and poultry ecotypes, as well as four out of six of the world's honey bee species. The country's agriculture sector supplies almost 80 percent of food, contributes 26 percent to the country's gross domestic product and provides employment to 33 percent of the population.
21. The Islamic Republic of Iran faces major problems: the relatively high rate of loss and degradation of forests and rangelands; the depletion of watersheds, which causes a water shortage for agriculture; and the loss of soil properties due to wind and water erosion. Soil salinity is on the rise due to natural phenomena and the excessive pumping of ground water for agriculture. The unabated loss and degradation of forests and rangelands have had a serious impact on ecosystem functions and services, while the ever increasing soil salinity has caused an estimated economic loss of approximately USD 1 billion per year.
22. The key anthropogenic threats facing these areas of the Islamic Republic of Iran are: i) unabated deforestation for fuel wood and timber in the absence of appropriate alternatives for household energy and timber for construction; ii) high grazing pressure due to relatively large populations of livestock beyond the carrying capacity of forests and rangelands, including the reduced mobility of pastoralists and inadequacy of water points; iii) unsustainable agropastoral practices; iv) inadequate land tenure practices; v) unregulated and heavy exploitation of biodiversity resources; and vi) rapid depletion of soil properties due to severe wind and water erosion, and increasing salinity.
23. This project was designed to address key barriers to sustainable land, forest and rangeland management in the Islamic Republic of Iran embedded in:
  - i. weak participation of local communities in government-led development initiatives;
  - ii. unsustainable agricultural practices;
  - iii. unsustainable use of rangelands; and
  - iv. limited intersectoral collaboration, a top-down approach and a lack of knowledge and skills among local and provincial government institutions in engaging with local communities to promote SLFM initiatives that integrate local traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the project documents and the MTR.

<sup>2</sup> The term is generally defined as a cultivated, genetically heterogeneous variety that has evolved in a certain ecogeographical area and is therefore adapted to the edaphic and climatic conditions, and to its traditional management and use.



### Box 1. Basic project information

- GEF project ID number: 3450
- Recipient country: the Islamic Republic of Iran
- Implementing agency: FAO
- Executing agency: FRWO, which is part of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad
- GEF focal areas: land degradation and biodiversity
- GEF strategy programmes: land degradation – Supporting Sustainable Agriculture and Rangeland Management, and Supporting Sustainable Forest Management in Production Landscapes/biodiversity – Strengthening the Policy and Regulatory Framework for Mainstreaming Biodiversity
- Project identification form approved: 10 October 2007
- Date of CEO endorsement: 29 March 2011
- Date of programme and project review committee endorsement: 20 April 2011
- Date of government cooperative programme agreement signature: 25 May 2011
- Date of project start: 1 July 2011
- Letters of agreement: 2013 (signed 25 August, amended 4 September); 2015 (signed 22 September); 2017 (signed 21 February); and 2018 (signed 8 January)
- Initial date of project completion (original NTE): February 2016
- Revised project implementation end date: 31 December 2021
- Date of mid-term evaluation: completed May 2016

Source: FAO. 2011. *Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and degraded land with particular attention to saline soils and areas prone to wind erosion. Project document*. Rome.

24. The overall objective of the project was to reduce land and forest degradation by investing in SLFM in two target provinces and developing national and local capacity to support the widespread implementation of these techniques across the Islamic Republic of Iran. The project had four components:
  - i. Component 1 – participatory and integrated SLFM capacity development;
  - ii. Component 2 – implementation of participatory and integrated Village Level Plans (VLPs) and Watershed Level Plans (WLPs) in selected pilot sites;
  - iii. Component 3 – improving the policy and institutional environment for a participatory and integrated SLFM approach; and
  - iv. Component 4 – i) awareness raising and dissemination of best practices and lessons learned; and ii) project management.
25. The project was implemented in two Iranian provinces: Kerman and South Khorasan. The project pilot site selection criteria included the following: distance from the provincial capital and airport; state of infrastructure; administrative and institutional capacities, national priorities; ecological indicators (e.g. type of ecosystem, potential for rehabilitation, degree of being representative in the Islamic Republic of Iran); and socioeconomic factors (e.g. community groups, willingness to participate, dependence on forest, land and natural resources, age and gender).

**Table 2. GEF allocation and the originally planned government cofinancing**

Source of funding	Type of funding	Funding amount (USD)
Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran cofinancing	Cash	5 003 280
Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran cofinancing	In-kind	3 335 554
GEF allocation	Cash	2 668 300
<b>Total</b>		<b>11 007 134</b>

Source: FAO. 2011. *Rehabilitation of forest landscapes and degraded land with particular attention to saline soils and areas prone to wind erosion*. Project document. Rome.

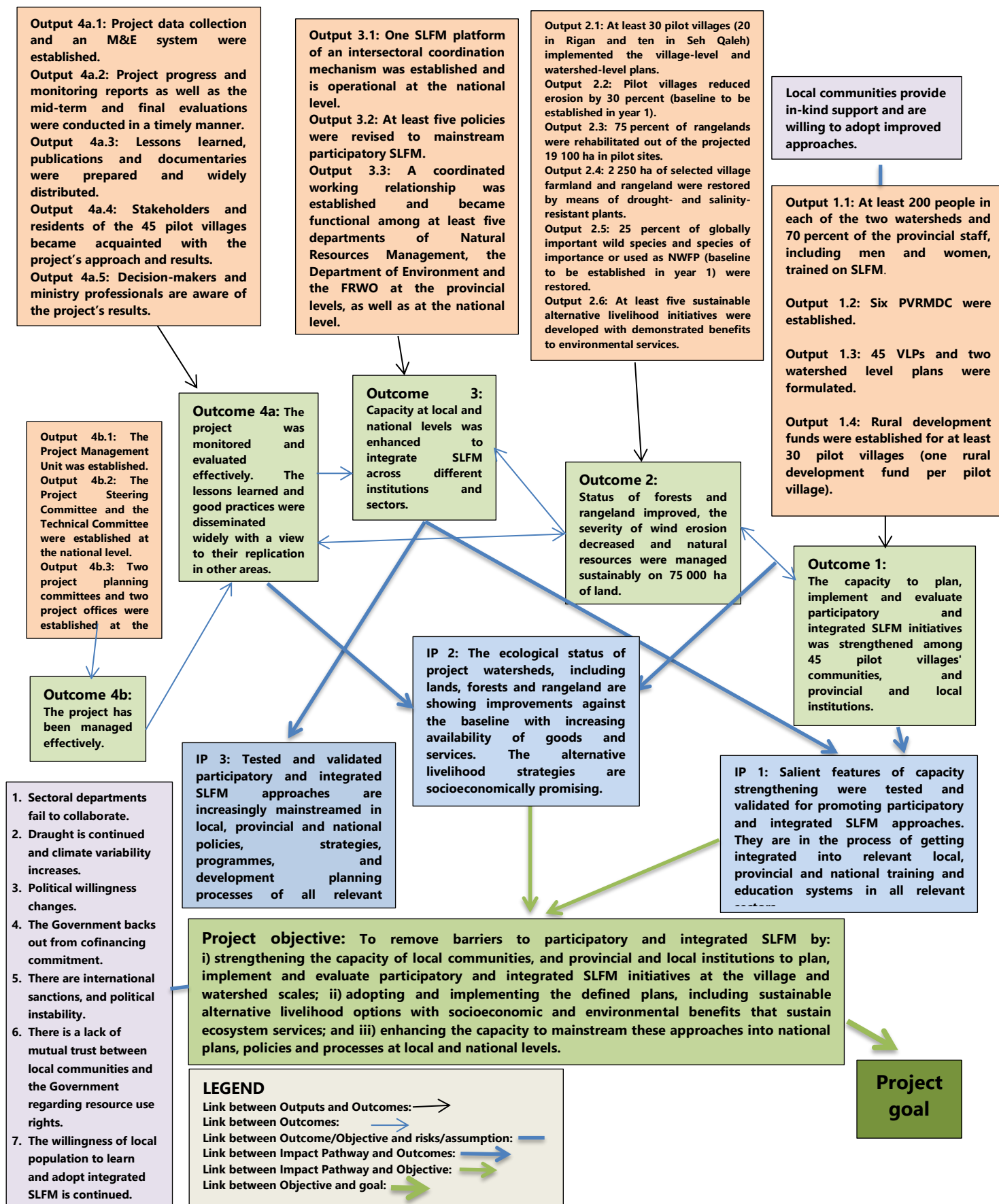
26. Originally, the project was designed for implementation in one watershed of Kerman and one of South Khorasan. The project inception team further reduced the project areas to one subwatershed area for each of the two watersheds on the ground since the identified watersheds were too big for pilot implementation. It was decided that once the successful models are developed at subwatershed levels, they could be replicated in the whole watershed.
27. A mid-term review conducted in 2016 drew conclusions on the project concept and design, as well as its execution. Key conclusions were as follows:
  - i. Project implementation was severely hampered from 2011 to 2014 when transferring GEF funds was impossible due to international sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran.
  - ii. Administrative and financial processes were unclear, complex and cumbersome, as perceived by the stakeholders.
  - iii. The project expenditure, as of December 2015, was 35 percent of the total GEF grant. However, the government contribution increased to 144 percent of the committed amount.
  - iv. Strong governmental commitment resulted in an effective and comprehensive institutional arrangement and management structure for the project. The Project Steering Committee, however, met only twice prior to the mid-term review, while the other committees met regularly.
  - v. A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan was in place. However, most of the 20 indicators were quantitative and did not depict the qualitative aspects of project achievements. This included capacity building among local communities to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives.
  - vi. The project's communication materials were effectively distributed. This made the project highly "visible" among relevant government offices and project sites.
28. The mid-term review found the project's progress and results to be satisfactory. It recommended a two-year extension, funds permitting. As a result, the project was extended until 2020. The mid-term review made 11 other recommendations. This terminal evaluation has duly considered such recommendations during its assessment and analysis.

## 2.1 Theory of change

29. A theory of change was constructed for the purpose of this evaluation. It was based on the project's intended impacts that were implicit in its results framework. The theory of change was instrumental in clarifying the scope of the project. It was used to analyse the evidence and frame the evaluation findings.
30. As shown in Figure 1, three impact pathways were identified depending on the outputs being achieved under each targeted outcome. These would complement and support the achievement

of results under other outcomes and collectively contribute to accomplishing the project's objective. The synergetic impact of the achievements of all four components was expected to transform into the achievement of the development objective. This would further contribute to reaching the project's goal.

31. The three impact pathways were developed under the project development objective and overall goal. These impact pathways were also in line with the government's priorities, as outlined in The national action programme to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought of Islamic Republic of Iran (FRWO, 2004), National strategy for mitigation of climate change impact (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2017) and the Twenty-year national vision (Khamenei, 2005). They also align with the GEF and FAO strategic programme objectives. They are detailed as follows:
- vii. Impact Pathway 1. Salient features of capacity strengthening – tested and validated to promote participatory and integrated SLFM approaches – are being integrated into relevant local/provincial and national training and education systems of all relevant sectors.
  - viii. Impact Pathway 2. The ecological status of project watersheds, including land, forests and rangelands, are showing improvements against the baseline with the increased availability of goods and services, as well as promising alternative livelihood strategies.
  - ix. Impact Pathway 3. Tested and validated participatory and integrated SLFM approaches are becoming increasingly mainstreamed into the local/provincial and national policies, strategies, programmes and developmental planning processes of all relevant sectors.

**Figure 1. Theory of change (constructed for the terminal evaluation)**

Source: Elaborated by the Evaluation Team.



### 3. Key findings by evaluation questions

#### 3.1 Relevance

**Finding 1.** The project design was fully congruent with the national policies and plans of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Evaluation Team agrees with the first conclusion of the MTR that the project was a direct response to the Iranian national priorities of seeking to remove barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM.

32. The priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran on environmental issues are defined in the country's constitution and implemented by the central and provincial level government departments (Iranian Department of Environment, n.d.). The project was reported to be congruent with all development plans and programmes of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran relating to forests, rangelands, watersheds and agriculture. The project complemented The national action programme to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought of Islamic Republic of Iran (FRWO, 2004). This plan aims at combating land degradation and mitigating the effects of drought. It does so by promoting sustainable development measures and improving the living conditions of the affected people, as well as strengthening capacities at all levels to combat desertification. This project was also congruent with the Islamic Republic of Iran's National strategy for mitigation of climate change impact (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2017) This strategy underscores the rehabilitation of forests and rangelands in watersheds through locally implemented rural projects that involve carbon sequestration and/or storage, and develop linkages between natural resources and clean energy sectors for improved ecosystem services. The project was also consistent with the Islamic Republic of Iran's Revised national biodiversity strategies and action plan (NBSAP2) 2016–2030 (Islamic Republic of Iran, 2016) that underscores:
  - i. the establishment of linkages in interjurisdictional institutional mechanisms for coordinating policies, norms and actions for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity;
  - ii. generating, disseminating and encouraging experiences of sustainable management with a focus on human and ecosystem well-being;
  - iii. promoting biodiversity conservation through ecoregion-based planning and implementation; and
  - iv. strengthening national capacities for biodiversity conservation through the development and application of economic instruments.
33. The MTR drew two conclusions from the project concept and design. First, the Rehabilitation of Forest Landscapes and Degraded Land with Particular Attention to Saline Soils and Areas Prone to Wind Erosion (RFLDL) project is a direct response to national priorities that seek to remove barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM. The key barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM, as stipulated in the project document, were:
  - i. weak participation of local communities in government-led development initiatives due to a lack of mutual trust between the people and the government institutions;
  - ii. limited intersectoral collaboration, a top-down approach and a lack of knowledge and skills among local and provincial government agencies in engaging with local communities and relevant government sectors to promote SLFM initiatives that integrate local traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge;
  - iii. unsustainable agricultural practices dependent on the extensive use of chemical fertilizers and incentives for high yielding crop varieties that prompt deep-bore water

- harvesting, contribute to the extinction of ecologically adapted native crop varieties and further increase soil salinity; and
  - iv. unsustainable use of rangelands that got exacerbated after the nationalization of forest and rangelands in the 1960s, which resulted in the breakdown of traditional rangeland management practices. With the increasing settlement of nomadic pastoralists on flat plains, the grazing pressure on forests and rangelands of these areas went beyond their carrying capacity.
34. The review of the project's workplans and progress reports indicated that the project activities and approaches used to achieve the project outputs and outcomes were geared at removing those barriers. The terminal Evaluation Team fully agrees with these conclusions drawn from the MTR.

**Finding 2.** The project outcomes were fully congruent with the GEF-4 Focal Area Strategies on Land Degradation and Biodiversity.

35. The three project components aimed at improved living conditions in the rural arid and semi-arid areas of two provinces. These sought to address the threatened livelihoods of the majority of the population due to decades old drought conditions and the unabated degradation of forests and rangelands, including increasingly difficult living conditions from wind erosion.
36. These three project components were congruent with the four priority areas of the FAO Country Programming Framework in the Islamic Republic of Iran: i) environmentally sustainable and climate-smart agriculture; ii) food and nutrition security and food safety; iii) inclusive and resilient rural development; and iv) a knowledge-based economy and society. The project outcomes were fully congruent with GEF-4 Strategic Objectives 1 and 2 regarding the Land Degradation focal area that addresses: i) the development of an enabling environment that places sustainable land management in the mainstream of development policy and practices at regional, national and local levels; and ii) upscaling of sustainable land management investments that generate mutual benefits for the global environment and local livelihoods. Similarly, Strategic Objectives 2 and 3 regarding the biodiversity focal area emphasize: i) mainstreaming biodiversity in production landscapes/seascapes; and ii) safeguarding biodiversity.

**Finding 3.** The project design was restructured to intervene in two provinces, Kerman and South Khorasan, at the project preparation grant stage. The community-based agroforestry in saline soils intervention in the province of Yazd was dropped.

37. The review of project-related documents revealed that at the project identification form stage, there was a plan to intervene in three provinces: Kerman, South Khorasan, and Yazd. However, at the project preparation grant stage, it was realized that the project could be better planned and implemented in two provinces instead of three within the limit of the allocated funding. Hence, the components defined in the project identification form stage were regrouped and rephrased without losing the essence of the outcomes. The only change was that the community-based agroforestry in saline soils intervention for the Yazd province was dropped.
38. The Evaluation Team considered this restructuring to be the right decision at the project preparation grant stage. This is because the saline soils-related issues were also to be dealt with in the selected two provinces. Moreover, the process-oriented approach of the project to tackle key barriers demanded highly focused efforts within the limit of the available funding.

**Finding 4.** The project intervention area was redefined and further downsized from watershed to subwatershed level at the project inception phase.

39. The review of project-related documents, specifically the project document, revealed that the project was to be implemented in an area of 587 461 ha of the Ab Barik watershed at the Rigan site of the Kerman province and 163 586 ha of the Seh Qaleh watershed in South Khorasan. These areas were selected on the basis of site selection criteria established at the outset of this project. The criteria included general, ecological and socioeconomic indicators (MTR report, 2016). However, the project inception team realized that the project results could be better achieved through a focused, pilot area intervention at the subwatershed level. Hence, the project intervention area was further downsized, and the Cunarnai subwatershed in the Ab Barik watershed at Rigan, and the Hamboo subwatershed in that Seh Qaleh watershed at South Khorasan were selected for project intervention (Project Inception Report, 2012).
40. The justification given for further downsizing the intervention area from the watershed to subwatershed level was that once a successful working model at the subwatershed levels was piloted and developed, the project activities could be extended to other subwatersheds of the selected watersheds. The Evaluation Team considered this rationale and decision as logical given the complexity of the barriers to be tackled, and the community-based and process-oriented approach to be adopted in a relatively difficult physical and demographic setting.

**Finding 5.** The project design was simple yet overly ambitious. It included many risks and assumptions, and was difficult to evaluate in the absence of baseline and qualitative indicators of key outcomes, for example improvement in forest and rangeland conditions, and capacity building.

41. The terminal evaluation found the project design to be a little too ambitious given its four-year time frame. For instance, no significant and visible improvements in forest, rangelands and watershed conditions, nor biodiversity status, could be expected within four years of the project intervention.
42. The project design followed a logical approach to defining the outcomes, outputs and indicators. However, it included too many risks and assumptions. These were found to be, arguably, within the control of the project executing agency and the government. For instance, the risks and assumptions involved the following: "if local people/communities are willing and continue to participate" and "if the government continues to provide cofinancing". These factors could not be considered as a risk or assumption since they formed the basis for the project design and were needed to be secured by the project executing agency and the government for project implementation.
43. Some important baselines were to be established prior to the project intervention. These included land degradation, biodiversity and capacities at the local community, provincial and district government level, per the project's results framework. However, no baseline was found.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the project's results framework did not have qualitative indicators to undertake an objective evaluation on these important features of the project intervention. For instance, the change in knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour of the project beneficiaries, service providers and stakeholders was difficult to assess in the absence of qualitative indicators.

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<sup>3</sup> A document titled *Socio-economic baseline at a glance*, which was shared with the Evaluation Team, does not mention when the study was conducted. No other baseline was evidenced.



### 3.1.1 Rating of relevance

44. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities: Satisfactory. The project was well aligned with GEF-4 Focal Area Strategies on Land Degradation and Biodiversity, FAO Strategic Objectives at the global level, and FAO's Country Programming Framework.
45. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs: Satisfactory. It was relevant and closely aligned with both national and global priorities, as well as local community needs and expectations.
46. Complementarity with existing interventions: Satisfactory. Ongoing, complementary interventions by the Iranian Government to combat land degradation and desertification, and conserve biodiversity were reported.
47. Overall strategic relevance: Satisfactory.

## 3.2 Effectiveness

**Finding 6.** To a large extent, the capacity in 14 pilot villages – which covered 45 project villages of two subwatersheds – to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives were strengthened.

48. The communities of 45 project villages (grouped into ten and four pilot villages in the selected subwatersheds of Rigan and Sarayan, respectively) were covered under the project's capacity-building initiative. The pilot villages covered 462 068 ha of forest, rangeland and agricultural land, which was to be placed under participatory and integrated SLFM.
49. At the outset, project-appointed field facilitators<sup>4</sup> were trained on facilitation skills and participatory tools and techniques. They were mobilized to: work with local communities; motivate and capacitate the community members; build their trust and confidence; and ensure that they receive the required social, institutional and technical assistance. The field facilitators also need to achieve coordination among communities, their local institutions and relevant local and provincial government institutions and service providers for a smooth implementation of project activities.
50. By the eighth project implementation review (PIR), 2 198 people from the local communities and relevant government staff, benefited from capacity building on participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. Starting with orientation meetings, and awareness raising on livelihood and natural resource issues, the training activities were organized in the form of workshops on various topics related to rangelands and forest management, environmental, health and sanitation issues. Training on most of the technical topics were organized in a systematic manner using the already standardized and existing modules from the FRWO and the Department of Environment for sustainable development in arid and semi-arid areas. Specific training activities on a participatory approach to integrated SLFM and facilitation techniques were arranged by FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These modules, however, could not be evidenced and validated by the Evaluation Team.
51. With the help of field facilitators, the communities in each of the pilot villages actively engaged in undertaking a participatory assessment of the natural resources in their area, and conducted participatory resource mapping exercises. This enabled them to not only reflect on their

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the project-hired field facilitators had relevant experience, including the skillset of using participatory tools and techniques.

resources but also livelihood and development-related issues. Accordingly, they also engaged in undertaking and documenting a village development needs assessment.

52. The project engaged the Technical and Vocational Training Organization (TVTO) to impart training on a wide range of environment-friendly and/or resource-efficient livelihood measures for the community members that were interested and willing in particular livelihood measures. The majority of the community members trained for such livelihood measures adopted them and began to benefit from them.<sup>5</sup>
53. The community members who were involved in the awareness, capacity and livelihood development activities acknowledged a better comprehension of the causes that underlie the connection between living conditions and the depletion of forests, rangelands and biodiversity. This included greater water scarcity and unabated wind erosion. They were prepared to do whatever they could to improve the situation so that they could have sustainable living conditions in their own villages. By interviewing project beneficiaries, the Evaluation Team learned that some community members – guides of external hunters turned conservation stewards – started to assist the protected area field staff after engaging in the project.

**Finding 7.** To some extent, the capacity of provincial and local government institutions on participatory and integrated SLFM approaches was strengthened through awareness raising and sensitization initiatives.

54. Capacity building initiatives on participatory and integrated approaches to SLFM were organized for the authorities<sup>6</sup> and staff from all relevant provincial and local government institutions. They were involved in capacity building initiatives in the form of regular coordination meetings. Their awareness was enhanced. They shared details on problems faced by the provinces and their project areas. Further, they discussed what the project strived to achieve, and the strategies and approaches in engaging with local communities so that they can address the problems. Key issues were discussed, such as how the local communities could be actively involved, what kind of support they would require from relevant government institutions and how the project should aim at working with the government institutions and the village communities.
55. By the fifth PIR, approximately 434 individuals from the relevant provincial and local government institutions were engaged in capacity building on participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. The progress report claimed to have capacitated the targeted 70 percent of staff at the provincial and local government institutions. However, the exact figure on the total number of staff trained on participatory and integrated SLFM approaches, and the extent to which they were using or were capable of using the knowledge, skills and attitude to facilitate the SLFM approaches was not possible to validate. This was due to the limitations that this evaluation came across, including the lack of in-person consultation.
56. Consultation with the project staff from the FRWO of the DAB revealed that training events were organized systematically. These initiatives followed the workplan and were accurately implemented, even during the pandemic, through online platforms and the expertise of other organizations. The positive outcome of the awareness and sensitization of multilevel government institutions was instrumental. This was reflected by entering a memorandum of

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<sup>5</sup> Key alternative livelihood measures included: aviculture; needle work; stone carving; shop keeping; tailoring; palm tree planting; village orchard growth; medicinal plants; pickling; baking bread; embroidery; repair shop activities; hair care; handicrafts; garlic farming; and palm fibre spinning. These activities have almost zero impact on forest and rangelands.

<sup>6</sup> From interviews at the provincial level, the Evaluation Team learned that the terms “training” or “capacity building” could not be used for authorities and bureaucrats, for example governors and village council members. This was a matter of respect, and those in these roles could not engage in such capacity building initiatives for a day or two.

understanding with many of them, and securing their support in the planning and implementation of project activities. There were many occasions when the governors and authorities invited other relevant authorities and urged them to engage with the project and its activities. Project staff from the FRWO of the DAB fairly and confidently articulated that they now have the capacity to plan, implement and evaluate the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM. Further, they stated that there is sufficient funding to carry out future trainings in other parts of the country. However, the project staff in the field indicated that while the capacity building of provincial, district and local government institutions on SLFM was undoubtedly useful, more frequent sessions will be required in future. Such sessions may need to be done on an annual basis to ensure long-term impact and sustainable results amid governmental staff changes.

**Finding 8.** The project was successful in establishing, capacitating, functionalizing and institutionalizing community institutions. For example, there were 20 PVRMDCs and 41 rural development funds to support and facilitate participatory and integrated SLFM in two subwatersheds.

57. The PVRMDCs were established as village-level institutions. They addressed village issues, and planned and took actions to respond to those issues. All inhabitants of the two project-selected subwatersheds of 62 settlements (58 in Rigan and four in Sarayan) were clustered into 20 PVRMDCs. Each cluster selected 7 to 13 executive members (both male and female) to constitute its executive committee. While selecting the executive committee members, due consideration was given to the physical, demographic and economic situation of the villages and settlements. It was also ensured that the selected executive members were respected, trustworthy, capable and willing to represent all settlements in their PVRMDCs. The office bearers of the PVRMDCs worked on a voluntary basis, regularly held fortnightly meetings to discuss issues and plan actions to respond to the problems affecting their pilot village.
58. By the seventh PIR, 20 of such PVRMDCs (ten in Rigan and ten in Sarayan)<sup>7</sup> were established. Here, capacity was built and institutionalized through a number of workshops and training events and made functional in the project area. It was noted that the social mechanism of the project adopted in the PVRMDC process was delegated to local communities. This included many participatory team activities, including rehabilitation (seeding, sapling production, planting, watering plants and irrigation) and other development activities. The PVRMDC organized and supervised project activities, as well as monitored and reported the progress of capacity building events and field work. The achievement of institutionalizing functional PVRMDCs exceeded the set target. It was noted that they are registered as a legal entity in the FRWO of the DAB and the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad.
59. Two subwatershed-level Watershed Resources Management and Development (WRMD) Committees were also constituted by all members of the 20 PVRMDCs and other key stakeholders in the area. Some capacity development events were also organized by the project for the WRMD Committees. However, the Evaluation Team could not find any evidence of their activities. This was probably due to the unavailability of the approved WLPs.
60. Reported as sustainable community development funds, the rural development funds were intended to mobilize and manage the existing and available funds of the village. This included future funds that could potentially be available to them through the PVRMDCs. The PVRMDCs get an overhead out of the project's conservation and rehabilitation work, and deposit that into

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<sup>7</sup> Since Seh Qaleh is a large settlement of about 1 300 households, six PVRMDC subcommittees representing farmers, business people, youth, women, herders and teachers were formed. In Rigan, one PVRMDC covered an average of five settlements and 175 households.

the rural development funds. This was also meant as funding to promote sustainable livelihood measures and undertake village development initiatives within the framework of a participatory approach. Rural development funds, also considered an extended financial arm of the PVRMDCs, involved from 20 to 25 male and female members as a group, which was led by a PVRMDC executive committee member. The head of the rural development fund, appointed by the PVRMDC, was responsible for the formation of the rural development fund group, the collection of membership fees, the monthly savings of its members and mobilizing the funds. Each rural development fund had a separate bank account in the nearest bank. Rural development funds hold monthly meetings where its members discuss the issues of their village and seek solutions to overcome those issues. They do this in addition to the collection of individual members' savings, loan paybacks and loan disbursement. Currently, the main sources of funding from the rural development funds are: i) savings of its members; ii) income accrued from overhead earned by their PVRMDCs via community-based rehabilitation activities and services; iii) administrative fees obtained for processing the loans of their members; and iv) matching funds or donations from national and international agencies, for example from the GEF funds of this project.

61. By June 2021 (ninth PIR), 41 rural development funds, including 25 new ones (since 2021) in Rigan and one in Sarayan, were reported to be established and functioning. A male–female membership balance in the rural development funds has been maintained. The membership fee varied from USD 1 to 5. Rural development funds lend money to their members to establish and/or expand their supportive livelihood businesses on the basis of the group guarantee. Rural development funds have maintained an average repayment rate of 95 percent. The group guarantee enables every group member to monitor if any member who took out a loan uses it for its designated purpose and is able to pay it back on time. Members can take out a loan amounting to ten times the money in their savings account. A rural development fund group member told an interviewer that, in fact, this limitation has often proved to be a barrier for group members to expand their successful businesses as the loan becomes too little for them to meet their needs.
62. All the operational rural development funds in the two subwatersheds of the project further joined hands to get established as two legally registered cooperatives – one in each pilot area. Section B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of Country Development Plans now entitles these cooperatives to have development-related contracts from the government agencies in their area. They can then partner with or subcontract to the relevant PVRMDCs to accomplish the development work. In such cases, they have been entitled to overhead fees for any project won in tender offers. Cooperatives can also receive cash support from government agencies or financial institutes in the form of grants or loans.
63. By the MTR, the then functional 14 rural development funds (ten in Kerman and four in South Khorasan) had a total membership of 2 943 individuals (1 577 male and 1 366 female) from 1 897 households. These 14 rural development funds raised a total capital of IRR 3 229 000 and mobilized a loan of IRR 4 559 000 to 860 households with a repayment rate of 94.5 percent. Accordingly, the two cooperatives raised a capital of IRR 1 080 000 (equivalent to USD 50 000). However, the documented evidence of the fund mobilization status of the existing 41 rural development funds and two cooperatives was not available as of 30 June 2021.

**Finding 9.** The project lagged behind markedly in preparing the VLPs and WLPs. However, the priority development needs of communities in the project areas, per their participatory needs assessments, were addressed to a certain extent in the coordination, support and facilitation of the project, and through the PVRMDCs

64. At its outset, the project aimed to formulate 45 VLPs and two WLPs. During project implementation, it was learned that there were 62 village-type settlements in the two selected project subwatersheds (58 in Rigan and four in Sarayan). These settlements were clustered into ten pilot villages in Rigan and four in Sarayan. Accordingly, the project decided to formulate 14 VLPs for 14 pilot villages and two WLPs for two subwatersheds.
65. By the third PIR, the background work for the preparation of the VLPs was undertaken. This involved the orientation and sensitization of local communities towards village resources, and the opportunities and threats in village development, participatory resource mapping and the participatory needs assessment. By the fourth PIR, a consulting company was contracted to develop the VLPs and the WLPs based on the background information of the villages. This included the priority needs of the people in the project area. By the fifth PIR, the VLPs were developed and submitted for approval by the DAB. A respondent from the PPMT told the interviewer that the DAB was not convinced with the quality of work done by the consultant and that somehow the consultant could not refine the VLPs per the requirement of the DAB. Hence, the achievement of this output was seriously delayed. Later, the assistance from FAO was requested for preparing the VLPs and the WLPs. However, bringing in international expertise was constrained due to the pandemic. The Evaluation Team eventually learned that the DAB managed to have alternative arrangements to get the VLPs formulated. By the ninth PIR (last year of the project), four VLPs for the Sarayan pilot area were formulated, and the remaining ten for the Rigan pilot site were in the process of formulation. The WLP formulation remained pending.
66. The Project Management Unit authorities at the national level, however, informed the Evaluation Team that the VLPs were formulated by the respective facilitators through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) meetings with the local population. The villagers' needs and concerns related to civil works and infrastructures were compiled and presented to the local authorities and institutions for coordination. Formulating the WLPs had complications due to upstream–downstream linkages.<sup>8</sup> This eventually led to conflicting interests and demands of the communities in upstream and downstream villages. Hence, the drafted WLPs have yet to be finalized and await expert advice. Although the WLPs still need to be finalized, the concept emerging out of the WLP has already impacted the government's development planning institution. The concept of defining and elaborating development initiatives based on geographical boundaries instead of the existing demographic boundaries, such as cities, counties and provinces, has already been internalized in the large-scale national planning for development programmes in the country.
67. Based on the participatory community needs assessment, especially after the fourth PIR (2015), many development activities were implemented in the villages of two subwatersheds through active participation of the local communities and support from the project. Many of these activities were beyond the scope of the project. However, they were instrumental in building

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<sup>8</sup> Upstream–downstream linkages include environmental, socioeconomic, institutional and cultural factors. For instance, the downstream communities suffer due to the overuse of water or flooding upstream. The upstream communities suffer when the downstream communities unsustainably use the upstream resources, for example forests, rangeland and biodiversity. The upstream impacts on hydrological processes may be due to human-influenced activities related to land use and/or natural impacts related to climate.

trust and confidence within and among the communities, and the relevant local and provincial government institutions. These development activities comprised the improvement of potable water sources, the construction of schools, roads and bridges, and the asphaltting of the school yard. The project provided technical assistance and coordinated with relevant local and provincial government institutions to avail necessary material and funding support. The villagers voluntarily contributed their labour to accomplish such development activities.

68. Additionally, the local communities engaged in project-supported rehabilitation activities under the leadership of their PVRMDCs. The rehabilitation activities within and around the project villages were selected and prioritized based on community needs. The topic of rehabilitation is further discussed under Finding 13.

**Finding 10.** The achieved outputs meaningfully contributed to strengthening the capacity of local communities in select villages to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. These outputs, however, need continued local and provincial government support in the future.

69. During interviews with project beneficiaries, their representatives in project-established community institutions and field facilitators, the Evaluation Team learned that training and education was extremely helpful for communities. It enabled them to internalize the ground realities of their local environment and living conditions. It helped them learn how to cope with the situation without hurting the environment. This was the first project of its kind in the Islamic Republic of Iran that worked with the communities in the project area. The communities themselves were actively engaged in their needs assessment and entrusted with implementing the project activities.
70. The bottom-up and participatory approach to a community needs assessment enabled project work with the people and the design of the capacity building initiatives. This approach proved extremely useful in creating social bonding, and building trust and confidence among communities, project and relevant government agencies. It was instrumental in creating a positive attitude of local communities towards the government institutions.
71. In the past, the relevant government institutions at the provincial and central level used to contract out the local development works to an outsider contractor who would get the job done with no regard for local needs and concerns. The local people were not consulted, and their traditional knowledge on the issues to be addressed through such development works was not utilized. This project enabled the communities to establish their own institutions, make use of their own indigenous and traditional knowledge, and learn how to create their own financial capacities to work with the relevant government institutions and adopt a participatory and integrated approach to improving their living conditions and livelihoods through SLFM.
72. In its early years, the project had to purchase saplings to be used for erosion control from outside the project area. But towards the end of the project, saplings of all locally preferred species were raised by the communities within the project area and were available to the project to purchase in the desired quantity. The community members with relatively large land holdings and vulnerable to wind erosion were encouraged by their PVRMDCs to create windbreaks by planting suitable plant species. The most important outcome of the individual and institutional capacity strengthening at the community level was reported as a change in attitude and practice of local communities. For instance, overgrazing and removing bushes from rangeland for firewood was totally stopped in some areas, and the villagers who used to work as guides for hunters coming from outside became wildlife protection stewards in the later years of the project.

73. The Evaluation Team noted that the capacity strengthening, so far as the participatory and integrated approach to planning, implementing and evaluating the SLFM is concerned, should be considered as an ongoing process built within the delivery mechanism of SLFM initiatives. In this case, the project-appointed field facilitators were the key resource people who worked with the communities and their institutions, and built their capacities by orienting, motivating and engaging them in planning and implementation of SLFM initiatives. Furthermore, the TVTO was there to train them on technical aspects of sustainable development and the livelihood strategies of their choice. By project closure, these facilitators were gone and no evidence of such facilitating capacity in community institutions was evidenced – even though some institution leaders might have acquired some facilitation skills. Hence, there is a likely future gap in facilitation for keeping communities united and organized for common purposes and collective actions leading to integrated SLFM initiatives.

**Finding 11.** The achieved outputs were successful in orienting and sensitizing the local and provincial institutions with regard to the processes involved in, and the value added of the participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. However, their institutional capacity to facilitate a participatory and integrated approach to SLFM initiatives could not be evidenced.

74. Government institutions tend to have well-institutionalized bureaucratic processes and procedures. These include the norms and values which indicate that they are the “providers” and the people are the “recipients” of the development initiatives. This is generally referred to as a top-down approach to development. Moreover, government sectors often work in isolation with each other, even as tremendous opportunities exist for collaboration with, between and among sectors. In contrast, the participatory and integrated approach to sustainable development demands that all relevant government institutions work with the people for whom the development is meant to serve and involve them in decision-making.
75. It was evidenced that the project engaged with relevant local and provincial institutions for their capacity strengthening through orientation, sensitization and coordination meetings and workshops. The consultation with senior professionals of the project executing agency revealed that the intersectoral relationship developed between the FRWO and the Department of Environment was noteworthy. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, private banking systems and other agencies were involved at different stages of project implementation. An independent assessment by an academic institution<sup>9</sup> concluded that for the communities, community–government and intersectoral relationships were markedly improved as a result of the orientation and sensitization of stakeholders at multiple levels. However, the Evaluation Team learned from field level interviews that although intersectoral coordination and support was available and effective at the local level, extra effort was required to secure active support and coordination from the provincial institutions. Also, there were no signs that the field staff of these institutions were trained and prepared to work as facilitators of a participatory and integrated approach to SLFM. The project could have done a better job by creating a pool of field facilitators for the promotion of participatory and integrated SLFM within the local and provincial government institutions. This would have provided continuity to a future SLFM approach.

**Finding 12.** The project, through its rehabilitation activities, succeeded in initiating an improved status of forests and rangeland.

76. According to project progress reports, by 2019, 46 981 ha of rangeland around the villages were rehabilitated. By 2021, an additional 2 224 ha of rangeland was further rehabilitated and 9 km of

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<sup>9</sup> This report was not provided to the Evaluation Team.

windbreaks were established along the orchards by the last year of the project. Additionally, different species of local and new medicinal plants were cultivated in different village areas, covering a total plantation area of 681 ha. The achievement in forest and rangeland rehabilitation exceeded the target of the project considerably.

77. Rehabilitation activities were undertaken through the extensive participation of local communities – from the selection of locally feasible and preferred species to the use of existing local knowledge on the suitability of various plant species for different rehabilitation purposes, for example soil binding, water retaining and salinity reduction. The project ensured local community participation in the rehabilitation activities by signing a terms of partnership with their PVRMDCs and channelling the rehabilitation activity funds through them. The major rehabilitation activities included: nursery establishment and sapling production; planting through direct seed sowing and planting of saplings; mulching, as and where required; watering and irrigating the plants; constructing check dams; developing windbreaks; protecting vulnerable areas through the erection of enclosures; managing run-off wherever required; and using water harvesting techniques.
78. The project introduced alternative energy devices in areas deprived of a power supply to reduce pressure on forests and rangeland for wood energy. Local communities were encouraged to take loans from their rural development funds to install solar water heaters and gas ovens, and could purchase gas cylinders and water tanks made available to them at a subsidized price in their villages. By the ninth PIR, 1 450 households had installed green energy technologies, for example solar water heaters, solar gas cookers, gas ovens, wind water pumps and gas cylinders. Moreover, 950 gas bakery ovens, 500 gas ovens and 400 gas cylinders were reported as procured and planned for distribution in July 2021. However, there was no evidence on how much pressure was reduced on forests and rangeland in terms of a reduction in per capita consumption of wood energy due to the project-promoted green energy alternatives.
79. The restoration of farms and rangeland in an area of 2 250 ha of selected villages was undertaken with drought and salinity-resistant plant species. These species were identified by the local communities and included other multipurpose species that are suitable for local conditions, for example *aloe vera*, safflower and thyme. Such plants may generate income for the farmers. The restoration of farms and rangeland was linked with the rehabilitation activities of the fourth PIR. Further, the project promoted drip irrigation and the use of a water sprinkler on farms to save water. This included water harvesting techniques in severely affected areas.

**Finding 13.** The project had some achievement in the recovery of globally important wild species and species used as non-wood forest products (NWFPs). However, it could have done much better, especially in recovering the species used as NWFPs.

80. The project needed to establish a baseline of the existing species of globally important flora and fauna prior to any intervention for the recovery of globally important wild species and species used as NWFPs. However, the Evaluation Team found no evidence of such a baseline. The Department of Environment, in close collaboration with the FRWO and in consultation with provincial and local level stakeholders, established a no hunting area (NHA), Ziarat-shah, with support from the project within the project boundaries by the fourth PIR. The establishment of the NHA was considered an important step towards a forest and rangeland rehabilitation that included biodiversity conservation – even though the total NHA area and whether it was fully or partly within the project boundaries was not found in the project reports. The declaration of this NHA had been set until 2021. As reported in the fifth PIR, a study<sup>10</sup> conducted on the

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<sup>10</sup> The authors of this study were not reported.



identification and assessment of faunal species claimed a 25 percent recovery of wild fauna. According to the ninth PIR, a 10 percent growth of wild species was estimated for the last three years. The NHA protection unit and reports by the local population were cited, however, it was unclear whether this was floral or faunal. Encouraged by the protection outcomes, the status of the NHA was extended for another five years.

81. Important wild fauna, such as leopards, black bear, wolves, wildcats, wild goats, rams, ewes, eagles, hawks, see-see partridges and some reptiles, were reported as observed. But the NWFPs, including the recovery of globally important floral species, remained unreported. The Evaluation Team notes that the project basically confined itself to supporting the establishment of the NHA. The NWFPs certainly got some focus in rehabilitation areas where local people were engaged in the selection of plant species for village gardens. The project could have done much better by focusing on globally important and locally used NWFP species through specific activities within the NHA.
82. The GEF Biodiversity Tracking Tool at the baseline was not available for the Evaluation Team. At the MTR (assessed in February 2015), this tool was available, but its results were not cited in the MTR report. A review of this tool's information at the MTR revealed that: i) the financial scorecard indicated 15.45 percent of total possible score; ii) biodiversity considerations were incorporated in the agriculture and forestry sector policies, where appropriate regulations were claimed to be in place and being implemented; iii) the performance of a biosafety framework scored 3 out of 32, and the prevention, control and management of invasive alien species (IAS) scored 1 out of 29. The Evaluation Team for this report could not get an assessment based on the tracking tool, despite requests made to both the executing and the implementing agency. Hence, it was not possible to assess the biodiversity status change from the MTR to project closure.

**Finding 14.** The project succeeded in decreasing the severity of wind erosion in targeted areas.

83. By the MTR, the project had already established approximately 27 ha of live windbreaks around vulnerable project village sites through the active participation of concerned communities. Moreover, the very first wind erosion monitoring station in the Islamic Republic of Iran was established and operationalized in the Dehreza village of Rigan. By 2018, the second monitoring station was also established and operationalized in Sarayan. The monitoring of wind erosion was given continuity throughout the project period, and the rehabilitation interventions were implemented in priority sites per the findings of the monitoring reports. By the seventh PIR (2019), it was reported that wind erosion in agricultural lands reduced by 99 percent. No further progress has been reported since late 2019 due to COVID-19 restrictions.
84. Given the adverse ecological conditions, climate impacts, prolonged drought conditions and depleting natural resource base, the project's approach to a monitoring-based intervention for reducing wind erosion around the project villages is deemed successful. The communities engaged in traditionally appropriate water harvesting technologies, soil moisture and nutrient conservation practices, establishing greeneries in and around villages through live fencing, village gardening and the establishment of windbrakes.
85. Some key informants who were engaged in establishing greeneries in and around the villages, informed the Evaluation Team that the project intervention significantly contributed to the reduction of even the severest cases of wind erosion. Villagers who had been forced to migrate to nearby cities due to an erosion-induced loss of livelihood, started to return to their villages after this reduction.

**Finding 15.** The project succeeded in promoting alternative livelihood measures that may contribute to the restoration of forests and rangeland. However, the sustainability aspect of the promoted livelihood measures needed more work.

86. The project went far beyond the target set for sustainable livelihood promotion. Since the early years of the project, the natural resource dependent community members had been encouraged to choose an alternative livelihood initiative that both suited them and held good marketing and business potential in their area. The technical assistance of the TVTO was procured with project support, and the interested community members were provided production and business training on a diverse range of sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives. They took out loans from their rural development funds as and when required, and engaged in their alternative livelihood business practices throughout the project area.
87. By ninth PIR, about 49 different alternative livelihood measures<sup>11</sup> were being practiced in the project villages. A reported 1 024 male and female members from 1 765 households in Kerman, and 789 households in Sarayan, took out loans from their respective rural development funds, received skills trainings from the project and engaged in income generation. The majority of the project-promoted alternative livelihood initiatives contributed to the improvement of the status of forests and rangeland by reducing pressure on natural resources.
88. The Evaluation Team learned from its field-level key informant interviews that many of the project-promoted alternative livelihood initiatives had recently faced funding problems and were no longer self-sustaining due to continued inflation in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A member of the rural development fund could take out a loan equivalent to ten times his or her savings in the fund, which was often claimed to be inadequate in starting or maintaining any business. The access to credit from the rural development fund tended to be relatively easy compared to other lending institutions. However, this was limited since other members had to wait for their turn to take out a loan. Hence, the problem facing those engaged in alternative livelihoods was two-fold: i) there were difficulties in finding money from rural development funds when it was most needed; and ii) the amount available was often inadequate to meet their needs. The project needed to look into all viable solutions to this problem.
89. It was also noted that the project placed due attention on the interest and willingness of the community members in supporting the specific alternative livelihood businesses. However, this was not based on an adequate value-chain analysis and projection of future market demand. The Evaluation Team learned from its field-level interviews that, after time, marketing had emerged as a problem for certain products. This made the sustainability of such livelihood businesses uncertain.

**Finding 16.** Continued efforts are required over the coming years to achieve the desired status improvement of forests and rangeland, reduction in wind erosion and sustainable management of natural resources in the project pilot areas.

90. Before the project, the majority of the local population in the project area had reportedly been dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry, and had placed heavy pressure on forests and rangeland for various livelihood and income generation purposes. By the time of project closure, it had built the foundation for the improved status of forests and rangeland through rehabilitation initiatives. These were paired with viable measures to reduce wind erosion and restore farms and rangeland in the vicinity of the project villages. The project-promoted clean

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<sup>11</sup> Key alternative livelihood measures were: aviculture; needle work; stone carving; shop keeping; tailoring, palm tree planting; village orchard care; medicinal plants; pickling; baking bread; embroidery; repair shop activities; hair care; handicrafts; garlic farming; and palm fibre spinning, which have almost zero impact on forests and rangeland.

energy devices and sustainable alternative livelihood strategies significantly contributed to reducing such pressure on forests and rangeland by providing people with better options.

91. The project did not have a baseline on the status of forests and rangeland, nor did it monitor any change in this status that could be attributable to the rehabilitation and sustainable livelihood initiatives. Nevertheless, the consultations at the field level revealed that the dependence on natural resources in the project areas had slowly decreased with enhanced awareness and exposure to new learning through group activities in community institutions. Farmers were also unlikely to cooperate if they were forced to reduce their animal herd size within a short timeframe. Hard work over years, if not decades, is needed to motivate people and persuade them with better options to change their resource use habits. To that end, the project has had milestone achievement towards an improvement in status of forests and rangeland.
92. The rehabilitation activities included planting in degraded forests and rangeland. Here, direct sowing was carried out and saplings were planted. These will need regular protection and tending, such as replacement planting, until they can generate the desired impact in the landscape. Similarly, run-off management, water harvesting activities and check dams will need seasonal repair and maintenance as long as they are not stabilized. The project successfully capacitated the communities and their institutions to undertake these activities and give continuity to the rehabilitation and protection of forests and rangeland. After project closure, the project-supported and established PVRMDCs and rural development funds will need to mobilize communities and ensure that they are supported by relevant local and provincial government institutions both technically and financially. It is likely that this will be necessary for many years in order to achieve the desired level of improvement in the status of their forests and rangeland.
93. The Evaluation Team could not validate the claimed project achievements on rehabilitation and other associated activities through direct observation and in-person consultation meetings with beneficiaries and stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> The before and after pilot site-specific photographic evidence of rehabilitation achievements were not provided to the Evaluation Team. Some photographic evidence of rehabilitation and other activities retrieved from the debriefing presentation of the Project Management Unit is included in Annex 2.

**Finding 17.** The associated outputs of Outcome 3 were successfully delivered at local and provincial levels and, to a large extent, at the national level.

94. Outcome 3 of the project aimed at enhancing capacity at local and national levels to integrate SLFM across different institutions and sectors by: i) establishing a national-level SLFM platform/intersectoral coordination mechanism; ii) supporting at least five policy revisions to mainstream participatory SLFM; and iii) establishing a functional inter and intradepartmental linkage in at least five departments in the ministerial Natural Resource Management. This included at least two linkages that were established between the Department of Environment and the FRWO at provincial levels, and at least one such linkage at the national level.
95. As reported in the fifth PIR, an SLFM platform at the national level was established. It has remained functional since then to foster interministerial and interdepartmental coordination towards integrating SLFM approaches across development sectors at the national level. The orientation and sensitization of policymakers and institutions took place in the form of bilateral and multilateral coordination meetings, and through an international study tour. Selected

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to the Limitations section.

policy-level professionals of the central and provincial governments had an international study tour in Morocco where they had an opportunity to learn about the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM. The senior policymakers of various ministries, including some parliamentarians, visited the project areas as the community mobilization and capacity building activities built momentum. These initiatives could be considered as capacity enhancement at the national level for mainstreaming the participatory and integrated approach in development policies.

96. On the national policy front, the progress reported in the fifth PIR revealed that two out of five targeted policies<sup>13</sup> were reviewed and revised. However, it did not mention which policies were reviewed and revised, and what provisions were made to mainstream the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM into those revised policies. In 2019, however, the Rules and Procedure of Section B, Article 29 of the permanent sections of the National Development Plan was revised and adjusted to recognize the project-established community institutions. It also mainstreamed participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives into the FRWO laws and regulations. This policy revision recognized the cooperatives and the Watershed Management and Development Committees – the umbrella organizations of the PVRMDCs – as a legal entity that is eligible for development contracts from the government agencies within the framework of participatory and integrated SLFM. This was a major achievement for local government and community institutions. It enabled them to take on local development activities without a third-party contractor from outside their area.
97. Regarding the third output, the project was interlinked with all departments under the provincial Natural Resources and Watershed Management Office (NRWMO), and with the provincial Department of Environment. This ensured their support and cooperation in the implementation of project activities in both provinces. The cooperation between the NRWMO and the provincial institutions under the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad was also facilitated by the project. The project signed eight partnership agreements with relevant local and provincial institutions in Kerman, and four in South Khorasan to secure intersectoral collaboration for implementing its activities. At the national level, all departments under the FRWO were interlinked, and the participatory and integrated SLFM approach was mainstreamed into them. The FRWO also developed close working relationships with the Department of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad.

**Finding 18.** The existing evidence indicates that the project moved meaningfully towards achieving Outcome 3 and the mainstreaming of SLFM across different institutions and sectors.

98. The project became a member of the district administration and planning councils in two project provinces. This was due to the continued orientation and sensitization-focused meetings with village councils, district governors and relevant sectoral agencies in the project districts. It was also included as an employment working group member in Rigan and Sarayan. This membership included district and local representatives from all sectoral ministries. Decisions made on these councils were to be supported by the provincial planning and development councils chaired by the respective provincial governors. A funding line for this project was eventually established within the annual funding agreement framework of Rigan, which was initiated and facilitated by the Office of the District Governor.

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<sup>13</sup> Output 3.2 indicates that the project should revise at least five sector policies to mainstream their participatory and integrated SLFM approach. However, the policy formulation and revision are exclusively the domain of the government, and the project could simply support, assist and facilitate the policy revision and refinement process.

99. The Evaluation Team noted that many relevant local institutions realized that their development objectives were no different from that of the project. However, the project's service delivery mechanism was focused on capacitating the communities and their institutions, and empowering and enabling them to take a lead in planning, implementing and evaluating integrated SLFM initiatives. This included improving their own living conditions through sustainable livelihood strategies. Accordingly, they showed keen interest in the service delivery mechanism of the project and maintained their focus on each and every project activity. This also helped them build their capacities on participatory and integrated approaches. As a result of the project's capacity building efforts, the SLFM principles were utilized in urban planning for the city of Sarayan.
100. At the national level, it is likely that the project played a strategic role in guiding, facilitating and fostering an effective national and provincial-level intersectoral coordination and collaboration. This, even though the progress reports after the fifth PIR did not report any activities and achievements of the national SLFM platform. Nonetheless, this strategic role was evidenced in project achievements, such as: i) the declaration and establishment of the no hunting area in collaboration with the Department of Environment at the central and provincial level, and in consultation with the local government and communities in the area; ii) the replication of the PVRMDC structure and approach in the country's northern provinces; iii) the development of a national proposal to fight desertification across 22 provinces through a participatory approach, based on the project's lessons.<sup>14</sup> The Evaluation Team does not have any evidence, but it was likely that the national SLFM platform may also have played a key role in facilitating the amendment in Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of Country Development. This dealt with plans to mainstream a participatory and integrated SLFM approach through the inclusion of Paragraph B.
101. A social impact study on the human development index (HDI) (Tahmasebi, n.d.), commissioned by the project in pilot sites, concluded that the community social capital attributed to the project increased by 52 percent in South Khorasan and 30 percent in Kerman. Further, job diversity increased by 20 percent and 40 percent, respectively, and the local HDI increased by 11 percent and 8 percent, which was largely due to knowledge development.
102. Two independent studies (Ghorbani, Evazpour and Khorasani, 2015; Ghorbani, Azadi, Janečková, Sklenička and Witlox, 2021) also indicate an improvement in community–community, community–local authority and intersectoral relationships throughout the first four years of the project. The study used statistical analysis, such as the geodesic distance method through data collected in field interviews, to illustrate an improvement in social and organizational cohesion. Network density, centralization, bond reciprocity and transitivity strengths were reviewed and analysed to better understand the depth and potential for the sustainability of a joint participatory approach and integrated management by diverse stakeholders.

**Finding 19.** The project produced an unintended positive result.

103. The project did not envisage the formation of cooperatives at the watershed level. However, extensive community participation in the PVRMDCs led to development initiatives and the success of rural development funds. This encouraged the constitution of cooperatives at the subwatershed level. These were represented in village councils that the PVRMDCs and expertise had made available among civil society organizations in the area. This emerged from the

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<sup>14</sup> Points 2 and 3 were noted by the terminal Evaluation Team throughout key informant interviews at the FRWO level. The terminal evaluation does not have any evidence of these strategic moves of the FRWO that can be attributed to the project.

realization that the local communities and their institutions were capable of taking responsibility for their own development provided they had the trust and support of the government institutions. These cooperatives were recognized as a legal entity, which enabled them to enter into any service contract with the central and provincial government institutions. This could be beneficial for implementing development projects within the framework of certain provisions that foster and promote participatory and integrated SLFM under Paragraph B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of Country Development Plans.

### 3.2.1 Rating of effectiveness

104. Delivery of project outputs: Moderately Unsatisfactory.
    - i. Under Component 1, most of the outputs were achieved with some minor shortcomings, except Output 1.3 (preparation of the VLPs and the WLPs), which was practically unachieved.
    - ii. Under Component 2, Output 2.1 was not achieved at all. Outputs 2.2, 2.3 and 2.5 were achieved, but they could not be assessed and evaluated without their baselines. Outputs 2.4 and 2.6 were achieved with minor shortcomings.
    - iii. Under Outcome 3, Outputs 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 were achieved with some minor shortcomings.
  105. Progress towards Component 1: Moderately Satisfactory – Institutional capacity to use participatory tools and techniques, and facilitate participatory and integrated SLFM, could not be developed within provincial, local government and community institutions.
  106. Progress towards Component 2: Moderately Satisfactory – In the absence of a baseline, the extent to which the forests and rangeland were rehabilitated, severity of wind erosion reduced, percentage of globally important wild species and species of importance/used as NWFPs recovered could not be assessed and evaluated. The VLPs and the WLPs could not be implemented due to their unavailability.
  107. Progress towards Component 3: Satisfactory – Intersectoral coordination at local and provincial levels was instrumental in project implementation. Legal recognition of the cooperative as an umbrella institution of community-based institutions for participatory and integrated SLFM focused development efforts on Section B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of Country Development. This was a major breakthrough towards mainstreaming the SLFM approach along sectors and institutions.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives: Moderately Satisfactory
108. The capacity of project beneficiaries and their newly created institutions to plan and implement integrated SLFM using a participatory approach is enhanced. However, the pilot villages could not fully own nor implement their VLPs and WLPs.
  109. The local and provincial institutions became oriented and sensitized on participatory and integrated SLFM but could not institutionalize the concept within their operational systems and procedures.
  110. Good achievements were made in reducing the pressure on land, forests and rangeland and in eliminating threats to biodiversity, but the extent to which those efforts contributed to achieving the project objectives could not be assessed due to inadequate monitoring and tracking tool information.

### 3.3 Efficiency

**Finding 20.** The project adjusted to the changed administrative and economic environment at the time of its implementation and made necessary adjustments in its institutional arrangements.

111. The project had almost no progress until its inception in July 2012, following its start in 2011. The project needed to make adjustments in its institutional arrangements due to i) the increasing trend of administrative and fiscal decentralization in the Islamic Republic of Iran; and ii) the challenges of cofinancing based on persistent inflation and foreseen delays in receiving GEF funds as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran.
112. Accordingly, the July 2012 project inception workshop shifted the Project Planning Committee from the Project Management Unit at the FRWO of the DAB to the provincial level. This was because the Project Planning Committees were to be chaired by the respective Directors General of the NRWMO in the two project provinces. The National Project Manager of the Project Management Unit became National Project Coordinator and was entrusted with coordination responsibilities in the project provinces and among relevant partners, ministries and departments, as well as academic and research bodies. The composition of the Project Steering Committee was adjusted to include the National Project Director, the National Project Coordinator, the Chief Technical Adviser, two provincial Project Managers and a maximum of two experts from the DAB. These roles served as its permanent members. Experts from both within and outside the FRWO were invited, as and when required. The composition of the Technical Committee was also adjusted accordingly.
113. There were also changes<sup>15</sup> to the names of community institutions. For example, the Village Council became the Village Resource Management and Development Committee. The rural development fund became the Community Sustainable Development Fund. The Participatory Village Resource Management Council became the Subwatershed Resource Management and Development Committee, and the Watershed Management and Development Committee was to be established. Additionally, two pilot subwatersheds were selected to pilot the project activities based on agreed criteria.<sup>16</sup> This was done to avoid covering the whole area of the already selected watersheds of two provinces. It eventually decreased the number of project villages to be covered and the area of forests and rangeland to be rehabilitated. The Evaluation Team found these changes and adjustments supportive in enhancing the efficiency of project implementation.

**Finding 21.** To a large extent, the partnerships and intersectoral coordination established by the project contributed to achieving its objectives.

114. The project was executed by the FRWO of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad – mandated to manage forests, rangeland and protected areas<sup>17</sup> – in collaboration with the Department of Environment and the Agriculture and Natural Resources Research Centre<sup>18</sup> (also a part of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad). Accordingly, the annual workplan for project implementation was entrusted to the FRWO, the Agriculture and Natural Resources Research Centre and the Department of Environment representatives of the project provinces. This included the village

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<sup>15</sup> Remarkably, this change in nomenclature of institutions was not uniformly reflected in the project progress reports.

<sup>16</sup> For example: the upstream–downstream relationship; severity of wind erosion in Rigan and the level of water salinity in Seh Qaleh; socioeconomic conditions of the villages; willingness of the villagers, suggestions by the local authorities; and ecosystem conditions such as forests, rangeland and deserts.

<sup>17</sup> In protected areas, the FRWO's responsibilities overlapped with those of the Department of Environment.

<sup>18</sup> This is mandated to work on farmers' needs at the provincial level and align with national priorities of agriculture sector.

council members of the project pilot area. This partnership arrangement allowed the project to remain focused on project objectives based on the local needs and the relative advantages of the partner institutions in the area.

115. The Evaluation Team learned that the necessary partnerships were established with all relevant government and non-government agencies in the initial years of the project. No respondents consulted by the Evaluation Team mentioned the absence of any sector or stakeholder associated with the development of natural resources. Further, the project did not leave out people's well-being.
116. The ability to address priority needs that emerged from the participatory needs assessments in the project villages allowed for coordination and collaboration with a range of sectors: roads and transportation, education, water and irrigation, and energy. The Evaluation Team's consultations with the Project Management Unit and the PPMT revealed that the National Project Director and the Project Steering Committee members developed linkages with and secured the cooperation of relevant ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Interiors. At the provincial and district level, the respective provincial and district governors facilitated the intersectoral coordination and ensured that the relevant sectors collaborate with the project and contribute to achieving project outputs. The TVTO at the provincial level actively engaged in community capacity development in the project villages. It assisted in skills training and business planning on a diverse range of environment-friendly alternative livelihood enterprises, which were successfully implemented by the communities.

**Finding 22.** The community-based, participatory approach and the decentralized annual planning and implementation of project activities tended to make it cost-effective and time-efficient. However, the delays incurred due to workplan endorsement and the distribution of funds from the DAB hampered the timely implementation of project activities. This eventually impacted both cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency.

117. Project implementation was founded on creating awareness among the project beneficiaries and mobilizing them through capacity building. It also needed to build the capacity of relevant local and provincial government institutions to enable them to join hands with the community institutions and provide them with the required support and assistance to plan, implement and evaluate the integrated SLFM initiatives. This approach tended to be time consuming at its initial stage but had a huge potential for being cost-effective and time-efficient once the community institutions were established with the desired levels of trust and confidence to work well with the government institutions. The terminal evaluation learned the following:
  - i. The beneficiary communities significantly contributed with their traditional knowledge and time in implementing the project activities.
  - ii. Many community members raised and sold the saplings required by the project, which were procured from outside the project in its initial years. It created jobs, saved money from getting drained from the project area through third-party contractors and, importantly, the rural development funds earned an overhead on the income earned from sapling sales.
  - iii. Beneficiary communities provided their labour contribution in planting and erosion control activities. This was tentatively estimated at approximately 50 percent of the total planting cost, as claimed by a key informant. Furthermore, the project's investment in establishing the rural development fund, that is, the sustainable community development Fund, helped in building the local economy through supportive livelihood businesses. This approach, which was adopted for project implementation, is considered ideal by the Evaluation Team in achieving both cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency.



118. After its inception, the project initiated an annual workplan through the provincial project planning committees. It followed a bottom-up approach, and considered the relative advantages of project implementation and the associated risks. Accordingly, budget estimates were prepared and sent to the DAB in Tehran for approval and budget release. The Evaluation Team believes that the approach of workplan preparation and budget estimation adopted by the project had merit in being realistic and cost-effective. This is because it included the interest and concerns of local communities and their willingness to participate and contribute. However, the workplans needed to be reviewed by both the Project Steering Committee and the Technical Committee in case it needed to be endorsed by the Project Management Unit prior to the distribution of funds (cofinancing and the GEF contribution) from the DAB. This process of workplan endorsement/approval and funding release tended to be time consuming. It eventually delayed the implementation process and negatively impacted both cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency. Further, it was reported throughout project implementation that the PPMT had problems getting timely support from Project Management Unit and the DAB.
119. The Evaluation Team learned that administrative and fiscal decentralization could never be fully realized per its intent as far as on-the-ground project implementation was concerned. For some project components like capacity building, the provincial team was fully entrusted to work with the communities and institutions per the workplan. This was because the provincial team was capable and trained, and the alternative livelihoods-related capacity building was outsourced to the TVTO. Moreover, the participatory rural appraisal experts hired by FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran also provided training on PRA tools and techniques. In most cases, the procurement of goods and services related to all project components remained centralized and was undertaken by the DAB in Tehran. The fiscal decentralization did not materialize, and the funds allocated under cofinancing continued to be handled by the DAB in Tehran. The decentralization of GEF funding management also kept changing over time. For instance, petty cash management for relatively small procurements was authorized to the PPMT at one point of time. It was, however, withdrawn because the financial procedure followed by the PPMT could not meet the standard procurement procedure of the GEF agency.<sup>19</sup> The Evaluation Team's consultation with the DAB authorities responsible for the project revealed that the DAB was basically a coordinating authority between the GEF agency and the two provincial project offices. The budget estimates prepared by the provincial project offices per the annual workplan were reviewed and approved without any overhead, and there was no delay in payment from the DAB side.

**Finding 23.** The project was not negatively impacted by a shortage of financial resources. Rather, it was negatively impacted due to: i) constrained mobility, and communication and service delivery opportunities, as demanded by the participatory nature of the project; ii) the cumbersome administrative and financial processes resulting in the delayed procurement of equipment and expert services; and iii) restrictions imposed on travel and group activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

120. The total financial resources allocated for the project was USD 11 million (USD 2 660 000 from GEF contribution and USD 8 330 000 from the government cofinancing, which includes USD 5 million in cash and USD 3 330 000 as in-kind contributions. The MTR noted that in first four years, while the GEF grant disbursement to the project was only at a level of 35 percent of the total grant amount (USD 937 000), the government had already invested more than double its committed in-kind contribution (USD 8 million) and 75 percent of in-cash commitment (USD 4 million out of the committed USD 5 million). The average rate of inflation in the Islamic Republic of Iran was 24 percent between 2011 and 2015 (World Bank, 2022). The impacted exchange rates and meant that the purchase power of the disbursed 35 percent of the GEF

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<sup>19</sup> FAO Representation in Iran is the implementing agency, as well as the GEF.

funds were raised by at least 20 percent (tentative estimate), whereas the government cofinancing got valued at 24 percent less than the actual amount over that period. That is, USD 8 million as in-kind contributions and USD 4 million in cash were reduced to around USD 9 million. Hence, even if the enhanced purchase power of the disbursed GEF funds is not factored in, the total financial resources invested between 2011 and 2015 in the project comes to approximately USD 10 million, which is 90 percent of the total fund allocation. The GEF funding disbursement significantly had increased from 2015 onwards, and by June 2018, the government contributed 100 percent of its committed cofinancing.

121. Most of the components had a budget allocation both from the GEF funds and government cofinancing. There was no shortage of financial resources in the initial years of the project, despite a relatively small amount of GEF disbursement. The Evaluation Team noted, however, that the shortage of sufficient GEF disbursement negatively impacted the procurement of equipment and the recruitment of international expertise at a time when they were needed the most. This reveals that the unavailability of required GEF disbursement affected the project, but not so much on the implementation of the project activities on the ground.
122. The community-based, participatory and integrated approach to the implementation of project activities demanded the development of trust and confidence among the people. This also had to occur between the communities and the government institutions through continued dialogue, consultation and coordination among diverse interest groups and stakeholders. The project villages, however, were located in relatively remote areas and had experienced constrained mobility, communication and service delivery opportunities. The physical and social environment of the project area demanded more time and effort than anticipated. Planning, organizing and conducting capacity building initiatives in remote areas, and establishing the funds were all process-oriented activities that took more time than expected. The project, in its initial three to four years, had to sustain all kinds of delays due to learning by doing on the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM in relatively remote project areas.
123. As also noted in the MTR, the project implementation and management procedures were established per the GEF requirements. However, the processes for such established management procedures were remarkably slow and quite bureaucratic. This resulted in an unprecedented delay and was often regarded as a constraint in the timely delivery of project outputs. The project management team in the field sites and provinces were not adequately trained nor knowledgeable about the procedures involved in project planning, letter of agreements, funding approvals, procurement policies, financial management, and project progress and financial reporting requirements of the GEF. Once FAO's Field Programme Management Information System (FPMIS) was established, it was not functional for tracking a result-based budget system due to technical problems. The procurement of equipment from FAO could not be accomplished in time due to various reasons. This included fluctuating market prices in the Islamic Republic of Iran due to persistent inflation and FAO's complicated procurement procedure.
124. The Evaluation Team learned from some key informants that for the formulation of the VLPs, all the background materials of the pilot villages, including the participatory community needs assessment, had already been accomplished well in advance by the PPMT. Not much work remained in formulating the VLPs since a format and guidelines had been agreed upon and made available to the PPMT. However, the contract to formulate the VLPs and the WLPs was given to the University of Tehran by the DAB. The VLPs delivered were not found to be at the desired quality and standard for approval and implementation as demanded by the DAB. Later, FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran was requested to provide expert services. However, FAO

could not bring in this expertise due to various reasons. Nevertheless, during interviews with the Evaluation Team, the executing agency claimed that the VLPs had been formulated and the WLPs were in the process of expert review. The Evaluation Team, however, could not find evidence of the approved VLPs and/or their handing over to the concerned pilot villages.

**Finding 24.** The FRWO transferred its project management and administration-related roles and responsibilities reasonably well. It, however, could have done better.

125. FRWO, the project executing agency, established project offices in Tehran at the central level, in Kerman and Birjand at the provincial level and at Rigan and Saryan at the project pilot sites level in two project provinces. The project management team included 15 full-time positions, mostly funded by the FRWO, for the project. Additionally, a full-time Chief Technical Adviser<sup>20</sup> was recruited from GEF funds. Moreover, FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran had recruited a Project Operations Officer and an M&E consultant in the early years to support the effective implementation of the project. At the provincial level, one manager was to lead the project assisted by one administrative and one finance assistant, and two field facilitators for Kerman and one for Birjand. Additionally, eight expert<sup>21</sup> positions proposed per province in the project document were to be fielded per the needs during project implementation. The progress reports reveal that the communications, M&E and other experts were hired as consultants as and when required during project implementation.
126. A Project Steering Committee chaired by the National Project Director was put in place to oversee the progress of project implementation, approve annual workplans, budget and steer the project, and provide strategic guidance for its effective and efficient management. The Project Steering Committee was supposed to have at least two meetings every year. It was, however, evidenced that after the inception of the project, the Project Steering Committee had met only twice (in 2012 and 2015) prior to the MTR in 2016.
127. A Technical Committee was also put in place. This was comprised of technical experts from the FRWO, the Research Institute for Forest and Rangelands and the Department of Environment, as well as representatives from universities in the Islamic Republic of Iran with expertise in rangeland, agriculture and forestry research. The Technical Committee met regularly and provided technical guidance to the project as and when it was required.
128. The FRWO ensured that a desired level of coordination and collaboration had been established with the relevant ministries and departments, as well as academic and research bodies and other non-government institutions at the central and provincial level. This made certain that the project results could be effectively and sustainably achieved and replicated elsewhere in similar socioecological settings of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
129. The FRWO ensured that the project was not negatively impacted by a lack of funds since FAO was unable to disburse the committed GEF amount in the initial years. However, project performance had been relatively slow until 2015, as noted in the MTR. The Evaluation Team observed that during this period, after the administrative and fiscal decentralization in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the provincial FRWO needed to be proactive. However, it could not be proactive to the required level given it needed to get clearance from the Project Management Unit at the DAB for every move. The project needed an enhanced level of coordination efforts from the Project Management Unit at the DAB during the transitional period of change in

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<sup>20</sup> The Chief Technical Adviser left in November 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Expertise could be in the field of integrated watershed management, alternative livelihoods, gender, social communication or community mobilization.

administrative and fiscal arrangements due to decentralization. The Project Management Unit and the DAB lagged behind in this.

**Finding 25.** Project management did its best to adapt to the changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation. However, it could not achieve the desired level of efficiency due to various reasons outside the control of both the executing and implementing agencies. This caused delays and led to a five-year project extension.

130. The project was first extended until 2018, per the recommendation of the MTR (2016 was originally the project's completion year). This was due to the realization that the project was moving well towards achieving its results, despite the delay in channelling GEF funds due to the economic sanctions. By the sixth PIR (June 2018, the project's extended period), the committed government cofinancing was fully spent while the GEF funds were still underspent. The project had yet to deliver many pending activities and outputs, which required another extension. It was reported that the workplan prepared for this extended period was too ambitious and that the project management could not undertake corrective measures to avoid further delays and administrative problems. Moreover, the indirect effect of sanctions was that the procurement of project equipment from FAO could also not be accomplished by this extended period. This led to a second extension for another 15 months in order to enable it to accomplish the pending activities and attain a meaningful exit.
131. By the seventh PIR (June 2019, revised project end date), the project was still not able to deliver per the letter of agreement signed for the activities to be accomplished during the 15-month extension. It was reported that the project faced many challenges including: i) a lack of understanding and cooperation between FAO and the FRWO with regard to the procurement of goods and services per FAO's procurement policy; ii) delayed submission of project progress reports and PIRs; and iii) delayed and partial implementation of a letter of agreement for the provision of trainings and workshops, despite follow ups by FAO. Furthermore, the project also got delayed due to the shift towards the emergency response to the humanitarian crises that emerged due to nation-wide flood in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A third time extension for the project was justified until September 2020. This was due to the fact that the GEF funding of USD 637 000 remained unspent since the second sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran after the second project extension in 2018. Some important project activities needed to be accomplished: i) livelihood business plans; ii) financial support to rural development funds; iii) formulation of the VLPs and the WLPs; and iv) consolidation of project achievements and dissemination through success stories and the strengthening of communication strategies. The actual end date of the project was set for December 2021.
132. As reported in the ninth PIR (last one in June 2021), the likelihood of the project achieving some of its outputs and outcomes in the last extended period was meagre since the country was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also had a severe, negative impact on the project's achieved results. All activities requiring continued community participation and collective action through the Participatory Village Resource Management Councils (PVRMCs) and the rural development funds was discontinued. The executing agency at multiple levels could not fully function for providing backup support to the established community institutions and implementing the planned activities. Many project-supported livelihood businesses that had been suffering from continued inflation got further setbacks due to one lockdown after another.
133. The government's investment after the committed cofinancing was exhausted, but this was not reported. However, there had been additional in-kind and cash investment due to the extended project timeframe. The project continued until an extended period of five additional years, yet it

could not achieve some of its key intended results. The overall assessment in the above paragraphs indicate that the project struggled to achieve the desired level of efficiency in its implementation.

**Finding 26.** The risks were identified and managed to a certain extent at the implementation level. However, they could not be managed to the desired extent at the strategic level. This was partly due to the international sanctions and partly to the prevailing administrative procedures that constrained communication, coordination and adaptive project management.

134. The transfer of the GEF funds to the Islamic Republic of Iran got obstructed due to international sanctions throughout the initial years of the project, until late 2014, and again from late 2018. FAO handled this situation by continuing to channel limited GEF funds into the project until it got the Office of Foreign Assets Control <sup>22</sup> licence in mid-2014 and managed to transfer the required amount of GEF funds from 2015 to 2018. However, the sanctions were reinstated again in late 2018, and the project was once again negatively impacted due to the unavailability of GEF funds as the government cofinancing was spent. Consequently, project implementation was negatively affected, as detailed in paragraphs 117 and 118.
135. The project had to navigate many risks and challenges ranging from: i) natural calamities, for example prolonged drought, climate impacts and a deteriorated COVID-19 situation; ii) economic risks, for example international sanctions, inflation and currency fluctuation; iii) coordination and management-related issues, for example delays in implementing letters of agreements, submission of reports and documents, recruitment of qualified consultants, timely technical support on the ground, formulation of the VLPs and the WLPs, and interrupted coordination between the Project Management Unit and the PPMT, and between the executing agency and FAO. The risks were identified well in advance, and measures to mitigate them were included in the reports and workplans so that timely actions could be taken at the relevant level of management. Risks encountered at the field level, and within the scope of the PPMT were managed to a large extent. However, at the strategic level, despite good efforts, project management often could not oversee them at an effective level.
136. Within its scope, the project addressed the prolonged drought and climate impacts through alternative livelihoods and watershed rehabilitation activities. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the timely decisions made to work remotely and handle affairs online, it still had an adverse impact on many key outputs of the project. This is also mentioned in paragraph 119.
137. The project management at the implementation level was adaptive, as evidenced from interviews and consultations. The PPMT remained in close contact with the provincial and local government institutions and maintained a close working relationship with all relevant partners. The field facilitators were regularly present in the project pilot villages working with communities, supervising and monitoring the progress, as well as helping them solve the emerging issues and challenges at their level. For instance, it was evidenced that the project had to demonstrate that it really cared about the living conditions of the project beneficiaries by assisting them in many development activities beyond the scope of the project at its outset. It was also evidenced that the rural development funds reviewed and revised their loan issuance policy owing to the failure of some livelihood businesses established through its loans. Training for new, better and more marketable livelihood enterprises were provided to those affected. The Evaluation Team's interviews at the provincial level revealed that the PPMT was able to manage the field-level issues and challenges to a large extent. However, they had to make extra efforts

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<sup>22</sup> The Office of Foreign Assets Control is administered by the United States Treasury Department.

to obtain timely support from the relevant provincial government institutions and the DAB. A respondent from the provincial level informed that the centralized planning and budgeting practiced in the DAB often was a constraint for the efficient delivery of project results. For instance, the gas oven procurement undertaken at the DAB level took too long to reach the beneficiaries.

138. Management at the strategic level remained responsive to the risks and challenges encountered during project implementation. However, it had its own limitations within the existing country context and administrative procedures. The Evaluation Team noted that the Project Steering Committee had met only twice before the project's MTR (2012 and 2015), despite the provision of at least two Project Steering Committee meetings per year. Furthermore, the deteriorated political environment due to international sanctions and the constrained transfer of the GEF funds to the Islamic Republic of Iran remained an all-time constraint in achieving meaningful coordination between the executing agency and FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The lack of availability of the required amounts of GEF funds often did not enable the timely procurement of equipment and international and national expertise when it was needed the most. There were a limited number of monitoring and supervision missions from the GEF in the project pilot sites during the last ten years of implementation. Existing anecdotal evidence suggests that the deteriorating political environment and the frequent staff turnover within the executing and implementing partner organizations in the Islamic Republic of Iran often obstructed the desired level of coordination between the partners. It was reported in the seventh PIR that the project was negatively impacted by the drastically impeded and delayed procurement of services and goods. This was due to a failure by the executing partner to acknowledge FAO's workflow and procurement procedures.

### **3.3.1 Rating of efficiency**

139. Quality of Project Execution: Moderately Unsatisfactory – The project execution could have been improved in many ways. For instance, it could have: i) established the baseline well in advance in order to monitor changes in individual and institutional capacities, as well as forest, rangeland and biodiversity conditions, and learn lessons for replication; and ii) accelerated project implementation by simplifying the administrative procedures and delegating the administrative and financial authorities related to project activities at the provincial level.
140. Quality of Project Implementation: Moderately Unsatisfactory – The project could not get the required level of technical support and assistance when it needed them the most. FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran could have considered being adaptive in its goods and services procurement policies and procedures in response to the demand of the project at appropriate times.

Overall rating of efficiency: Moderately Unsatisfactory.

## **3.4 Sustainability**

**Finding 27.** The terminal Evaluation Team found no reason to disagree with the first conclusion of the MTR: the project had high prospects of long-term sustainability of its achieved results given its participatory and integrated approach to SLFM.

141. Regarding the MTR's second conclusion, the terminal Evaluation Team concludes that the sustainability of project's achieved results at the community level and their institutions is highly likely. It is, however, only moderately likely at the provincial institutions level with some extra investment and adequate management of risks and challenges.

142. There were two key MTR conclusions drawn on the project sustainability: i) the prospects of long-term sustainability of project achievements were good; and ii) the RFLDL project played a catalytic role in the Islamic Republic of Iran to promote the participatory and integrated SLFM approach.
  - i. The reasons for the first conclusion were that the project was highly relevant and was considered a consolidated watershed management programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran with considerable government investment. The social mobilization approach that had an integrated SLFM element in this project made it most appropriate for the FRWO to continue with its integrated watershed management agenda in the foreseeable future.
  - ii. The second conclusion was based on the articulation that the GEF played a catalytic role through capacity building for a participatory and integrated SLFM approach. It enabled the communities to produce a public good, even though the precise nature of the “public good” being produced was not elaborated. The MTR indicated the likelihood of the developed and field-tested VLPs and WLPs as an integrated watershed management model for replication elsewhere in the Islamic Republic of Iran.
143. The Evaluation Team noted that the GEF-induced catalytic efforts (GEF Independent Evaluation Office, 2007) were two-fold in this project: i) the strengthening of capacity of communities in pilot villages, and of the provincial and local institutions to plan, implement and evaluate participatory and integrated SLFM; and ii) the strengthening of capacity at local and national levels to integrate SLFM across different institutions and sectors through the mainstreaming of a participatory and integrated SLFM approach in at least five government policies.
144. The impact of the project’s achieved results at the time of this terminal evaluation, per the available evidence are as follows:
  - i. The communities demonstrated their strengthened capacities and willingness for sustainable rural development by engaging in conservation-friendly alternative livelihood initiatives through rural development funds.
  - ii. Community institutions, such as the PVRMDCs and the rural development funds, got institutionalized and were now prepared and willing to undertake integrated SLFM initiatives for village development.
  - iii. Communities demonstrated their willingness to engage in sustainable agricultural practices, as evidenced in the creation of live enclosure against wind erosion, sapling production, village gardening, and a gradual shift towards drip irrigation and the production of dates.
  - iv. The communities demonstrated their enhanced trust and confidence to join hands with local and provincial government institutions through their participation and voluntary labour contribution (equivalent to approximately 50 percent of the total cost involved) in project supported rehabilitation, wind erosion reduction and agricultural lands restoration activities.
  - v. The cooperatives at the subwatershed level emerged as the legally recognized umbrella organizations of the PVRMDCs eligible to undertake local development projects within the framework of SLFM.
  - vi. The PVRMDCs were reported to be “knocking at the doors” of the relevant local and provincial government institutions with documents describing their participatory needs assessment in order to try to secure their support and assistance in the priority needs of their pilot villages.
  - vii. Replication of participatory and integrated approaches in urban development planning of the Sarayan city demonstrated the enhanced trust and confidence of local

- government institutions to join hands with local people and respect their needs and concerns in sustainable development initiatives.
- viii. The enhanced trust and confidence of the relevant district and provincial governors on the project-promoted participatory and integrated approach to SLFM was demonstrated as they played a proactive role in securing intersectoral coordination. The Evaluation Team's consultation at the Project Management Unit of the DAB revealed that the VLP and the WLP implementation was included in the job description of the district and provincial governors. However, no mechanism was evidenced that could confirm the existence of sustainable intersectoral coordination after the end of this project.
  - ix. Enhanced collaboration, especially among the FRWO, the Department of Environment and other agriculture – and natural resource-related organizations under the umbrella of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad was demonstrated. This could be considered institutionalized to a large extent after the enactment of Section B of Article 29.
  - x. The enactment of the Rules and Procedure of Section B, Article 29 of the permanent sections of the National Development Plan enabled the cooperatives to implement the VLPs and the WLPs in full or in part.
145. The areas in which the project lagged behind in making desired achievements leading to sustainable impact are detailed as follows:
- i. It was unable to finalize the VLPs and validation from their relevant pilot villages and their implementation through the PRVRMDCs. This could foster the local ownership of the VLPs and enhance trust between the communities and the local and provincial government institutions.
  - ii. The local and provincial government institutions were oriented and sensitized to promote participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives, but their institutional capacity to facilitate such initiatives was not evidenced.
  - iii. There was almost negligible evidence of progress toward reducing a top-down approach. For instance, this was observed in the centralized approach to finalizing the VLPs and the WLPs.
  - iv. The rehabilitation of forests and rangeland, and the conservation of biodiversity was initiated. However, the extent to which it could be achieved during the project period could not be objectively verified without the baselines for monitoring qualitative indicators.
  - v. Participatory and integrated SLFM was mainstreamed into only two out of the five targeted policies. Also, the specific policies and content of the mainstreaming could not be evidenced.
146. Points 1 to 5 under paragraph 128 reveal that the likelihood of the sustainability of the project results decreased or were compromised due to the following:
- i. The project could not do much to eliminate the prevalent top-down approach in development planning. This was evidenced in the centralized approach to the formulation and finalization of the VLPs and the WLPs, even though the pilot villages were ready and willing to implement their plans.
  - ii. No evidence was found regarding any efforts made to build and sustain the institutional capacity in local and provincial government institutions to work as "the facilitators and change agents for the promotion of participatory and integrated SLFM approach" (FAO, 2011). Outsourcing facilitation to promote participatory and integrated SLFM could not be considered sustainable and robust, nor could it contribute to building trust between the communities and the government institutions.



- iii. The planned mainstreaming of participatory and integrated SLFM in at least five policies was not prioritized. This may create barriers to participatory and integrated SLFM promotion in the future.
- 147. Given the ecological features of the arid and semi-arid areas where the project was implemented, the sustainability of the project's achieved results are likely to be subjected to the risk factors of drought, sandstorms, untimely floods and any future pandemic threats, such as COVID-19.
- 148. The Evaluation Team concludes that the project's achieved results are likely to be sustainable at the community level and their institutions. Their sustainability, however, is moderately likely at the provincial government institution level with extra efforts and the adequate management of foreseeable risks and challenges.

### **3.4.1 Rating of sustainability of project outcomes**

- 149. D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability: Moderately likely – The sustainability of the project's achieved results at the community level are highly likely with government support. At the level of the government institutions, sustainability is less likely unless all relevant service providing government institutions are oriented and participatory and integrated SLFM is mainstreamed into their service delivery mechanism.
  - i. D1.1. Financial risks: Likely – The Executing Agency expressed a strong willingness to replicate and promote participatory and integrated SLFM. However, the desired level of government allocation of the budget may not be possible.
  - ii. D1.2. Sociopolitical risks: Likely – There is almost negligible sociopolitical risk since the project empowered the communities and community institutions that were legally recognized to make decisions on improving their living conditions by addressing their livelihood-related issues and the associated issues of their locally existing natural resources.
  - iii. D1.3. Institutional and governance risks: Moderately likely – Institutional capacity to promote a participatory and integrated approach to SLFM was not evidenced. A prevalent centralized approach to decision-making contradicted the bottom-up and participatory approach to promoting SLFM.
  - iv. D1.4. Environmental risks: Unable to Assess – The project's achieved results may be seriously affected by sandstorms, drought, untimely floods and other environmental disasters.
- 150. D2. Catalysis and replication: Likely – The community-based integrated approach to SLFM holds fairly good chances of replication with government support.

## **3.5 Factors affecting performance**

### **3.5.1 Monitoring & evaluation system**

**Finding 28.** The project lagged behind in establishing a practical, well-structured M&E plan to capture all aspects of the four project components.

- 151. The project document had provided an M&E and reporting roadmap that included a results framework and a summary of the budgeted monitoring plan. It needed further elaboration to establish a monitoring system with methods, tools, processes and procedures of data collection and reporting responsibilities. Some indicators were revised in the inception phase. However, the development of a detailed monitoring framework could only be delivered in 2018 by a

consulting company that was hired by FAO. Systematic reporting was then done in 2018, as reported in the seventh PIR.

152. Per the results framework, the project needed to establish baselines on the status of forests, rangeland and biodiversity prior to rehabilitation interventions so that the change in their status over the years of project implementation could be monitored. However, no baselines were evidenced at the time of this evaluation.
153. Most of the objectively verifiable indicators listed in the project's results framework could only provide the information on whether the quantitative targets were met through the implementation of activities. They could not provide qualitative measures of change to learn whether the achieved outputs had contributed to achieving the outcomes for which the outputs were meant. For instance, these measured involved: i) the percentage of people trained using the newly learned knowledge and skills; ii) the percentage of plant survival per unit area planted/rehabilitated; iii) the percentage increase in natural regeneration of local/native/endemic plant species in planted/rehabilitated/protected forests and rangeland; and iv) the change in agriculture production per unit area safeguarded from wind erosion. These factors were not included in the monitoring. This information would be helpful in understanding the extent to which the training could be put into practice successfully.

**Finding 29.** The M&E system operated per the M&E plan provided in the project document. Overall, the generated information was helpful in making timely decisions and fostering knowledge.

154. A periodic schedule that involved a review of the progress and the monitoring of meetings at multiple levels of project execution was institutionalized after the inception of the project. Accordingly, the PPMT met twice a week to review the progress, issues and challenges. The monthly, quarterly and biannual reports submitted by the PPMT to the Project Management Unit were largely based on the fortnightly reports of field facilitators and the progress made at the provincial level. This included supervisory missions undertaken by the provincial project manager. The progress, which was monitored quarterly and every six months, monitored the implementation of activities and the achievement of outputs. This included the issues, challenges and likely risks.
155. The information generated from the M&E required decisions for corrective measures. Any issues and challenges that might have constrained the smooth implementation of activities were also reported by the pilot villages to the provincial project manager. Many such constraints, issues and challenges within the capacities of the provincial project manager were generally sorted out at the provincial and local level well in advance. For instance, it was found out in the early stage of the project that women's participation was relatively limited in awareness and livelihood-related training activities due to local traditions. The project mobilized the women facilitators to gain the trust of communities. This resulted in their extensive participation. The lack of mutual trust between the FRWO and the local communities that had surfaced in the initial years of the project was resolved through continued sessions with local communities. These sessions convinced them and demonstrated that the project was committed to a bottom-up, participatory and transparent approach to identifying activities and the allocation of resources, and to enabling them to influence decisions for implementation. Information needing strategic actions that had been forwarded to the Project Management Unit of the DAB were subject to delays due to the administrative processes involved. This was detailed under Findings 25 and 26.
156. In an effort to supplement the existing M&E findings, an assessment of the impact of the project on the local HDI was commissioned by the project in 2019. It revealed that the project

had succeeded in improving the local HDI by 11 percent and 8 percent in the South Khorasan and the Kerman pilots, respectively. The project had a major contribution to improving the knowledge dimension of the target communities. This dimension was determined by two indicators, namely environmental knowledge and the social capital. Both indicators significantly improved to over 30 percent in both the pilots.

157. The progress reports revealed that the learnings from the M&E findings resulted in the documentation of two success stories, a professional paper on approaches to reducing the severity of wind erosion in the project area, an article on the countries' good practices regarding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2, and a project brochure.

### **3.5.1.1 Rating of M&E**

M&E design: Moderately Unsatisfactory – A baseline, per the results framework, was not established, and the MTR recommendations regarding the refinement of the M&E design and quality indicators were not given due consideration in a timely way.

M&E plan implementation: Moderately Satisfactory with minor shortcomings.

Overall quality of M&E: Moderately Satisfactory.

### **3.5.2 Stakeholder engagement**

**Finding 30.** The project effectively engaged with all identified stakeholders, including the private sector and minority groups throughout its implementation, even though it did not have a stakeholder engagement strategy.

158. The project document did not include a separate stakeholder engagement strategy. However, based on the interviews conducted, it was confirmed that at the early stages of the project, a lot of effort and resources were used to conduct assessments and hold various meetings with all potential stakeholders in the pilot areas to ensure any intervention has the support of all local actors. The project engaged with all stakeholders identified in the project document at different stages of project implementation. The ministerial Natural Resources Management Office, the Department of Environment, the provincial departments of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad and the village Islamic councils were engaged with the project throughout its implementation at the local and provincial level. The Office of Nomadic Affairs, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security were engaged with the project, as and when required. Additionally, the project worked in close cooperation with the directory of governor generals and subgovernor generals. It also brought on board the Rural and Municipal Water and Sanitation Department, the Department of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare, and the Administration of Cultural Heritage, as and when required.
159. The progress reports reveal that the procurement of different equipment relied on the previous consultation of relevant manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers and workshop owners from all over the country. All these were engaged in the manufacturing and sale of various livelihood- and alternative energy-related equipment.

#### **3.5.2.1 Rating**

Stakeholder engagement: Satisfactory – All stakeholders identified in the project document were involved at multiple levels.

### 3.5.3 Environmental and social safeguards

**Finding 31.** The environmental and social concerns were adequately taken into consideration in the implementation of the project, even if they were not included in the project design.

160. No evidence has been found on any environmental screening of the project. This is relevant, considering the project aimed at enhancing the biodiversity and restoring the ecosystem services of degraded forest landscapes and agricultural lands in order to deliver goods and services for sustainable livelihoods, food security and combating desertification at the watershed level. It was not clear from the project document whether the project was exempted from environmental assessment. The project document did not have an environmental and social safeguards plan.
161. Drought, wind erosion and land degradation were the main environmental issues of the project area and were tackled within the scope of the project. Other than that, no environmental concerns related to the project were reported throughout its implementation.
162. An impact study focused on the change in social and institutional cohesion at the project pilot sites after project intervention in 2015. Conducted by the University of Tehran, this study concluded that the project was successful in enhancing social empowerment, increasing social capital and reinforcing institutional cohesion in project pilot sites.

#### 3.5.3.1 Rating

Environmental risks: Unable to Assess.

Environmental and social safeguards: Satisfactory.

### 3.5.4 Cofinancing

**Finding 32.** The inadequate disbursement of GEF funds between 2011 and 2014, as explained under Finding 23, delayed the project results. However, this did not negatively impact the project.

163. As explained under Finding 23, between 2011 and 2014, the bulk of the cofinancing from the government was in the form of in-kind investment (equivalent to USD 8 million, as opposed to the committed USD 3 330 000), and USD 4 million (about 75 percent) of committed in-cash cofinancing. Hence, the total financial resources invested between 2011 and 2015 were approximately 90 percent of the total fund allocation.
164. It was noted during the interviews and consultations that the project was not negatively impacted due to the lack of GEF funds. This is because both the GEF funds and the government cofinancing were allocated in all project components and the project activities could be implemented smoothly. However, the procurement of equipment and expert services that were to be funded by GEF sometimes hampered the effective implementation of activities and negatively affected the timely delivery of project results.
165. The availability of GEF funds were regularized from 2015 to 2018. This, however, was disrupted again in late 2018, further impacting the procurement of goods/equipment and services, and the project could not deliver per the letter of agreement and the 2018/19 workplan. Since early 2020, the outbreak and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on the delivery of project results.

**Finding 33.** No evidence could be found regarding some project positions being funded by the government and its foreseen relationship with the sustainability of the project.

166. The position of National Project Manager was changed to the National Project Coordinator, and it was decided to be funded by the government at the time of project inception. Other than that, the Evaluation Team could not access information regarding any project position being funded by the government as far as the GEF agency was aware.
167. The Evaluation Team, however, learned that the executing agency was highly impressed by the participatory approach to mainstreaming SLFM in the development sectors. This provided a learning platform for project beneficiaries, as well as authorities and decision makers. The bottom-up approach adopted for designing the development interventions through the VLPs and the WLPs, and defining the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors, was regarded as highly appropriate. The project managed to bring together the project beneficiaries and the stakeholders, and contributed to awareness raising. This enabled them to understand their rights, capacities and competencies. The government considered this approach to be highly sustainable and was committed to replicating it elsewhere. Hence, the Evaluation Team could not eliminate the possibility of the government funding future project positions so that it could make an assessment of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the participatory and bottom-up approach to planning and implementing an integrated SLFM.

### 3.5.4.1 Rating

Cofinancing: Moderately Satisfactory.

### 3.5.5 Knowledge management

**Finding 34.** The project's communication of its objectives, achieved results and key messages were effective and likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results.

168. The project developed a communications and visibility strategy in 2017. This was finalized based on inputs provided by the communications experts at FAO headquarters. The project implemented this strategy while effectively communicating its objectives, progress, achieved results and success stories.
169. The project established its website in both the English and Farsi languages. It specifically produced and posted relevant communications materials for its website of [www.rfldl.ir](http://www.rfldl.ir) in Farsi. The project also used the media effectively at local, provincial and national levels to promote its materials in the country.
170. It was reported that the project's promotional activities were aligned with its communications and visibility strategy. The materials communicated were geared at: i) awareness raising on good practices and lessons learned; ii) the organization and mobilization of local communities; iii) approaches used in the capacity development of communities, as well as their PVRMDCs and rural development funds; iv) approaches used in participatory rehabilitation activities and the promotion of alternative energy efficient livelihood businesses; and v) the roles and significance of intersectoral coordination. The project's success stories were also posted on FAO official websites and on the Islamic Republic of Iran websites of the United Nations.
171. Interviews with the executing agency revealed that the concepts and approaches introduced under this project had slowly worked their way into the governance system of different parts of the country since they were considered highly successful in the pilot areas. A national project on combating desertification in 22 provinces of the Islamic Republic of Iran was designed by the FRWO using the successful approaches of this project. It remains under consideration at this stage. The evidence indicates that the knowledge dissemination of the project's achieved results

supported the achieved results and catalysed the scaling up of the concepts and approaches used in this project.

### 3.5.5.1 Rating

Knowledge management: Satisfactory.

## 3.6 Gender

**Finding 35.** Gender considerations were taken into account in project design and implementation. Both men and women had equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from project activities in an equitable manner.

172. A review of the project document revealed that the gender considerations were sufficiently taken into account at the design stage. A key project strategy was to collaborate with experienced and relevant Iranian Government departments, such as the Department of Nomadic and Pastoral Women's Affairs within the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad and women's non-governmental organizations. This ensured that women have equal opportunities to participate in and equitably benefit from all project activities.
173. Interviews with women leaders and beneficiaries revealed that the project had mobilized a handicraft expert from an all-female consulting company. This expert worked closely with the female field facilitators to promote handicraft-related livelihood initiatives. Furthermore, women's participation in all kinds of vocational training and workshops was above 70 percent.
174. Women were involved alongside men in all project activities from capacity building and livelihood initiatives to decision-making. The progress reports indicated that: i) at least 33 percent of the PVRMDC's executive committee members and, among them, 40 percent of chairpersons were women; ii) 87 percent of women executive members regularly attended the PVRMDC meeting; iii) 33 percent of the rural development fund members were women; iv) 38 percent of total savings of rural development funds belonged to women; v) 49 percent of loans were allocated to women; vi) 97 percent of loan disbursement was paid by women; vii) among those participating in site visits, 37 percent were women; viii) 54 percent of alternative livelihood businesses were established by women; and ix) the share of women's participation in rehabilitation activities was incredible – 20 percent in seed collection and almost 100 percent in plant production and kitchen gardening.
175. The project contributed to creating relatively healthier living conditions for women in their homes. Before project implementation, the women used to collect fuelwood for cooking and heating, and were exposed to smoke in the kitchen for hours where no cooking gas and electricity were available. The project procured gas cylinders, gas bakery ovens and stoves, and distributed them in the project pilot villages. The rural development funds disbursed loans to their female members to buy clean energy devices that were to be paid back in instalments. This relieved women from fuelwood collection and saved them from many respiratory diseases. It could be considered a step towards closing the gender gap and placing women in a more equitable living condition.
176. As noted in Finding 29, monitoring activities in the early stage of the project found that women's participation was relatively limited to awareness and livelihood-related training activities due to the existing local traditions. This was acted upon to enable the results noted in the previous paragraphs.

### 3.6.1 Rating

Gender: Highly Satisfactory.

## 3.7 Progress to impact

**Finding 36.** Evidence suggests that the project was successful in establishing the foundation for progress towards long-term impact.

177. The project was successful in the following:

- i. It introduced a participatory and integrated SLFM approach to the communities in the pilot villages.
- ii. It engaged with these communities on awareness raising, empowerment and capacity building with regard to a diverse range of social, environmental and development-related issues.
- iii. It worked with them to tackle these issues by taking collective actions with relevant local and provincial institutions. These initiatives instilled communities with a sense of attachment to their forests, rangeland and biodiversity resources. They also carried a responsibility to take initiatives on addressing their local development needs and their sustainable livelihood measures. It also instilled them with a drive to reach out to their local and relevant provincial government institutions for help and assistance. It was crucial in developing mutual trust between the communities and the local and provincial government institutions. Accordingly, the human capital created in the pilot villages was the progress towards long-term impact.

178. The project successfully facilitated the establishment and institutionalization of the community institutions. For example, this involved the PVRMDCs and the rural development funds, that is, the sustainable community development funds, in pilot villages and cooperatives, and on WRMD Committees at the subwatershed level. The PVRMDCs successfully: i) mobilized the communities in forest and rangeland rehabilitation, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agricultural practices and wind erosion reduction activities; and ii) collaborated with local and provincial government institutions and initiated local development initiatives that had been identified through a participatory needs assessment. The rural development funds actively engaged in building the local economy through savings and credit schemes, and supporting the alternative livelihoods initiatives. It was evidenced that these community institutions were on their way to becoming self-reliant. This may be considered as the developed social capital in the pilot areas which, in itself, is a progress towards long-term impact.

179. It was evidenced that efforts were made to avoid any risk of reverting back to the unabated deforestation and degradation of lands by: i) increasing community access to alternative energy sources and equipment for cooking and heating; ii) promoting alternative livelihood measures and businesses that are not dependent on land and forest resources; and iii) undertaking various rehabilitation activities in forests, rangeland and agricultural lands. A no hunting area was established and protection activities were increased. This resulted in more wildlife species sightings that were becoming rapidly extinct in the area. The village gardens of some local medicinal plants and the NWFP species were established.

180. In absence of an established baseline on the status of forests, rangeland and biodiversity, it was not possible to make a holistic assessment of the change brought through project intervention and the extent to which desertification was combated and degraded lands were restored to support farm-based livelihoods. However, it was evident that initiatives to eliminate the threats

to forests, rangeland and agriculture lands were taken and have high chances of maintaining momentum since the pilot areas now have the strengthened human and social capital.

**Finding 37.** The Rules and Procedure of Section B, Article 29 of the Permanent Section of the National Development Plan was revised as a result of the project's work towards Outcome 3.

181. As detailed out under Finding 17 (paragraph 90), Section B, Article 29 of the permanent provision of the National Development Plan was revised and updated to provide legal recognition to the PVRMDCs and the rural development funds, and their cooperatives. This revision followed many study visits by selected parliamentarians and the central-level policymakers. They came to the conclusion that the locally-based PVRMDCs and their cooperatives were much better than outsider registered development contractors for what concerns the sustainability of the local development and the SLFM projects in any particular area. The cooperatives are established as umbrella institutions of the PVRMDCs. This way, they can participate in bidding for local development projects and implement the development initiatives by mobilizing the respective PVRMDCs and people. Part of the overhead accrued for these cooperatives could then go to the rural development funds of the relevant villages. This arrangement in the FRWO and the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad laws and regulations was a progress towards long-term impact since it entrusted the local, community-based institutions with the responsibility of their own sustainable development and building their local economy.

**Finding 38.** The future progress towards long-term impact is likely to meet obstacles: inadequate institutional capacities within local and provincial government institutions, a shortage of funding, and risks associated with natural and climatic hazards.

182. As explained under Finding 12 (paragraph 70), the institutional capacities of local and provincial government institutions to facilitate the process of participatory and integrated SLFM was not built by the project. They were just oriented and sensitized to support and assist in the project-promoted participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives. After project closure, the services of the field facilitators and the SLFM-related experts will most likely be unavailable to local and provincial government institutions unless procured for this purpose. The government would need to allocate special budgets to tackle the SLFM-related issues that may arise with the initiation of the participatory needs assessment in the target areas. It was learned that the district and provincial governors are now responsible for coordinating the implementation of the VLPs and the WLPs. However, the existence of any institutionalized mechanism to secure intersectoral coordination and collaboration needed to implement the VLPs and the WLPs was not evidenced. The future progress towards long-term impact of the project's achieved results will largely depend on how these barriers are dealt with and eliminated.
183. Most of the arid and semi-arid areas of the Islamic Republic of Iran are ecologically fragile, resulting in year-long spells of drought, untimely floods, continued severity of wind erosion and soil salinity. The ever-increasing impact of climate change is likely to further complicate the situation by inducing uncertainties in the existing natural/ecological condition of these areas. The gains of an integrated SLFM initiative tend to be visible slowly. At the same time, they are at risk of being washed away suddenly if any significant threats come into play, and may need restarting from scratch again.





## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusions

**Conclusion 1.** The project was fully relevant to the national priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in that it strived to eliminate sociopolitical, policy and institutional barriers to a participatory and integrated SLFM approach and achieve the conservation and development objectives at the watershed level.

**Conclusion 2.** It took a considerable amount of time to get this project endorsed by GEF. This was due to a delay in the submission of commitment for cofinancing. Moreover, the project could not be practically implemented until its inception in March 2012, even though it officially started in July 2011.

184. The second conclusion of the mid-term review on project design stipulated that the project was developed over a long period of time (46 months). However, the documented evidence indicates that the project was designed and submitted to GEF Secretariat for approval in September 2007. However, the confirmation for cofinancing and the request for CEO endorsement was possible only in mid and late-2010, respectively. Endorsement from the GEF was technically not possible prior to the written commitment for cofinancing mentioned in the project design. The project received the GEF endorsement in March 2011 and started in July of the same year. Hence, the delay was in the project's endorsement process. Moreover, the project could not be practically implemented until its inception in March 2012, even though it officially started in July 2011. It needed to adjust its institutional and implementation arrangements in response to the ongoing administrative and fiscal decentralization in the country.

**Conclusion 3.** The project was successful in making the stakeholders realize the relative advantage of empowering the local communities and engaging them in SLFM initiatives. This realization resulted in the government's enactment of Paragraph B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of the Country Development Plans, which further enhanced the relevance of the project.

185. This project demonstrated to the stakeholders the significance of empowering local communities, helping them establish their own institutions and working hand in hand with community institutions by enabling them to participate in development decision-making.

186. The relative advantage of this approach was realized and appreciated by the project executing agency and other stakeholders. This paved the way for the enactment of Paragraph B of Article 29 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of the Country Development Plans. The cooperatives of the PVRMDCs and rural development funds established under this project were legally recognized. This entitles them to bidding on behalf of the communities of the area to undertake the development projects under the participatory and integrated SLFM approach.

**Conclusion 4.** The project was successful in demonstrating that those impacting and/or impacted by the well-being of land, forests, rangeland and biodiversity resources in a landscape could be the best stewards and managers of those resources. It contributed significantly to developing the human and social capital at the project beneficiary level, and established the foundation for SLFM.

187. The bottom-up and participatory approach to integrated SLFM initiatives promoted under this project was instrumental not only in creating awareness among the resource user communities by empowering and capacitating them but also in making them the stewards and managers of the resources on which their well-being depended. An enhanced level of human and social capital development was evidenced among the communities and their institutions involved in

the project. The local economy was strengthened and became vibrant as a result of the improved human and social capital in project areas.

188. The extent to which the project's objective of the rehabilitation of forests, rangeland and agricultural lands was achieved could not be assessed. However, it was demonstrated that the local communities were able to successfully undertake the land and forest rehabilitation activities provided they are made aware, capacitated, involved in resource-related decision-making and entrusted to take actions with adequate backup support from relevant government institutions. A robust foundation for a participatory and integrated approach to future SLFM initiatives was established in the project area.

**Conclusion 5.** The sustainability of the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM in the project areas is ensured. It seems likely to be replicated in areas with a similar ecological setup. However, the human resources of the relevant provincial and local government institutions will need to be reoriented to assume the role of facilitator, motivator and technical service provider, rather than that of the implementer of SLFM.

189. The project's achieved results at the community level, and the sustainability of their institutions is fairly likely to be sustainable. The approach promoted by the project also holds a huge potential for replication in similar settings elsewhere in the country, as evidenced in this evaluation.
190. However, much more is required to change the mindset of the provincial and local government institutions. Within their centralized service delivery mechanism, they were oriented to support the project per its requirements. The participatory and integrated approach to SLFM requires that the human resources in the relevant government institutions shed their existing role of "the provider of the development" and assume a new role of "facilitator, motivator and technical service provider for the development." The development service delivery processes and procedures of the government institutions would need to be adjusted to recognize the lead role of communities whose well-being is affected by the development initiative.

## 4.2 Recommendations

191. The following recommendations take into consideration that, at the time of writing, the project still has several months ahead until December 2022 and significant resources remain in the budget.

### 4.2.1 Recommendation to the project executing agency, the FRWO

**Recommendation 1.** The remaining unfinished project activities and outputs should be completed in order to meet the commitment, consolidate the project achievements and strengthen the prospects for sustainability by the end of the project period.

192. The formulation of the VLPs were claimed to be accomplished at the time of this evaluation. The VLPs and the WLPs, once finalized and approved, will also need to be endorsed by their relevant community-level institutions before they commit themselves to implementation. It is, therefore, recommended that the project should assist in the finalization of the VLPs in consultation with the people in their respective pilot villages and hand them over for implementation. Furthermore, the WLPs at this stage were reported as reviewed by the experts. The project should assist in the finalization and approval of the WLPs, and should facilitate this to ensure that the functional cooperatives in two subwatersheds take ownership over implementing those WLPs.

193. Some alternative livelihood businesses promoted by the project faced problems due to the shortage of funds for expansion. Others, instead, faced market unavailability. It is therefore recommended that the project consolidate the achievement of this output by undertaking activities, such as: i) reviewing the performance of all different types of alternative livelihoods based on the problems faced; ii) undertaking a value chain analysis of the most promising alternative livelihoods; and iii) developing a strategy for sustaining the most viable alternative livelihood businesses in consultation with community institutions and the cooperatives in order to give continuity to the successful ones and support the partly successful ones in the future.
194. The strengthening of the relevant provincial and local government institutions' capacity should be taken into consideration so that they can work as facilitators and technical service providers in the participatory and integrated SLFM process. This requires reviewing and refining the service delivery mechanism of these institutions, and redefining the job description of all their development professional and field staff.

#### **4.2.2 Recommendation to the Lead Technical Officer (supported by the Budget Holder at the FAO country office)**

**Recommendation 2.** It is recommended that FAO provide the technical support and assistance to the project executing agency per its request to accomplish the recommendations made under paragraphs 171, 172 and 173.

#### **4.2.3 Recommendation to FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

**Recommendation 3.** FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran should commission a study to capture and document some areas' apparent good practices highlighted by the evaluation. This should take place before the project is completed and the staff departs in order to capture institutional memory and feed experience into future investments. These areas of enquiry include a participatory approach in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and its apparent influence), behavioural change and gender.

195. This exercise could be useful for future projects in the Islamic Republic of Iran and elsewhere. It would be important to develop the findings and explain how certain results were achieved, as well as the critical factors involved.

**Recommendation 4.** It is recommended to field test FAO's FPMIS in the project country and to provide the project team with hands-on training. They should also be enabled to use it prior to its execution for a better tracking of the results-based management of the project.



## 5. Lessons learned

**Lesson 1.** The design of a GEF project is highly likely to be affected due to any significant context change in the recipient country, including the policy environment.

**Lesson 2.** The factual assessment of GEF projects largely depends on the systematic monitoring based on the established baselines, as stipulated in the project's results framework. Therefore, it could not be overlooked.

**Lesson 3.** The quantitative measures of achievements at the output level would not be sufficient to assess whether a project has achieved its objectives. It is of utmost importance to have qualitative measures of achievement at the project's outcomes and objective level in order to assess whether outputs achieved have cumulatively contributed to achieving the outcomes and objectives of the project.

**Lesson 4.** "Lack of trust between the communities and the government institutions" (key informant interview) was noted as a key barrier in this project. This issue was addressed to some extent as the project adopted a bottom-up and participatory approach, empowered project beneficiaries, organized them into their own institutions and enabled them to undertake dialogue and interaction with relevant local and provincial government institutions. This was a first development attempt of its kind in the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, a lot remained to be done in order to induce changes within the government institutions. Therefore, this lesson emerges as the participatory and integrated approach to SLFM demands that the government agencies create an enabling environment for local communities to get engaged in development activities right from the needs assessment to planning, implementation and evaluation of their development. This would require review and refinement of job descriptions of the government institutions, preparing them to work in partnership with community institutions, and making adjustments in their service delivery procedures and mechanism.

**Lesson 5.** The focus of this project on sustainable livelihoods made it possible to bring women out of their households and into the communities so that they can engage in social responsibilities. This happened with the help of the project female facilitators well in advance.

**Lesson 6.** The project's efforts to build social cohesion on the ground made it possible to break the sociocultural barriers hindering women of certain project areas, namely those characterized by ethnic and religious diversities such as Shia and Sunni women and descendants from Baluch and Fars. Members of previously conflicting tribes reportedly got married. Diversity has been increasingly recognized and respected due to the project's efforts in building social cohesion.

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## Additional resources

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## Appendix 1. People interviewed

Interview number	Last name	First name	Organization/position	Role	Method
7	Abdolhosseini		FRWO	National Project Director	Skype
15	Alizadeh	Mina	FRWO	Facilitator	Phone
28	As'ad SeQale	Mehdi	FRWO	Facilitator	Phone
19	Ashrafzadeh	Ali	Local	PVRMDC	Phone
11	Barani		FRWO	Expert	Phone
30	Barzang	Ashraf	Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
24	Behbahani	Niloofer	FRWO	PPMT (South Khorasan)	WhatsApp
26	Beheshti	Fatemeh	FRWO	Facilitator	Phone
22	Beheshti	Fatima	Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
6	Boedeker	Gerold	FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran	BH	Zoom
2	Braun	Genevieve	FAO headquarters	Programme Officer	Zoom
13	Dastyar	Hadi	Local representative	VLP/sustainable community development fund	Phone
18	Ebrahimi		Local representative	PVRMDC	Phone
16	Faramarzi		Local representative	PVRMDC	Phone
10	FasihZadeh		FRWO in the Islamic Republic of Iran	Former PPMT	Phone
5	Ghanbari	Marjan	FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran	Assistant FAO Representative	Zoom
12	Habili		FRWO	Expert	Phone
4	Haddad	Fidaa	FAO headquarters	Lead Technical Officer	Zoom
8	Jafarian	Vahid	FRWO	National Project Coordinator	Skype
21	Mirkhani		Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
23	Mohammadi		Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
14	Nazeli	Saeed	FRWO	Facilitator	Phone
27	Palangi	Kobra	Project beneficiary	Active women	Phone
9	Rajabizadeh		FRWO	PPMT (Kerman)	WhatsApp
17	Sabeghi	Hooshang	Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
3	Saemian	Sina	FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran	Project Manager	Zoom
29	Shahiki	Aziz	Project beneficiary	Alternative livelihoods	Phone
20	Shahmohammadi		project beneficiary	Active Women	Phone
1	VeyretPicot	Maude	FAO headquarters	Technical Officer	Zoom
25	Yousefi	Mohsen	FRWO	PPMT (South Khorasan)	WhatsApp

## Appendix 2. GEF evaluation criteria rating table

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating	Summary comments
<b>A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE</b>		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	S	Refer to section 3.1.
A1.1. Alignment with the GEF and FAO strategic priorities	S	Fairly aligned.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs	S	Fairly relevant.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	S	It complements with the Islamic Republic of Iran's national desertification plan and sectoral development programmes.
<b>B. EFFECTIVENESS</b>		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MS	Refer to section 3.2.
B1.1. Delivery of project outputs	MU	Most outputs were achieved with minor shortcomings. Outputs 1.3 and 2.1 had major shortcomings.
B1.2. Progress towards outcomes <sup>23</sup> and project objectives	MS	Refer to Sections 3.2 and 3.3.
- Outcome 1	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 2	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 3	S	Level of outcome achieved was more or less as expected.
- Outcome 4a	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Outcome 4b	MS	There were moderate shortcomings.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/outcomes	MS	i) Capacity of project beneficiaries and their newly created institutions to plan and implement integrated SLFM using a participatory approach was enhanced. However, the pilot villages could not own and implement their VLPs and WLPs in their real sense. ii) The local and provincial institutions got oriented and sensitized on the participatory and integrated SLFM but could not institutionalize the concept of participatory and integrated SLFM within their operational systems and procedures. iii) Good efforts were made in reducing the pressure on lands, forests and rangeland and in eliminating threats to biodiversity, but the extent to which those efforts contributed to achieving the project objectives could not be assessed due to inadequate monitoring and unavailability of GEF tracking tool information.
B1.3. Likelihood of impact	ML	Institutionalized community-based capacity on SLFM is moderately likely to make an impact.
<b>C. EFFICIENCY</b>		

<sup>23</sup> Assessment and ratings by individual outcomes may be undertaken if there is added value.

C1. Efficiency <sup>24</sup>	MU	There were significant shortcomings, and the quality of implementation or execution was somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
<b>D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES</b>		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	ML	Refer to section 3.4. Moderate risks to sustainability.
D1.1. Financial risks	L	Little risks likely.
D1.2. Sociopolitical risks	L	Little risks likely.
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	ML	Moderate risks likely.
D1.4. Environmental risks	UA	Incidences of natural disasters and their magnitude of risks to sustainability cannot be assessed.
D2. Catalysis and replication	L	Little risks to sustainability.
<b>E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE</b>		
E1. Project design and readiness <sup>25</sup>	MS	There were shortcomings. See Findings 4 and 5.
E2. <b>Quality of project implementation</b>	MU	The quality of project implementation was somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
E2.1. Quality of project implementation by FAO (Budget Holder [BH], Lead Technical Officer [LTO], Project Task Force [PTF], etc.)	MU	Lower than expected.
E2.2. Project oversight (Project Steering Committee, project working group, etc.)	MS	The Project Steering Committee failed to meet at regular intervals as planned.
E3. <b>Quality of project execution</b> For DEX projects: Project Management Unit/BH; For Operational Partners Implementation Modality [OPIM] projects: Executing Agency	MS	The quality of project execution was somewhat lower than expected. Refer to section 3.3.
E4. Financial management and cofinancing	MS	Not adequately decentralized and relatively cumbersome financial management
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	S	There were minor shortcomings.
E6. Communication, knowledge management and knowledge products	S	There were minor shortcomings.
E7. <b>Overall quality of M&amp;E</b>	MS	Refer to section 5.1.
E7.1. M&E design	MS	There were some shortcomings.
E7.2. M&E plan implementation (including financial and human resources)	MU	There were significant shortcomings.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	MS	
<b>F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS</b>		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	HS	Refer to section 3.6.
F2. Human rights issues/Indigenous Peoples	S	No issues reported.
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	S	The project, to some extent, contributed to environmental and social goods.
<b>Overall project rating</b>	MS	

<sup>24</sup> Includes cost-efficiency and timeliness.

<sup>25</sup> This refers to factors affecting the project's ability to start as expected, such as the presence of sufficient capacity among executing partners at project launch.

## Appendix 3. Rating scheme<sup>26</sup>

### PROJECT RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Project outcomes are rated based on the extent to which the project objectives were achieved. A six-point rating scale is used to assess overall outcomes.

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Description</b>
Highly Satisfactory (HS)	"Level of outcomes achieved clearly exceeds expectations and/or there were no shortcomings."
Satisfactory (S)	"Level of outcomes achieved was as expected and/or there were no or minor shortcomings."
Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	"Level of outcomes achieved more or less as expected and/or there were moderate shortcomings."
Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	"Level of outcomes achieved somewhat lower than expected and/or there were significant shortcomings."
Unsatisfactory (U)	"Level of outcomes achieved substantially lower than expected and/or there were major shortcomings."
Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	"Only a negligible level of outcomes achieved and/or there were severe shortcomings."
Unable to Assess (UA)	The available information does not allow for an assessment of the level of outcome achievements.

During project implementation, the results framework of some projects may have been modified. In cases where modifications in the project impact, outcomes and outputs have not scaled down their overall scope, the evaluator should assess outcome achievements based on the revised results framework. In instances where the scope of the project objectives and outcomes has been scaled down, the magnitude of and necessity for downscaling is taken into account and despite achievement of results per the revised results framework, where appropriate, a lower outcome effectiveness rating may be given.

### PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND EXECUTION

The quality of implementation and of execution will be rated separately. Quality of implementation pertains to the role and responsibilities undertaken by the GEF agencies that have direct access to GEF resources. Quality of Execution pertains to the roles and responsibilities undertaken by the country or regional counterparts that received GEF funds from the GEF agencies and executed the funded activities on ground. The performance will be rated on a six-point scale:

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Description</b>
Highly Satisfactory (HS)	There were no shortcomings and quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> exceeded expectations.
Satisfactory (S)	There were no or minor shortcomings and quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> meets expectations.
Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	There were some shortcomings and quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> more or less meets expectations.
Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	There were significant shortcomings and quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> was somewhat lower than expected.
Unsatisfactory (U)	There were major shortcomings and quality of implementation was substantially lower than expected.
Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	There were severe shortcomings in quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> .
Unable to Assess (UA)	The available information does not allow for an assessment of the quality of <b>implementation</b> or <b>execution</b> .

<sup>26</sup> See instructions provided in Annex 2: Rating scales in (GEF Independent Evaluation Office, 2017).

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The quality of project M&E will be assessed in terms of:

- i. design; and
- ii. implementation

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability will be assessed by taking into account the risks related to the financial, sociopolitical, institutional and environmental sustainability of project outcomes. The evaluator may also take other risks into account that may affect sustainability. The overall sustainability will be assessed using a four-point scale:

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Description</b>
Likely (L)	<i>There is little or no risk to sustainability.</i>
Moderately Likely (ML)	<i>There are moderate risks to sustainability.</i>
Moderately Unlikely (MU)	<i>There are significant risks to sustainability.</i>
Unlikely (U)	<i>There are severe risks to sustainability.</i>
Unable to Assess (UA)	<i>Unable to assess the expected incidence and magnitude of risks to sustainability.</i>

## Appendix 4. GEF cofinancing table<sup>27</sup>

Name of the cofinancer	Cofinancer type <sup>28</sup>	Type of cofinancing <sup>29</sup>	Cofinancing at project start (amount confirmed at GEF CEO endorsement/approval (in USD million))			Materialized cofinancing as of 30 June 2021 (in USD million)		
			In-kind	Cash	Total	In-kind	Cash	Total
Government of the Islamic republic of Iran	Government	Grant	3.34	5	8.34	5.25	3.428	8.678
<b>Total (in USD)</b>			<b>3.34</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>8.34</b>	<b>5.25</b>	<b>3.428</b>	<b>8.678</b>

<sup>27</sup> Per the last and ninth PIR.

<sup>28</sup> Examples of categories include: local, provincial or national government; semi-government autonomous institutions; the private sector; multilateral or bilateral organizations; educational and research institutions; nonprofit organizations; civil society organizations; foundations; beneficiaries; GEF agencies; and others.

<sup>29</sup> This includes grants; loans; equity participation by beneficiaries (individuals) in the form of cash; guarantees; in-kind or material contributions; and others.

## Appendix 5. Result matrix showing project achievements and the Evaluation Team's comments

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
Outcome 1: Local community capacity to plan, implement and evaluate a participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives was strengthened in 45 pilot villages, as well as provincial and local institutions. (baseline to be established in project year 0)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Participants were trained in participatory and integrated SLFM initiatives and are currently using their new skills on the ground.</li> <li>ii. The PVRMC and Village Councils' SLFM, VLP and WLP were developed for the pilot villages and village clusters, respectively.</li> <li>iii. Rural development funds were established in pilot villages.</li> </ul>	See details given in the outputs under this outcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Quantitative achievement on capacity building exceeded the target.</li> <li>ii. Achievement in establishing PVRMDCs exceeded the target.</li> <li>iii. Target of formulating VLPs brought down to 14 by clustering villages.</li> <li>iv. Four VLPs for Sarayan were approved. The approval status of ten VLPs for Rigan was not evidenced.</li> <li>v. Two WLPs were targeted but not prepared.</li> <li>vi. Rural development funds exceeded the target, with 41 rural development funds established and operational.</li> </ul>	<p>No evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. percentage of those trained on SLFM among government staff using the SLFM learnings;</li> <li>ii. efforts to institutionalize the participatory and integrated SLFM capacity building in government institutions;</li> <li>iii. the PVRMDCs' and rural development funds' capability to keep existing after the end of the project without government support, given their largely institutionalized nature; and</li> <li>iv. clarity about the linkage between rural development funds, cooperatives and the cooperatives' role.</li> </ul>
Output 1.1: At least 200 people of the population in each of the two watersheds and 70 percent of the provincial staff, including men and women, were trained on SLFM.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Four hundred thirty-four FRWO and relevant line ministry staff members at multiple levels were oriented on participatory and integrated SLFM approaches through 25 workshops, 19 meetings, two stakeholder workshops and two study tours to the carbon sequestration project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. One thousand four hundred ninety people (1 237 from villages and 253 from staff) were trained on SLFM by the time of the fifth PIR. These became 2 198 by the eighth PIR, even though the total number of staff trained is lacking.</li> <li>ii. No SLFM training is reported after 2020 due to Pandemic.</li> <li>iii. More than 100 percent was achieved quantitatively.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Training qualitative achievement, especially in case of government staff, is not evidenced.</li> </ul>
Output 1.2: Six PVRMCs were established.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. One hundred ninety-two orientation workshops were organized in 20 pilot</li> </ul>	<p>By the end of the seventh PIR:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. twenty PVRMDCs were established, capacitated and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. No evidence of functional WRMDs was found.</li> </ul>

Appendix 5. Result matrix showing project achievements and the Evaluation Team's comments

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
		<p>villages.</p> <p>ii. Twenty PVRMDCs (ten per pilot area) were established.</p> <p>iii. Two hundred nine villagers (140 males and 69 females) were oriented and included in 20 PVRMDCs.</p> <p>iv. Two WRMD Committees with 42 members (28 males and 14 females) were constituted, one per pilot area.</p> <p>v. One hundred eighteen workshops capacitated the PVRMDCs and the rural development fund committees on organization and management, community and funds mobilization, technical aspects of SLFM and supportive farming and energy efficient livelihood measures.</p> <p>vi. Three local study tours involved 122 PVRMDC members.</p>	<p>made operational through project support and assistance;</p> <p>ii. two watershed-level WRMD Committees were also capacitated and strengthened; and</p> <p>iii. the PVRMDCs overachieved the target.</p>	
Output 1.3: Forty-five VLPs and two WLPs were formulated.		<p>i. Fourteen participatory village resource mappings and 27 participatory village needs assessments were completed to engage with the PVRMDCs.</p> <p>ii. The project supported need-based village development activities in</p>	<p>i. By the fifth PIR, the consultant had prepared the VLPs for approval from the DAB, but the WLPs had not been prepared.</p> <p>ii. By the ninth PIR, four VLPs had been prepared and an additional ten VLPs in Rigan had been finalized.</p>	i. The project lagged behind in the formulation of VLPs and WLPs.



Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
		collaboration with relevant sector agencies in the pilot villages.	iii. The WLP is pending. iv. The reported progress is 70 percent.	
Output 1.4: Rural development funds were established for at least 30 pilot villages (one rural development fund per pilot village).		i. Fourteen rural development funds – ten in Kerman and four in South Khorasan – were established for a total of 2 943 members (1 577 males and 1 366 females) in 1 897 households. ii. Rural development funds raised a capital of IRR 3 229 000 and mobilized a loan of IRR 4 559 000 to 860 households with a repayment rate of 94.5 percent until the reporting period. iii. Two cooperatives were established. They raised a capital of IRR 1 080 000 000 (equivalent to USD 50 000).	i. Forty-one rural development funds, including 24 new ones in Kerman and one in South Khorasan, were established and are operational. ii. The progress reported is 100 percent.	i. Whether or not the cooperatives have been mobilizing the funds is unreported.
Outcome 2: Status of forests and rangeland improved, severity of wind erosion decreased and natural resources were managed sustainably on 75 000 ha of land.  (baseline limited and dispersed)	i. surface of forest and rangeland under SLFM field interventions (including windbreaks, restoration of degraded land, improved water harvesting techniques, livestock management and sustainable agriculture); ii. number of villages implementing VLP and WLP;	See the details provided under the outputs of this outcome.	i. The formulation of VLPs and WLPs were delayed. ii. Other complementing project activities and the activities per specific villages' needs were implemented to some extent with people's participation and in collaboration with various departments at multiple levels. iii. Reduction in severity of wind erosion was achieved as targeted, although the baseline was not evidenced.	Conflicting interests of the upstream and downstream communities were claimed to be the major bottleneck in the formulation of WLPs.

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
	iii. number of sustainable alternative livelihoods; iv. percentage of biodiversity and forest recovery; v. identification and mapping of forest areas for conservation and rehabilitation; and vi. changes in the number of species of flora and fauna as measured by species composition and canopy cover, direct spot, pellet group counts and tracks in the identified conservation and rehabilitation areas.		iv. Rangeland rehabilitation exceeded the quantitative target and secured extensive people's participation, especially in seedling production, direct sowing and planting. v. Project-promoted alternative energy devices where required were the driving force for people's participation. vi. Alternative livelihood measures were promoted well above the target.	
Output 2.1: At least 30 pilot villages (20 in Rigan and ten in Seh Qaleh) implemented the village-level and watershed-level plans.		i. Development and maintenance of physical infrastructure (e.g. roads, bridge, irrigation, school and educational facilities) were supported and contributed to collaboration with the relevant sectors.	i. VLPs <i>per se</i> have not been implemented. However, need-based development activities were supported in pilot villages with the participation of people and the support of the relevant sectors. ii. The WLP preparation being contracted out to a research institute failed. There were plans to contract it out to another consultant. iii. The reported progress is 70 percent.	Despite the absence of VLPs, village communities implemented their need-based development activities, supported by the project in coordination with relevant sectors.

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
Output 2.2: Erosion decreased 30 percent in pilot villages ( <u>baseline to be established in year 1</u> ).		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. The first wind erosion monitoring centre was established in the village of Dehreza (Rigan site), and it is regularly working.</li> <li>ii. Three academic papers were prepared and presented in the third national conference on wind erosion and dust storms in Yazd (February 2014).</li> <li>iii. Circa 27 ha of live windbreaks were established around communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. By the seventh PIR (2019), wind erosion in agricultural lands was reduced by 99 percent.</li> <li>ii. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, there had been no further progress since late 2019.</li> <li>iii. The project promoted and distributed clean energy facilities, such as gas ovens and stoves, and gas cylinders. This contributed to restoring forests and rangeland in the pilot villages.</li> <li>iv. The progress reported is 100 percent.</li> </ul>	<p>Baseline was not evidenced.</p> <p>The project had planned to distribute 950 gas bakery ovens, 500 gas stoves and 400 gas cylinders since July 2021. The status of this process is unknown.</p>
Output 2.3: Seventy-five percent of the planned 19 100 ha of rangelands in the pilot sites were rehabilitated.		<p>With community participation, 22 600 ha of rangeland were rehabilitated. This includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. production and plantation of 342 000 seedlings;</li> <li>ii. irrigation of 1 124 ha (906 ha of which are planted area);</li> <li>iii. enclosure protection of 17 300 ha;</li> <li>iv. sowing of 274 ha with 21 tonnes of seeds;</li> <li>v. construction of 12 check dams, using 37 000 m<sup>3</sup> of earth; and</li> <li>vi. run-off management in 2 000 ha of seeded areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. By the seventh PIR (2019), 46 981 ha of rangeland were rehabilitated.</li> <li>ii. By 2021, a further 2 224 ha were rehabilitated.</li> <li>iii. Nine km of windbreakers for orchards were also completed.</li> <li>iv. 681 ha of new and different medicinal plants were planted.</li> <li>v. The progress reported is 100 percent.</li> </ul>	Community participation in seedling production and rehabilitation activities was highly underscored.
Output 2.4: Two thousand two hundred fifty ha of farmland and		Multi-purpose species ( <i>Calotropis procera</i> , <i>Myrtus communis</i> and <i>Withania somnifera</i> ) were identified and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. By the third PIR, 91 ha of farms were restored in the pilot villages.</li> <li>ii. By the fourth PIR, the overlap</li> </ul>	

Appendix 5. Result matrix showing project achievements and the Evaluation Team's comments

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
rangeland were restored with drought- and salinity-resistant plants in selected villages.		promoted through a participatory approach. Other multipurpose species compatible with local conditions ( <i>Aloe vera</i> , <i>Carthamus tinctorius</i> and <i>Thymus</i> ) were modified for the income generation of villagers in Rigan.	<p>between Outputs 2.3 and 2.4 was internalized, and 145 ha of farmland and rangeland were restored.</p> <p>iii. By the fifth PIR, the output was linked with the promoted and improved irrigation system. The target achievement was reported at 41 percent.</p> <p>iv. By the sixth PIR, the targeted 2 250 ha of farmland and rangeland were reported as restored.</p> <p>v. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	
Output 2.5: Twenty-five percent of globally important wild species and species of importance or used as NWFP was recovered ( <u>baseline to be established in year 1</u> ).	<p>i. percentage of biodiversity and forest recovery;</p> <p>ii. definition of areas for conservation activities and rehabilitation; and</p> <p>iii. establishment of one NHA in Rigan.</p>	<p>i. The inventory of flora and fauna was initiated and is in progress.</p> <p>ii. Three training workshops on biodiversity conservation were completed in collaboration with the Department of Environment.</p> <p>iii. Medicinal herb farming (rosemary, artichoke, wormwood, thyme, sage and hyssop) was supported in 2 ha in Sarayan.</p> <p>iv. An NHA was established in Rigan by the Department of Environment.</p> <p>v. The basic requirements to declare it a protected area were completed.</p>	<p>i. By 2021, 681 ha of new and different medicinal plants were planted.</p> <p>ii. By the sixth PIR, monitoring to record the change in status of biodiversity in an NHA was initiated but not allowed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;</p> <p>iii. Ten percent increase in wildlife reported by the Department of Environment but not validated by project monitoring.</p> <p>iv. Major activities were the following: coordination with the Department of Environment; patrolling; photographing wildlife; training park rangers; and raising awareness of locals, as well as recruiting and training protection volunteers from among local and nomadic people.</p>	i. Eighty percent of output reported as achieved but no evidence to validate the recovery of globally important wild floral species.

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
Output 2.6: At least five sustainable alternative livelihood initiatives were developed with demonstrated benefits to environmental services.	Overgrazing and fuel wood harvest inside the forest boundaries defined for conservation activities decreased 50 percent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Skills training on alternative livelihood measures was provided to interested community members by engaging with them and supporting a vocational training centre.</li> <li>ii. The rural development fund supported trained villagers with loans to start their business.</li> <li>iii. Six hundred fifty-six alternative livelihood businesses were put into practice, such as cattle, camel and turkey breeding; ostrich, poultry and mushroom farming; bakery, grocery and shopkeeping; and carpet weaving.</li> <li>iv. Eight solar water heaters, nine water tanks and seven solar packages were installed.</li> <li>v. One hundred fifty-nine gas ovens and 29 gas bakery ovens were distributed among local communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Forty-nine different sustainable alternative livelihood measures were developed and promoted. These became 65 in the ninth PIR period.</li> <li>ii. Above 1 024 males and females from 1 765 households in Kerman and 789 males and females from 789 households in Sarayan took out loans from their rural development funds and got skills training from the project to engage in income generation.</li> <li>iii. Most of the promoted alternative livelihood initiatives had environmental benefits.</li> </ul>	This is the most successful project output. In some cases, it faced fund inadequacy to mobilize and access the market.
Outcome 3: The capacity to integrate SLFM across different institutions and sectors was enhanced at local and national levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Inter and intrasectoral coordination were increased.</li> <li>ii. SLFM was integrated into relevant sectoral policies.</li> </ul>	See the outputs of this outcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. One national and two provincial SLFM platforms were established and are currently working.</li> <li>ii. The SLFM approach was mainstreamed in a major development policy.</li> <li>iii. A functional linkage</li> </ul>	

Appendix 5. Result matrix showing project achievements and the Evaluation Team's comments

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
(baseline does not exist)			<p>between the Department of Environment and the FRWO was established.</p> <p>iv. The provincial-level inter and intrasectoral linkages were developed and are functional.</p>	
Output 3.1: One SLFM platform/ intersectoral coordination mechanism was established and operational at the national level.		<p>i. Two SLFM platforms were established at the provincial level.</p> <p>ii. An intersectoral coordinated and decentralized planning process was initiated at the district and provincial levels.</p>	<p>i. By the seventh PIR, an intersectoral committee was established and functional as an SLFM platform at the national level.</p> <p>ii. Participatory SLFM has been mainstreamed per the Rules of Procedure of Section B, Article 29 of permanent sections of the National Development Plan.</p> <p>iii. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	
Output 3.2. At least five policies were revised to mainstream participatory SLFM.			<p>i. By the end of the sixth PIR, altogether four policies are reported as revised.</p> <p>ii. Which sector policies were revised is not documented.</p> <p>iii. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	Which sector policies got revised and what was the content of the revision could not be evidenced.
Output 3.3. At least five departments in Natural Resources Management working with inter and intradepartmental linkages, and at least two linkages were established		<p>i. The RFLDL project became a member of the District Administration and Planning Council and Employment Working Group in project provinces. This is where all line ministries and stakeholders jointly plan the district-level</p>	<p>i. By the end of the sixth PIR, at least five departments related to natural resources management were reported to be working with inter and intradepartmental linkages.</p> <p>ii. Those departments were not indicated in the documentation.</p> <p>iii. No further progress was reported from the seventh PIR</p>	

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
between the Department of Environment and the FRWO at provincial levels. At least one linkage operated at the national level.		<p>development to be endorsed by provincial planning and development councils.</p> <p>ii. A funding line for the RFLDL project activities was set up for the Rigan district with support from the district governor.</p> <p>iii. Project activities have been supported by all departments of the provincial NRWMO.</p> <p>iv. A strong coordination between the Provincial NRWMO and the Department of Environment in project provinces was established.</p> <p>v. A coordination with the Provincial Agricultural Jihad Organization was established.</p> <p>vi. Partnership agreements with relevant provincial and local institutions were signed: eight in Kerman and four in South Khorasan.</p>	<p>onward.</p> <p>iv. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	
Outcome 4a: The project was monitored and evaluated effectively. The lessons learned and best practices were disseminated widely with a view to their	<p>i. Project data collection and the M&amp;E system were established.</p> <p>ii. Project progress and monitoring reports were prepared and the mid-term and final evaluations conducted in a timely manner.</p>	See the outputs of this outcome.	<p>i. Project progress was monitored per the indicators in the results framework.</p> <p>ii. An M&amp;E system had been developed and used since 2018.</p> <p>iii. The project information was disseminated through the website and brochures.</p> <p>iv. The MTR was accomplished in</p>	

Appendix 5. Result matrix showing project achievements and the Evaluation Team's comments

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
replication in other areas.	Lessons learned, publications and documentaries were prepared and widely distributed.		2016.	
Output 4a.1. Project data collection and an M&E system were established.		i. The M&E system is in the process of preparation under a consultancy assignment.	i. By the seventh PIR, the M&E system was established (2018) and improved. ii. The impact of the RFLDL on the local HDI was studied (2019). iii. The progress reported is 100 percent.	i. Periodic monitoring remained focused on quantitative indicators. ii. The HDI study was a good initiative.
Output 4a.2. Project progress and monitoring reports were prepared and the mid-term and final evaluations were conducted in a timely manner.		i. The progress of the project was monitored against the indicators mentioned in the project document. ii. The MTR got delayed and was carried out in 2016.	i. Project progress reports were regularly submitted. ii. The MTR got delayed. iii. The terminal evaluation, scheduled for 2020, was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. iv. The progress reported is 70 percent.	
Output 4a.3. Lessons learned, publications and documentaries were prepared and widely distributed.		i. Brochures, educational packages and documentary films were developed and distributed. ii. Papers and articles on project activities were published in accredited journals, and two booklets were compiled. iii. The project website was established. iv. There was participation in press interviews and broadcasting programmes about the project approach and achievements. v. Awareness campaigns and	i. By the end of June 2021, two success stories, one article on the country's best practices of Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2, one project brochure, a reflection on the GEF at FAO in the Islamic Republic of Iran fact sheet and an exclusive interview with the FAO Representative via the <i>Mehr News</i> agency regarding the RFLDL on the occasion of World Food Day 2020 were published. ii. The progress reported is 100 percent.	



Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
		<p>special events were organized.</p> <p>vi. Beyond planned outputs, support was given to local activities of social demand to build trust and cooperation for catalysing participatory approaches.</p>		
Output 4a.4. Stakeholders and residents of the 45 pilot villages are acquainted with the project approach and results.		i. Project site visits for authorities and stakeholders were organized: five in Ragan and three in Sarayan, with 123 participants.	<p>i. By the fourth project year, 20 site visits in Rigan and nine in Sarayan were organized for 855 participants from sectoral authorities and key stakeholders.</p> <p>ii. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	
Output 4a.5. Decision makers and ministry professionals are aware of the project results.		<p>i. Many briefing sessions and meetings with the FRWO and the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad authorities were organized at the national and provincial level.</p> <p>ii. A communication expert was recruited for communication and extension purposes.</p>	<p>i. During the fifth project year, some parliamentarians accompanied by FAO and the FRWO policymakers visited the Sarayan project site, learned about project activities and achievements, and interacted with local communities and relevant service providers.</p> <p>ii. The progress reported is 100 percent.</p>	
Outcome 4b. The project was managed effectively.	<p>i. The project management unit was established.</p> <p>ii. The Project Steering Committee and the Technical Committee were established at national level.</p> <p>iii. Provincial project offices and project</p>		<p>i. The PPMTs in two provinces and field offices were established and staffed after inception.</p> <p>ii. The Project Steering Committee, the Technical Committee and the Project Management Unit were established in the DAB as planned.</p>	

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
	<p>planning committees were established at the provincial level (one for each project site).</p> <p>iv. Activities were implemented on time within the available budget.</p>			
Output 4b.1. The Project Management Unit was established.		i. The Project Management Unit was established in the FRWO of Tehran. It has been staffed and equipped, and is currently working.	Achievement is 100 percent. No further progress occurred.	
Output 4b.2. The Project Steering Committee and the Technical Committee were established at the national level.		i. The Project Steering Committee and the Technical Committee were constituted and functional, as and when required.	<p>In the ninth project year (2020/21):</p> <p>i. Four Project Steering Committee meetings were held, two Technical Committee meetings per month and regular coordination meetings were held.</p> <p>ii. The National Project Director organized high-level meetings with the Barkat Foundation and other agencies for replication of the GEF-induced SLFM approaches elsewhere in the country.</p> <p>iii. A workshop on the RFLDL project's model and its achievements was organized by the FRWO of the DAB for staff from other departments to educate them and generate ideas for internalizing the capacity</p>	<p>i. The Project Steering Committee was not regular until 2016. One Project Steering Committee was held in 2017 to discuss the project extension. Four Project Steering Committees were held in 2017/18. No Project Steering Committee was reported in 2018/19 and 2019/20.</p> <p>ii. The Technical Committee had regular meetings.</p>

Project objectives	Objectively verifiable indicators	Achievement at MTR (2016)	Achievement at terminal evaluation (2021)	Evaluation Team's comments
			building approaches and replicating the GEF-induced model of SLFM. The achievement is 100 percent.	
Output 4b.3. Two project planning committees and two project offices were established at the provincial level (one in each province).		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Project planning committees in both provinces were established as planned.</li> <li>ii. Two provincial project offices were established, staffed, equipped and are functional.</li> <li>iii. Two field offices in Kerman and one in South Khorasan were established and are functional.</li> </ul>	Project planning committees and PPMTs remained functional including the field offices. Achievement is 100 percent.	

## **Annexes**

Annex 1. Terms of reference for the evaluation (final version 20 September 2021)

[https://www.fao.org/3/cc9605en/GCP\\_IRA\\_064\\_GFF\\_Annex\\_1.pdf](https://www.fao.org/3/cc9605en/GCP_IRA_064_GFF_Annex_1.pdf)

Annex 2. Some photographic evidence of the rehabilitation and other project activities

[https://www.fao.org/3/cc9605en/GCP\\_IRA\\_064\\_GFF\\_Annex\\_2.pdf](https://www.fao.org/3/cc9605en/GCP_IRA_064_GFF_Annex_2.pdf)



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